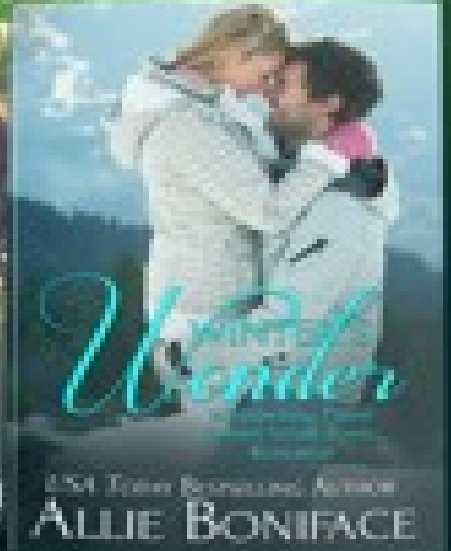
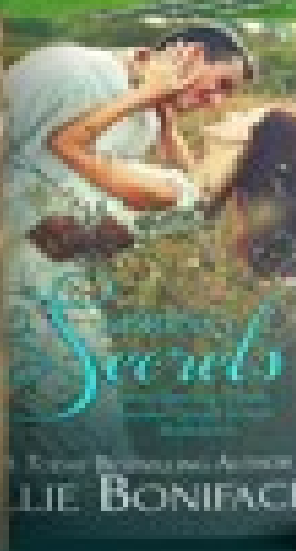


LOVE IN  
WHISPERING

# Lines

Books 1-4



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**ALLIE BONIFACE**

# LOVE IN WHISPERING PINES

ALLIE BONIFACE

[Join my newsletter](#) and get three free short stories! From strangers who find love at a wedding, to big-city acquaintances who realize a flame burns between them, to small town teachers who try and resist each other's charms...there's something for every romance reader in these bite-sized stories!

Copyright © 2021 DFM Publishing Cover Art by Wicked Smart Designs

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

# CONTENTS

\*\*\*

---

## SECOND CHANCE SUMMER

Before

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Volume 2](#)

[AUTUMN ALLURE](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)  
[Epilogue](#)

[Volume 3](#)

[SPRING SECRETS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)

[Volume 4](#)

WINTER'S WONDER

Untitled

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Epilogue

About the Author

\*\*\*



# SECOND CHANCE SUMMER

## BOOK ONE

***She can't remember her past. He's on the run from his. Love may be their only hope.***



Ten years after leaving home, the last thing Summer Thompson expects is to inherit her estranged father's half-renovated mansion. And the last thing she wants is to face the memories of the night her brother died, fleeing as they may be. Now a San Francisco museum curator, she plans to stay east just long enough to settle the estate and get rid of the house. Until she finds it occupied by a hunky handyman who's strangely reluctant to talk about his past.

Damian Knight has been hiding his mother and sister from a violent ex, and Whispering Pines is the one place they've found peace and safety. He keeps to himself. He tells no one about his past. Yet when the lonely, haunted Summer steals his heart, he finds himself opening up to her in ways he should never risk. Especially to a woman who's planning to leave town after selling their refuge out from under them.

As their attraction grows, the past begins to catch up with them. Summer's mounting flashbacks leave her confused and determined to uncover the truth about the night her brother died. But that truth will cross paths with the man Damian and his family have been avoiding for years.

Can new love help them defeat the pain of the past? Or are some scars too deep to ever heal?

# BEFORE

**T***en years old. Everything was new.*

SUMMER SPREAD her arms wide and spun in circles. Favorite red dress. Favorite yellow shoes. She didn't care if Gabe Roberts had made fun of them on the playground. Rachael said that meant he liked her, but that was just gross. Boys were annoying, obnoxious, and smelled bad. They liked snakes and cars and didn't care if they got dirty. She'd never have a boyfriend. Not ever.

"Come on!" Rachael waved from the end of the dock. "You can see the fish today. There are *hundreds* of them." She bent over the water, hands on her knees, as her white-blond hair caught the afternoon sun. "Hurry!"

So Summer did. She ran down the lawn and across the gravel road that wound all the way from Whispering Pines over the mountain to Silver Valley. She'd never been to Silver Valley, but some of her friends had, like Tina Driver and Maddie Ostrander. But Tina and Maddie were rich and had two parents and two cars and went out to dinner at restaurants with cloth napkins and tablecloths.

Summer Thompson wasn't rich. She didn't have a mom. She got most of her clothes from the Pretty Penny Secondhand Shop downtown, and sometimes Dad made the same thing for dinner a lot of nights in a row. But she didn't care. Rachael Hunter was her best friend in the whole world, and if you had one of those, Summer figured, you couldn't ever be really poor or really sad.

Plus, Rachael lived on Whispering Pines Lake as of a few months ago, and that was better than any fancy restaurant or brand new dress. Summer skipped onto the dock beside Rachael. The water stretched out in front of them, deep and blue and forever wide. Summer couldn't even see the houses on the other side. Her father had told her he grew up there, but when he talked about growing up, his eyes turned sad and squinty. Sometimes he stopped talking altogether. Those were the times Summer let her little brother Donny follow her over to Rachael's, even though Donny was five years old and probably didn't even know why Dad stopped talking in the first place.

"Aarrghh!"

The fish scattered as a stick hit the water, followed by a dog, followed by Rachael's little brother Nate, who landed in the water fully clothed. Rachael shrieked.

"Aha! Gotcha!" Nate laughed. He splashed water at them as the dog grabbed the stick in its teeth and headed for shore.

"I hate you." Rachael stuck out her tongue and propped her hands on her hips. "You are the worst brother *ever*." She looped her arm through Summer's and turned her back on her brother. "Come on. Let's go back to my room where boys are *not allowed*."

Summer stole a look over her shoulder as they retreated down the dock. Nate's white-blond hair, the perfect match to his sister's, gleamed wet in the sun. He had a funny gap between his front teeth,

and he teased Rachael a lot, which made sense. She knew from experience, that was what little brothers did.

“Come *on*.” Rachael tugged her arm again, and they walked across the road and up the steep lawn and inside the red farmhouse that always smelled like fresh bread or soup or cookies. It was one of the best places in the world, and in that moment, with her best friend by her side, Mrs. Hunter taking warm snickerdoodles out of the oven, and the whole afternoon ahead of them, Summer knew that nothing in her life could ever go wrong.

*FOURTEEN YEARS OLD. Everything was wrong.*

SUMMER SLAMMED her bedroom door and threw herself onto her unmade bed. She hated Maddie Ostrander. She hated Gabe Roberts for liking Maddie Ostrander. But most of all, she hated *herself* for liking Gabe in the first place, and for thinking that he'd chosen Summer for his lab partner for any other reason except she was smart.

“Summer?” Donny knocked on her door.

“Go away.”

“I'm hungry.”

“Then eat something.”

“There's nothing to eat.”

Summer balled her fists under her eyes. “Of course there is. Stop being stupid.”

For a minute, Donny was silent. Then he knocked again. “Can I come in?”

“No.” Why couldn’t she be an only child? Why did she have to have a little brother who followed her everywhere?

“Dad said he wouldn’t be home until late tonight.”

Like that was a big surprise. “I have homework,” she called through the closed door. “I’ll make something for dinner later.”

But a moment later, the knob turned anyway, and Donny poked his thin, serious face inside. “Please? Can’t I come in just for a minute?”

She turned her back on him and rubbed away tears. “Fine. But don’t talk to me.”

He climbed onto the bed. “Why are you sad?”

“What part of *don’t talk to me* didn’t you understand?”

The mattress dipped a little as he rearranged himself beside her. When he didn’t speak again, she glanced over her shoulder. Eyes the same deep brown as their father’s. Hair dark blond and wavy like her own. At nine years old, he was still shorter and scrawnier than most of his friends. Her anger eased. It wasn’t Donny’s fault her life was a total mess. She flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

“Did you finish your homework?”

He nodded. “Did you?”

She smiled. “Yes, pipsqueak, I did.”

“Do you think Dad’ll let me play Little League?”

“I don’t know.” Little League meant money for uniforms and figuring out a way to get back and forth to practice. Summer couldn’t drive him. She supposed their friends’ parents could drive him if they asked, but they already asked for so much from other people. “I’ll talk to him, okay?”

“Okay.” Donny nodded, and his hair fell into his eyes.

“You need a haircut.” Summer pushed it off his forehead.

“No, I don’t.” He swatted her hand away. “I’m never gonna cut it again.”

“Then I’ll cut it in your sleep.”

His eyes grew wide. “No!”

“I’m just kidding.” She sat up and checked her cell phone. It was secondhand, and she couldn’t do anything on it except call or text. She ran her thumb over the screen. They didn’t have Wifi in the house either, or cable, or anything that pretty much every other eighth-grader had.

*My life sucks.*

No one had texted her since school got out, not even Rachael, probably because every other eighth grader she knew was either at field hockey or football or soccer practice. Or making out in the hallway. Or holding hands while they took selfies and posted them online so everyone who had a real cell phone could comment on the pictures and talk about them tomorrow. She tried not to think about the pictures she’d seen today of Gabe and Maddie doing just that.

“Summer?” Donny patted her leg.

“What?”

“It won’t always be like this.”

She looked over at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, things will change. That’s what Mrs. Targarean told me today. She said even if you’re sad or scared about something, it won’t stay that way forever.”

“Oh, buddy.” Summer pulled him into a tight embrace. “Are you sad or scared about something?” Add that to her list of failures: being a lousy older sister. Even if her life sucked, Donny’s shouldn’t have to.

“Not really. But sometimes it seems like you are.” He sighed and rested his head on her shoulder.

For a few moments, she listened to him breathe, to the quiet rhythm of his chest rising and falling close to hers. “You’re right,” she said after a while. “Things will change.” They always did.

*EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD. Everything was amazing.*

SUMMER SAT on the hood of Gabe’s convertible and watched him balance three ice cream cones in his hands. A warm summer night, graduation behind them, and a long, beautiful July and August ahead of them. Life couldn’t get any better.

“Did you get mint chocolate chip again?” Donny asked from the back seat.

“Of course.” She never got anything else. “Get out of the car to eat. Gabe’ll kill you if you spill ice cream on the leather.”

Donny laughed but obliged, crawling over the seats. “No, he won’t. Gabe likes me.”

“Whatever.” Summer rolled her eyes and took the cone from her boyfriend of four amazing months. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Gabe leaned over and kissed her, taking his time, letting his tongue linger on hers, even though the parking lot was full and probably everyone was watching.

*Let them watch. I have the best boyfriend in the world. No, in the universe.*

“Gross,” Donny said. “Be careful. You might suck her face off.”

“Shut up,” Summer said, her cheeks hot. Gabe just smiled and handed Donny his chocolate and orange twist with rainbow sprinkles.



“*That’s* gross,” Summer said. “How can you eat all those different flavors?”

Donny took an enormous bite of ice cream rather than answer. Gabe slid onto the hood beside Summer. His leg pressed against hers, warm and strong, and she went tingly all over, the ways she always did around him. “You can stay over tonight?” he whispered as Donny trotted over to talk to some other middle schoolers.

“Yeah. I told my dad I was sleeping at Rachael’s, so he won’t expect me ‘til tomorrow sometime.”

“Donny won’t say anything?”

“Nah.” Her little brother could be stupid sometimes, but he looked up to Gabe and pretty much worshipped the ground the guy walked on. Donny would take a secret to the grave if Gabe asked him to.

“Good.” Gabe licked his cone and gave her a long look. “Because I can’t wait to be alone with you.”

Tingles again. Everywhere. She’d never imagined it could feel this amazing to have a boyfriend. She thought about Gabe all the time, from the moment she woke up until she went to sleep at night. She loved the silly texts he sent her, the way his hand felt holding hers, the way he looked at her right before he kissed her. And even though he was going away to college at the end of August, they had two long months until that happened. They didn’t have to think about saying goodbye. They didn’t have to think about anything except stretching out every day as long as they could, starting with tonight.

His parents were away for the weekend, which meant their lake house was empty. Gabe touched her thigh, and she glanced at him sideways. She wasn’t sure she loved him—she wasn’t sure what love was supposed to feel like—but this seemed pretty close. Trusting him. Wanting to be with him. Thinking about how all the strands of her life wove around him, and it was a hundred times

better than it had ever been before. She laced her fingers through his and counted the hours before they could be alone.

*I want everything to stay just like this forever...*

CHAPTER

ONE

TEN YEARS LATER

“He left me a house?”

Summer stared at the solid silver container holding her father’s remains. She’d always pictured someone’s ashes preserved in a fancy urn. Something sculpted or carved, meaningful and dignified. Instead, Hope Memorial Services, following Ronald Thompson’s wishes, had sealed his remains in a six-by-eight-inch metal box, which now sat in the center of Joe Bernstein’s desk.

