

Becoming One (A Short Paranormal Mystery)

by

Regina Duke

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Kris Watson's unusual psychic powers help Detective Maltzoff in the search for his missing partner, and in doing so, she finds a piece of herself.

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Kris didn't want to say yes, but the detective at her door had the biggest puppy-dog eyes she ever saw, and she gave in, against her better judgment. He wasn't alone. There were two other detectives with him, but they were not his partners. She knew that for a fact, as she knew so many other things, but she was hard pressed to explain exactly how. The two others stood close together, putting space between Puppy-Dog Eyes and themselves. She detected no dislike between them. More likely they were trying to stay far enough away not to be overwhelmed by the pain rolling off the lead detective.

His pain was palpable, and Kris resisted the urge to reach out and relieve him of some of it. But she knew he had to be macho. He couldn't let it show on the surface. Kris didn't have the luxury of hanging back because she'd always picked up on other people's feelings. It wasn't her primary talent, but she was pretty good at it. She could tell, for example, that the tall rangy one on the left didn't believe in her abilities. He thought she was a fake, a fraud, an opportunist.

Kris looked him in the eye and said sarcastically, "Hey, mister, you guys came to me, not the other way around."

The stunned look on his face was gratifying.

She turn back to Puppy-Dog Eyes. He was so wounded, so needy. Was that the kind of man she was always attracted to? This one fired all her pistons, made her long for dinner and dancing, maybe a quiet evening of conversation that might lead to more intimate activities. She shook it off, cleared her throat, and addressed the lead detective.

"Come in. It's cold out there." It was a Sunday morning in February, 8:15 a.m., and the skeletons of the trees were white with frost. Kris turned and went back inside, trusting these cops to have enough training to close the door behind them. She led them into the dining room where her table was piled high with papers and a laptop and cups of cold tea with the strings still stuck to the sides. She started picking them up.

"Have a seat. I'll make coffee."

Puppy-Dog pulled out his shield and ID. "I'm Detective Roger Maltzoff. We spoke on the phone."

She ignored the proffered proofs of identity. "Hi, Roger. I'm Kris Watson. Let me get rid of these." She put the cups in the sink, then cleared a space at one end of the table. "I have an office in the other room, but my dogs want me out here most of the time."

Roger Maltzoff looked around. "Dogs?"

"They're locked in the bedroom. They get in the way when I'm doing this psychic stuff." As if on cue, the Bostons barked from their pillowed prison.

Maltzoff introduced his companions. "This is Detective Jewell." The tall one, the disbeliever. "And Detective Larssen." Balding, pale, no lips, and surprised by how attractive Kris was. That

was so obvious on his face that she didn't have to be psychic to pick up on it. She spoke to keep from laughing out loud.

"Nice to meet you, fellas." She wasn't sure she meant it, but that was the formula. No sense in saying what she was really feeling. *I want to get to know Roger better so I can soothe his pain, so you two go drive your unmarked car around the block fifty times while we talk.*

Instead, they sat down on her ladder back chairs and tried not to look like they were staring at everything. Kris ran water in the sink, then turned it off and wiped her hands. She didn't like the way Larssen kept peeking at her, but it was only strange because it was happening in her house. She often turned male heads, and sometimes female heads as well. She was used to it. She was five-ten, 140 pounds, long-legged, and narrow-waisted, just like her father was. Larssen was getting an eyeful of her form-fitting jeans and snug sweater. He wouldn't look twice at her sister. Mary got their mother's genes. Shorter, plumper. Except she got the perfect skin, and Kris got the freckles.

Maltzoff fidgeted, turned his ID case over and over. He didn't even know he was doing it. Kris reached out and covered his hands with her own. Kris already knew he was in pain, and she could almost see it radiating outward. Now, touching him, the depth of his suffering rocked her in her chair. Her breath hitched, and she squeezed his hands. Their eyes met.

She tried to sound reassuring. "Your partner is still alive. There's still time. Did you bring the stuff I asked for?"

"Yeah." He opened the paper bag he was carrying.

