

SEPTEMBER CANVAS

by
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PROLOGUE

She ought to be locked up!”
Deanna Moore froze, her hand on the spine of a book. Obviously she wasn’t alone in the small bookstore. The woman on the other side of the shelf must have thought the same thing, because she didn’t bother to lower her voice.

“Legally she hasn’t committed a crime,” another female voice said.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s immoral and obviously doesn’t hesitate to prey on innocent young people. If I had known how she’d betray our trust—”

“But you didn’t, Gloria. None of us did.”

Deanna squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath. She knew who Gloria was.

“And two years later, poor Savannah is still paying the price.” Gloria sounded cold. “My angel’s reputation is forever linked to *that woman*. I can’t imagine how this will affect her. Long term, I mean.”

“There now, Gloria,” the other woman said. “Savannah’s strong. She’ll come to her senses and go to an Ivy League school before you know it. Meanwhile you just have to make sure she spends time with the right crowd. She might even get back together with Ned.”

“Oh, don’t get me started on poor Ned. He was totally humiliated, and I had to face his mother and try to explain how this monster dug her claws into my baby. You’ll never know how terrible that felt. They’re one of the Boston Fraziers.”

“I can just imagine. But you don’t have anything to worry about. You made sure that woman will never teach at this or any other Vermont

school again. Everyone considers you a hero for standing up for your daughter like that.”

“I tried to do the right thing, but everybody gossiped about my sweet angel.”

Deanna grimaced at Gloria’s holier-than-thou tone. If she could only slip out of the store without facing the women...but she couldn’t show such weakness in front of Gloria Mueller, Grantville’s self-proclaimed first lady. Deanna pulled a book from the shelf and strode up to the counter where the store owner was glancing nervously at Gloria and her friend.

“I’ll take this one, please.” Deanna was happy that her voice held.

“Oh. Right. That’s...that’ll be eighteen-eighty, please.” The store owner cleared her throat and placed the book in a bag.

Deanna paid, and as she turned to leave Gloria and her friend, the new mayor’s wife, stood only a few feet away. “Excuse me,” Deanna murmured and stepped toward them.

Gloria’s eyes were slits of disgust. “You have some nerve.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Deanna made sure she sounded completely indifferent. “Remember, though, that your voice carries a long way. Discussing personal topics in a public place is a lawsuit waiting to happen. Slander can be expensive.”

Gloria gasped and clutched her purse. “Slander! If I had my way, you’d be run out of town, you—”

Deanna moved closer, her anger rising like bile. “Careful, *Gloria.*”

The woman next to Gloria tugged her friend aside and Deanna passed them, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

“Did you hear her? Did you *hear* how she threatened me?” Gloria’s voice followed Deanna out of the store.

She hurried to her car and slumped into the front seat, her knees buckling. It had taken all her strength not to show any sign of weakness. In the rearview mirror her dark blue eyes looked stormy. No wonder the two women had seemed almost afraid of her. *How long will this go on? And how long can I stand it?*

CHAPTER ONE

I have to let you go now, Mom. I need to focus on the traffic and make sure I don't miss the sign to Grantville." Faythe Hamilton listened to her mother's concerns for what she called "Faythe's moment of insanity" half a minute longer before she interrupted again. "I hear you, Mom, and I'll think about it. Right now I need a vacation and I've made up my mind about taking this break."

"Honestly, child—"

"I'm not a child. Tell Bruno hello for me."

"Bruno? Oh, please, darling. Bruno left for Europe weeks ago. I'm seeing Chester again."

Faythe tried not to groan. "All right. I'll try to remember Chester. Ciao, Mom. End call." Faythe sighed. Chester. Bruno. Who could keep track of her mother's lovers? Two days after Faythe graduated from college, her mother had divorced Faythe's father, and since then entertained one young lover after another. Her father followed his ex-wife's example and traded one girlfriend for another at least once a year. *Like his cars*. Faythe frowned and accelerated past a dirty old Volvo.

Faythe loved to drive, and living in Manhattan didn't allow for much of that. She was her father's daughter in that she adored her car, a silver-gray Chrysler Crossfire, but unlike her father, she didn't trade for a newer model every year. She was happy with the one she had, which was far from worn out.

