

**NORA
ROBERTS**
HIDDEN
RICHES



piatkus

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*To Mom,
because she loves trinkets,
and a good bargain*

Prologue

HE DIDN'T WANT TO BE THERE. NO, HE HATED BEING trapped in the elegant old house, prodded and pinched by restless ghosts. It was no longer enough to shroud the furniture in dust-covers, lock the doors and walk away. He had to empty it and, by emptying it, purge himself of some of the nightmares.

“Captain Skimmerhorn?”

Jed tensed at the title. As of last week he was no longer captain. He'd resigned from the force, turned in his shield, but he was already weary of explaining it. He shifted aside as two of the movers carried a rosewood armoire down the staircase, through the grand foyer and out into the chilly morning.

“Yes?”

“You might want to check upstairs, make sure we got everything you wanted put in storage. Otherwise, looks like we're all done here.”

“Fine.”

But he didn't want to go up those stairs, walk through those rooms. Even empty they would hold too much. Responsibility, he mused as he reluctantly started up. His life had been too crowded with responsibility to ignore one now.

Something nudged him along the hallway toward his old room. The room where he had grown up, the room he had continued to inhabit long after he'd lived here alone. But he stopped in the doorway just short of crossing the threshold. Hands jammed into tight fists in his pockets, he waited for memories to assault him like sniper fire.

He'd cried in that room—in secret and in shame, of course. No Skimmerhorn male ever revealed a weakness in public. Then, when tears had dried, he'd plotted in that room. Small, useless childish revenges that had always boomeranged back on him.

He'd learned to hate in that room.

Yet it was only a room. It was only a house. He'd convinced himself of that years before when he had come back to live there as a man. And hadn't he been content? he asked himself now. Hadn't it been simple?

Until Elaine.

“Jedidiah.”

He flinched. He'd nearly brought his right hand out of his pocket to touch a weapon that was no longer there before he caught himself. The gesture, and the fact that he'd been so lost in his own morbid thoughts that someone could have come up behind him, reminded him why the weapon no longer hung at his side.

He relaxed and glanced back at his grandmother. Honoria Skimmerhorn Rodgers was neatly wrapped in mink, discreet daytime diamonds winking at her ears, her snowy hair beautifully coiffed. She looked like a successful matron on her way out for lunch at her favorite club. But her eyes, as vivid a blue as his own, were filled with concern.

“I'd hoped I'd convinced you to wait,” she said quietly, and reached out to lay a hand on his arm.

He flinched automatically. The Skimmerhorns simply weren't touchers. “There was no reason to wait.”

“But there's a reason for this?” She gestured toward the empty

room. “There’s a reason to empty out your home, to put aside all of your belongings?”

“Nothing in this house belongs to me.”

“That’s absurd.” The faint whisper of her native Boston crept into her tone.

“By default?” He turned his back on the room to face her. “Because I happen to still be alive? No, thanks.”

If she hadn’t been so worried about him, the curt answer would have earned him a ringing reprimand. “My dear, there’s no question of default. Or any kind of fault.” She watched him close in, shut off, and would have shaken him if it would have helped. Instead, she touched his cheek. “You only need some time.”

The gesture left his muscles taut. It took all of his willpower not to jerk away from the gentle fingers. “And this is my way of taking it.”

“By moving out of the family home?”

“Family?” He laughed at that, and the sound of it echoed nastily down the hall. “We were never a family here, or anywhere.”

Her eyes, previously soft with sympathy, hardened. “Pretending the past doesn’t exist is as bad as living in it. What are you doing here? Tossing away everything you’ve earned, everything you’ve made of yourself? Perhaps I was less than enthusiastic about your choice of profession, but it was your choice and you succeeded. It appears to me that you made more of the Skimmerhorn name when you were promoted to captain than all your ancestors did with their money and social power.”

“I didn’t become a cop to promote my damn name.”

“No,” she said quietly. “You did it for yourself against tremendous family pressure—including my own.” She moved away from him to walk down the hall. She had lived here once, years before as a bride. An unhappy one. “I saw you turn your life around, and it awed me. Because I knew you did it for no one but yourself. I often wondered how you were strong enough to do that.”

Turning back, she studied him, this son of her son. He had

inherited the bold good looks of the Skimmerhorns. Bronzed hair, tousled by the wind, swept around a lean, rawboned face that was taut with stress. She worried, woman-like, because he had lost weight, though the fining down of his features only heightened their power. There was strength in the tall, broad-shouldered build that both accented and defied the romantic masculine beauty of pale gold skin and sensitive mouth. The eyes, a deep striking blue, had come from her. They were as haunted and defiant now as they had been in the young, troubled boy she remembered so well.

But he was no longer a boy, and she was afraid there was little she could do to help the man.

“I don’t want to see you turn your life around again, for the wrong reasons.” She shook her head, walking back toward him before he could speak. “And I might have had reservations when you moved back in here alone after your parents died, but that, too, was your choice. And for some time, it seemed you’d made the right one again. But this time your solution to a tragedy is to sell your home, throw away your career?”

He waited a beat. “Yes.”

“You disappoint me, Jedidiah.”

That stung. It was a phrase she rarely used, and had more bite than a dozen of his father’s raging insults. “I’d rather disappoint you than be responsible for the life of a single cop. I’m in no shape to command.” He looked down at his hands, flexed them. “I may never be. And as for the house, it should have been sold years ago. After the accident. It would have been sold if Elaine had agreed to it.” Something backed up in his throat. Guilt was as bitter as bile. “Now she’s gone too, and it’s my decision.”

“Yes, it’s yours,” she agreed. “But it’s the wrong one.”

Rage sizzled in his blood. He wanted to hit something, someone, pound his fists into flesh. It was a feeling that came over him all too often. And because of it, he was no longer Captain J. T. Skimmerhorn of the Philadelphia Police Department, but a civilian.

“Can’t you understand? I can’t live here. I can’t sleep here. I need to get the hell out. I’m smothering here.”

“Then come home with me. For the holidays. At least until after the first of the year. Give yourself a little more time before you do something irreversible.” Her voice was gentle again as she took his rigid hands in hers. “Jedidiah, it’s been months since Elaine—since Elaine was killed.”

“I know how long it’s been.” Yes, he knew the exact moment of his sister’s death. After all, he’d killed her. “I appreciate the invitation, but I’ve got plans. I’m looking at an apartment later today. Over on South Street.”

“An apartment.” Honoria’s sigh was ripe with annoyance. “Really, Jedidiah, there’s no need for that kind of nonsense. Buy yourself another house if you must, take a long vacation, but don’t bury yourself in some miserable room.”

He was surprised he could smile. “The ad said it was quiet, attractive and well located. That doesn’t sound miserable. Grandmother”—he squeezed her hands before she could argue—“let it be.”

She sighed again, tasting defeat. “I only want what’s best for you.”

“You always did.” He suppressed a shudder, feeling the walls closing in on him. “Let’s get out of here.”