

Part I

Chapter 1

The bulky manila envelope was heavy with the weight of rejection as Postmaster Alex Bentley placed it on the counter and began filling out the yellow pick-up slip. In the three years since his promotion to postmaster of the small rural office in upstate New York, Alex had delivered his share of good news and bad. Even if the tiny post office he ran was only a mailbox drop, he was there six days a week in rain, sleet, snow, and sometimes into the darkest of night. He tolerated the postal jokes, ran an efficient operation, and received numerous awards, all displayed proudly on the office walls of the ruggedly handsome young man who, at age thirty-two, was the youngest level fifteen postmaster in the district. Years of walking a mail route had given his body a permanent tan and his daily routine of lifting mail sacks was all the exercise he needed to maintain his well-toned physique.

Promptly at eight a.m., Alex opened the front window and began his daily routine of sorting the mail. He deftly inserted the various bills, letters, magazines and other correspondence into the lock boxes of the 352 year-round residents and 175 New York City summer escapees that lived in Keonka Lake, a tiny speck of a town deep within the Catskill Mountains. Most of the time, he enjoyed his work. He never enjoyed delivering disappointment-especially to someone as persistently optimistic as Rachel Clark.

An ex-lawyer from New York City, who had traded in her disillusionment of the legal profession for the seductive illusion of a writing career, Rachel fled the stifling summer heat of New York City for the clean air and cool mountain breezes of the country. For the past two years, she rented a secluded cabin, camouflaged deep in the woods where, alone with her imagination, she created romantic, fictional characters whose relationships were full of passion and happy endings. A sharp contrast to the frustrations and bitter disappointments of the real ones she had known all her life.

When she brought in her first stack of manuscripts, over two years ago Alex thought she was a college student on summer vacation. In sandals, Alex was a full six inches taller, and with her lightly freckled face and shoulders Alex couldn't think of any other word to describe her other than cute. It was hard for him to believe she had been a high powered New York City District Attorney.

When she told him she had quit her job to become a romance writer, Alex had been unimpressed. He enjoyed murder mysteries, especially ones with lots of steamy sex, and he'd written occasional columns for the two postmaster's Association magazines, *The Postal Advocate*, and *Postmasters Gazette*. But a girly romance novel was the last thing Alex would ever be interested in reading, and after seeing the address label on the last package he pulled out of the sack, he knew no one else was going to be reading it either.

He heard the lobby door open and immediately recognized the floral scent of her perfume announcing to his senses that she was in the lobby. She walked up to the counter carrying four large envelopes, each containing a little piece of her soul and an inexhaustible amount of hope. After two years of hard work and a great deal of postage, Rachel was still an unpublished writer whose dreams died a little with each rejected manuscript.

"Any news, Alex?" Her voice was high in expectation.

"Sorry, Rachel. Another one came back."

He tried not to see the disappointment in her bright green eyes. She tried to hide it from him, but her smile wasn't convincing. She tore open the package, quickly read the form rejection letter, and put the new pile on the counter with the check already made out.

"This one's going back to Prelude Press?" He read the address label.

"Yes. Prelude's editor, Joan somebody, actually wrote a personal critique she sent along with the form rejection letter. She seemed genuinely reluctant to return it. I discussed it with my agent and she suggested I make the changes Joan suggested and re-submit the full manuscript in printed format and disk, which is why this one is so heavy."

Rachel separated the envelopes into two stacks.

"This pile only contains three chapters and a synopsis, but with the return envelope, it's still a lot of postage. You know the routine, Alex. By the time the summer is over, you'll have enough money to send your kids through college."

"My kids would thank you, if I had any kids," He said. "You're one of the few people who still use us," Alex said. "Not that I'm complaining."

"For the amount of postage I've spent here, I wouldn't think you would. There are still a few publishers who like the feel of paper and it's hard to bring a computer into the bathroom, where I think most of them read!" She joked. "Cereals, Alex, I put a piece of my soul onto every word and that energy just doesn't transmit well over the Internet. At least that's my feeling anyway."