"Okay, before we begin, I know you don't all believe I can do this. But you guys called me, not the other way around. I get calls from all over the country, and most of them I have to turn down. Otherwise I'd have to give up my own life altogether and move from town to town like some kind of traveling circus. But you guys are from right here where I live, and I've been following the news, and I was frankly surprised when you took twenty-four hours to call."

Maltzoff nodded. "I had to convince my boss. He was afraid the press would get hold of this and — you know."

Kris nodded. She knew all too well. Vans of television crews camped on the curb, no way to come and go without obnoxious, pushy, overly groomed twenty-somethings shoving microphones in your face. She pushed a promise into her voice. "They won't hear about it from me."

Jewell leaned back in his chair. His long torso let him tower above the other detectives even sitting down. "What is it exactly that you do, Miss Watson?"

"I become things." She looked him in the eye. "And then I look around and describe where I am."

He snorted, a nervous, derisive sound.

Maltzoff shot him a warning glance.

Kris pinned Jewell with her gaze and spoke calmly but firmly. "Look, if you think this is all bunk, I'll have to ask you to go wait in the car. I need the room clear of scornful disbelievers." She bugged out her eyes and wiggled her fingers in the air as she added, "Your negative vibes create a cosmic vacuum."

Larssen laughed. Maltzoff smiled, too worried about his partner to do more. Jewell looked uncomfortable. "I'll keep it to myself."

“That’s not enough. If I feel you blocking me, I’ll ask you to leave. And you will go without argument. Agreed?” She was civil, businesslike.

He nodded. “Agreed.”

She turned her attention to the sack. “There haven’t been many details on the news.” She was just chatting, giving herself a chance to investigate the contents. “You’ve managed to keep quite a lid on this thing, considering.” Her hands danced over the paper bag, skimming the edges, letting it tell her a few things about Maltzoff. He was a dedicated cop, filled with a desire to make things right. A gentle man in a rough business.

Maltzoff said, “Nothing in there will spill. You can empty everything on the table.”

“If I do that, everything will try to talk to me at once. I’ll take things out one at a time.” She spared him a patient smile.

Jewell glanced nervously at Larssen. Maltzoff was watching Kris, her face, her hands, waiting.

She pulled out a photograph. “This is him?”

Maltzoff nodded. “Yeah. Benjamin Hoff.”

“Handsome man. Who carried this photo?”

“No one. It’s been sitting in a frame on my refrigerator.”

She nodded and pressed the photo between both palms. Then she lifted it to her head and pressed it against her forehead. A moment later, she inhaled it, as if by closing her eyes and breathing it in, she could draw the environment of the photograph into herself.

She opened her eyes. “Who drinks all the beer?”

“What?” Maltzoff looks puzzled.

“There are three twelve-packs of beer in your fridge.”

His eyes widened. “I was planning a party. Before this happened.”

Kris nodded. “Okay. Glad it wasn’t all for you.” One corner of her mouth quirked in a hint of a smile. “Let’s see what else we’ve got.” The next item was an expired driver’s license.

“Hoff’s?”

Maltzoff nodded.

Kris repeated her routine with the license. She took her time. This was something that Hoff carried next to his person. She breathed, calmed herself, and moved deep inside her own mind. She gathered what she referred to as her essence and let it float into the plastic laminate covering. Then she listened. Her goal was to let the plastic talk to her. If she could get it to tell her something about the past, about its experience in Hoff’s wallet, she might be able to psychically merge with it. That was her method, her gift.

She could hear the three men breathing as she worked. She could feel the tingle of Maltzoff’s curiosity. She could also feel the dark cloud of Jewell’s doubt, but for the moment she was able to block it. She bowed her head to hide her face and refocused on the license, and a moment later, she was there.

Kris became one with the license. She became the laminate. She floated there for a while, in the plastic’s past, in the dark warm pocket of Detective Hoff’s wallet. Then she forced her plastic eyes open and looked outward, past the denim of his jeans into the squad room where his desk was. She hovered there. She saw a picture on his desk, a pretty redhead and two little girls, both blonde with curls. She listened with her plastic ears. Dody, Taylor, and Cameron.