“The McCready estate, yes,” the lawyer said. “Although calling it a house might be...” He stopped and cleared his throat.

“A stretch of the imagination?” Summer was surprised the thing still stood. Kids in town had always called the place haunted and avoided it on their way to school. Teenagers broke into it, leaving behind empty beer cans and used condoms. Adults mostly ignored it, driving by its thick hedgerow without so much as a glance at the craggy black rooftop.

Now she owned it?

“Well, yes. He didn’t do much work on it. He had a lot of plans, though.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. I haven’t lived here since—”

She stopped. Summer hadn't spoken to her father in ages. She'd never imagined he owned anything more than the clothes on his back. "Why would he leave me a house?"

The lawyer didn't answer.

She blinked a few times, then shook her head. "Well, obviously I'll sell it." She'd left Whispering Pines ten years ago. She wouldn't have any reason to stay once she put her father's affairs to rest. She smoothed her suit jacket and brushed the edge of the engraved business card holder deep in her pocket.

*Summer Thompson, Chief Curator, Bay City Museum of History.* Knowing the words were there, close to her skin, brought some comfort. She could do this. She could go through her father's affairs and spend a few days in her hometown. Then she'd hop a plane back to San Francisco and be done with it all. Within the museum walls, her world made sense. She could return to the business of cataloging other people's lives and studying long-gone civilizations. She could organize press conferences, plan exhibit openings, and design educational seminars for local schoolchildren.

Outside those walls? She lost her voice. She lost her grip. Amnesia had created a world where Summer couldn't puzzle together the last decade of her own life. Even this meeting was a kind of surreal, underwater dream. She could barely say the word *father*, because Ronald Thompson hadn't been one to her in almost a decade. She mourned his death, in a detached sort of way, but she hadn't spoken to him in years. All the plans and details his lawyer had laid out for her meant little. She didn't belong in Whispering Pines anymore, and she wasn't about to open old wounds by staying any longer than she had to.

She took another look at the papers on the table. "You're absolutely sure he *owned* the McCready estate? Free and clear?"

She almost expected a cameraman to jump out from behind a door and tell her she was the star of a joke reality show.

“I did all the paperwork for him when he bought it.”

Summer refrained from asking when that had been. *I would've come back. Maybe. If he'd asked me just once.*

But he hadn't.

“You might want to take a look at the place before you make any decisions,” Joe went on. “I know what you think. It's always been a mess. Deserted since before any of us can recall. But it's beautiful, despite being, well, a little worse for wear. Your father had vision.”

*Your father.* Her lips pressed together, and her heart ached despite her resolve to remain cool and collected. *It could have been different.* But he hadn't wanted it to be.

“Summer?”

“I'll drive out this afternoon,” she said as she pulled out her cell phone to check her messages. “But I can tell you already, I won't be keeping the house.” She couldn't imagine what it looked like inside. Even in good condition, it would be ten times bigger than she needed. And she'd never live in Whispering Pines again. Too many ghosts here. Too much heartache. “Can you give me the name of a couple local realtors?”

Joe tapped his fingers on the table. “Of course.” He paused for a moment. “If you do decide to sell, there's something you should know.”

His cautious tone made her lower the phone to her lap. “What is it?”

“There's an old farmhouse on the back acre of the property that your father rented out. A family's been living there for a couple of years now.”

She glanced out the window to the mountains that framed the small town. “So if I sell it, farmhouse and all, I’m a schmuck who’s throwing someone out of their home.”

“You could never be a schmuck. I just wanted you to know.”

She pulled at her bottom lip. “Could I sell it with some kind of contingency? Let the renters stay on?”

“I’m sure you could talk to the realtor about that. Might make it harder to find a buyer, though. I know you want to get this taken care of...” He cleared his throat again. “...as soon as possible.”

Summer shifted in her chair. Ten years since the accident. Ten years of memories she couldn't put together, of friendships neglected, of loss she'd tried to forget. *As soon as possible* was preferable, yes.

“Mac Herbert’s doing the repairs on the house,” Joe added. “You remember him? Went to high school around the same time as you.”

She nodded.

“He’s got a new guy in town helping him out. Well, not new, exactly. He’s been here for a couple of years. Damian Knight. He’s the one renting the farmhouse.”

“They’re still working on it?”

“Your father paid them through the end of the summer. He left a checking account to cover the costs.”

Joe reached over and squeezed her hand. He still wore the thick gold ring she remembered as a child, encrusted with his initials and those of Yale Law School. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to rush. Take some time to think things through. To process everything.” He paused. “I’m worried about you, rushing in and out and...well, you need to mourn.”

But she didn’t need time. She needed to move on, the same way she had years ago.

Summer slipped her purse over her shoulder. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” The manila envelope went into her briefcase. She adjusted the clip holding her dark blonde hair away from her face, then tucked the box of ashes under one arm.

He tented his fingers together. “How long are you staying?”

“A few days. I’ll go look at the house now and start the process of listing it tomorrow. I can’t stay any longer than a week, either way. I have a return plane ticket booked.” She had museum exhibits coming in. A fundraising meeting the following Tuesday, and an interview with the local paper the Thursday after that. The Bay City Museum had a full-time staff of four and a handful of volunteers that ran it in her absence. Summer couldn’t put the rest of her life on hold just because her father had died.

“You’ll call me before you leave?”

“I will.” She stopped with one hand on the door. “You know I’m too old for you to worry about, right?”

The sixty-five year-old rose, all knees and elbows inside a navy suit that hung loose on his angular frame. “Never. Your father would want me to.”

*My father is dead. She squared her shoulders. And I don’t feel any sadder today than I did all those years ago when he sent me away from Whispering Pines.* For a moment, an eighteen-year-old with flyaway hair, bright blue eyes and a stomach full of grief reared up in her memory.

“I’ll call you later,” she said and waved goodbye.

“Take care, then.”

Summer paused just outside the law office. In the distance rose Sunrise Mountain, the highest peak of all those that surrounded the town. Once upon a time, she’d loved looking up at it. Now it seemed ominous, as if pressing down on the tiny town at its base. She

sighed. She didn't really want to walk down Whispering Pines's Main Street to the corner lot where she'd parked her rental car. She didn't want to see the silhouette of the high school, or trip on the cracked sidewalk by Evie's Parlor where the tree roots always came up, or pass by the Corner Sweet Shoppe where she'd spent so many afternoons over hot fudge sundaes.

But neither could she stay here, talking about a man she'd said goodbye to long before he actually left this earth. Outside, the sunlight might blind her enough to keep the ghosts from taking up residence inside her head again. She took a deep breath and lifted her chin. The McCready house sat only a few miles away. She might as well drive across town right now and see what she was dealing with. She squared her shoulders and put on her sunglasses.

"Let's go get this over with."



## CHAPTER TWO

**E**ight miles away, Damian Knight and Mac Herbert stood on the front porch of the McCready estate, holding ice-cold bottles of water and looking out across the lawn.

Mac took a long drink of water and glanced at his phone. “Summer Thompson’s coming over to check out the place. Ron’s lawyer just texted me.”

Damian leaned against the porch railing and took a long drink of his own. “Guess you owe me twenty bucks, then.”

“Guess so. You called it right.”

“I knew she would. No one would be able to sell a place without even lookin’ at it.” Damian stuck his hammer into his tool belt, slung low across his waist. “So what’s she like?” He’d met her father only a couple of times. Nice guy, but solemn and tight-lipped. He wondered if the daughter would be the same.

“Summer?” Mac shrugged. “It’s been a long time.”

“Not that long. And this town isn’t that big. C’mon. The two of you probably went to homecoming or prom together.”

Mac grinned. “Nope, never. Summer was too good for me. She was a couple years behind me in school, anyway. We didn’t cross

paths much.” He cocked his head. “But she was cute back then, from what I remember.”

“Yeah?”

“Kept to herself a lot, but yeah. One of those smart types who’s good-lookin’ but doesn’t know it. Great body, cute face... Hey, quit hogging the chips.” He grabbed an open bag from beside Damian and dumped the crumbs into his mouth.

“Why’d she leave town? California’s a long way from here.”

Mac busied himself with collecting empty soda cans from lunch and tossing them into a cardboard box. “You didn’t hear?”

Damian shook his head.

“Her little brother died in a car accident right after she graduated from high school. Summer’s boyfriend at the time was driving.” He shook his head. “Terrible thing. Her father sent her off to live with an aunt somewhere near Chicago. I think he figured she’d be better off away from it all, but some people thought he blamed her for what happened. She never came back after that. Don’t know how she ended up on the west coast. College, maybe.”

Damian whistled. “That’s pretty rough. No mom around?”

“I think she died when Summer was young.” Mac stood with a grunt, one hand on his lower back. “Be too bad if she decides to sell this place, huh? You know that house of yours is part of this property.”

Damian dug one heel into the ground. Of course he knew. The farmhouse was a rental, because they didn’t have the money to buy a place outright. They never had. And his mother had just finished decorating it the way she liked.

“Maybe she’ll divide the property and sell the farmhouse to you.”

“Yeah. Sure.” And maybe pigs would get up on their hind legs and dance.

“Sorry, man.” Mac clapped a hand onto Damian’s shoulder. “Not a done deal, though. Talk to her when she gets here, face to face. If it doesn’t work out, I got a cousin with a couple of rental places over in Silver Valley. You want his number, let me know.”

Damian nodded without answering. He glanced over his shoulder at the mountains that rose just beyond the roofline of the McCready house. About fifty miles west of the New York-Massachusetts border, Whispering Pines sat at the base of the Adirondack Mountains. To most travelers, it was only an exit off the interstate, a stop halfway between Albany and Syracuse where you could get some gas or a burger before continuing on to more interesting destinations. It had a movie theater, a grocery store, a school, and a handful of bars. Slow pace, sure, but the people were nice enough. Actually, Damian thought, the people were more than nice. Whispering Pines got too much snow in the winter and not enough sun in the summer. It wouldn’t ever appear in a magazine spread of the country’s most glamorous vacation spots, though Sunrise Mountain was pretty amazing to look at, especially on mornings that gave the peak its name. And the five thousand residents who made their blue-collar lives here were steady and strong, cut from good cloth. They helped each other out, and they didn’t talk much behind each other’s backs.

Damina’s hand tightened on his tool belt. This town had given his mother and sister a place to escape, a chance for a new life, and for that he was eternally grateful. Summer Thompson couldn’t sell the farmhouse. She couldn’t pull the ground out from under them, not after everything they’d been through. He would do everything in his power to make sure that didn’t happen.

SUMMER TURNED ONTO MAIN STREET. Fifteen years ago, Whispering Pines had installed its first and only traffic light out by the school. Now she could see they'd added another, just past the center of town. Slowing for the red, she braked and looked around. *A few changes, not many.* The town had a few new stores, the roads were in better shape, and the city limits reached out a little farther, but not much else had changed. In the distance she caught a glimpse of a new housing development dotting what she remembered as farmland with paved roads and sprawling homes.

The light changed, and a pickup truck behind her tooted twice. Raising her hand in acknowledgement, Summer squinted into the rearview mirror. Sure enough, she recognized the face at the wheel of the blue Dodge Ram. Back in high school, Billy Watkins had been the leader of a group of kids who skipped every class except gym and lunch and spent their days smoking out by the baseball fields. True to form, the Billy of today clenched a cigarette in his teeth and puffed with a vengeance as he turned the wheel and headed away from her.

She readjusted clammy hands on the steering wheel and wondered who else she'd see. She hadn't left any close friends behind except Rachael Hunter. Everything and everyone else had faded over the years. But as she headed down Main Street and neared Whispering Pines Central School, memories flashed inside her head. A wide, white smile. Broad shoulders that filled out a football jersey. A laugh that turned heads. With little effort, she could almost see Gabe Roberts again—eighteen and handsome enough to bring a lump to her throat. Bare skin against hers. Lips murmuring promises into her neck.

And then.

His voice, strained and panicked. His hand tugging at hers. Shrieking tires and metal thundering against metal. Moonlight and blood and then, finally, darkness. Gabe had been there the night everything changed.

Summer's jaw snapped shut and she bit the inside of her cheek. *Stop thinking about it. It happened forever ago.* She couldn't get lost in those memories. Nothing good could come of it.

She turned from Main Street onto Red Barn Road. Here the houses spread farther apart and the sidewalks vanished. Another mile, and a handful of enormous old homes lined the road. Some had been renovated. Most were falling down. At the turn of the last century, they'd belonged to wealthy families from New York City, vacation homes for those who couldn't quite afford Newport or Nantucket. But they'd been empty for years.

*Why on earth did you buy one of them, Dad?* Beyond that, why had he left it to her? He couldn't have expected her to return. And from what she'd heard, his cancer had taken root firmly and progressed steadily, so he couldn't have thought he had years left to live. She took a deep breath as a wall of thick green shrubbery rose up. Spires shot into the air above the trees, and a lump grew in her throat. She didn't want to see it. She surely didn't want to own it.