"That's an interesting philosophy," he said. "Here's hoping your vibes will transmit a more positive outcome this time."

Alex put the stamps on the return envelopes, the meter stickers on the outside, and tossed the packages into the outgoing bin.

"All these years and you never told me what your story is about."

"You never asked."

"I'm asking."

"It's about a lawyer who goes on vacation in the country, falls in love, has her heart broken, takes the guy to court, sues his pants off, and they live happily ever after. Ya know, the usual. I'm sure it would bore you to death."

"Never say death to a postal employee!" He smiled and was pleased when she laughed. "You're right, it doesn't sound like anything I'd read, but I'm sure there are a lot of people who enjoy stuff like that."

"Well, if I keep getting these," she held up the returned manuscript, "we'll never know, will we? Toss this into your very dead letter pile, please," she threw the crumpled rejection notice at him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Alex took aim toward the corner wall behind him and pitched the impersonal letter into the trash can. He re-directed his gaze onto the small of Rachel's back as she left the lobby and waited until the door safely closed before leaving the area behind the counter. Alex walked quickly to the front window where he pretended to adjust the display posters, all the while his eyes were focused on an entirely different picture.

Outside, the rays of the afternoon sun radiated delicate streaks of firelight through Rachel's red hair creating an enchanting crown above her head. Her delicate fingers opened the door of her rented white Chevy Malibu and she slid behind the wheel. Before closing the door, Rachel glanced over her shoulder toward the front entrance of the post office where she caught Alex gazing at her through the large picture window. She smiled back at him flirtatiously. As she slowly drove the car away, Rachel put her hand out the window and gave him a playful wave

good-bye. Her gesture sent a shiver throughout Alex's body. If anyone could write about romance, he thought, no doubt Rachel Clark could.

It was almost six when Alex finished carrying the mail sacks out to the loading area. Lighting a cigarette, he rested his back against the wall and waited for the driver. The afternoon sun was warm on his face, and he closed his eyes against the brightness. His photographic memory immediately brought Rachel's face into view. He remembered how she had unsuccessfully tried to hide her disappointment when he handed her the returned manuscript and how he wished like hell he was handing her a publisher's contract instead.

Alex took a final drag and dropped the butt on the landing. It rolled dangerously close to the pile of mail bags and he rushed to put it out. As he was crushing the life out of the threatening ember, his foot knocked over one of the sacks, causing the latch to pop open. Packages and letters tumbled everywhere. Alex cursed aloud as he scrambled to recapture the escaping mail. He reached for the last package and noticed it was one of Rachel's manuscripts. Instead of returning it, he closed the sack, secured the lock, and without thinking about how many postal regulations he was violating, took the package back into his office.

Alex slid his fingernail under the clasp of the envelope, making certain not to damage the paper. Inside was a cover letter, a synopsis, a CD, and over four hundred pages of a double-spaced, laser-jet printed manuscript. Alex sat down at his desk, turned on the light, and began reading.

After years of visually scanning addresses, Alex had developed a talent for fast reading. Eight hours later, he turned the page on the final chapter of Rachel's manuscript. Alex was no expert on romance novels, but Rachel's writing could convince him to become an avid fan. She was good. Damn good, he thought, but an important element seemed to be lacking. Rachel's descriptions and dialogue were colorful and dramatic, but, in Alex's opinion, the leading male character lacked any real emotional depth for a romantic hero. The main female character was a strong, independent and highly sensual woman, but there was no believable chemistry between the two. Alex could also tell by her description of the country setting that Rachel had been living in a concrete jungle for most of her life. He could understand why the publishers kept returning the book.

He remembered the pain in Rachel's eyes when she tossed him the rejection letter, and how he'd wished he could have done something to change the message she'd received. Alex stared at the computer screen, lightly tapping the edge of the keyboard, and started to think. His fellow postmasters told him they enjoyed reading his articles, and he had taken a creative writing course in college. Maybe her manuscript falling out of the sack wasn't just a coincidence.

