

REDHEADS WERE HIS WEAKNESS



“Come on, boy, let’s do one more loop,” called Mark as he turned into Laurel Lane, a cul-de-sac in the Brookshire neighborhood where he lived. It was going on eleven at night, and he was running at a fairly good pace, giving both himself and his Dalmatian a thorough workout before they called it a day. “Come on, Percy. Don’t let me down.”

The quiet street was very familiar to them both, and Percy ran on ahead. “Damn!” Mark exclaimed suddenly as he broke his stride to stop and tie a shoelace that had somehow come undone.

“Hey, Perce, wait up,” he called as he saw his dog still running forward. Running was one of Percy’s favorite activities and, as Mark took time to check his other lace to be sure there wouldn’t be another unplanned stop, he was surprised to see Percy stop two driveways up. He seemed to be looking at the car sitting in the driveway, and then he moved closer as if checking it out.

Mark started running again, and as he got close to the driveway, he called, “Come on, Perce, let’s go.”

Percy ignored Mark and continued sniffing around the car, so Mark stopped at the end of the driveway, snapped his fingers, and said sternly, “Percy, now.” When the Dalmatian still didn’t come,

Mark moved closer to the car, intending to take Percy by the collar, but something in the car caught his own attention, so he walked towards the driver's side, trying to see inside the vehicle.

He knew he was on private property, and he had no desire to intrude on someone who might be in the car, but his instinct told him to check it out. Maybe it was Percy's behavior, but something didn't feel quite right.

He ducked his head and squinted a little and managed to make out the silhouette of someone slumped over the steering wheel. Mark owned a private security firm and was well versed in strange situations, so he moved forward enough so he could knock gently on the driver's side window.

"Hello! Are you all right?"

The figure leaning on the steering wheel shot up and screamed.

"Ma'am, I'm not going to hurt you. I live in the neighborhood, and I'm just checking to be sure you're all right."

"I'm fine," came the muffled reply, but Mark could have sworn it was accompanied by a sob.

"My name is Mark Cunningham, and I own a security company. Tell me how I can help you."

"Go away!"

Mark hesitated. There was no law against sitting in one's own car at eleven o'clock at night crying, but he didn't feel as if he should just walk away.

"Can you open the door so I can be sure that you're all right?" he asked. "I'll back up while you do if it'll make you feel better."

Silence.

He put his hand forward and opened the door ever so slightly. He knew he was taking a chance on being accused of something, but he couldn't just leave this woman until he knew why she was crying and if she was safe.

"Go away!" the woman demanded desperately. "Just leave me alone."

Mark opened the door all the way but then stepped back so she

wouldn't feel he was threatening her. "Is there something I can help you with?" he asked, watching her wipe her tear-stained face with the back of her hands.

"Yes, you can leave me alone."

"Is this your house?" he asked, nodding towards the two-story limestone house on the property.

"Yes," she sniffled.

"Let me help you inside, and then I'll leave."

She hesitated and then seemed to realize she wasn't going to win the encounter, so with a deep sigh she picked up a huge purse from the passenger seat and got out, locking the door behind her.

"I'm fine," she assured him in an uneven voice. "You can go now."

Mark's practiced eyes took in a woman of maybe thirty-five, barely average height and definitely on the slim side, maybe even skinny. It was hard to tell in the night light, but he had the impression of red hair—a lot of it. Interesting. Redheads were his weakness.

"I'll wait until you're in the house. Are you sure I can't do something for you?"

She turned without answering and walked slowly to the front door. After a short fumble with keys, she opened it, then turned briefly towards Mark and called, "I'm fine now, thank you." Before Mark could answer, she'd closed the door again, leaving him staring at the dark front of the house. He waited a minute until he saw a light come on and then decided his business there was done, at least for the moment.

He turned and looked at Percy, who had been sitting in the driveway watching the whole exchange. "Come on, boy, let's finish up for the night."

When Mark got home, he showered and then took out his laptop to see what he could find about the mystery resident of 121 Laurel Lane. Working in the security business, he had extra sources of information, but he came up with very little information about

the slim redhead who'd been crying in her car. Maybe it was a rental house, or maybe she'd just moved in. Come to think of it, he didn't remember having seen that car there before, and he and Percy frequently ran on Laurel Lane. It was late, but he promised himself he'd find out more in the morning.

"Come on, Perce, let's turn in."



LIZ LOCKED the door behind her and then paused a minute before turning on a light in the entry hall. She dropped her bag on the nearest chair and then slowly moved into the living room, where she sank wearily onto the sofa and closed her eyes.