Faythe gripped the steering wheel and changed lanes. A sign farther up the road said Grantville, 5 miles, and she took in the beautiful scenery as she approached the exit to the local road. Maple trees on fire,

from the brightest yellow to the darkest red, lined the road. Billowing fields of green, and quaint villages with houses dating back to the Civil War and earlier, created a unique atmosphere. She hadn't been to Vermont since she was a teenager, but had longed to go back ever since. The summer at her Aunt Nellie's lakeside cabin was one of the happiest in Faythe's life.

Nowadays, Nellie spent hardly any time in Vermont. Instead she lived in Florida all year and lent her Vermont cabin to Faythe for as long as she needed it. Usually, when Faythe took a rare few days off, she visited Nellie in Fort Lauderdale for a weekend, but this time, this long break when so much hung in the balance, Faythe needed to spend some time alone.

Her cell phone rang again, making her jump. She glanced at the display. *Mom*. "Ignore." Faythe knew she ought to feel guilty for screening her parents' calls, but she had explained to them why she needed this time by herself to figure things out. If they couldn't understand and respect her decision, she couldn't do much about it.

She approached a new sign. Grantville. Est. 1812. Population 8245. This number easily doubled in the summer. The lake was a popular place for water sports and fishing. Wealthy New Yorkers like Aunt Nellie kept houses here and employed one of the locals to care for them in the winter. Faythe intended to stay at least until Christmas, which would give her plenty of time to figure out her future and make plans. *I might just write something.*

Seeing the familiar shops along Main Street, she was transported ten years into the past. After graduating from high school, she'd stayed at Aunt Nellie's for three months before she went to college. So many things fell into place during that magical summer, and Faythe gave her aunt all the credit.

Whereas Faythe's parents were calculating and materialistic, Nellie was down-to-earth and caring. Faythe often wished Nellie had brought her up. Instead she had to face the fact that she'd been marinated in her parent's shallowness since the day she was born. Her mother Cornelia's mantra was "possessions and position."

Faythe took a right and drove along the lake, spotting new houses where empty fields and trees used to be. When she reached the narrow gravel road that led down to her aunt's property, she slowed.

The cabin looked unchanged. Faythe stepped out of the car and

stood still for a moment, taking it all in. But this was no cabin. The one-story house boasted six bedrooms, four and a half baths, a living room, an entertainment room, an open-plan kitchen, and a library. Slowly, Faythe circled the house and walked down to the water. The lake was like a mirror, and the wind seemed to hold its breath as Faythe leaned against a tree, absorbing the calmness. The setting sun's last rays made the water look transparent and poured gold on its surface before it dropped behind the treetops.

Most of the time she enjoyed everything the Big Apple had to offer, and she loved her neighborhood and her many friends, but this serenity, the fresh air...she couldn't find this in New York.

Looking to her left, Faythe noticed a light in the neighboring cabin. The dark shingled house resembled Nellie's, but was much smaller, maybe two or three bedrooms. A young family rented it when Faythe visited ten years ago. Were they still around?

She was about to walk back up to the house when her neighbor's porch door opened. Curious, Faythe remained half hidden behind the tree. A tall figure walked onto the porch and stood by the railing, gazing over the water. It was a woman, but her shoulder-length black hair hid her face. She held the railing with both hands and stood motionless for more than a minute. Faythe shivered in the evening air, which had become increasingly colder. She didn't want the other woman to catch her spying, so she tried to ignore the goose bumps on her arms.

The woman suddenly banged both fists on the railing and shouted. Faythe pressed closer against the tree, intrigued. The woman rubbed her face with both hands, then put her arms around herself in a tight squeeze. The gesture, which Faythe interpreted as loneliness, stirred an unwelcome memory of doing the same thing many times during her adolescence.

The slamming door made Faythe look up to find that the other woman had disappeared. Faythe eventually made her way up the path to her car, careful not to trip in the poor light.

She carried her two sport bags that doubled as suitcases to the deck. Nellie had arranged to have a set of keys mailed to Faythe's condo earlier in the week, and now she opened the door, expecting the house to smell musty. Instead it smelled fresh and polished, which was exactly what it was, she discovered as she switched the light on. Every surface was clean and so were the curtains, the kitchen towels on the

rack, and everything else. The service Aunt Nellie employed had done a good job.

The rustic pieces in Nellie's cabin were both durable and attractive. As Faythe walked from room to room, every memory that surfaced soothed her. The tautly wound spring inside her slowly uncoiled, and she yawned as she returned to the car for her briefcase. She'd brought only her cell phone and her laptop, and purged every work document from both of them before she packed.

