

CROSSROAD TO LOVE

By

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Dedication

There have been so many people who encouraged me along the way to finish this story. I'd like to thank you all for your support and encouragement in this crazy venture.

To my husband, Neal, who kept telling me to put my vivid imagination to use, and whenever I got discouraged, would not let me quit.

To Staci and Dustin and your friends, who kept telling me how awesome this whole thing was.

To my mother and my sister-in-law, who told me I could do this if I tried.

To my neighbor, who read the first few chapters of the first draft, looked at me and said, "You've got to finish this."

To the co-workers who listened to my ideas, at times thought I was crazy, and when it all fell into place, threw a surprise party for me to celebrate my becoming a published author.

And of course, to my own Fab Five girls, although there were nine of us, who grew up together and have remained close throughout the years. This one's for you, Mary Ellen, Mary Lou, Ann, Donna, Lynn, Brenda, Linda, and Betty.

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PROLOGUE

It had begun to rain. A slow, gentle drizzle, just enough to annoy the man behind the wheel. "When are you planning to tell him?" the man asked quietly, looking at the beautiful, blonde woman seated contentedly in the passenger seat of his new deep sea mica, state of the art Lexus LS. The automobile was decked out with every luxury imaginable. He had special-ordered it with every option available and had insisted they drive to Chicago for the weekend seminar, rather than fly from Indianapolis. He wanted to try it out on the open road. She had reluctantly agreed, preferring a short flight to the long drive, but knowing his excitement about the new car, she had finally given in.

"I'll tell him tonight when we get in." The woman sighed as she nervously removed the dazzling, three-carat, oval-cut, diamond and sapphire ring from the third finger on her left hand, placing it carefully into a black velvet box. She dropped the box into her handbag and replaced the ring with a small, plain gold wedding band. "Then we can finally, really begin our life together."

The rain was coming down harder now, in sheets, making visibility difficult.

"Well, it's about time. I've waited a long time for you to get to this point, my sweet."

He made the fatal mistake of leaning over to kiss her, taking his eyes off the road for only a moment. In that split second, the world came to an end for the lovers in the blue Lexus.

And just before the deafening sound of crunching metal and breaking glass penetrated the silence of the night, the little girl in the back seat of another car said, "Daddy, my Girl Scout leader said I'll have my badge by our next meeting."

"That's wonderful..."

CHAPTER 1

Katy Barron stood beside the large, four-poster bed in the upstairs bedroom of her charming, two-story Victorian home in Chicago, fastening the latch on her old, burgundy tapestry luggage. Thinking that she should have bought new luggage for the trip, she struggled until finally she was certain the latch was secure. *There, that's done*, she thought as she smiled in anticipation of the week ahead, a week of fun and relaxation, catching up with her three oldest and dearest friends.

The phone on the antique oak night table next to the bed rang shrilly. She sat on the edge of the bed and hurriedly picked up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Katy." She absent mindedly fingered a loose thread on the floral comforter and looked around her beautifully decorated, china blue and buttercup bedroom. She never grew tired of the serenity of this room. The tranquility had been a godsend all these years, her own private haven in which she could hide from the world and indulge her sorrow.

"Hi, it's Lizzie. Are you packed and ready to go?" the voice on the other end of the line asked cheerily.

"I just finished not seconds ago." Katy laughed as she asked, "How about you?" She reached for the antique Blue Willow cup on the nightstand and took a sip of her coffee, quickly setting it back. It had grown cold during her packing.

"Haven't even started, but I should have plenty of time tonight. Rex is working late at the agency again and the twins are hardly ever here anymore," Lizzie replied wistfully.

Katy detected the sadness in her friend's voice. She knew things had been hard for Lizzie lately. She had always been the picture perfect wife and mother, but her family suddenly seemed to have outgrown her, putting her at a loss as to how to spend her days. *Much like me*, Katy thought sorrowfully.

"Have you spoken to Mari or Angie?" she asked her friend, keeping her voice light. She was determined not to be a killjoy on this vacation.

"Not since last week. Marianne was going to check with the hotel and make sure everything was perfect for the arrival of the 'Fab Four,' and Angie was snowed under with work as usual. She had a lot to get done before she could leave the Quad Cities."

"Ever our career gal," Katy giggled as she thought of their friend and her constant deadlines.

"You got that right," Lizzie said. "So, sweetie, how are you doing today? I know it's the tenth anniversary of the accident. Are you holding up okay?" Lizzie gingerly addressed the subject on both women's minds that day.

"As well as can be expected, I guess. Every year it gets a little easier. Bree would be twenty now. It doesn't seem possible, does it?" To Katy, Bree would always be a sweet, precocious, ten-year-old little girl. Her precious daughter, lost to her forever.

"No, but then Cara and Colt are twenty-two and that's crazy too. Have you heard from Alex?" Lizzie inquired about Katy's son.

"He called between classes this morning." Katy spoke proudly of her only son, who had been her saving grace all these years. He had taken on the role of man of the family at the tender age of eight and had given her a reason to live. Now he was pursuing his

own dreams with his mother's reluctant blessing. She knew it was time, but it had been difficult to let him go.

"I couldn't let the day pass without calling."

"And I appreciate that more than you know, Liz. This trip couldn't have come at a better time for me."

"Or for me, that's why I cooked it up. I really needed to get away and put some things in perspective. Like what I'm going to do with the rest of my life." Katy's friend replied jovially.

"I hear you. Now that Alex has gone off to college, I need to start living for myself again. Bill would want that for me." *And he would*, she thought, thinking of the husband she had lost ten years ago today. Katy's mind drifted to the gentle way he always caressed her cheek just before they made love. She remembered him holding her close as she fell asleep in the bed they had shared, the bed that was now cold and empty.

"Yes, honey, he would. Well, I'd better get off here and think about packing. I can't wait to see you tomorrow. You have the gate number where we're meeting in St. Louis?" Liz asked, bringing Katy back to reality.

"I have it. See you tomorrow."

"Toodles, can't wait to see you."

"Bye, Lizzie." Katy placed the receiver back in its cradle and sighed as she thought about the conversation she'd just had with Lizzie. *I'll have to find some time to talk with her alone next week*, she thought as she headed to the sunny kitchen on the main floor of the house to find something in the cupboard for her lonely dinner.

Ryan O'Grady sat down to read the evening paper with a fresh cup of coffee. He glanced at the date, set the paper down, and closed his eyes. Ten years. Where had the time gone? *Because of you, Marnie, no woman will ever break my heart again. But even knowing what I do, I would have never wished you dead.* A flood of memories came rushing back, his mind a whirl of emotions. He remembered the night of the accident and the days, weeks, and months of numbness that had followed.

If it had not been for his younger brother, Shane, asking him to relocate to Dallas and go into business with him, he might never have survived. Now ten years later, the upscale, downtown restaurant was thriving, so much so that they were planning an expansion and also planning to open a chain of restaurants across the country. Life was good for Ryan, Shane, and his wife Chloe. But Ryan had stuck to his guns about women. Plenty of women had tried and failed to melt his cold heart. Some had made it to his bed, but he never stayed with one woman for long, thus earning the reputation as a playboy in the metroplex social circles of Dallas. He had even been dubbed as Dallas's most eligible bachelor, and he intended to stay that way, a bachelor.

His thoughts returned to the present as he glanced at his watch and saw that it was time to go to work. It was his night to manage the restaurant. He said a silent prayer for his deceased wife, and for the man and little girl who had been in the other vehicle. And the man who had been with his wife.