But as if someone else were guiding her, she put the car into park and slipped off her sunglasses. There stood the McCready house: terrifying, monstrous, and all hers.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

The house was larger and more imposing than Summer remembered: three stories high, topped by cupolas and a widow's walk. The two lower floors boasted crumbling balconies, and ivy obscured many of the windows along the ground floor. A worn, chipped walk led up to the porch, which extended the entire length of the house and wrapped around both sides. Overgrown oaks and elm trees surrounded it. According to the deed, the estate included five acres of property, with the two-story farmhouse out back as well.

*The rental farmhouse.* Summer's stomach tightened. Even after his death, Ronald Thompson hadn't managed to make things easy on her. "Couldn't just leave me a place I could put on the market right away, could you?" She closed her eyes and tried to summon strength. When she opened them again, she felt better. A little.

She also felt rather sweaty, thanks to an unforgiving afternoon sun. She peeled off her suit jacket and left it in the car. Silly to think she needed to dress formally for her lawyer's meeting. She was in Whispering Pines now. Unless things had changed, jeans and T-shirts would do just fine.

As soon as she stepped through the hedgerow, she saw piles of lumber and building supplies. Well, the workers were definitely here and definitely in the middle of things. She glanced at her watch and walked toward the house. Part of her—most of her—wanted to catch an early flight back to California. Out there, she knew who to trust and who to avoid. She had an apartment, a career, and a routine to fill her days. High school lay tucked away in a neat row of photo albums on the top shelf of her closet.

“Ow! Damian, watch it—what the—”

“Sorry, Mac.”

Summer shaded her eyes. “Hello?” Despite the scaffolding propped against the front of the house and the tools scattered everywhere, the grounds seemed vacated. *Didn't I just hear them?*

“I thought I said—”

“I know, but...”

She looked up. Along the roofline stood two men. The head on the right bobbed up and down, and a thick arm jabbed skyward for emphasis. She smiled as she recognized the bushy-haired, no-necked running back from Whispering Pines High's football team. Next to Mac, another head with lighter hair caught gold from the sun. She didn't recognize it.

“I'll take care of it.”

“Well...” Mac's voice faded, and Summer couldn't hear the rest of his reprimand.

She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hello?” For a moment, no one responded. Then both men leaned over the edge of the roof and stared down at her.

“Summer?” Mac wiped his brow. “You got here fast. Hang on. We'll be right down.”

As Summer waited, she studied the house. The double front doors hung loose on their hinges, the glass inside them scarred and cracked. Ancient graffiti had scratched illegible names in the porch railing. The porch itself was scuffed and scarred, and dusty cobwebs decorated every corner. *What a mess.*

She ran one finger along the splintered banister. Yet even run-down and raggedy, the house stood with a sort of grandeur. If she tried hard enough, she could almost picture a woman in hoop skirts sweeping her way down the wide stairs, while a man in a top hat and tails waited at the bottom. *Maybe I could do some research on the place, find out its history.* People might like buying a house with a story. She stepped closer.

“Hey, you can’t go up there.” A strong hand grabbed her elbow.

Summer turned with a start. “Why not?”

“Not safe yet.” He motioned to the steps, and when she looked closer, she saw a missing riser and a deep ragged hole behind it.

“Oh. Geez, thanks.” She smiled an apology at Mac’s assistant.

He was tall, with light brown hair and deep blue eyes, and his broad, shirtless chest shone with sweat. Muscular biceps, no doubt made strong from summer labor, twitched as he reached for an itch between his shoulder blades. Summer swallowed and tried to chase away a crazy urge to scratch the spot for him.

“I’m Summer Thompson” She reached out a hand in greeting. “The—ah—the new owner of this place.”

“Hi. Damian Knight.”

*The one who’s renting the farmhouse.* “Listen, I...” She meant to talk to him about that, but she couldn’t quite process the words as his blue eyes locked with hers. Her heart hammered. Her mouth grew dry. Damian hadn’t yet dropped her hand, which she didn’t



mind in the least. It was awfully strong. Warm. Sending electricity straight through her. *This might be a problem.*

“Summer!”

Mac’s hand on her shoulder broke her out of her reverie. She turned and plastered on a smile she hoped looked normal. “Hi, hey, Mac, it’s great to see you,” she babbled.

“Hey there, yourself. Welcome back. Can’t believe you’re here.” He shook his head and grinned, and she glimpsed the chipped front teeth she remembered from high school.

“I wanted to see the house. I just...” She faltered. “I just found out about it.”

“I know. Your father wanted it to be a surprise. Sorry about your loss, by the way.” He looked over his shoulder. “He did a great thing, buying this place. Wish he could have seen it finished.”

She wasn’t sure it was a great thing at all, and still didn’t understand why her father had saddled her with it, but she kept her mouth shut. Someone else would appreciate it, she was sure. There were a few history buffs around here, and if she priced it low enough, they could get it for a song.

“We’re working on the roof today,” Mac went on. “Got another day or so before it’s done. There’s some interior work to do after that. And don’t use these front steps, okay? We still gotta replace a few.”

She nodded. “It looks...” *Like nothing I would ever want to live in? Like the biggest mistake my father could have made?* She wasn’t sure what to say. She slid a glance toward Damian, her cheeks still hot. She couldn’t think straight with him standing so close.

“It’s a lotta work,” Mac interrupted her thoughts. “But your father paid us through Labor Day, and we’ll probably finish most of the major structural work by then. ‘Course, I don’t know what your plans

are. If you're gonna sell it as is, or..." He stopped and waited for her to finish the sentence. She didn't.

"Can I see the inside?" she asked instead. She wanted an idea of the mess she was dealing with. But her doubt grew as she looked around. The needed repairs seemed overwhelming, and those were just the ones she could see.

"Sure." Mac glanced at his watch and turned to Damian. "You're leaving early today, right?"

"Yeah." But Damian didn't move. Instead he ran one hand through his hair and sent a cloud of sawdust flying. A grin touched his eyes and, for a brief second, Summer saw her own reflection in his gaze. She looked small and dark, a little girl floating on the blue of his iris. He smiled, and in the sunlight, the blue deepened until she felt like she was falling inside it, forgetting who and where she was. Something jumped in her stomach, and her palms tingled. Knights in Whispering Pines? There hadn't been any for as long as she could remember.

*Don't fall for the guy whose heart you have to break tomorrow.*

Mac cleared his throat. "Uh, there's a door around back we can use until these stairs are fixed."

"Okay." She did her best to negotiate the walk with care, but a couple of times she almost tripped over a loose stone or a soft spot in the grass.

*Get a grip.* She tried not to think that her unsteady steps came from anything else besides high heels on cracked pavement. Certainly not from the guy behind her, whose gaze she swore she could feel burning into her back. She managed to reach the far corner of the house without losing her footing again, but then she made the mistake of turning and peeking over her shoulder. Damian had pulled on a faded T-shirt, which promptly turned damp and stuck

to his broad chest like it had been painted on. He gave her a grin, and her head spun yet again.

As he bent and collected some tools, his chiseled arms flexed as he deposited them into a box. Summer wondered what they'd feel like on her instead. Carrying her, perhaps, straight up the stairs and into an abandoned bedroom where he...

"You still there?" Mac called from the porch.

"Ah, yes. Right here." She pinched the skin on the back of her hand to keep herself from drooling. *You're being ridiculous. Damian's a local guy working on the house, that's all. So he's got a great body. And an amazing smile. He's probably got a girlfriend too. You'll be gone in a matter of days. And he'll be packing his things and moving, courtesy of your signature on a sheet of paper.*

That thought got her head back where it belonged, even though it made her heart ache. "I'm coming," she called to Mac, and hurried to join him. Better to get this over with as soon as possible.

CHAPTER  
FOUR

Twenty minutes later, Summer and Mac stood on the landing between the first and second floors. The air barely moved inside the house, and the humidity seemed to have skyrocketed since noon. Summer pulled her hair off the back of her neck. “You were right,” she said. “It is beautiful. And it has tons of potential.”

“Yep,” Mac agreed as he wiped his face.

She turned in another slow circle and took it all in with her curator’s eye. Who had lived here a century ago? The lady of the house, preening before a mirror as she waited for guests to arrive? Her husband, who toiled over the books by candlelight? Had five or six children tumbled across the threshold? Had an army of servants kept it spotless? She made a mental note to visit the archives down at the Town Hall and see what she could unearth about the history of the house. It would definitely help the sales listing.

She glanced into a good-sized bathroom off the main hallway. A claw-foot tub stretched along one side, and built-in cabinets covered one whole wall. Maybe she should let them continue remodeling. It would increase the value of the place, that was for sure. *The second floor would make a nice master suite and a good place to—*

Summer stopped breathing.

From where they stood, she could see straight through the great room's tall windows. Thickets of pines surrounded the house. Beyond that, the tall peak of Sunrise Mountain. To the right, the roof of the rental farmhouse peeked out in the distance. But beyond the roof, beyond the trees, a mile or so away, rose the black iron gate of All Saints Cemetery. And somewhere in that green expanse lay her brother's remains.

Her chest grew tight. She'd never stepped foot inside All Saints. She had no idea where her brother was buried or what his headstone said. Her father had never allowed it that summer, nor bothered to tell her years later. Now he wanted her to live within shouting distance of Donny's grave? Was this some kind of punishment? Or messed-up karma?

*"SUMMER, listen carefully. Can you hear me? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"*

*She rolled her head against the pillow. Everything hurt, from the bandage around her forehead to the splint that held her broken ankle in place.*

*"Aunt Sue is coming tomorrow to take you to her place. You'll stay with her out in Chicago for a while."*

*"But—"*

*"No buts. I've already decided. It'll be better for everyone."*

SHE BLINKED. Was that her father's voice? That conversation—she didn't remember having it. She didn't remember anything from the night of the crash or the three days following. She stared into the

distance as the cemetery gate grew blurry in her vision. Wiping both hands against her skirt, she fought growing anxiety. Perspiration covered her forehead. *I can't breathe.* She turned to flee and caught one heel on the top riser.

"Whoa!" Mac caught her elbow just before she pitched headfirst down the stairs. "Might want to wear some different shoes if you're going to be spending a lot of time here."

"Don't worry," Summer said through clenched teeth. "I'm not." She counted to ten and drew a breath. Then another.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just the heat, I guess. It got to me."

"Here." He handed her a clean rag from a pile on the stairs, and she pressed it to her forehead.

"Thanks."

"So what do you think?" He asked as they descended.

*What do I think?* Summer shook her father's voice from her mind. "It's great. And enormous. I'm definitely putting it on the market. Today, I hope." *It was some kind of weird flashback, that's all.* Her therapist had told her she might experience them, especially in the wake of her father's death. She just hadn't thought coming back to Whispering Pines would jog the past into her present so quickly.

"Let me know if I can help out with anything," Mac offered.

"I will." By the time they reached the first floor, the strange memory was gone. "Any chance you know Sadie Rogers' number? She took over the family real estate agency, right?" She'd asked Joe for some realtor names, but she needed to get this house listed and out of her hands as quickly as possible. She'd figure out how to deal with the complication of Damian Knight and the rental property later.

"I don't know it offhand, but there's a good old-fashioned phone book in the kitchen." Mac checked his watch. "Might be tough to

catch her, though. It's already after four."

"She closes that early?"

"Well, she's got the twins that she's always running around to things, plus I don't know if ya heard, but Manny left her last year, so she's a single mom now," Mac's cheeks turned red, as if he'd said too much. "She's got a lot on her plate," he added.

Summer pulled out her cell phone. "Well, let me call her, at least." Maybe she could get the paperwork started.

"Staying at the Point Place Inn?"

Summer nodded. It wasn't as though the town boasted a slew of choices. Though she would have been welcome at Rachael's, she wasn't sure she could deal with the memories that would greet her there. Better a neutral hotel room with no connection to her past. She Googled Sadie's number, but as Mac had promised, the answering machine at Rogers' Real Estate picked up, so she left a quick message. With any luck, Sadie would call her back soon. The two of them had gone to school together, even shared some of the same classes their junior year. Maybe Sadie could rush things along, work out the details over the phone, arrange for Summer to fax her signature from California.

"If you need anything else, or have questions about the place, gimme a call," Mac said. "Or just stop by. We're here pretty much all the time."

"Okay. I appreciate it." She checked her voicemail. Four messages, none crucial. Good thing. Her brain, already on overdrive, couldn't handle much more this afternoon.

"I've got to go into town for some supplies," Mac said as he headed for the door. "You're welcome to stick around if you like. Just be careful. You have a key?"

