

REFUGE *on*  
CRESCENT  
HILL

A NOVEL

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*Refuge on Crescent Hill: A Novel*

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The glass door was locked, but that didn't stop Camden Bristow from yanking on the handle. The imposing desk on the other side of the glass was vacant, and the receptionist who usually greeted her had disappeared. Behind the desk, the *Fount Magazine* logo mocked her, whispering that the money she so desperately needed had disappeared as well.

She pounded on the glass one last time, but no one came to the door.

Turning, she moved to a row of windows on the far side of the elevator. Sixteen stories below, swarms of people bustled toward their next appointment. Someplace they needed to be.

Not long ago, she'd been rushing too, up and down Park Avenue to attend meetings at ad agencies and various magazines . . . including the suite of offices behind her.

Whenever the photo editor at *Fount* needed the most poignant pictures for his magazine, he called her, and nothing stopped her from capturing what he needed for the next edition. Human rights. Natural disasters. Labor disputes. She'd dedicated the past five years to responding to Grant Haussen's calls, but after she came back from Indonesia two months ago, he stopped contacting her.

She'd e-mailed him the pictures of the earthquake's aftermath along with her regular invoice of fees and expenses. He'd used the pictures in the next issue, but apparently discarded the invoice. She never received a check, and he didn't return even one of her many calls.

A few years ago, she wouldn't have worried as much about the money—those days her phone rang at all hours with freelance photography assignments—but her clients slashed their budgets last fall and were using stock photos or buying photographs from locals. The results

weren't as compelling as a professional's work, but keeping the lights on—the rent paid—trumped paying for the best photography.

Her clients may be making rent, but she hadn't been able to pay hers for two months. Her savings account was depleted, and the income from her Indonesia shoot was supposed to appease her landlord. Even though she hadn't heard from Grant Haussen, she held out hope that she might at least recoup the expenses for her trip so she could pay off the whopping flight and hotel charges on her credit card.

All hope shattered when she read the morning's headline.

FOUNT MAGAZINE DECLARES BANKRUPTCY

Others may have skimmed past this article, but the news stunned her. Three hours ago, she had left her studio apartment and started walking to the Reinhold Building in Midtown. A few staff members might remain at the *Fount* office, packing things up, or if there were some sort of bankruptcy proceedings . . . maybe she could collect a few thousand dollars. Just enough to pay a portion of her bills while she tried to find more work.

It appeared that no one had stuck around for the aftermath.

The elevator dinged behind her, and she turned away from the windows and watched a skinny man in overalls push a mop and bucket into the hallway. He was at least two inches shorter than her five foot six.

She forced herself to smile, but he didn't smile back. She pointed at the office door. "I need to find someone from the magazine."

He grunted as he dipped his mop into the gray water and wrung it out. Shoving her fists into the pockets of her long jacket, she stepped toward him. "They owe me money."

"You and half this dadgum town."

"Yes, but—"

"They ran outta here so fast last night that the rubber on their shoes was smokin'." He flopped the mop onto the tile floor and water spread toward his boots. "I'd bet good money that they ain't comin' back."

Camden slumped against the window. Even if she were able to track down Grant, it wasn't like he would personally write her a check for money the magazine owed. He was probably out hunting for a job already, or maybe he was stretched out on his couch watching *Seinfeld* reruns, enjoying the luxury of not having to report for duty. He could collect unemployment while he scrolled Internet sites for a new gig.

Unfortunately, freelancers earned no unemployment.

The janitor pushed the mop across the tile in straight strokes like he was painting instead of cleaning it, taking pride in his work.

She understood. At one time she had been proud of her work too. There was nothing more exhilarating than flying off to a country rocked by tragedy and immersing herself into an event that most people only read about. She was on-site to see the trauma, feel the aftershocks, though she never allowed herself to get personally involved. It was her job to record the crisis so others could help with the recovery.

Because of her travels, she hadn't accumulated much stuff over the years. All she needed to do her job was her camera equipment and laptop. Her landlord furnished her flat before she moved in, and for the almost five years she'd lived there, the apartment and everything in it felt like hers. It was the longest she'd lived in one place her entire life.

But tonight, her landlord was changing the locks. Someone else had rented her home.

The man pushed his mop by her. She couldn't blame him for his indifference. This city was full of people who needed a job—he was probably doing everything he could to keep his.

She would mop floors if she had to. Or scrub toilets. It wouldn't pay enough for her to make rent, but maybe it would keep her from having to contact her mom and beg for cash.

She hopped over the wet trail left by the mop and stepped into the elevator.