Alex took the disk out of the envelope and put it into his computer. With a click of the mouse, *Legal Briefs* by Rachel Clark flashed onto the screen. And, as he ignored his body pleading for sleep and his brain telling him all the reasons why he shouldn't be doing it, Alex began typing.

All through the night, Alex wrote and re-wrote parts of Rachel's manuscript. He edited sentences, changed some of the dialogue, and added just a little lust to the romantic scenes. It was seven the next morning when he finished printing the revised manuscript. He slid the entire package back into the envelope and sealed it tightly, just as the delivery truck was pulling up to the loading platform. Alex met the driver at the back door.

"Here, Walter. You missed this yesterday," he handed the driver the manuscript. "I won't report it, this time. Just don't tell anyone that the meter stamp is a day late."

Walter shrugged. "You're the postmaster here, Alex. I'm not going to say anything. One day, two days, who cares?" Walter took the envelope, gave Alex the sacks of mail and drove off.

"You should care, jerk," Alex said to the back of the truck as Walter drove away. Lucky he didn't notice I hadn't shaved. He thought. Good thing, I keep a razor in the bathroom.

Alex tried to make himself look as if he hadn't been awake all night, and barely succeeded when he opened the front window at exactly eight o'clock. He phoned a nearby restaurant, and ordered a large cup of black coffee, which he barely managed to finish just as the first customer walked into the lobby.

Rachel slammed open the door of the cabin and hurled the manuscript against the wall where it made a loud thud before landing on the carpet. She grabbed the telephone and speed-dialed her agent in New York.

"Sandra, I just came from the post office. Another publisher sent back the book. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to call, Rachel, but you know how it gets around here. I've been sending e-mails and faxes all week. Don't worry. It's a good book. I'm sure we'll find the right house. Did you mail the others out to the list I sent you?"

"I just got back from the post office. I swear the postmaster there is more depressed about these rejections than you are. Maybe I should hire him as my agent!"

"That could be dangerous. In this business, everyone is on the verge of going postal! Rachel, I really do have to get back to work. I'll make some more calls. Don't worry."

Rachel hung up the phone and picked up the pile of papers that had fallen out of the smashed envelope. It was beginning to get dark and Rachel was tired. She had rented the cabin to get away from the distractions of the city, but the silence was now beginning to get on her nerves. Or was it the loneliness? Rachel couldn't believe that it had been more than two years since she'd quit her job in the New York City District Attorney's office to work on her writing career full time. She'd also quit her affair with her overly ambitious partner Mark Greystone, or maybe he had quit her. She couldn't remember.

Rachel tossed a frozen dinner into the microwave, poured herself a glass of wine and began reading the rest of the mail she'd picked up that afternoon. She was having difficulty concentrating, and it wasn't the wine that was the cause. Thoughts of Alex, and the way he'd behaved earlier, were suddenly more interesting than the article she was trying to read. He had been so cute and so obvious when she'd left the post office. She knew his attempt to "fix" the posters was just an excuse so he could watch her leave. Just as her waving to him was her way of letting him know his ruse hadn't worked.

Driving home, she could still feel his eyes burning the back of her neck like the intense rays of the afternoon sun. She didn't know if she felt uncomfortable because he was watching her, or because the fire she was feeling was beginning to inflame other, more intimate, parts of her body.

He was so completely different from the men she had worked with in the City. Two hours away from the formality of Manhattan, there was no need to wear three piece suits and stuffy ties. She liked Alex's casual, scruffy look and the way his dark, wavy hair wasn't so perfect. No one in Twenty-First Century New York City would be caught dead sprouting a seventy's style mustache, but even that fashion faux pas made Alex more of an individual, and all that much more desirable.

His smile was genuine and honest. Unlike those she had seen plastered on the faces of men who used it to conceal an ulterior motive. He told her he didn't have children and she wondered if that meant he also didn't have a wife.

"Get real, Rachel" she said aloud to the silence. "You're beginning to sound like a character in one of your novels. You're just a little lonely, that's all."

But as she began eating the plastic food from the plastic container, she wondered if Alex was also eating alone. And if so, she wondered if he could cook.