

## Chapter 1

*Friday, May 21, 1999 Maple Creek, Kansas*

**Katrina stormed from the house** into the garage and pushed the garage door button. Mark followed. He was shocked at her anger. She was never like this. But she had seemed on edge lately, like the memorial shit was about to hit the fan.

“Katrina, what is it? What’s going on? I hate it when we fight like this,” he said. He stood at the opened doorway leading from the laundry room to the garage. The house and the garage still had that smell of newness that freshly-built homes do.

“You just don’t listen, Mark Sterling! I lie awake half the night, worried about my restaurant mainly because you’re never supportive about it. I feel like I’m doing it totally alone. I just want emotional support! She flung open the car door of her Saturn. “Living with you is like living with a wall.

She got in. “You and your damn writing. That’s all you ever think of.” She slammed the door and rolled down the window. “I just need emotional support.”

Mark shrugged and kicked some remnant sawdust. “Shoot, Katrina. I’m sorry. I really try.”

She started the engine and mouthed something Mark couldn’t hear, but it looked like “it’s all your fault.” She backed out of the garage with a little screech.

Mark rushed forward, following her car out of the garage and down the driveway. “Oh, baby, I’ll make it up to you,” he said, but he was sure she couldn’t hear him. “How about Sergio’s tonight as usual?” he called. She didn’t work on Friday nights, so they usually went to Sergio’s, where the marinara was tangy and the atmosphere just right. Reminding her of their Friday night tradition might help cool things down. At least it wouldn’t be *her* restaurant, always the issue.

He waved, but she was looking away, swerving into the street. He stopped midway down

the driveway, suddenly feeling hopeless. *Can I really do better for her?*

Mark looked down 111th Lane, their street. All the homes were about finished in the new subdivision. The sod was finally laid yesterday. Their new friends on the street had originally nicknamed it Radon Row since so many of them had to call Radon Technologies, Inc. to rid their homes of the problem, caused by Maple Creek's rich soil and shale deposits. The problem was totally resolved when Radon Technologies installed in each home foundation-to-roof PVC "vents" that eradicated the problem completely and inexpensively. So, much relieved, the folks on the street dropped the Radon designation and simply referred to their street as "The Row." Sam, Mark's next-door neighbor and The Row's ad hoc social director, had begun using The Row designation on fliers he'd send out to the "Row Gang" to announce parties or neighbors' birthdays. It gave Mark a sense of community, all "The Row" business, and made him feel less the isolated writer on the Kansas plains and more a part of a burgeoning community of friendly people.

Still, he couldn't dispel his feelings of isolation. Mark had two books published a year ago, but, while his career had just begun to take off, he still felt a sense of struggle in it. Alliance Press, an imprint of Eagle Publishing, based south of LA, had done little to help him promote his first books, so neither had fared particularly well; they weren't even near a second printing. His advances had been decent, but the books were unlikely to accrue royalties that would ever pay them back. Rona Hargrave, his editor at Alliance, had advised him to find ways to more convincingly put his readers into the action: "Get the reader close and make your protagonist seem less removed," was the way she put it. Now, struggling with his third book, his mission was to reduce the "psychic distance" between his reader and his hero.

With Katrina so upset, presumably because of the restaurant and his lack of empathy, Mark

felt alone in his craft. He had always felt so close to her, but since he had really begun to focus on his third book a year ago, he felt distant from her and he knew she felt distant from him. Since the wedding five years ago, they had been the typical cuddly couple, but no longer. She just seemed cold: no kisses, nuzzles, cuddling. They only made love ceremonially once a week.

Mark looked next door and saw Kandy, Sam's wife, leave her house and lock her door. He waved.

"Hi, Mark. Hot enough for you?" Kandy walked past Mark's house, down the street. It was over ninety for the tenth day in a row, unusual for late May in Kansas, normally laden with thunderstorm after thunderstorm, and multi-colored Doppler radar displays on the evening news.

"What are you doing to stay cool besides running the air conditioning twenty-four hours a day?" he asked.

She stopped and turned. "Eve and I are going to the early show in Iroquois. Sam is home today; his trip was canceled. He's waiting for Derek and Keith to get home from school. They're looking forward to their last day, June 11th."

"Have fun," Mark said. Iroquois was the hundred-year-old town situated five miles down Route 7 from their subdivision, Maple Creek, which was a new addition to burgeoning southwest Kansas City. There wasn't much in Iroquois except a movie theatre, a few restaurants, a temporary Department of Corrections detention center, a Salvation Army store, a post office, the county courthouse complex, some bail bonds stores, and a thirty-minute photo shop that took five days to return prints.

When Mark and Katrina had moved to Maple Creek a year ago from a loft in the City Market section of Kansas City, all the neighbors thought that the new subdivision would be a

wonderland with its ten-acre lake, fine golf course, and classy club. But after a year, the dust, workmen's trash, and perpetual rumbling from construction equipment had worn on everyone. To celebrate the sod finally being laid, folks on "The Row" had already begun talking about having a celebration party soon—the end was near. They were all hoping that the heat wave wouldn't give Richard, the building superintendent of Carlson Construction, the builder of their homes, a convenient excuse if all the sod died and had to be replaced. After all, he always said he wasn't liable for acts of God. Having to re-lay the sod would be such a psychological setback!