“Joe gave me one. Thanks.” Mac left, and Summer took her time surveying the kitchen. A bay window looked out onto the back lawn, a green expanse that stretched to a grove of pine trees about a hundred yards away. She could imagine a breakfast nook here, a table with chairs pulled up close and a checkered cloth on top. In her imagination, children tugged on their mother’s legs while she laughed over their heads to her husband. *A family belongs here. A family with lots of kids and lots of hope and no heartache.*

She pushed open the screen door, made her way down the steps and had almost reached the ground when her foot hit another soft spot. *Stupid high heels.* She grabbed for something—found nothing—stumbled and fell. “Oof.” Her knees met the ground and she wrenched her wrist trying to break her fall. She kicked off both shoes, disgusted with herself.

“Are you okay?” The voice came out of nowhere.

Terrific. A witness for her humiliation. She didn’t answer, hoping the voice and the person it belonged to would go away. It didn’t. Instead, a hand touched her shoulder.

“Summer?”

*Damian.* Something loosened in her stomach, and she scrambled to her feet. “I thought you were gone.” She dropped a quick glance at his left hand. No ring. But construction workers didn’t always wear rings on the job, did they?

“Forgot something.”

His hand had moved from her shoulder, but it left an imprint of heat, and she shivered despite the eighty-degree temperature. *Touch me again. And don’t let go this time.* Her wrist ached and she cradled it, more to keep her hands from reaching out and touching him in places they probably shouldn’t.



“Sure you’re not hurt?” He took a step closer and bent to inspect the wrist she was rolling back and forth.

Summer shook her head and tried to find words. Her skin burned at his touch.

He rubbed it lightly, feeling the bones and massaging the tendons. “Doesn’t feel broken.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. Just having a clumsy moment.”

He smiled. “You get a look at the place?”

She nodded. Her arm tingled from where he’d touched it.

“It’s beautiful.” Squinting, he leaned back as if to take it all in. “I can almost picture how it’ll look when it’s all done.” He met her gaze. “Your dad had a lot of vision. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to know him better.”

Summer bent to brush dirt from her skirt and didn’t answer. It would take a lifetime to explain her relationship with her father to someone who hadn’t always lived in Whispering Pines, who hadn’t known the way her father had protected her. Worried over her. Blamed her and sent her away after her brother died.

“Listen, about the rental house,” she began.

He stuck his hands into his back pockets. “Yeah. About that.”

“I know you’ve been living there for a while. If I can, I’ll try to sell the place to someone who’ll leave it status quo.”

“And if you can’t?”

She didn’t answer.

“I get it. If you’re selling fast, you don’t have a lot of choices.”

“I’m trying to figure them out. Really.” The grass didn’t feel so bad between her bare toes, and she leaned into it for a moment.

“Leaving early for a hot date?” she teased.

He gave her a half-grin. “You could say that.”

Reluctantly, she slipped her shoes back on. *Of course he is. Look at him. Probably every woman in town wants to go out with him.* “What’s her name?” Maybe Summer had graduated with the lucky woman.

“Dinah.”

“Oh.” She didn’t recognize it. “Well, have fun.”

“I will.” He backed around the corner of the house, holding her gaze longer than he needed to.

Summer watched until Damian disappeared into the shadows. A long breath escaped her. On the surface, Whispering Pines seemed the same sleepy hamlet she’d grown up in, but when she looked closer, certain details had shifted in the last decade. A house that towered to the sky. A handsome, complicated stranger who turned her thoughts inside out. Memories of her brother and father that sprang up when she least expected them.

Suddenly exhausted, she headed for her car. She couldn’t wait to get out of here.

SIX HUNDRED MILES AWAY, Theo Braxton drew a sleeve across his mouth and wiped away lunch. “You got ’em?”

Randall Potts, dime-store private investigator, nodded. He slid an unmarked manila envelope across the scarred desk and smiled. “Eight pictures. Taken last week.”

Theo stared at the envelope without reaching for it. His foot jounced on the stained linoleum, nerves getting the better of him. Three years. He’d lived without his wife and daughter for three long years. And now he couldn’t get up the balls to look at what the PI had uncovered. He coughed. “Got any water?”

The man with the hair plugs and cheap blue suit nodded and ambled down the hall. Alone, Theo inched closer to the desk. Closer to the envelope. His heart hammered in his chest. He'd wanted this, after all. He'd convinced himself it was the right thing—the only thing—to find his family and bring them home again.

Potts returned with a paper-cone cup of water. "Here you go." He cleared his throat and remained standing. "That'll be two hundred, like we agreed."

Theo barely heard him. He downed the water in a single gulp and then slid one finger under the flap of the envelope. Eight glossy photographs slid into his hands, and there she was, his beautiful Hannah, smiling down at their daughter as the two of them ate ice cream at some roadside stand. Faint lines had etched themselves around her mouth and eyes, but he'd smooth them away. He'd make her remember what it was like to be young and carefree. If she came home again, he'd give her anything she wanted. Sweat broke out on his brow.

"Here." He handed over four fifty-dollar bills, fresh and uncreased. "When can you get me her address?"

The investigator cleared his throat. "You want that, I'll need another two hundred."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Said you wanted pictures. You want contact info, it's gonna cost more. She's got a prepaid cell number and an unlisted landline. Tougher to trace."

"So just tell me where the pictures were taken." He could make out pine trees behind them and a cloudless blue sky. No buildings.

"You got the cash?"

Theo fisted both hands in his lap so he wouldn't reach over and throttle the guy. "Got a roofing job next week. I'll have it then."

“Call me in ten days. You have the cash, I’ll have what you need.”

Theo got to his feet and slammed the office door on the way out. He was sick of waiting. Sick of wondering where his family had gotten to and how long until he could see them again. Outside, he lit a cigarette and stomped to his truck. Probably should find out if his boss had any work for him, but all he really wanted was to belly up to the local bar for a couple shots of Jack Daniels.

He pulled out of the parking lot and cut off a minivan. The driver honked and got the finger in return as the shingle with Randall Potts’ name on it disappeared in Theo’s rearview mirror. His temper eased. He’d give this idiot ten days, and if the guy couldn’t deliver, he’d go to someone who could. Or he’d hunt down his wife and daughter on his own.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

Damian coasted to a stop outside the soccer fields by the high school. A few hundred yards away, figures in bright yellow and red jerseys darted across the grass. Behind them, the sun hung over the hills and cast sheets of light in every direction. His watch read four forty. Good, he wasn't late. He drummed his fingers in a restless pattern on the steering wheel and let his aching back relax. Closing his eyes for a minute, he listened to the faint shouts from the field. The images of soccer players faded, replaced by luminous dark eyes and long hair.

Summer Thompson. From Mac's accounts, he'd expected her to be attractive. What he hadn't expected was someone with such a steady gaze, such long legs and a mouth he wanted to capture with his own. Something about the curve of Summer's lips made you stop and look. And then look again.

Damian opened his eyes and rubbed one palm against his leg to still his desire. *Take it easy, buddy.* She might be a looker, but she wasn't staying in Whispering Pines longer than a few days. Besides, he didn't have time for a girlfriend or even a fling. He wasn't available, and beyond that, Summer was the reason he might be homeless in a month.

The reminder threw cold water on him. Would she really sell the farmhouse out from under them? She didn't seem cold-hearted, but with everything Mac had said about her past, Damian couldn't blame her for not wanting to stick around town.

A whistle blew. The players had gathered into a knot at the edge of the parking lot, and Damian pulled himself from the Camaro and headed for the group. From here, they all looked the same in their ponytails, nylon jerseys and shorts, tall white socks and black sneakers. Sometimes he tried to test himself, to see if he could spot Dinah before she saw him. He always failed. Sure enough, in another minute, she came running over.

"Dame!" Ten years old and tall for her age, his half-sister wrapped her arms around his waist and grinned.

"Hey, ladybug." Damian bent down and hugged her, damp hair and gangly arms and all. He tickled her ribs and she giggled up at him.

"How was practice?"

"Good. I scored two goals."

"Great job." Damian smiled and looked over her head. Station wagons and minivans idled at the curb, and one by one the players climbed into their cars and waved goodbye. Dinah leaned into Damian's legs and watched them go, and his heart ached the way it always did. His little sister deserved better than this. She deserved a father who'd pick her up from practice and take her for ice cream, a father who'd come to her games and cheer from the sidelines. Most of all, she deserved a sober father who'd carry her on his shoulders and protect her from the darkness that waited around corners. Damian felt like a poor substitute most of the time.

"Let's go." Dinah pulled at her brother's hand. But they'd gone only a few steps when he heard the voice behind him.

“Dinah! Damian!” Petite and blonde, with breasts that always seemed on the verge of escaping her tiny T-shirts, Joyce Hadley jogged across the field.

Damian took another few steps and reached for the car door. *Just pretend you didn't hear her.* But Dinah tugged at his shirt.

“Dame.”

“Hmm?”

“Coach Joyce wants to talk to you.”

Damian resisted the urge to close himself in the car, roll up all the windows and take off without looking back. Instead, he took a deep breath, inhaled perfume and gagged.

In her matching sky-blue shirt and shorts, Joyce looked like she belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine rather than at the helm of a soccer team. She blushed and tucked her hair behind one ear with a pinky finger.

“Hi, Joyce. How'd my sister do today?”

The platinum blonde fixed her gaze on Damian, barely looking at Dinah. “Fine.”

“Anything I need to know about the game this weekend?” Damian stuffed his hands inside his pockets.

“Be at the field by nine, same as usual.”

Joyce glanced at Dinah and took one step closer to him. A gold cross dangled in the low-cut vee of her shirt. “We'll be at Murphy's tonight. You and Nate should stop by.” He nodded and turned away without answering.

As Damian turned the key and pulled away, Dinah leaned out the open car window and waved. Joyce stood in the driveway beside the school. One hand twisted her hair; the other fluttered in their direction. Damian didn't bother waving. Instead he reached over and tweaked Dinah's ponytail.

“Why don’t you like Coach Joyce?” Dinah asked as she propped both feet on the dashboard. Damian slowed at the red light and tried to decide how to answer the question.

“Dame?”

“What, ladybug?”

“Why don’t you like her? She’s always saying hello to you, and you never want to talk to her.”

“I like her fine. And what do you mean? I was just talking to her. She seems like a good coach.”

“Yeah, plus she’s pretty,” Dinah continued. “And she bakes really good chocolate chip cookies.”

“So you told me.” *If that were all it took, I’d date her in a second.* But baking skills and good looks only counted for so much. Once you started peeling the layers away, you found out the truth about a person. All the truth, ugly and whole and real. After the heartbreak of Angie, Damian had no interest in dating. He couldn’t bear to fall again, only to have the world pulled out from under him. Besides, Dinah and his mom needed him at home. Even if he’d wanted one, a relationship with Joyce Hadley wouldn’t fit into his life.

“I wish I had hair like that,” Dinah said after a minute.

“Hair like what?”

“Like Coach Joyce’s. Long and blonde. Don’t you like it?”

Damian grinned and pinched his sister’s nose. “I like your hair just the way it is.” He turned before the McCready place—or rather, the Thompson place now, he corrected himself—and drove down a long dirt driveway. A minute later the barn-red farmhouse appeared. As soon as the engine died, Dinah jumped out and ran inside.

“Mom!”

Damian took his time before he followed her. He straightened the flowerpots on the porch steps and picked up stray bits of newspaper.



When they'd lived in Poisonwood, his mom had kept a perfect house, with blooming vines and a vegetable garden and a fountain in the front yard. Ever since the divorce, though, she hadn't been the same. Doctors called it depression, but Damian suspected that the beatings she'd endured for years at the hands of her ex-husband had caused something deeper than that. Still, since the move to Whispering Pines almost three years ago, she seemed better. The dark circles under her eyes had faded, and she didn't worry so much about letting Dinah leave the house.

Damian climbed the stairs and opened the screen door. Silence greeted him. The door at the end of the hallway stood closed. He stopped outside it and listened carefully. Nothing. Continuing down the hall, he ducked into the kitchen to find Dinah elbow-deep in chocolate ice cream.

"Want some?" A spoon dripped brown spots onto the faded linoleum at her feet.

"Ice cream before dinner?" Damian winked. "Sure, ladybug. Give me the works." He stuck one finger into the open container of whipped cream and dotted her nose with it. Dinah squealed with pleasure. When she dug the spoon into the carton again, he backed away and knocked on his mother's door.

"Mom?" Damian pressed his ear to the door. "Mom? You okay?"

Worry slid cold fingers up his spine. *When did the son become the parent? After T.J. started hitting her, when I was twelve and barely big enough to fight back for her? After the divorce, when she spent twenty hours a day locked in her room sleeping? Or after we moved to Whispering Pines and she couldn't walk down the street without looking over her shoulder?*

He knocked again, and when he still heard nothing, he gripped the knob and wiggled it. This time a soft shuffling moved across the

room. A moment later the door opened, and Hannah Knight peeked out at him. Relief melted the tension at his temples.