Without opening her eyes, she spoke. “Mrs. Hoff. Dody. Is she all right? Beautiful red hair. I always wanted red hair. Cute kids, too. They like those cross-gender names, don’t they? Taylor and Cammie. Cameron. Blond curly-tops.”

The silence in the room weighed on her like a lead blanket. Then Maltzoff said, “Yeah. Those are his kids. Dody’s doing as well as can be expected.”

Kris nodded. “Hoff likes to wear jeans. He’s a casual dresser.”

“That’s right.” Maltzoff again. Then, uncertainly, “Do you want me to talk?”

“Yes. You can confirm or deny what I’m getting. It helps keep me on track.”

She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. Plastic spent very little time breathing, and it felt good to separate and fill her lungs. When she did so, she caught a whiff of Maltzoff’s aftershave, a pleasant citrus scent. She laid the license gently on the table and reached into the bag again. She pulled out a wallet. “Is this his?”

“Yeah,” said Maltzoff. “You said something that was on his person.”

“How did you get this?” But the answer came to her as soon as she asked the question, and she drew a sudden breath. “Oh, jeez. They sent this to you to prove they have him. What is this, a ransom situation?”

Jewell started to speak. “We think—”

“Shhh!” Kris shushed him. “Sorry. Let me see what I can get before you tell me details.” She worked at calming herself. The initial rush from the wallet had her heart thudding. She didn’t want her alarm to show in her voice, but it was an effort to keep it from shaking. “This was on him when he disappeared, right?”

“Right,” said Maltzoff.

She took a deep breath and cradled the wallet in both hands. She caressed it, sniffed it, inhaled it, rubbed it against her face. She needed to feel what it felt, be what it was made of. She let her essence dry out and firm up, like aging leather. She let her mind settle into the worn lining of the billfold.

Kris became the wallet.

“What now?” Jewell asked.

“Shh.” This time it was Maltzoff who shushed him.

Kris heard Jewell speak from very far away. His words meant nothing to the wallet. She opened her wallet eyes, but her human eyes stayed closed. “It’s dark here. The place where they have Hoff. It’s stuffy and dark.”

Jewell makes a disgusted sound.

Wallet or human, she felt his contempt. It shattered her connection with the leather. She jerked her head up and glared at him. “You have to leave.”

“What? Hey, I was just—”

She was adamant. “This is a process, Jewell. I don’t just touch the stuff and abracadabra, come up with a street address. I have to go through the process, and if you’re going to make noises and distract me, or give off any more negativity, I can’t do it.”

Maltzoff and Larssen looked at each other for a moment. Then Maltzoff said, “Wait outside, Jewell.”

“Shit, it’s freezing out there!”

“Wait in the car, then! Hey, this is Ben’s life we’re talking about here.”

Larssen smoothed the waters. “Look, man, go phone in and see if they’ve heard from these wackos again, okay?”

Jewell was pissed off, but he went.

Kris’s hands trembled. She pushed some papers around on the table, looking for her cigarettes. She still hadn’t been able to quit. Nicotine was a bitch. Maybe she’d try those new electronic cigarettes. Better than clogging her lungs. She knocked a stack of bills off the edge and cursed.

Maltzoff pulled a pack out of his jacket. “Looking for one of these?” He smiled at her surprise. “I recognize the frantic activity. Been there, done that.”

“Thanks.” Kris was grateful and pleased. These days, so many guys didn’t want anything to do with a smoker. It annoyed her. It’s not like she was taking pot shots at people with a rifle. She was just getting her nicotine fix. She took the offered filter tip. A moment later, Maltzoff had his lighter out and lit it for her. Kris found the old-fashioned gesture touching and romantic. But she was working. She took a drag to calm herself. “I hate this confrontation crap. Why do you guys come to me if I have to prove myself every damn time? Huh? Answer me that!”

Maltzoff spread his hands. His puppy-dog eyes were pleading with her. “Jewell means well. He’s just covering up because he’s afraid of what you do.”

She frowned and blew smoke. “Afraid? Of what?”