Mark saw Kandy walk up to Eve's front door, two homes away. Eve appeared. She was a statuesque blond, about Kandy's age—mid-thirties. They laughed together at the front door, then Kandy entered. They were a contrasting pair: Eve was tall and lithe with blonde hair that was cut at her shoulders. Kandy was short, perky, and brunette. They had already gained a reputation on The Row as best buddies. They had matching four-year-old boys and husbands who were away much of the time, traveling in support of obscure high tech companies that no one understood. So, Kandy and Eve had naturally become good friends.

Early that evening Mark and Katrina drove through the quiet neighborhoods just off Santa Fe, the main drag in Iroquois, the tiny hundred-year-old town down the road from Maple Creek. The sun was setting.

"I'm really hungry," Katrina said. "I never feel this hungry. This Friday-night-at-Sergio's is the only break we ever take together anymore," Katrina said.

“Sounds like you’re complaining.”

“Well—” she said.

“I thought by taking you to Sergio’s, I’d show you how sorry I was about our fight this morning. Are you still mad at me?”

She was wearing her short-shorts. “Your legs are something else,” he said, stroking her inner thighs. “It’s so baby soft here!”

“Oh, babe,” she said, “And you’re so skinny—so what! Do you have to do that right now? I just need to take a serious break from the restaurant once in a while, and have a regular talk about it with you. There’s all this stuff on my mind.”

“You can start by taking off a night here and there. Jose can stand in for you, can’t he?”

On the little streets off of Santa Fe Boulevard, the main road through Iroquois, Mark saw lots of ancient little homes in various stages of disrepair with multiple window air conditioners. Each of the homes was painted a different shade of dirty white and was nestled among mature oaks.

“It’s amazing that families of four or five or more people can fit in those houses. Some day our home will have little ones running around, too, huh?”

She sat there stoic, which was odd. Katrina had always said she wanted children. She didn’t answer.

“What, it sounds like maybe you don’t want kids? Did you change your mind about that?”

“It’s just a bad time for me,” she said.

They had purchased their home with kids in mind. Being in their mid-thirties, they couldn’t wait much longer to start a family. Until then, they’d continued playing it safe with various forms of birth control.

“The restaurant, right?” he asked. “Too tough juggling kids and a job.”

“Just shut up.” She pouted and looked out of the window. “It’s just so frustrating there, like a treadmill, day and night. I never get a break. I wish you’d sell more books.”

“Now that’s it,” he said. “The number of books I sell? Not the restaurant and how it’s dominated your life for the last year.” Katrina’s Place, her Bohemian restaurant in downtown Iroquois, was one of the first nice eating spots available to the citizens of Maple Creek. That’s unless you count Sonic Burger on Santa Fe, the Taste Freeze on K-7, and Sergio’s, where they were headed. Truth be known, Katrina’s Place only had a signature goulash dish to justify the Bohemian designation. Otherwise, the menu offered the usual American fare to attract the folks who had bought homes in Maple Creek after relocating from Kansas City, Chicago, St. Louis, and Minneapolis.

“You just need an assistant manager,” Mark said. “Maybe bump up Jose.

She shook her head. “You always have the answers, don’t you, Mark? If you’d been listening to me over the last ten months, you’d know I can’t afford an assistant manager yet. I’ve said it over and over. Listen—I know other people can. You’re just so focused on your writing that you don’t have enough energy for me.”

They pulled into the lot of Sergio’s. Because they loved the pasta and the marinara sauce, they frequented the place. They walked across the lot, freshly black-topped.

“Can we just not fight anymore?” he said. “Change the subject?”

“OK, we can try. This feels so much better than the gravel!” Katrina said. “The black-top is so much smoother. And at night it’s cool to the touch.”

As usual, Katrina was wearing one of her many ankle bracelets with barefoot sandals, called “Maui snow boots,” that consisted of an island design on a piece of fabric stretched

across the top of her feet, leaving her soles bare. They were affixed with thin leather tongs that wrapped from her second toes to the back of her ankles.

“I’m surprised you don’t have major calluses from going barefoot everywhere,” Mark said.

“That lotion from Maui keeps ‘em pretty.” She posed, stretching her willowy legs and waving her right foot.

Mark hugged her close. “I’m sorry about today. I’ll listen better. I promise.”

“Oh, Mark, you always say that, but it never makes a difference.” She scruffed his hair. “It’s action that counts.”

They walked into the restaurant, waved to Sergio, behind the counter, and took their favorite table around the corner to the left. The place was furnished in light maple, decorated with vines strung from trellises on the ceiling and mounted on the walls. The ceiling fans added atmosphere and, with the air conditioning, a nice cooling effect on a balmy late spring evening. Each table, polished maple on a single chrome pedestal, sat four customers.