“You’re okay.”

She smiled. “Of course I’m okay. Can’t a woman have a few moments to herself?”

Without answering, Damian leaned in the doorway and studied her. Dark hair untouched by gray swung against her shoulders; faint pink circles colored her cheeks. Even the pain and loneliness that sometimes creased her countenance could never hide the huge brown eyes, the high cheekbones, the translucent skin. If only he could erase the emptiness that shadowed her expression and replace it with the easy, dimpled smile he remembered from years ago.

Hannah raised one hand to his face. “You’ve turned into such a handsome man,” she said softly. “What happened to my little boy? Sometimes I don’t even recognize you. I catch myself thinking, what is that good-looking guy doing in my house? You must drive the women in town wild.”

He shuffled his feet. “No women for me, Mom. You and Dinah are the only ones I need.”

“Oh, no. Don’t be silly. You should be dating someone. What about Dinah’s soccer coach?”

*Joyce? No way. She can’t take a hint. Won’t leave me alone.* He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“It’s been a long time since you and Angie broke up.”

Damian winced. He knew.

“I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”

She squeezed his hand. “You know what I mean.”

He shrugged again. Angie was gone, Joyce didn't interest him, and he didn't have the strength to bare his soul to anyone new. But then Summer Thompson flashed into his imagination, and again he felt her soft, warm wrist under his fingertips. He rubbed the back of his neck, and his cheeks grew hot. *Where did that come from?*

"Listen, the new owner of the property stopped by today," he said. Hannah's hand dropped from his. "And?"

"And she's talking about selling everything included with the property, this place too."

"Oh, no." His mother's face lost its radiance. "There's no way we can stay?"

"I don't know. I'm gonna talk to her about it." Damian would find a way to keep them in this house. He had to. They'd gone through so much in the last few years, spent so much time looking over their shoulders and checking the locks on the doors. He couldn't bear for them to move again. "Don't worry. I'll convince her to let us stay." He pressed a kiss to his mother's cheek and backed out of the room.

Dinah stood in the doorway of the kitchen. She held a spoon in one hand and wiped her mouth with the other, leaving a streak of chocolate down the length of her arm.

He laughed. "You're gonna need a bath."

"No, I'm not." She beamed up at him. "Hey, you wanna go for a hike before dinner? Mom said I could pick some of those flowers down by the creek, but she won't let me go alone."

*Of course she won't.* Though the divorce had been final for years, with sole custody of Dinah granted to Hannah, their mother still lived in fear that her ex-husband would steal the girl away. T.J. hadn't shown up. He hadn't called. But neither did they believe that the guy was gone for good. Damian's fists tightened. With a love of liquor and a smile that could sweet-talk the devil, T.J. was a rattlesnake

with a deadly bite. Since their move to Whispering Pines, Damian had made it his personal responsibility to make sure he never got close enough to the girls to hurt the air they breathed or the ground they walked upon.

“Sure, let’s go,” he said as he took Dinah’s hand. “But don’t forget the rules, ladybug. In my sight at all times, okay?”

THEO SLOUCHED in the chair and pulled a baseball cap over his eyes. He didn’t need the librarian or the old guy next to him giving him an eyeful while he was pecking away at the keyboard.

His first Internet search turned up nothing. “Shit.”

A young mother nearby frowned and covered her toddler’s ears. “Excuse me,” she hissed. “This is the *library*.”

*Didn’t think it was the circus*, he wanted to say. He bit his lip instead and tried another search. This time he typed in Hannah’s son’s name. Damian Knight had never been anything but trouble in the years Theo had put a roof over their heads. Wouldn’t be surprised if he was the one who had told Hannah to leave the state in the first place. He scowled at the screen. No matter where they’d ended up, Theo was one-hundred-percent certain Damian still lived with his mother and sister, if not in the house with them, then somewhere close by.

This search turned up something. *Knew it*. Theo glanced around and hunched as close to the computer screen as he could get. Damian’s name appeared halfway down a list of graduates from a two-year college somewhere in upstate New York. Theo pursed his lips and jotted the name of the school on a scrap of paper. The date was almost two years old, but he would bet Hannah hadn’t taken the

family too far from there. He hadn't tried to contact her in ages. She would have grown comfortable by now. Safe.

Theo shoved the piece of paper into his pocket and shut down the computer completely. Next step: finding a map of New York. After that, he'd drive straight from center-city Baltimore to whatever podunk town Hannah and Dinah now called home.

He'd worry about Damian when he got there.

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

Summer studied the papers strewn across the blue polyester motel quilt. Only a few days away from work, and she already felt out of the loop. Later that summer, their museum would have the rare opportunity to borrow a collection of artifacts recovered from the 1607 Jamestown colony. She ran a finger down the list of broken wine cups and cooking pots. She loved reading background material, reliving archeological digs that brought such finds to light. She loved seeing them up close and in person, wondering how many hands had touched them before hers. And yet all the documents in the world could never explain the most important things.

They couldn't explain why a young girl, on a particular day, might have chosen to mix corn and venison stew in her cooking pot. Or whether she'd learned the technique from a Potomac Indian woman or raised a callus on her finger as she stirred. Had she watched her mother nurse a newborn? Had she blushed and dropped her chin when a certain boy walked by?

Summer pushed the papers together in a heap. She reached for the glass of water on her nightstand and wished it held something stronger. *I only like putting other people's pasts in order because I*

*can't remember my own.* That's what an ex-boyfriend had told her once. She downed the water and wondered if it were true.

She'd been back in Whispering Pines for forty-eight hours, and aside from the one strange moment in the house, she still hadn't remembered anything about *that night*. Not that she really wanted to. Her eyes filled as she tried to remember her brother's face, his laugh, the way he teased her about being in love with Gabe. She couldn't. Everything about Donny had become a fog. More than one therapist had told her she was better off not remembering anything about the accident. Selective amnesia they called it, the brain sorting out and banishing any traumas too painful to recall. She'd thought being back here would bring them to the surface, but it looked as though she'd buried them too deep for that.

*Just as well.*

Summer pulled off her T-shirt and panties and flung them over a chair. The sheets, pilled but soft, she drew up to her chin. *Sleep*, she ordered. *A good eight hours of it, please.* This day had worn her out. Tomorrow or the next day, she'd meet with Sadie Rogers and get the house on the market. By the end of the week, she'd fly back to California. And this whole thing would be over.

DAMIAN SETTLED himself into a lawn chair on the front porch and stretched out his legs. Folding one hand behind his head, he yawned and studied the mountains that wrapped their arms around the town. At night, especially in the absence of a moon, they became shadowy giants that towered over the residents. A few clients had told him they were good for hiking, especially Sunrise Mountain, but after almost three years of living in Whispering Pines, he still couldn't

decide whether they soothed him or scared him. Sometimes it was a little bit of both.

His cell phone buzzed, and Nate Hunter's name appeared on the screen.

"Hey, man. What's up?"

"We going out tonight?" Damian's best friend asked.

"Sure. Where?"

"Murphy's?"

Joyce Hadley flashed into Damian's mind, pink and sky-blue and smiling with eyes that wanted much more than to coach his kid sister. *We'll be at Murphy's tonight...* "No. No way."

"Then how about Jimmy's? I'm trying to get in good with the manager there. Word is they're looking to hire a part-time bartender."

Damian nodded in the dim light. "All right. I'll meet you there around nine."

"Sounds good."

"I'm going out with Nate for a little while," Damian told his mother a few minutes later.

"Good." Hannah smiled over the dishes she washed, though her expression seemed weary. "There's no reason for you to sit home with us every night."

*But I would.* He didn't need to say the words; they hung in the kitchen above them, understood.

"We'll be fine," Hannah said, and the set of her mouth confirmed her words. "Go."

Out of habit, he checked the deadbolts on the front and back doors before he left and made his mother promise not to open the door for anyone except the police. She nodded, slipping into her quiet nighttime mood, and Dinah waved goodbye from her beanbag chair by the television.



With the day behind him and food in his stomach, Damian felt rested and more relaxed than usual. He tapped the steering wheel as music poured from his speakers. He headed down Main Street, toward the highway, until he reached a side street just beyond the overpass. Nate stood in the doorway of Jimmy's Watering Hole, waiting. A corner bar away from the center of town, this place attracted the local thirty-somethings more than the drunken college kids home on summer break. *Much better than Murphy's.*

Damian had never really been into the bar scene, though he'd done it enough when he first started college. But too many nights of wandering home near dawn and puking into the toilet bowl had turned his stomach. Now he only went out occasionally, usually to quieter bars or the ones with a good band playing. Tonight this bar looked more crowded than usual, though, and he wondered if even Jimmy's had been a mistake.

"Thanks." He took the beer Nate had bought him and followed his buddy through the narrow room. Before him, a sea of faces blended together. He finished his beer in a few long swallows and propped the empty bottle on the table beside him. A collection of other bottles sat there, next to a wrinkled cocktail napkin with a smeared phone number scrawled across it. Damian worked his hands into his pockets. Sometimes it felt like he was getting too old for this sort of thing.

Then he saw her. The door to Jimmy's opened and four women pushed their way inside. Clad in tight T-shirts and miniskirts, they strutted across the room and winked at the bartender. Damian's chest tightened. The Hadley sisters: Tara, Joyce, Eva and Marie. All blonde, all beautiful. According to Nate, they'd grown up in Whispering Pines, two years apart in age, and never left. Damian

wondered if they ever would. Joyce had mentioned going to Murphy's. What were they doing here?

He glanced over his shoulder and wondered if Jimmy's had a back exit. Nope. Nothing but bodies stuck too close together. He shrank into the wall and looked at his feet.

"Damian!" She'd spotted him.

His stomach did a slow flop, over and back, and he raised his chin. No use avoiding her. "Hi, Joyce."

The shortest and blondest of the four wound her way through the crowd, and heads turned as she passed. When she reached him, Joyce looked up through mascara-drenched lashes and shook her head with a teasing smile. "This is a nice surprise."

He cleared his throat. "Thought you were going to Murphy's."

"Changed our minds. Besides, I thought you might show up here." She moved closer. "You're here with Nate?"

He nodded.

"Why don't you both come back to our place?" She curled an arm through his and pressed her breast against him. Warmth from her skin seeped through his shirtsleeve and into the crook of his elbow. It felt good, and for an instant he considered her offer. Maybe his mother was right. Joyce was easy on the eyes, and she sure wasn't making things tough for him.

Then he took a deep breath and shook his head. "Sorry. I'm calling it an early night."

"You sure?" She pushed her lips out in a pout.

"I've got a lot of work to do tomorrow."

She released his arm and pouted a moment longer. "I'll be around if you change your mind. And you have my number." With a wiggle of her slim hips, she rejoined her sisters at the bar.

Damian watched her for a minute and then searched for his friend. In the dark ocean of faces and beer bottles, he couldn't see anything at first. Then he spied Nate at the other end of Jimmy's, with one of Joyce's sisters giggling into his shoulder. Well, at least one of them would get lucky tonight. He threaded his way to Nate's other side and mumbled a goodbye.

"You're leaving already?" Nate said. "We just got here."

"Long day."

"Call me tomorrow, then."

"Will do."

Eva Hadley started snaking her tongue along Nate's earlobe right about then, so Damian slid out the front door before Joyce could bury her fuchsia nails into his own skin and drag him home with her.

On his way back through town, he circled through Park Place Run, Whispering Pines's version of a scaled-down Fifth Avenue. Nate had told him there used to be cornfields here, as far as you could see in every direction. Damian had a hard time picturing it now. Seemed a shame to lose so much countryside, but he supposed everything changed in the name of progress. Now, instead of fields, sidewalks of red brick wound into darkness, and white lights dotted miniature trees.

He slowed the car. One restaurant remained open and a few people sat at the bar. Sometimes Damian longed to be part of them, to be part of a couple just for one night. To sit at a bar and drown in a woman. To watch her cheeks darken and her skirt shift as she crossed her legs. To lose himself in her conversation as evening became midnight and then wound its way to dawn without taking a breath. He hadn't felt that way in years. Sometimes he thought he might not ever feel that way again.

Except now there was Summer. Now there was someone he couldn't keep his thoughts off, no matter how hard he tried. He headed for home, calculating the hours until morning and hoping she'd come to the McCready house again. This time, he wouldn't stop with just a hand on her shoulder. No, he'd wind one arm around her waist and pull her close. See how her mouth felt against his, and see if he could make her lose her breath when he kissed her.

Damian smiled for the first time all night.

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

Summer sat up, no closer to sleep than she had been three hours earlier. She got up and rifled through her overnight bag. Nothing. She'd used up her last Ambien on the flight here. Not even a lousy Tylenol PM lay loose in the bottom of her bag.