Larssen shrugged and glanced at Maltzoff for permission before explaining. “In the car on the way over, he was saying this is all the work of the devil. Jewell’s spooked by this stuff.”

Kris took another deep drag, then put the cigarette out. “Devil, my ass. If I were doing the devil’s work, I’d get paid for it.” She straightened her spine and took a deep breath, then let it out.

Maltzoff asked, “You ready?”

“Yeah, sure.” She cupped the wallet again, squeezing it in her hands before letting it come to rest between her palms. She repeated the process of getting into the leather. The seconds ticked by. The refrigerator motor kicked in and it sounded like a motorcycle in the silence. At last, she spoke.

“Like I said, it’s dark and stuffy. The place where I was with Hoff. Not just in his pocket, but all around him. Us. He has a headache. They hit him on the head. There are voices close by. Wait a minute, I’ll push outward a little.” More silence. Then, “I’m in a closet. I *was* in a closet.”

Maltzoff speaks softly. “Can I ask questions?”

“Yes.”

“How many different voices can you hear?”

“A woman. High, stressed voice.”

Larssen whispers, “There was no woman--”

Maltzoff cuts him off. “How many men?”

“One deep voice. Real deep. Bass drum. And another voice. Could be male or female. Southern drawl.”

Larssen sounded pleased. “Baker’s from Arkansas!”

Maltzoff’s voice was very close to her face. “We need to know where they are now,” he says earnestly. “Any clues at all could help. There haven’t been any phone calls. No chance for a

trace. They left Ben's cell in the gutter three blocks from the station. No one saw who delivered the wallet and the note."

Kris's eyes popped open. "Note? You have a note? Was it written by one of the voices?"

Maltzoff nodded. "Yeah. They said they're going to kill Hoff by noon on Sunday. Today."

"You didn't bring it with you?"

"The experts at the station are poring over it. They wouldn't let go of it for a second."

"Bring me the note. It can verify what I'm getting."

Maltzoff nodded at Larssen. "You mind going?"

"I'm on it." Larssen got up eagerly and left. Maltzoff leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face.

Kris's voice softened. "You're worried, because you think all I'm getting is the inside of a closet."

He looked embarrassed. She'd found him out.

"Don't worry. Now that Larssen's gone, I should make some progress."

Maltzoff looked surprised.

She wagged her brows at him. "It's obvious you're the only one who thinks I can do this. Larssen is just as scared of all this as Jewell is, but he hides it better."

Maltzoff narrowed his eyes at her. "You don't really need the note, do you?"

She shook her head no. "But it'll give those two something to do." She prepared to continue.

Maltzoff held up a hand. "Can I ask a question?"

"Go ahead." Her voice had a dreamy quality to it.

"You said you become the object and you can see what's around it. Is that right?"

"Close enough."

"You become the wallet?"

Kris's voice lost its dreamy quality as his questions pulled her out of the leather. "That's how I explain it. Obviously I don't physically become the wallet. A part of my mind sort of merges with it."

"And talks to it."

Kris gave a deprecating grin. "All psychics are crazy. Just ask your friends."

Maltzoff made a disapproving noise. "They're not open to new ideas. My question is, how can the wallet see where Hoff is now? I mean, the wallet is here, not with Hoff." He rubbed his face. "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to understand. I'm not doubting what you tell me."

Kris nodded. "I know. Look, if I could explain exactly how I do it, I would. Believe me, I'd like to know. Maybe when I die, they can cut open my brain and find some strange clump of neurons or something. Whatever. But I touch the wallet he carried in his pocket, and it's as if I absorb all the wallet's memories of what happened before it was taken from him. And then, somehow—and believe me, it doesn't always work this way—somehow, I can make the leap from the wallet to the clothes that carried it, and maybe even from the clothes to Hoff's hair or wedding ring."

"Can you read his mind?"

"No. I can't read minds. Would I be living here if I could read minds? I'd be in Vegas making very subtle wagers at a poker table." She rolled her eyes. "Something. Anything."

Maltzoff's features softened. "I think your house is warm and cozy."

Kris smiled. “Thanks. Any other questions?”

“No. I’ll shut up. You go ahead.”