Sergio walked up. “So, how are the Sterlings tonight?”

“Just fine, Sergio,” Mark said. “We’ll have the usual.”

“Prego! Katrina, how goes it down the street?” Sergio asked. He wrote their order down.

“Picking up, I think. How ‘bout you?”

“I think more newcomers are finding us.” Sergio laughed. “It’s a tough business, no? Especially here in town.” He walked away, laughing.

“I love your cushy lips,” Mark said.

She frowned. “When was the last time you kissed me? Really kissed me.”

“Not for a while, I guess,” he said. “But I could look at them and kiss them all night long.”

She fluttered her long lashes.

“Promises, promises.”

“I like your eyes, too.” He always made a big deal about her eyes and how their pale green contrasted with her curly, amber hair. “And your eastern European look.”

“The last time you said that, you called me an eastern European cleaning lady,” she said.

He laughed. “Well, as I remember, that day you looked a little like that.”

She snickered, “Gee thanks, you suave-ay dude.”

“I try.” Mark smiled, picked up her hand, and kissed it.

“Sure, you do. But—”

“But what?” he asked.

“The listening thing.”

“That again?”

“It’s just that you’re always buried in your writing, so I never feel that you’re really listening to me. I’m real life, not some story.” She pouted in her familiar way: bottom lip quivering, on the verge of tears.

“Maybe we should have a regular weekly talk so you can get all this stuff off your chest.

What do you think?”

“That might work—my day in court. This week we can start. I have something I need to talk to you about.” She sniffled. “OK?” She reached across the table and teasingly rubbed his head. “I love your scruffy brown hair and British look. I wish it were that simple.”

“Oh, Katrina. I promise to listen more.” He hung his head. “I guess I haven’t tried hard enough, especially since we moved here and you opened the restaurant.”

Just then, two muffled rings came from her purse. She reached in, pulled out a little flip

phone, and opened it. “Katrina Sterling?”

She listened. “Who? Laura Saeks? Right now?” She stood and motioned outside. “Mark, I’ll be right back.”

“What’s up?”

“Some vendor. I just have to go outside for a sec and take this call without the people talking in the background.”

“Please don’t be lon—”

Katrina was already up and scampering for the front door.

*Probably a stupid sales pitch from some vendor*, he thought. She often took calls from the staff or associates when she was supposed to be at home, playing uninvolved owner. Her usual solution for not having the calls interfere with their lives was disappearing for ten minutes. He watched her run out and could see her through the window, listening to the cell phone and gesturing. Suddenly, she looked angry as she started waving her hands.

He looked down at a few new dessert items Sergio had handwritten on a little card on the table. *He sure has nice handwrit—*

At that moment, he heard a screech of tires. He looked out the front window and saw a familiar souped-up car race by from left to right. His heart skipped a beat. He instantly heard a scream and a thump. The souped-up car—it looked like a neighbor kid’s—Randy Kravits’—reappeared, racing in reverse now. Then, it screeched again and took off, swerving through the parking lot, burning rubber. At that point, he clearly saw Randy Kravits’ flying blond hair and face. He had seen the boy race up and down 111th Lane during late afternoons on “The Row”, so there was no mistaking him.

Mark heard a commotion at the front of the restaurant and saw a few of the other guests leave

their tables. His heart did a flip-flop as he raced to the front of the restaurant. A mumbling crowd had already gathered at the door. He felt panicky as he pushed through the group. He gasped when he saw Katrina lying motionless, blood oozing from gashes on her forehead and mid-section.

“Katrina!” he yelled. He pushed people out of the way and rushed to her side. He knelt, rolled her over completely on her back, and felt for a pulse at her neck. Nothing! “Oh, Katrina. How could he have done this to you? My God! Call an ambulance!”

Sergio pushed through the crowd. “Mark! This is so awful! Somebody call the police and ambulance!” Flavio, Sergio’s chef and night manager, yelled from inside the restaurant that the police and paramedics were already on their way.

Sergio walked up to Mark. “Here, my friend. Stand aside till they get here.” He pulled at Mark’s arm, lifting him, holding him hard, and shaking him. “Just hang on. She’ll be OK.” Both Mark and Sergio mumbled indistinct protests at what had just happened. The crowd behind them had quickly grown to include the patrons of Mick’s Tap, two doors down. They all stood there, frozen in shock, gawking at Katrina’s still body and the accumulating blood.

A few minutes later, an ambulance and one black-and-white Iroquois police car pulled into the lot, lights blinking. A second police car immediately followed. They parked close to Katrina’s body. One paramedic jumped out of the ambulance with a stethoscope around his neck. He knelt by Katrina and put the end of the stethoscope on her neck, then her chest, each for a few seconds. Another paramedic ran up. “Well, Jim, what’s it look like?”

Jim only shook his head. Mark welled up. He gasped for air.

“Oh, Mark,” Sergio called. “This cannot be. This cannot be.” He hugged Mark again.

Mark stared at Katrina’s body, lying in a pool of blood. “I can’t believe this.”