She walked into the bathroom and stared at her reflection. Dark blonde hair, dark eyes, dark circles beneath them. A decent body, thanks to a semi-regular schedule at the gym, and curves that had emerged sometime around tenth grade. She pulled her hair away from her neck. If she looked closely enough, though, she could see the scar along her collarbone. It mirrored the smaller ones that crawled up the inside of her left wrist, spider-web fashion.

*Or broken-glass fashion.*

She dropped her hand and let her hair fall back into place. She didn't need to look. She could trace the marks inside her mind.

Without warning, the dizziness started again. Sweat broke out on her forehead. She reached for her T-shirt, her jeans, a pair of flip-flops by the door. Car keys and purse. *Deep breaths*, she tried to tell herself but the oxygen seized up inside her chest and she started to wheeze.

“What’s happening to me?” Her words echoed inside the room. A panic attack? Another random memory?

She yanked the door open and stumbled into the narrow corridor. The door swung shut behind her, and a second too late, she patted her back pocket. No keycard for Room 101.

“Crap.”

It didn’t matter now. Her pulse jumped as she stumbled down the hall; she could feel it inside her wrists and at the base of her throat. Perspiration dotted her upper lip and the corners of her mouth, and she tasted salt. At the far end of the hall, she reached for the exit door just in time, just as a voice echoed inside her head.

*“SUMMER? Where are you? My leg hurts. I’m scared. I can’t see you. Or Gabe. Where are you guys?”*

SWEET MOUNTAIN AIR flooded her lungs.

She’d forgotten how good it tasted, or that air could even taste at all. A complex combination of pine trees and starlight and wet, steamy pavement fell onto her tongue. *I’m okay. I’m okay.* She stopped and looked up. There they were, the dark shadows that hugged Whispering Pines. They hadn’t changed at all. The mountains still stood, half-gorgeous, half-ominous, and looked down on her in silence. She remained there for a long moment and just breathed.

*Oh, Donny.* She laid one hand against her chest and willed her heart to slow. She hadn’t dreamt of her little brother in years. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard his voice inside her head. And yet just a moment ago, he’d sounded as though he sat

right behind her. Tears filled her eyes and she pressed the heels of her palms to her face to stop them from coming.

*I miss you. I'm sorry. I wish I could have saved you.*

Summer climbed into her car and fumbled with the headlights. She took a long breath and blew her nose on a napkin. She couldn't think about it. She couldn't get lost in memories that weren't even memories at all, but just pieces that didn't fit together inside her head. She pulled out of the motel parking lot, took the first left and followed Perkins Lane around the back side of town. Maybe a drive would calm her. Or distract her.

Whispering Pines was deserted, with not a single car or person anywhere she could see. She kept going and passed a familiar collection of one-story homes and double-wide trailers set back from the road. Most had a basketball hoop hanging from the garage door and pots of flowers on the front step. Not much had changed. Maybe nothing here had changed, except for her.

At the corner of Melody Lane, a short half-mile from Whispering Pines Lake, she stopped. From here, she couldn't make out the modest ranch with the sagging roof. She couldn't see the pine trees that grew together and closed in the windows. But she knew her childhood home sat only a few hundred feet away. The yard she'd played in. The stream she'd waded through. The path that led through the trees and over the hill to Rachael's house. Her father had sold it shortly after the accident and moved into a condo, and she didn't know who lived in it now. Still, every part of her remembered it.

*"WE'LL DROP DONNY OFF FIRST." Gabe's hand, warm on her bare thigh, moved upward.*

*“What?” Donny’s mop-top head, his hair too long and his lips still smeared with chocolate ice cream, bobbed in the back seat. “What didja say, Gabe?”*

*“Nothing.” Summer turned up the radio. Warm June wind lifted the hair from her neck as the car darted along the empty roads outside Whispering Pines. She felt full, sated with the night and the happiness of high school graduation and the thrill of the guy in the seat beside her. She wanted to spend all night with Gabe. All of tomorrow too, and every day of summer until he had to leave for college.*

*She hadn’t known she could feel like this, like a helium balloon filled up to bursting. She adored him. She wanted to be alone with him. But they had to take Donny home first, or her father would—*

*The other car came out of nowhere. Blinding lights. Grinding brakes. A snapping motion that blew the airbag and bloodied her face. Tree limbs scratching at her arms and face. And the screaming, high-pitched and panicked in the stillness.*

*“Summer? Summer?”*

*His voice came from somewhere over her shoulder, and she would have tried to see where Donny was, except she couldn’t move her arms and she couldn’t find her legs and all she could hear was her little brother looking for her in the dark.*

THREE MILES FROM THIS SPOT, ten years ago, Summer’s world had shattered. Her brother—gone. The life she’d known—fractured. She’d spent a decade trying to piece herself together again, between college and various jobs and boyfriends that tried but never really took the place of Gabe. She’d seen a therapist. She’d taken up yoga. She’d done her best to put the past behind her.



But being back in Whispering Pines was stirring her up in ways she'd never dreamed possible. She tried to recall what had happened when the cops arrived that night. She couldn't. She only remembered the blinding beam of a flashlight moving over the car. Sirens. Gabe's hand in hers. Donny's voice far away.

And a lot of questions she couldn't answer.

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

Summer pulled onto the Hunters' front lawn, wondering again why she'd agreed to come to their lake party. She didn't really have time. She had less than a week before she left Whispering Pines, and if she could work a small miracle, she'd be gone even earlier.

"Summer!" Rachael Hunter waved from the front porch of the ivy-covered house.

She climbed from her car and looked toward the oaks that hid the water. *We used to climb those trees. We sat in the branches and spied on Nate and his friends until the sun went down.* Of course she'd come to this party. How could she not? How many days had she spent at this farmhouse as a child, basking in the warmth of Rachael and her family? And why hadn't she come back at least once in all the years since to visit her most loyal childhood friend? *Because I couldn't cope. Not even with seeing Rachael.* Suddenly she felt much older than twenty-eight. She palmed the car keys and locked the car doors before she remembered she was in the middle of farmland, not downtown San Francisco.

"I can't believe you're really here!" Rachael met her halfway and flung her arms around her best friend.

“Me either.”

Rachael gave her a long look up and down. “You look good. Too thin, but good. How long are you staying?”

“A few more days.”

“That’s it?”

“I have a ton of work at the museum.”

“C’mon, you haven’t been back since high school. Can’t you take some more time off? I mean, no offense or anything, but you run a *museum*. It’s full of things that have been around for a hundred years or more. Your exhibits aren’t going anywhere.”

“That’s not really the point.” Summer hated when people spoke about her job, about the way she’d chosen to spend her life, as if centuries long gone were less significant than what happened in the here and now. Without understanding the past, she always explained to the doubters, people had no business living in the present. Everything linked together in a beautiful, complicated chain.

“I’m sorry. I just mean that nothing’s going to grow legs and walk away if you stay another week or two in Whispering Pines,” Rachael said. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

Rachael blew platinum blonde strands of hair from her eyes and handed over a plastic cup. “Well, I’m glad you’re here now, anyway.”

Summer took one sip and gagged. “What is this?”

“Some punch Nate made. Why? Is it bad?”

“It’s awful.”

“Thanks a lot.” A deep male voice spoke behind her.

She turned and stared. A tall twenty-five-year-old, with white-blond hair identical to Rachael’s, grinned at her. “Wow,” she said. “Someone’s grown up.”

He chuckled. "Hey, Summer. Welcome back." The playful light in his eyes dimmed. "Hey, I'm really sorry about your dad."

She continued to stare at Rachael's little brother. "You're so...tall. When did that happen?" When she left Whispering Pines, Nate Hunter had been a short, cocky ninth-grader with acne and a bad haircut. Now he stood on the porch step below her, a man who'd grown about six inches and filled out.

He laughed. "I sprouted up in college."

"You look good."

Rachael stole her brother's baseball cap and mashed it down on her head. "Please. He's marginally acceptable right now. Tall doesn't mean he's grown a brain, that's for sure."

"Screw you, sis." Nate grabbed for the hat but Rachael dashed inside the screen door and vanished. He shrugged. "Some things never change, huh?"

Summer laughed. "I guess not."

He gave her a funny look. "You're not staying long, are you?"

"In Whispering Pines?" She shook her head. How did she answer his question? She wanted to ask how *he* could stay here after everything that had happened, but she supposed Donny's classmates had survived better than his eighteen-year-old sister, and their father who didn't want her around as a reminder.

He loped down the porch steps. "Coming to the lake?"

"Later." She waved and watched him disappear behind the trees, still amazed at the boy who had shed his awkward teenage skin for the shell of an adult. *He wears it well.* Still, he probably hadn't had much choice. When you lost your best friend at thirteen, the years that followed probably hardened you up a bit. Calloused you. Made you old before you really wanted to be.

Summer climbed the porch steps and let herself into the house. Inside the foyer sat the same red rooster doorstop. The same fruit-patterned wallpaper peeled in the corners of the kitchen. If she tried hard enough, she could almost smell the chicken casserole Mrs. Hunter cooked on Friday nights and the snickerdoodles she made for special occasions. Summer leaned against the breakfast bar. Suddenly she was ten years old again, sleeping over at her best friend's house, playing hide-and-seek in the woods, and sharing a tub of ice cream with Rachael long after her parents went to bed.

"Where is everyone?"

Rachael sat at the dining room table munching on chips. "Mom dragged Dad to a quilt show over in Silver Valley. Everyone else is down at the lake."

"Oh." Summer exchanged Nate's lethal punch for a diet soda.

"So what's it look like? From the inside, I mean." Rachael asked.

"What?"

"The McCready house. *Your* house."

"Oh, I don't know. It's a mess." She thought of the crumbling front steps, the broken windows, the cemetery gate visible from the second story.

Rachael straightened her brother's cap and propped her chin in one hand. "Remember when we used to go by there after school and dare each other to look in the windows?"

"Sure." Two skinny, knobby-kneed girls darted into Summer's memory.

"We never did, right?"

"Nope. We always chickened out."

"And now you own the place. You finally get to look in the windows. Get over your fears."

"I guess." Summer's face flushed.

“You okay? You look weird.”

“I’m just tired. Still jet lagged, I think.” She didn’t want to admit that the past was starting to pop into the present every time she turned another corner.

Rachael glanced out the window. “Oh, the guys are coming back in on the boat. Come on. I want to introduce you to someone.”

“Someone as in a guy?”

“Maybe.” Rachael held up a palm. “Before you say anything else, just let me introduce you. You’ll like him. He’s cute.”

“Rach, I’m only here for a few more days.”

“So you can’t have any fun in the meantime? Come on.” Rachael tugged on her arm, and this time Summer didn’t protest.

They walked outside and down the steep lawn that led to the road and the lake on the other side of it. The roar of a boat engine grew as it coasted into the dock. In the boat, three bare-chested men held beers and laughed. Nate waited for them on the dock and reached out to help them moor it.

*It’s beautiful here. Always was. Still is.* The water didn’t look like this in San Francisco. Beside the dock, the lawn met the lake in a crooked dirt line. No beach, just some frizzled grass that merged with sandy pebbles and disappeared. From there, Whispering Pines Lake took over, spreading one mile wide and three miles long, gorgeous and blue under the sun. The Hunters had their own dock, as did everyone who owned lakefront property. Two teams of laughing men and women played water volleyball nearby, and bikini-clad women sunned themselves on a raft.

Summer shaded her eyes. How was it possible that this place still smelled exactly the same, like wind and water and suntan lotion? Put her anywhere in the world and pipe in this scent, and she’d be a

teenager again, watching the sun beat down on Whispering Pines Lake.

Rachael hopped from one bare foot to the other on the hot wooden dock. "You guys ready to do some skiing?"

Two of the men in the boat glanced over. *Sure*, one mouthed. He opened a fresh can of beer and lifted it in Summer's direction. *Hi there*.

*Hi*, she mouthed back. He was good-looking, a little portly but with muscular arms and a buzz cut that showed off his dimples. The second guy reached out a hand to help her in, and she took it. He looked familiar, and she guessed they'd probably gone to school together, maybe a few years apart. As he shoved some towels off a damp seat for her, she tried to place the bright brown eyes and baritone laugh. *George Hoskin's little brother?*

But then the third occupant of the boat turned around, and her thoughts scattered. The same wavy hair glistened in the sun. The same blue eyes lit up when he saw her. Damian Knight raised one hand in greeting, and Summer waved in return. Her legs turned to jello and she reached for the side of the motorboat to steady herself.

So Damian was one of Nate's friends. The one Rachael meant to introduce her to? She'd almost forgotten how people's lives wove themselves together in small towns like Whispering Pines, how everyone belonged to everyone else. Each person became a puzzle piece that locked together to make the town the living thing it was. No secrets here, and no strangers either.

"Hi again, Summer."