Her landlord said she had until five o'clock to pack her stuff and vacate the building. The little credit she had left on her card wouldn't pay for a week in a Manhattan hotel. And the few friends she'd made when she wasn't traveling were struggling as much as she was. One of them might let her sleep on a couch, but she'd be expected to help with rent.

The elevator doors shut, and she punched the button for the lobby.

Where was she supposed to go from here?



The town hall basement smelled like burned coffee and tobacco. The navy carpet had faded to a dull gray, and the dais at the front of the room

was scuffed with shoe marks. Five men and two women sat behind a table on the platform—the bimonthly summit of Etherton’s City Council.

As the town mayor, Louise Danner presided over the city council from the middle chair. Her hoop earrings jangled below the signature Bic pen she propped behind her left ear. Copper-colored bangs veiled her smudged, penciled eyebrows.

Three steps below Louise’s chair, Alex Yates drummed his fingers on a stack of proposals and tried to listen as Evan Harper begged the councilors to let him tear down the barn on his property and replace it with a guesthouse.

In the eight months since he’d moved to Etherton, Alex learned that Louise Danner was almost as permanent a fixture in Etherton as the town hall. Within days of him taking this job, she told him exactly how she became mayor over the eleven thousand people in their town.

She had been born in a small house off Main Street and reigned as valedictorian over Etherton High’s class of ’67. Armed with a degree from Marietta, she returned home after graduation and worked in several businesses until she secured the job of hospital administrator. Louise served on almost every town committee for the next thirty years, from historical preservation to the garden club, but when she landed the mayoralty almost eight years ago, she dropped anchor.

She’d spent a boatload of money to retain her position during the last election—some said she bought her seat. With the state of the town’s economy, she would have to fight to keep her job when voters went to the polls in five months.

Alex rechecked the time on his phone. It was almost lunchtime, and Evan Harper was still pleading his case. Alex saw the dilapidated barn every morning on the short drive to his office. Guesthouse or no guesthouse, he agreed with Evan—someone needed to put the structure out of its misery. A hearty gust of wind would end its life if the council wouldn’t approve demolition.

Alex stifled a yawn as Evan named all the people who could stay in the guesthouse including his wife’s elderly parents and his daughter’s college friends. Apparently, no one had told the man he couldn’t get his way by filibustering city council. If the mayor didn’t curtail Evan’s speech, he’d probably pull out the local phone book and read until the councilors adjourned

for lunch. But once they walked out of the room, they wouldn't reconvene for two more weeks.

Alex couldn't wait that long for approval. He needed an answer today.

For the past month, he'd quietly courted the owner of the ten-acre property at the edge of town—part of the old Truman farm. If the council concurred, the owner was ready to sell the land and farmhouse for a pittance. The town could buy it and use the property to help with their plans to revitalize the local economy.

Alex caught the mayor's eye and tapped his wrist.

"Thank you." Louise interrupted Evan before he finished listing off every construction supply he'd purchased for the guesthouse. "I think that is all the information we need to make a decision."

Evan plucked another piece of paper from his stack. "But I haven't read the neighborhood petition."

"We appreciate all the time and thought you've put into this, Evan." Louise propped her chin up with her knuckles. "Have a seat and we'll let you know if we have any other questions."

Evan sat on the wooden folding chair at the end of the row, and Alex leaned back as the council began discussing the hot issue of preservation versus progress.

Most of the councilors were successful business leaders and attorneys, passionate in either their pro-growth or anti-development stance. Today Alex needed to convince them that voting yes on his proposal would commemorate the town's history and lay the foundation for their legacy while generating new revenue and development.

Alex glanced at his phone. If it took the councilors forty minutes to decide the fate of a rickety barn, how long would it take them to make a decision on his proposal?

When he parted ways with corporate mania last year, he thought he'd left behind the constricting strands of red tape that kept him from doing his job, but he'd learned that Etherton's residents, along with the city council, rode the high of debate until they were forced to vote. Sometimes the debate lasted weeks, or even months.

Edward Paxton led the charge against development. He didn't want *his* town to change—nor did he want Alex involved with any of the town's business. Rumor had it that he wanted his grandson, Jake, to take the

economic development position that Louise had created last spring to solicit new business. The only problem was that no one else on the council wanted Jake Paxton to work for the town, and now Edward held a personal vendetta against him for stealing his grandson's job.

At least the mayor was on his team. She'd gambled when she hired him, but he assured her and the council that he'd deliver. On their terms.