Kris nodded. She took a deep breath and once again merged her essence with the wallet. She tilted her head to one side, eyes closed, listening.

“Three voices. Let me reach out. See if I can become the door and glimpse what’s on the other side. Move into the room.” Silence. Then, “Yuck!”

“What?”

“Filthy. Smelly. Old furniture, old building. Grimy. The woman is pacing. Short, not skinny, but not fat. Dark hair pushed behind her ears. She needs to wash it. She’s with the bass drum. He’s sitting at a table. Music. There’s music. No. The table is an old stereo turntable. Arkansas is on the bed. Dirty tee shirt, ragged jeans. He’s wearing — that’s funny, he’s wearing blue canvas deck shoes.”

Maltzoff said, “He was a merchant marine.” Then, “Is it a house or a hotel?”

Kris shook her head no. “Not a house. But we’re on the ground floor. We didn’t come up any stairs. Motel. We’re in a motel room. One window. Dirty drapes.”

“Can you see outside?”

She tried to push her essence toward the drapes, but the wallet didn’t go there. Frustrated, she tried moving the wallet around in her hands. But it was as if the leather was protesting, telling her that’s not where it went. It went into the closet in Hoff’s pocket. How did it get in? Didn’t it move close to the drapes? Why couldn’t she retrace its steps? Hoff’s steps?

Suddenly she knew why, and the knowing frightened her. She opened her eyes and made a startled sound.

“What is it?” asks Maltzoff.

“They hauled Hoff into the room in a big canvas bag. Some kind of big bag.”

“A duffel bag?”

“Yeah, that must be it.” She wiggled her fingers, looking for another smoke. Maltzoff handed her one. Her fingers were shaking again, and she slumped in her chair. She was reminded of yet another reason why she’d given up all this psychic business. Becoming one with other objects was physically taxing. She knew she’d have to take a break soon. But Hoff couldn’t. She wouldn’t stop until she got more useful information. She had to help Maltzoff.

“What time is it?” she asked.

Maltzoff looked at his watch. “Nine fifteen.”

Kris shook her head and smoked fast. “I have to hurry.” She took another long drag and blew smoke out the side of her mouth. “Did you know nicotine is more addicting than heroin?”

Maltzoff’s eyes widened. “No wonder I haven’t been able to quit.”

“Me, neither.” She ground it out in the ashtray. “Okay. Let me try again.”

“You look worn out.”

“Thanks. Just what a lady likes to hear.” She pushed her hair behind her ear. “Don’t worry. I’m not giving up. I’ll sleep for two days straight when I’m done, but I’m not leaving Hoff alone with these creeps.” She reached for the wallet, then set it back down. It was beginning to annoy her. It got her so close to Hoff, then seemed to turn itself off. She felt her connection to the leather was gone.

“Damn.”

“Problem?”

“The wallet has stopped talking.” She reached for the photo. She’d been so close to getting out of that closet. “I think they were talking about noon. They have to vacate the room, check out is noon, and they plan to leave before then. They want to get rid of Hoff before they leave the motel. Jeez! Who are these freaks? Why are they doing this?”

Her questions weren’t really directed at anyone, but Maltzoff tried to answer.

“We don’t know, exactly. Some of the guys are saying...”

Kris interrupted him. “Are you married, Maltzoff?”

He laughs nervously. “You mean, you can’t just touch me and tell?”

Kris yawned and stretched. “I’m taking a short break. This stuff wears me out.” Her voice softened a bit. “Besides, just when I want it to work, to tell me everything about one person, I get nothing. It’s like, my own thoughts and feelings get in the way.” She shrugged and turned once again to Hoff’s wallet. She fondled it, ran her hands over it. “He really likes this wallet. This wallet has been lots of places with him.” Her forehead creased. “Bad places. He hangs out with scary people.” She tilted her head to one side. “He works the drug scene?”

Maltzoff shook his head no. “Not ordinarily.”

“Strange. I guess I’ve seen too many movies. These scuzzy people I flash on look like Hollywood’s version of druggies.” She stroked the wallet, tried to calm it down. “They carried him into the room in a duffel bag, so the only thing this wallet saw was the inside of that bag. I need to touch something that can see outside that motel. Something that wasn’t traumatized.”