Rachael's eyes widened. "Again?"

"Damian's working on the house with Mac." *He took my arm when I fell the other day. And looked at me the same way he's looking right now.* Tingles she hadn't felt in a very long time started

up around her toes and zipped to her belly. Then to her arms and hands and the base of her neck. Her cheeks. Probably her eyes too. She shoved her sunglasses into place. *Stop staring at him like a schoolgirl.*

“Oh, right. I forgot you guys probably already ran into each other.”

“Almost literally,” Damian said under his breath, just loud enough for Summer to hear, and she smiled.

Rachael took her place behind the wheel, revved the boat’s engine and pulled the rope from the dock. “So who’s water skiing?”

Summer stumbled as they accelerated across the lake. “Not me. I’ll watch.” She sank into the seat across from Damian and tried to read his expression. Surprise upon seeing her? Pleasure? Or resentment, that she was only in town to sell the house where he lived? She still needed to talk to him about that. Renters knew houses might change hands over the years, didn’t they? She hoped he wouldn’t blame her for needing to put it on the market.

Rachael offered her the skis twice, but Summer shook her head. She was content to watch the others skim across the water’s surface before they crashed into the waves. And she was more than content to watch the way Damian made them all look like amateurs as he cut in tight arcs across the boat’s wake on a single ski.

Rachael laughed as she spun the boat in circles, trying to make him fall, and Summer relaxed in slow degrees. She’d been right to come. Some part of her had missed this tradition of summer on the lake. She’d missed her best friend smiling, the laughter ringing on the wind, the houses rushing by. She’d missed the way an afternoon on the water turned to a night filled with bonfires and drinking, until everyone’s stomachs were warm with alcohol and friendship and desire.



Summer ran her hands in the wake. After a while, Damian stretched out on the floor of the boat beside her. Once he offered her a beer, and she took it. Their fingers brushed. Nothing touched but the space between them, yet the afternoon hummed with possibility.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

“**R**ace you to the water!” Rachael shouted, and pulled off her bikini top.

“Oh, no.” Summer watched Rachael dart away and buried her face in her hands. Eight, eighteen, or twenty-eight, her best friend didn’t seem to have a problem taking off her clothes. Maybe that came from growing up near the water.

Dinner was over. Beer bottles lay scattered around the lawn. They’d barbequed over the open fire and toasted marshmallows as the sun and moon traded places in the sky. After dinner Summer had thought about driving back to the motel to work on some press releases for the museum, but two margaritas later she’d abandoned the notion. Press releases could wait until tomorrow.

A few others followed Rachael, and soon six or seven naked behinds bounced across the lawn and into the starlit lake. In another minute, the sounds of splashing and laughing echoed through the darkness. Summer smiled. Truly, some things never changed. There was something sensual about warm water splashing over bare skin. She’d tried skinny dipping a few times, but only on the cloudiest of nights, when Nate and his friends were far from the house. Tonight she had no intention of baring anything.

She sat on the bottom porch step and leaned back on her elbows. The bonfire smoldered close by, and darkness wrapped her in comforting arms.

“Summer?”

She jumped.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.” Damian materialized from the driveway and sat down beside her.

“Oh.” She let out a breath. “You didn’t. Not really.” She bit her bottom lip, distracted by the heat from his arm so close to hers.

“You’re not swimming?”

“I do my swimming with a suit. And I forgot mine.” Summer stuck her hands under her thighs. “What about you?”

“Not in the mood.” He studied her. “Not that I really want to ask, but have you made any decisions about the house?”

“Ah, well, I’m trying, you know, to make sure...” She couldn’t lie to him. Sadie had told her that selling the place with a rental contingency could take twice as long as without it. “I think you might end up having to move. I’m sorry.”

He dug in the dirt with a stick. “We’ve been there for over two years.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s a lousy deal.”

“Yeah.” He paused. “You ever think about keeping the whole place for yourself?”

*No. Never.* She could never live in Whispering Pines again. “Honestly, it makes more sense to sell it. I mean, I know my father bought it for me, but I’m not really sure why. I haven’t lived here in a long time.” She shifted on the step and wondered if the warmth on her cheeks bloomed from the fire or from something else.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” Damian said after a minute.

“Thanks. I wasn’t close to him, though. He had cancer for a while, a couple of years at least. But he didn’t tell anyone until the end. He spent the last week in intensive care, over in Albany.” She paused. “So I heard.”

“You weren’t in touch with him at all?”

“My mom died when I was really young, and Dad and I...” She took a deep breath. “We didn’t talk much after I left town.”

“After your brother died?”

So he’d heard the story. “Yeah.”

Damian stretched out his legs. In the firelight, the blonde hairs on his ankles glowed. “Can’t imagine going through something like that.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“How old was your brother?”

“A week past thirteen.”

“Wow.” He didn’t ask anything else, and for that she was glad.

She reached down and picked up a twig, twisting it until it shredded. “That’s another reason I can’t stay. It’s too hard to be here.”

“I’ll bet.”

But Damian didn’t know the worst of it, which was that she didn’t remember most of what had happened that night. Or that pieces of the accident had started coming back when she least expected them to. She’d come to terms with Donny’s death long ago. She wasn’t sure she could bear to live it all over again.

Summer brushed her hair from her face. “What about you? You didn’t grow up around here.”

“Nope. Try a place called Poisonwood, about a hundred miles west of Philadelphia.”

“There’s nothing west of Philadelphia but farmland.”

“Exactly. Which is why I think of Whispering Pines as a thriving metropolis. It has a movie theater, two grocery stores, a separate elementary and high school...classy place, I’m telling you.”

She laughed. “Sure. Classy. So how’d you end up here?” It was a strange place to make a home, if you hadn’t been born in Whispering Pines. Single twenty-somethings, especially those who looked as good as this guy did, didn’t exactly flock to its county seat.

His expression sobered. “Long story. Save it for another time, maybe?”

“Okay.” Summer knew about long stories, and keeping them close to the heart. She rose and stepped closer to the fire.

After a minute, Damian came to stand beside her. “What is it you do, anyway?” He held his hands above the flames.

She studied his fingers and the way they threw shadows in the dark. She thought of how he’d touched her with them, feeling her wrist after she fell, and a lump of desire rose in her throat. “I’m the director of the Bay City Museum in San Francisco.”

“Mm...I don’t think I’ve heard of it.”

“Probably not. It’s pretty small. But it has a lot of great artifacts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Gold Rush, railroads, stuff like that. Plus we display traveling exhibits from all over the country.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Sounds like a cool job.”

Her elbow brushed his, and electricity radiated up to her shoulder. “It is. I love it. I could spend hours reading about the past, about lost civilizations, cities and empires and the way one person, or one event, changed everything.”

“I know what you mean. Makes you wonder how different our lives would be if, say, just one thing had ended up different. If the South had won the Civil War. Or JFK had lived. Things like that.”

Summer stared at him. “Exactly.” The same crazy wonderings about the world kept her up many nights. She’d flip through the archives at work and think, *What would the world be like if we were still a colony of the British Empire?* Or she’d stare at a piece of needlework in its glass case and wonder about its creator. *Who were you, really? Did you love? Did your heart ache at a sunrise? What was the world like, then?*

A breeze lifted the hair at her neck, and she shivered. Faint shouts floated up from the lake. The flames burned lower.

“Course, present day has its moments too,” Damian said. “Tomorrow, next week, next year, all this is history too. It keeps shaping itself while we’re just passing through.”

“I know. But somehow it’s different when you’re living in the middle of it.”

He cocked his head, and Summer wondered if she’d said something wrong.

“Are you involved with someone back home?”

Her heart skipped. “No. I mean, I was dating a guy a few months back, but—”

Damian caught her mouth with his before she could finish the sentence. His hands wound themselves in her hair, and she staggered against him, tingles in her palms. He smelled like soap and sawdust and the faint spice of aftershave. She ran her hands along his biceps, iron beneath her fingertips. Something inside her wanted to peel away his T-shirt and feel skin against skin.

Their tongues met and he slipped one hand from her hair to the small of her back. After a long moment, he moved his lips to her cheek before resting his forehead against hers. “I’ve wanted to do that since yesterday.”

“Yeah?” She laughed, a ragged, breathless sound in the silence.  
“Trying to make me change my mind about the house?”

He pulled away from her and frowned. “No. Is that really what you think? ”

“I was kidding.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and backed away. “Sure about that?”

“Damian, please. I’m sorry.” Somehow she’d ruined things. Her mouth ached with the absence of his.

“Listen, I should probably go. Early day tomorrow.”

“Wait. Let’s talk about this.”

But he was gone without even a glance over his shoulder.

Summer crossed her arms as disappointment flooded her. Sparks jumped in the dying fire, and a piece of wood toppled into ash. She’d been joking. She’d just made a stupid comment to fill up the nervousness inside her stomach. He’d understand that. Wouldn’t he? But he didn’t turn around, and he didn’t return, and after a long while, she crawled into bed in the Hunters’ guest room in search of sleep.

## CHAPTER TEN

Late the next morning, Rachael rapped on the door of the guest room. “You alive in here?”

Summer rolled over and squinted into the sunlight pouring through the blinds. “What time is it?”

“A little after ten.” Rachael sat on the edge of the bed.

“You let me sleep that late?”

“Figured you needed it. I thought a party and conversation with a certain good-looking someone would be good for you.” Rachael crossed her legs. “So? Tell me what happened last night.”

Clad in a tank top, Summer tossed off the sheet, swung her feet to the floor and reached for her overnight bag. “Nothing happened. I came to your party, had dinner, and watched while you and some other fools ran around naked. Then I went to bed.”

Rachael looked around the room. “Did you sleep with him?”

“Who?” Edges of a memory began to sharpen behind her eyes. Smiles over firelight. Damian’s hand reaching across a step and touching hers. A breathtaking kiss, and a mistake on her part. Then nothing.

“Damian. Who’d you think?”

“Of course I didn’t sleep with him. I barely know him.”



“Bummer.” Rachael sighed. “That never stopped me. Best way to get over sadness is a friendly little romp with someone who looks as good as Damian does.”

“Well, I’m not you. And I’m not sad.”

“Whatever. Did you at least kiss him?”

“Do I have any privacy around you?”

“Not since I showed you how to use a tampon back in seventh grade, no.”

Summer picked up her toiletry bag. She needed to fix her face, head back to the motel and meet with Sadie in less than an hour. She couldn’t sit here with her best friend and debate the finer points of kissing Damian Knight. “I’m not telling you. Use your imagination.”

“Geez, lighten up.”

Summer ducked into the bathroom and splashed water on her face. *Stop thinking about him. So he kissed you. So what?* She pulled her hair back from her face and dabbed concealer on the circles beneath her eyes. She had calls to make. Paperwork to take care of. And certainly, she had more important things to worry about than the lips of the guy she was about to evict.

LESS THAN A HALF HOUR LATER, Summer was driving back to town. She adjusted the radio station and hummed along. “Ooh, don’t you got what I need now baby...”

Damian’s face popped into her brain yet again. So much for not thinking about him.

*Makes you wonder how different our lives would be if, say, just one thing had changed...*

Her cheeks grew hot and she had to tell herself to unclench her hands before she squeezed the steering wheel in two. Sometimes

when she told people what she did, they looked at her as if she were crazy, dwelling in the land of yesterdays and making her living among ghosts. But not this guy. He got it. The hairs on her forearms lifted at the memory of his expression as he watched in her firelight.

She slowed at the stop sign where Sycamore Road met Main Street. A dangerous intersection shrouded by woods, this crossroads witnessed a few accidents every year as drivers blasted past the sign half-hidden by bushes. One winter when she was a child, a group of teenagers had collided with a snowplow. Four deaths, all under the age of eighteen. Whispering Pines had mourned for months.

*“SUMMER, I can’t find Donny. Where is he? Do you see him?”*

SHE BLINKED. That was Gabe’s voice inside her head. But why had he been looking for her brother? They’d all stayed in the car until the cops came. Hadn’t they?

Her hands shook. *Stop thinking about it.* The accident was long since over, her brother in the ground, Gabe Roberts a distant memory. She pressed her lips together until she tasted blood. After a long moment, the thoughts and the voices receded again. But how long would it haunt her?

Today the sun blazed in the sky, and both roads stretched to the horizon without a car in sight. This was not the same intersection, and this was not ten years in the past. She was twenty-eight, stable and strong. She was not a girl lying in a hospital bed trying to understand why her brother wasn’t standing beside her cracking jokes.

Summer turned right and headed for the motel. After her meeting with Sadie, maybe she'd try to find Damian at the house. She'd explain away her stupid comment of the night before. She could probably give him his last month rent-free to make up for the hassle of selling the property. Maybe that would calm him. Or convince him to kiss her again. Or—

Out of nowhere, a red sedan careened into the lane in front of her. A horn blared, and adrenaline poured into her veins, triple-time. With her heart frozen, she stomped on the brake pedal and slammed it to the floor.