After almost an hour of discussion, Louise called for a vote, and Evan smacked his knees when they approved his guesthouse with a 4-3 vote. He saluted the row of councilors as he rushed out, probably on his way to rent an excavator. Alex guessed the barn would be in a heap when he drove home tonight.

He sighed. *If only getting the council to approve a project was always this easy . . .*

Etherton needed the tax revenue from new businesses to fix its brick streets, increase the police force, and build a high school. The city's officials expected Alex to find a way to merge their small town charm with big city business.

Blending these two ideals was no small feat. Not long after he moved to Etherton, he worked a deal to build a WalMart Supercenter on a piece of farm property at the edge of town. Some towns didn't want a WalMart, but since Etherton's local economy had tanked, he thought most of the locals would welcome the store. After all, most of them drove forty-five minutes each week to visit the WalMart in Mansfield, and this would bring discount clothes, groceries, car care, and—most importantly—jobs to their back door.

He was wrong.

When the council voted last December, residents of Etherton packed town hall, a chorus of dissension over why their town couldn't bear the weight of a conglomerate. The icy room turned hot as tempers flared. Small business owners threatened to overthrow the seats of every council member who supported the proposal.

In the end, the council rejected his plan. The town desperately needed the revenue and the jobs, but apparently not enough to put out the welcome mat for a mega-store. A local farmer bought the field to plant corn, and Etherton missed out on the much-needed sales tax that would flood into Fredericktown when Wal-Mart opened its doors there this fall.

The council told him they wanted new business, but they wanted something quaint that would fit the town's celebration of all things old. It was a hard task—but he'd found the perfect solution. If the residents were willing to risk a little, he was ready to deliver both quaint and classy . . . wrapped up in a pretty package and tied together with a sound financial bow.

Louise slid the pen out from behind her ear and tapped it on the table. She dismissed the few people in the audience, explaining that the rest of the meeting was a closed session, and then she pointed at him. "You're up, Alex."

He straightened his tie and stood to face the councilors. It was about to get hot again.

## CHAPTER TWO

Six o'clock was the wrong hour to cross the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey. Horns honked on every side of Camden's car, as if the noise could prod the traffic forward, and she massaged her temples to rub away the stress that came whenever she drove her old Miata out of the parking garage and attempted to escape Manhattan. Usually she had an idea where she was heading—upstate New York or Long Island—but tonight she was driving until she found a cheap hotel. Very cheap.

Four hundred and fifty-six dollars would max her MasterCard, and when her credit ran out . . . she didn't want to think about what would happen then.

If her father were still alive, he'd reprimand her for flushing her finances down the toilet. Timothy Bristow had been a successful businessman in Columbus, Ohio, and as far as she knew, never had trouble with money. When he died, he'd left behind a couple million for his second wife. Camden was eleven when he passed away. She didn't know much about wills at the time. She just missed her dad.

Camden's mother never forgave her ex-husband for leaving both her and her daughter out of the will, but Camden understood. Her mother spent money faster than her father saved it. Any money left behind for Camden would be long gone by now.

When requests for work were pouring in, Camden tucked ten percent of every check she received into savings. Like her father would have done. And, after a few years, she'd built up a healthy rainy-day fund.

Problem was, she'd anticipated a rainy day . . . not a torrential storm. New York City was brutal on contingency funds.

Her savings account emptied in six months. She could still sell what

was left of her camera equipment, but without it, she had no hope of getting back on her feet . . . and she wouldn't receive even close to what she paid for it. The Miata could sell for three or four thousand dollars—she probably should have sold it months ago—but it was her only ticket out of town. And when she reached the limit on her MasterCard, it might be her only place to sleep.

She could call her mother to ask for money, but if she called, her mother would pass the phone to her latest boyfriend—a retired egomaniac living outside Madrid. Camden would rather sleep in a shelter than grovel to him. The boyfriend might pay her way to Spain, but then what? She'd spent most of her life tagging along behind her mother from boyfriend to boyfriend, country to country.

If she followed her mother back to Europe, she had no doubt she would get trapped in the drama and instability again. Her mother loved her, but she'd never been able to take care of herself or her daughter without help. Even though they might throw some cash her way, Camden refused to ask her mother's boyfriends to help her as well.

Her car crept forward a few feet, and she glanced between the steel braces on the tower beside her. The sun glistened off the Hudson River, sparkling against the backdrop of industrial buildings and smokestacks.

No matter where she traveled, there always seemed to be a glimmer of beauty in even the most dire of situations. She'd spent her life searching for beauty and hope in other people's lives. Now she just needed to find it for herself.