She was both embarrassed and annoyed. Why couldn't that guy have simply minded his own business? A girl couldn't even have a good cry anymore without some well-meaning Samaritan interfering. It had been downright embarrassing. She wasn't the kind who waved her emotions in public, and yet that's exactly what had happened. Instead of waiting to be safe in the privacy of her own home, she'd let the tears overwhelm her while she was still in the car. She hoped fervently that this Mark person would realize she was okay and just let it be.

Mark. She thought again of the man who had cautiously opened her car door and then stood guard as she went into the house. She'd been too distraught to take a good look at him, but her impression was of a handsome man with a muscular, well-toned body, someone who could look after himself and probably those around him too. In another time it might have stirred something in her, but not now. Just getting through the basics of every day took all her energy, so there was definitely none left to be dreaming about some man she didn't even know. Not that she was even sure she'd want another man in her life. The last one certainly hadn't worked out too well.

Liz sighed and pulled herself up again. It was time for this day to end. Tomorrow, life would start all over again.



MARK HAD a new-client meeting the next morning in Houston, so it was early afternoon by the time he returned to Bamford. He was tempted to swing by Laurel Lane and check on the redhead from last night, but he thought better of it. She had a right to her privacy, and in no way had she indicated either a need for his help or an interest in getting to know him. He needed to let it go.

“Hey, Percy,” he called loudly as he entered his two-story red brick house. Percy was probably in the backyard, but his excellent hearing normally brought him running back in through the doggie door, and today was no exception. He barked a welcome, and Mark ruffled the top of his head affectionately. “What do you say, boy? Anything new?”

He put his things down on a nearby table, checked his phone messages, and headed for the kitchen. He hadn’t stopped for anything to eat before driving back to Bamford, and his stomach was complaining loudly, so he made himself a thick sandwich with some leftover chicken and several slices of tomato and then added some guacamole for good measure.

“Okay, bud, you can drop the sad-eye routine,” he said as he grinned at the pitiful performance Percy was putting on. He tossed him a piece of chicken, then took a cold beer out of the refrigerator and headed for his study.

121 Laurel Lane. Mark typed the address into a real estate site that he sometimes found useful, but today he wasn’t sure whether or not the information was of any use. It seemed to indicate that the house was a rental and that the owner lived out of town. Wait. There was a footnote saying the owner was deceased and that the house was in probate. That was a bit unusual.

He sat back and laughed at himself. What did he expect to find,

a picture of the petite redhead from last night? He finished his sandwich, letting Percy have the last bite and simultaneously wondered how his rescue Dalmatian had gotten to be so spoiled.

He answered a few messages and then changed into running clothes. On most days he ran several times, partly because Dalmatians require a lot of exercise and partly to keep himself in top form.

“Come on, boy, let’s go,” he called to Percy as he headed for the front door. He carried a leash with him but probably wouldn’t use it. Percy was well trained and almost always obeyed Mark’s commands, so Mark usually gave him his freedom as the two ran through the streets of Brookshire. They were a familiar sight to most of the residents, fit ex-Marine, keeping a good stride and waving at neighbors as he went, and Percy, his beloved dog, keeping him company as they made the rounds at least twice a day.

As they approached the Laurel Lane cul-de-sac, Mark hesitated briefly and then turned into it. He told himself he was just taking a familiar route, but he knew that today it was more than that. For whatever reason, he’d been unable to get the crying redhead out of his mind, and now he was drawn back to her house.

Part of it was that he was the kind of guy who rescued people, and she’d seemed like she could use rescuing, but it was more than that, and he knew it. It was that damn red hair! He was a sucker for red hair, and what he’d seen, albeit briefly, had been a thick red mane almost too big for her head. It had been too dark to tell anything about the shade of red, and it was possible that in the daylight it could be more brown than true red, but something inside him held to the belief that she was a redhead.

He could see number 121 coming up, and he was disappointed to not see a car in the driveway. What had he expected? Did he think she’d be standing outside waving at him or inviting him in? He needed to get a grip and stop looking for problems or adventures where there were none. He had twin younger sisters, so

he was well acquainted with the fact that females could have a good cry and still be perfectly all right.

Time to stop obsessing about a chance encounter, he scolded himself as he loped past the quiet house, not sure why he felt a touch of disappointment.

“Come on, Percy, let’s up our speed a notch,” he called, and the energetic Dalmatian was only too happy to comply. Mark was ready to go home, take a shower, and maybe call a few friends.

He needed to put the house and the resident redhead out of his mind, at least until later tonight, when once again he’d run past it.