Maltzoff stared at her.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“No.” He looks away.

“Okay, it sounds nuts, but some objects are stronger than others. They have a consciousness, at the molecular level or maybe the atomic level. I don’t know the science. But something tells all those atoms to hang together as a chair or a car or whatever. It’s like cosmic glue.”

“Higgs boson,” said Maltzoff. “I saw a program on the Science channel. It gives mass to everything. That might be what you’re thinking of.”

“Is mass related to consciousness? Sense of self?”

“Does a chair know it’s a chair?” he countered.

“Something tells its atoms they belong to a chair. So I say yes. But it doesn’t matter really. I just need to become something else. After I take a breather.”

Maltzoff nodded. He sipped at his coffee, but it was cold. “So, what do you do for a living?”

Kris got up and fetched a Coke from the refrigerator. “Want one?”

“Sure.” He popped the tab and took a sip.

Kris opened hers and drank half of it before answering his original question. “I find things.”

“Excuse me?” Maltzoff’s face was a question mark.

Kris thought he looked adorable. “You know. People lose things, like jewelry, a lottery ticket. Stuff like that. I find their lost items, and they pay me for it. Then I write about it. I change all the names and stuff, of course.” She waved a hand at the dining room table. “I also run a research service, and I run some websites, stuff like that. Whatever it takes.”

“So, you like working at home?”

“I like working. My parents died a few years ago and left me and my sister a trust fund. I get by on that, and I supplement with this.” She waved a hand at the table. “I don’t have a regular job because I don’t have to.”

He smiled at her, a guarded, worried smile. “Lucky woman.”

She almost smiled back, but the bitter truth wouldn’t let her get away with a lie. Besides, she felt compelled to tell Maltzoff—Roger—the truth. “I work at home because it’s impossible for me to work anywhere else.” She stared at the can in her hand.

Maltzoff blinked at her.

Kris was about to explain when he said, “Oh. Oh, jeez, of course you can’t. How do you—? I mean, even shopping or putting gas in your car, you have to—”

“Gloves,” said Kris. “I own a hundred pairs, I think. I keep ’em stashed everywhere. Purse, glove box.” She laughed, a single harsh bark of dark humor. “I’m probably the only person in the country who actually carries gloves in their glove compartment.” She was finally able to lift her face and meet his gaze. He’d figured it out. She hadn’t had to say it out loud herself. And now she could see it in his face. The weight of her so-called gift was sinking in for him. She drained her Coke.

“Let me try again.” She picked up the photograph. “He’s wearing a shoulder holster. They took his gun away, of course, but do you think he’s still wearing the shoulder holster?”

Maltzoff shrugs. “Yeah, why not?”

She rearranged herself on her chair and leaned over the wallet. “They’re both made of leather,” she explained, “and they were both close to his body. But a holster carries a gun. It’s stronger. And sometimes I get better results with outer clothing. It sees more.” She didn’t worry about whether he understood her this time. He clearly understood a great deal. Kris wished they were having dinner together instead of desperately trying to locate Maltzoff’s partner before crazy people killed him at checkout time. She closed her eyes and very slowly, very gradually, she reached out to the pocket that had held the wallet, then moved upward and became Hoff’s shoulder holster.

This leather cradled a weapon. Out loud, she announced, “I carry a Model 1911, semi-automatic, ten rounds in the magazine, .38 caliber. I like surrounding this weapon. Snug fit. Fit is important. I fit Hoff real well. I’m moving with him along a dark street. Friday night, almost Saturday morning. There’s a ShopRite market on the corner. Parking lot is empty. Two guys, we’re talking to two men. Bass Drum and Arkansas.”

Maltzoff’s excitement colored his voice. “Yeah, yeah, he told me he was going to meet some guys at the ShopRite, to get some information on a case we’ve been working.”

Kris nodded. “I’m the holster, holding his gun, and he’s talking. He takes out his wallet and gives them some money. They say they want more. They say— Hell, I don’t know what they say, I’m just a shoulder holster, but there’s anger. I feel anger, and then we walk with them to their car.”