She squeezed the steering wheel, staring at the taillights in front of her.

Desperation was a feeling she despised. From age eighteen, she had been independent. Self-sufficient. After high school, she said goodbye to her mother and her mother's latest boyfriend in London and flew to New York.

Photography had been her passion since her father had sent her a Kodak Fun Saver for her eighth birthday. In New York, she'd found work as a photographer's assistant, and she'd taken pictures of families—hundreds of them. Her boss preferred shooting the pictures inside the family's house instead of the studio, because the home reflected the character of the family. The colors. The art on the walls. The style of furniture. Camden could feel the warmth of a happy family or the stale coolness of a family who didn't get along. They didn't tell these families, of course, but they always

recommended the unhappy ones have their pictures taken in the studio. Her family would have been among those whom her boss would have kindly suggested to appear at the studio.

After five years as an assistant, she began selling her own photos to a few magazines and agencies until she had enough of a client base to make it on her own. And for almost four years, her business thrived.

The freelance business was lucrative, but it was a death sentence on relationships. Most of her friendships lasted the duration of an assignment—guides and translators and other photojournalists who joined her on her journey.

On that last fateful trip to Indonesia, though, the guide she trusted stole her duffel bag. Later she was told that the woman probably sold her clothes but tossed the pricey equipment that Camden wasn't carrying on her that day. The stuffed dog that Grandma Rosalie had given her was gone too; her faithful companion, Ash, had traveled the world with her.

There was no justice. Thousands of people were displaced and wounded; the few police working the scene would have laughed at her request to recover her bag. She never would have asked them to stop their work anyway. Stolen luggage was a very small problem compared to what the locals were facing.

It wasn't about the luggage anyway, not really. It was about being violated by a woman she'd trusted to escort and translate for her. A woman she'd befriended.

She cracked her window for some fresh air, but the surge of exhaust fumes changed her mind. Rolling the window back up, she turned on the AC. Even though she had left her apartment over an hour ago, she was still hovering on the line between New York and New Jersey.

As she edged toward the other side of the bridge, she saw a billboard for *Les Misérables*, and she began humming the lyrics to "In My Life."

*You will learn truth is given by God  
to us all in our time, in our turn.*

Her grandmother used to sing that part of the song from the Broadway musical over and over when they worked together in the garden or took a walk in the trees below the hill, by the river and the cemetery. A very long time ago. Camden blinked.

The summer of 1992, she was supposed to spend with her father but,

once again, he'd been too busy working and traveling to care for her. Eloise, her stepmother, was too occupied shuttling her nine-year-old—Camden's half-sister, Liza—to ballet, French, and piano lessons. She didn't have time to babysit Camden as well. So instead of keeping her in Columbus, her father took her to the same place he did every summer since she was five years old—to his mother and the home where he'd spent his childhood. A place called Crescent Hill.

Crescent Hill had been the one constant in her young life.

During those summers with Grandma Rosalie, she'd felt like she had a home. For two months of the year, she didn't worry about her mother breaking up with her current boyfriend one night and yanking her out of school the next morning to move someplace new. Instead she roamed the hill behind the enormous old house and spent hours watching her grandma paint and blow glass in her studio. Together they planted flowers and picked flowers and then arranged them until the house filled with the scents of rose, hibiscus, and scarlet carnations.

That was the same summer her grandma gave her the stuffed dog, and she named him Ashter after the river she'd grown to love. Grandma Rosalie called him "Ash" for short, after the Bible verse in Isaiah that talked about trading beauty for ashes.

The name Ash stuck, and she treasured that puppy for eighteen years.

Camden checked the dashboard clock. Ohio wasn't that far from New York. A day's drive at the most . . . or an overnight trip.

She hadn't seen her grandma since that summer when she was ten. Her father died in a motorcycle accident the next year, and even though she'd begged to go back to Etherton, her mother thought it frivolous to pay for plane tickets to send her to the States. After all, Rosalie Bristow was her ex-husband's mother, and she had no affinity for anyone related to him.

At first, Rosalie mailed Camden wonderful notes, written on hand-painted cards, but over the next few years, she and her mother moved again and again. Camden sent letters and postcards to her grandmother, with their latest address, and her grandmother mailed her back—until Camden and her mother moved again, usually without leaving a forwarding address. Gradually, the cards stopped arriving in their mailbox.

With every move, her mother had wanted to forget the past. It was Camden who wanted to remember.

As she got older, she immersed herself in photography instead of relationships. Pictures, at least, were permanent.