Faythe wasn't hungry but still looked longingly into the empty refrigerator. She would have to go into Grantville and stock up in the morning. Right now the instant decaffeinated coffee her aunt kept in the pantry would do. Faythe made herself a large mug of steaming brew and found some powdered creamer to mellow it. It was six months past its use-by date, but as long as it didn't look weird when she stirred it into the coffee, she'd be all right.

Faythe decided to use the main bedroom, where her aunt usually slept. It had the biggest, softest bed in the house, which was too tempting. Nellie kept the bed linen in the hallway, and the familiar scent of lavender filled Faythe's nostrils as she pulled out sheets, pillowcases, and blankets. After making the bed, she curled up under the covers, clutching the coffee mug, and merely sat there in the dark, watching distant lights on the other side of the lake. Faythe thought again about the woman next door, how she'd slammed her fists into the railing and cried out. Had that been fury in her voice, or despair? Maybe both, Faythe mused, and sipped her coffee. She had done her fair share of fist-slamming into desks lately, and only when that no longer alleviated the stress did she realize she had to do something radical.

Suzy, her agent, wasn't thrilled. In fact, she had blurted out, "God Almighty, are you stark raving mad?" raising her voice with every word. "Your contract is up for renewal, and you're in a position to ask for a substantial raise. And you quit?"

"I'm not quitting. I'm taking a break."

"Same thing in this business," Suzy said, then downed the last of her Scotch. The waiter showed up to take their orders, but backed off when Suzy glared at him and shook her head.

"I don't care." Faythe spoke slowly, knowing that Suzy was like a petulant child when she threw a temper tantrum like this. "I'm twenty-

nine, and I've worked more or less nonstop since I was twenty-two. Seven years and zero vacation."

"Seven successful years *because* of that."

"And my life is passing me by. Don't complain, Suzy. I'm not ungrateful. You've been fantastic, but you've also made a lot of money as my agent. If I were to sign on for another season for the network, I'm sure you'd make an even bigger chunk, but...I can't let your commission determine my decision. I need a break. I need to figure out what I want to do next."

"Next?" Suzy looked at Faythe as if her prize possession was melting. "You always wanted to work in the media."

"I always wanted to be a good reporter. And someday, a *great* journalist. And I'm nothing but a glorified co-host of a morning show who introduces everything from earthquakes to dancing lima beans."

"You're so popular. A household name." Suzy gestured impatiently with a flick of her wrist. "The money's not bad either."

"There has to be more to a job than that." Frustrated with her agent, but not surprised, Faythe knew no matter how she tried to explain, her words wouldn't sink in. Like Faythe's mother, Suzy was very much about appearances, and on the surface Faythe's life was perfect. "I don't mind the hours, but the days are rushing by me. I have friends and live in a great area, but no time to enjoy it, no one to come home to. I sacrifice a lot for a job that doesn't seem worth it."

Suzy kept trying to convince Faythe to reconsider, but she didn't budge. The next day she called Nellie and arranged to stay at the lake.

Faythe settled against the pillows, her mind drifting back to the woman next door. She wondered what had annoyed or frustrated her enough to pound the railing. After her outburst she stood there in the fading light like an obsidian statue, black hair the only thing moving in the breeze.

Faythe padded over to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. She could hardly remember when she had thought so much about another woman. She wiped her mouth and made a wry face at her reflection. She was *not* going to count how many months had passed since she had been on a date, or even had time and energy to think about it. At least she could admit that it was far too long ago and that it was time for a change.



Deanna moved the pencil in long sweeping strokes across the paper, annoyed that her mental image refused to translate to the sheet on the table before her. She tried to wrap her mind around the loose idea, knowing that she wouldn't be able to get it out of her head until she put it on paper. She had managed to outline a female figure, but the woman in her picture was faceless. When she squinted, Deanna could almost see the person she was trying to depict.

It wasn't hard to figure out what distracted her. Her dinner sat uneaten on the kitchen counter, and though she tried to ignore the voices of the women in the bookstore earlier that day, they pierced her thoughts. Deanna was well aware of Gloria Henderson's leading position in Grantville. She lived with her husband and daughter in a colonial mansion and chaired several charities with absolute power. Gloria's daughter, Savannah, had ruled Grantville High School much the same way. She'd held court with her peers in the hallways or the cafeteria, and was the undisputed queen bee among the girls.

Deanna jerked at a sharp sound and stared at the broken pencil that had perforated the sheet of paper before her. The shattered remainder had stabbed the sketchy woman in the heart.