She was on the street in the dark and it was scary. She felt the cold. She shivered and rubbed her arms.

“They want us to go with them.” She shook her head in frustration. “This poor holster is really dumb. It can’t remember the words. They have something Hoff wanted, and he had to go with them to get it. He didn’t want to go, he was scared. But he got in the car.”

She dropped her forehead into her palms. “It’s a fifty-seven Chevy. Arkansas is riding around in a fifty-seven Chevy. Two-toned, red and white. No, kind of a cream color. Red and cream.”

Maltzoff left his chair and moved across the room. A moment later she heard him talking softly to someone on his cell.

Kris kept talking. The holster was showing her images, she was seeing everything it experienced, and the information was coming fast. “We’re driving somewhere. We left the ShopRite lot and headed west. We’re going west on Fourth Street, past the railroad tracks. Past the ice cream plant. We’re still going. Now we’re passing the stoplight where you turn up to go to the cemetery. But we don’t turn, we stay on Fourth. Still heading west.”

Maltzoff sat back down. Kris could feel his body heat inches away.

“There are motels here,” she said, pressing her fists into her eyes. “Old ones. Pink stucco, and one that looks like log cabins. And there’s one with a horse on the sign. A neon horse. We’re turning in here. Hoff is talking again. Real fast. He reaches for me, for the gun inside me, but Arkansas hits him hard on the head. I don’t know what he hit him with. Hoff is leaning over on the floor of the car.”

She opened her eyes and leaned her elbows on her knees. She was exhausted. “They stuffed him into a huge canvas bag. It took both of them to carry it. He’s in a motel room closet, in that motel with the neon horse.”

Maltzoff picked up his phone again. He relayed the information to his people.

Kris rubbed her neck. “You can go, if you want. I know you want to be there when they find him.”

“Yeah, I do. But there’s something I have to know.”

She tilted her head back to look him in the eye. She could read the question in his face. She didn’t want to tell him the rest of it, but she had to. “He was trying to buy drugs. Not part of a bust. For real. Now those people want to kill him.”

Maltzoff sagged a bit. He turned to go but stopped at the door. “Thank you for helping us.”

Kris dragged herself out of her chair and as she handed him the paper bag, her fingers brushed against his.

“Come back,” she said. “When all this is over, and you find Hoff, come back, and we’ll talk.”

He looked at her with those puppy-dog eyes and almost smiled. Then he turned and jogged toward his car.

She didn’t want to, but she closed the door.

The End

Books Regina Duke and K.B. Woods:

Contemporary Romance

The Wedding Wager (Colorado Billionaires, 1)

The Wedding Hope (Colorado Billionaires, 2)

The Wedding Venture (Colorado Billionaires, 3)

The Wedding Belle (Colorado Billionaires, 4)

The Wedding Guest (Colorado Billionaires, 5)

The Wedding Toast (Colorado Billionaires, 6)

The Wedding Gift (Colorado Billionaires, 7)

The Wedding Deal (Colorado Billionaires, 8)

The Wedding Veil (Colorado Billionaires, 9)

The Wedding Song (Colorado Billionaires, 10)

The Wedding Cake (Colorado Billionaires, 11)

Colorado Billionaires 8 Novellas (Contains: Sunny's Christmas, Krystal's Christmas, Christmas Angel, Love Again, Twice the Joy, Jingle Bell Magic, Jingle Bell Wedding, Jingle Bell Romance)

North Rim Delight (Silver State Romance, 1)

The Woof in the Wedding Plans (Silver State Romance, 2)

Calin's Cowboy (Silver State Romance, 3)

Now and Forever Romances (1-hour reads)

Paranormal & Science Fiction

My Vampire Wedding (Collectors 1)

My Vampire Beau (Collectors 2)

Sugar Rising (Mindflesh Saga 1)

Strange Tales 1-10

Self-Help for Writers: Being Your Own Cheerleader

Loving the Sensitive Dog

Regina Duke lives in Northern Nevada with her little dogs and a piano that demands to be played.

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