Her car inched off the George Washington Bridge and crept into the Garden State.

Her grandmother had cared for her, and in every letter she had written, she invited Camden back to Crescent Hill.

Maybe she would let her stay again for a few weeks, until she got back on her feet and found work. Surely, her grandmother wouldn't turn her away. Not like her father.

The clock on her dash clicked past six, and she hit the accelerator as traffic picked up speed.

She didn't need to spend money on a hotel. If she drove all night, she could be in Ohio by morning.



The Bristow family mansion watched over Crescent Hill like a battered Union soldier. Rain had pounded the brick walls for almost two hundred years, and a hailstorm had crumbled one of the four chimneys a decade ago. In spite of the weather that threatened to topple her, the house held strong, braving Ohio's volatile weather like she'd braved the War. And like a good Yank, she harbored secrets deep inside her walls.

Jake Paxton wasn't interested in the architecture or the history of the old house, but he was very interested in its secrets . . . or at least Edward was.

Now that Rosalie had kicked the bucket—and the crowds of visitors were gone—he promised his grandfather that he would search the mansion, top to bottom, in a day or two. He needed to be sure none of the visitors were still hanging around town.

Edward made him swear he wouldn't get caught this time, like it was his fault that the detective caught him selling Mrs. Rolling's silver on Craig's List. How was he supposed to know her ugly platter was worth ten thousand bucks? Or that it was stolen? Or that Mrs. Rolling would try to buy another platter, only to discover that the replacement platter she purchased was in fact her family's heirloom?

Buck Houston had given him the stupid platter to pay off a gambling

debt, and Jake had done what anyone else would do—sold it. If he'd known it was worth something, he would've asked a whole lot more than two hundred dollars. Mrs. Rolling never would have dumped ten thousand to buy the platter off Craig's List. A collector would've bought it instead, and he'd be scot-free.

Instead Edward bought his freedom. Jake still didn't know how he did it, but his grandfather paid the right people a truckload of cash—or at least, that's how much Edward said he paid—to get him out of the county jail. Edward considered it an investment, and he refused to let Jake forget that at any moment, he could put Jake in the slammer.

Edward would make Jake pay for the rest of his life. His only hope was that Edward's lifetime might not last too many more years.

Jake tromped through rusty iron gates that once guarded the gravel driveway. The expansive yard leading up to the mansion was mostly dead grass and weeds. The meadow on the east side of the hill sloped down to a forest that wrapped around the property and hid the Ashter River below. A pond lay beyond the trees along with acres and acres of fields, newly planted with corn.

On the west side of the house, across the street, was another slope. This one dotted with homes that weren't as lofty as the Bristow mansion, or as run-down.

When a tornado ripped across a field outside town a few years ago, its winds tore scads of shingles off the old mansion and delivered a branch through one of the cupola's windows. The tornado damaged many homes in town—ripping apart clapboard siding, shutters, and shingles—but unlike the Bristow mansion, their owners repaired the homes to their former Victorian glory.

There was no one left to repair this house—or at least no one who wanted the hassle of trying to patch it back together.

Maybe if they knew what was inside its walls, someone would try to keep it standing a little longer. But according to Edward, no one knew the most valuable secret of this old place except him . . . and now Jake.

He would search every inch of the house and prove he wasn't the idiot his grandfather thought he was. It didn't matter if the legend was a hoax. Edward was convinced the treasure was still there, and until someone proved him wrong, Jake would try to find it.

He bounded up six cement steps to the lofty doors of the Bristow mansion and rang the bell. No one answered the door so he strained his neck to look into the darkened window of the sitting room on his right. He could see the edge of the couch and an end table through the smudged glass, but nothing else. Eyes might be watching him from the other side of the room, and he wouldn't know.

The thought made him shiver.

He wasn't the least bit frightened of any *person*—except maybe his grandfather—but the supernatural terrified him. He didn't care what anyone else said, ghosts were real and dangerous.

He rapped the knocker one last time, but no one came to the door.

Most of the town had eaten Sunday brunch or dinner at least once in this house, but Rosalie Bristow had never invited the Paxton family over for a meal. At least, not his side of the family. Edward's cousin Dotty Sherman had been a regular over at the house, but she never invited him along, even when Rosalie hosted the annual Christmas party for what seemed like half the children in town.

But now, after thirty-one years of living in this rat hole of a town, he would explore the house on his own terms. There was no one to stop him.

He put his ear to the door and listened.

*Silence.*

He'd give it another day, to make sure all the visitors had really gone home. Then he'd find out if Edward's story was true.