“What the—”

She didn't have time to honk her own horn or check her mirrors or wonder who the driver was or where he'd come from. With both hands clutching the wheel, she held her foot to the floor and prayed.

Time slowed. Every movement of her car seemed magnified a hundred times. The distance between them closed. Could she pull off? Swerve around? Thick oaks lined the road, with almost no shoulder. The metallic tang of fear rose up on her tongue. The distance between her hood and the red sedan narrowed to a few feet. Bracing herself for the impact, she bit her lip, and her back teeth ground together in panic.

Crashing glass and the blunt smack of metal against metal filled the air around her. Her car jolted to a stop. Then everything went silent.

*I hit someone. Or maybe hurt someone.* She closed her eyes and counted to ten, then twenty. She heard nothing. After another moment, she forced her eyes open and ordered herself to breathe. *In. Out.* She wiggled her toes. All there, all accounted for. She touched her forehead, her chest, both arms. All okay. She eyed her

car, assessing the damage. No cracks in the windshield. The hood seemed smooth, with no splintered metal.

Summer frowned. She *had* hit the other car, hadn't she?

But as she looked around, she saw the dented bodies of two other cars, one the sedan, the other a large extended-cab pickup truck which had collided with it. Glass covered the road. Steam poured from the hood of the truck. Her own car had stopped after all, short of hitting either vehicle.

She climbed out and stared at the mess in front of her. Silence. Skid marks. Horribly crunched metal. This stretch of road never saw much traffic, certainly not on a Sunday morning. She rubbed both temples and forced herself to squint at the sedan and truck. No one emerged from either vehicle. With trembling hands, she picked up her cell phone and dialed 911.

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

“Are you okay?” Rachael asked on the other end of the line.

Summer turned away from the accident scene and listened for the ambulance siren’s wail. “I’m fine. Just a little shaken up.”

“Do you want me to come down there? Wait with you?”

“No. Don’t bother.” She couldn’t keep her eyes from returning to the two hunks of metal sitting in the middle of the road.

“Do you know who was driving?”

“I don’t, no.”

“Call me later when you get back to the motel, okay?”

“I will.”

As she hung up, a police car came screaming up the road from town. A rescue vehicle followed seconds later. Behind them, a smaller pickup truck with a blue flashing light pulled to a stop. Two men hopped out, and within a matter of minutes they had placed orange cones and lighted flares in a long, sweeping line.

Medics clambered over the scene like ants, attending to the sedan and pulling open the pickup’s door. Summer leaned against the hood of her own car and licked her lips. After standing in the sun

for nearly twenty minutes, her throat felt parched, and perspiration slid from her neck to the small of her back. One policeman took down plate numbers. The other walked over to her. She didn't recognize him.

"You the one that called this in?"

She nodded. "I was following the red car. Actually, it pulled out in front of me. I didn't see what happened. I didn't even see the truck coming from the other direction."

The officer flipped open a notepad and began to write. Her name? Address? Details of what she'd witnessed? Summer answered his questions as best she could and tried to avert her eyes as the medics pulled the unconscious driver from the truck's wreckage and loaded him into the waiting ambulance.

"Are they going to be okay?"

The officer glanced behind him. "Well, it's a nasty accident. Looks like the truck driver took the steering wheel and the windshield pretty good with his face. Good thing you were following. They might have been out here for a while before anyone else came along."

Summer tried to nod. Right now she couldn't feel glad about that. All she wanted was to go back to the motel and get on with the rest of her day. She didn't have a strong stomach for blood. Or car accidents. "Do you need me for anything else?"

He shook his head. "Don't think so. I have your phone number, anyway, just in case." A yell from one of the other men interrupted him, and she turned away.

Summer wiped sweaty palms on her shorts and reached for her car door. Then she stopped. The man, the one who had yelled, jogged over to where the policeman stood. Dressed in his standard-issue blue shirt and pants, he looked like one of the many volunteer firefighters and paramedics in town. Yet something about the way he

crossed his arms and cocked his head made her squint. Then he opened his mouth and spoke.

“It’s Lonnie Perkins in the car. I went to school with him. He’s banged up bad.”

Lightning bolts jumped from the sky into Summer’s skin. For an instant, the sunlight bouncing off the pavement distorted her view, but it didn’t matter. The tugging in her heart knew, if her eyes weren’t certain. Gabe Roberts—*her* Gabe Roberts, dark-haired and square-jawed, the boy she’d fallen in love with a lifetime ago—stood mere yards away. The pavement tilted beneath her feet. Her throat closed.

Then he glanced past the policeman’s shoulder and saw her. “Summer?”

She couldn’t say a word. She hadn’t talked to him in ages, hadn’t heard what had happened to him in the years she’d been gone. Part of her was surprised he still lived here at all.

“Hi, there.” Two words rolled off his tongue, and a decade unfolded in a heartbeat.

“Hi.”

He walked toward her with an uncertain smile, and for a minute she stood again in the yellow light of Lou’s Fifty Flavors ice cream stand as a teenage Gabe crossed the parking lot with his eyes on her. *Hi, there*. He’d said the same two words back then, and she hadn’t heard anything else the rest of the night.

“Welcome home,” he added. Something dark moved across his face, a shadow of something she imagined he saw on hers as well. “Sorry it’s under such lousy circumstances.”

*Home. Is that where I am?* Summer felt more like she’d tumbled down the rabbit hole, flown up to the moon, vanished into another dimension where everything was upside down and backwards. She wondered if she were hallucinating, or if the accident had thrown her

into shock. After two or three years, she'd learned to put away the hurt of losing Gabe. And after two or three more, she'd forced herself to forget about him and move on. Only one scrapbook sat on a shelf back in her apartment, with pictures of their summer together and a few melancholy poems she'd scribbled when her father sent her away.

"You okay? You look a little white."

"I'm fine." Summer reached for the car to steady herself.

Gabe nodded. "I know. Been working as an EMT for close to five years. It never gets any easier."

"You do this? All the time?" She stared at him. "How?" After everything they'd been through, how?

He studied the man with the flares and didn't answer. "I heard you were coming back." He raised his gaze to meet hers. "Scared me to death, if you want to know the truth."

She could have asked why, but she already knew the answer. *Seeing you again makes it real. Reminds me of what happened. Makes my heart ache all over again.*

"You look good," he said after a minute. "Not so scary, after all."

She laughed and lifted a hand to her hair. Strands had fallen and stuck to her cheeks. "So do you."

He shrugged.

"I sort of own a house here now," she went on.

"The McCready place."

"Heard that too?"

"You know how people talk." He paused. "How long are you staying?"

"Only another few days. Long enough to list the place with Sadie Rogers. Then I'm heading back to San Francisco."

"Ah."



The rescue truck roared to life. A lanky arm waved from the driver's side window, and the horn beeped.

Gabe raised a hand in acknowledgement. "Guess I'd better go."

Summer nodded, not sure if relief or disappointment kept her from speaking.

"Do you want to get together before you leave?" he asked. "Maybe have a drink or lunch or something?"

Her chest tightened. Peel back the layers of ten years? Make conversation about the present while the past sat on the table between them and waited for attention? Her hazy flashbacks were one thing. Facing the one person who could bring them all to life was something else altogether.

He spoke again before she could answer. "Never mind. Probably better we don't. I'm sure you've got a lot to do, anyway."

Summer nodded as he walked away and thought that was the smartest thing anyone had said to her in a long time.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

The following day, Dinah perched on the curb as Damian unloaded bags of supplies from the trunk of the car. She hopped from one foot to the other, across the sidewalk and back. “Can I help?”

“Not with this, ladybug.” He juggled two bags of supplies and set them on the ground. Reaching inside the front door of the Camaro, he pulled out a smaller paper bag. “But you can carry lunch.”

“Yum! What is it?”

“Sandwiches from the deli. Turkey and tomato, your favorite.”

Dinah grinned.

“And salami with lots of peppers and onions for Mac,” he added.

“Bout time too,” a gruff voice called from the front lawn. “I’m starving.” Mac stuck his head through the hedgerow and winked at Dinah. “So you’re the one with the food, little lady?”

She nodded, her face aglow. “Right here.”

“You get pickles?”

“And soda and chips.” Carrying the supplies, Damian followed his boss and Dinah around to the back porch.

The three sat in their usual spots on the back steps. Mac dug into the bag and passed around cellophane-wrapped sandwiches, and

Damian broke open the bottles of soda and handed Dinah a stack of napkins. Within a minute, a moustache of mustard spread across her freckled face.

“Is that mine?” He pretended to reach for the sandwich she held, but Dinah jumped to her feet and dashed down the steps and around the side of the house. At the corner she stopped, one eye on her brother, and ate the rest of her sandwich through giggles.

“Man, she’s cute,” Mac said around a mouthful of pickle.

“Yeah, she is.”

“How’s your mom doing?”

“Pretty good.”

“She working?”

“Not right now.” Panic attacks combined with depression made it tough for Damian’s mom to keep a job. One fist tightened in his lap. Because of T.J. Because of a man they hadn’t seen in years who still had the power to haunt her.

Mac stood, one hand massaging his left knee.

“You all right?”

“Yep. Just too many tackles in high school. Left me with no cartilage in either knee. Course, I didn’t care back then. Told coach to wrap me up, and I’d play ’til I couldn’t move.”

“And now you really can’t.”

Mac laughed. “Who thinks about that when you’re in high school?”

Damian scanned the lawn. “Where’s Dinah?” He didn’t like it when she disappeared, even for a few minutes. Made him nervous to have her out of his sight. He supposed it wasn’t really fair to his sister, watching over her shoulder all the time, calling her back and interrupting her games of make-believe, but he couldn’t help it. He knew what T.J. was capable of.

Mac hobbled down the steps and looked around. After a minute, he pointed to a grove of small pine trees. "Over there."

Damian shaded his eyes and saw her crouched down, talking to a chipmunk. He let out a tense breath. *She's so quiet. Too quiet.* Sometimes he wished his little sister would run screaming in circles. Even on the soccer field, Dinah stood silent, apart from the others as she waited for the ball. She never slapped her teammates in high fives or cried out when she twisted an ankle. He supposed she'd learned the silence from their mother. He didn't like the idea.

"Hello?" The voice came from somewhere around the front of the house.

Mac grinned. "Back here, Summer!"

Damian ignored his buddy's knowing glance and leaned against the railing as she approached. Part of him wanted to disappear inside the house. The other part wanted to pick up where they'd left off the other night, after the kiss and before the anger. He cleared his throat and ran one hand along the banister. She looked as good as he remembered. Better, even. One strap of a green tank top had slipped off her shoulder, and he stuck his hands in his back pockets to resist the urge to slide it up again. Or down.

Summer fixed the strap herself as she juggled two white Styrofoam containers. "I brought some goodies." She met his gaze. "Peace offering."

*You can't buy me off with brownies,* he wanted to say, but the comment made him sound like a jerk even inside his own head. *Get over it. Not her fault she's gotta sell the place.*

Mac had crossed to her before the words were out of her mouth. "Lanie's? All right." He dug into one container and came out with an enormous chocolate chip cookie. "Thanks," he mumbled. The crumbs fell from his mouth.

She offered the other one to Damian, and when he took it, he let his fingers brush against hers. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry,” she said under her breath, and Damian’s throat closed. She had bottomless eyes. Fifty different emotions shimmered under their surface, and for an instant he wanted to lose himself there, just plummet down into her invisible ocean and find a place to float.

She stepped back after a long moment of silence. “Wow. It looks good. I didn’t get a chance to see the roof the other day.”

“Sure you want to sell it?” He hated himself for asking, but he had to try. So much lay at stake if they had to pull up roots again. “You could subdivide it,” he went on before she could answer. “You talk to Sadie about that? Maybe we could work something out. I could buy the piece with the farmhouse on it, and you could put the rest on the market.” He’d stayed up thinking about it last night, trying to work out the finances in his head. It was the best solution so far.

She looked away, across the tree line. “I did.”

“And?”

“It would take weeks to subdivide it. Months, maybe. I’d need an engineer. Someone to draw up new blueprints. Someone else to do an environmental study.”

“So it’s not worth it.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I just don’t have that kind of time or money.” Her voice shook with emotion. “Believe it or not, I’m not doing this to try and ruin your family.”

“You don’t know my family. Or anything about me.”

Her eyes blazed. “Well, that goes both ways.”

“I know that half the reason you’re running back to San Francisco so fast is because your father—”

“Be very careful what you say next.” Her voice, low and threatening, seared him straight through the gut.

He lifted both hands and backed away. “Fine. You have any paperwork for me, put it in the mail. Or give it to Mac.” He thought he saw tears rise in her eyes, but he turned away before he could see for sure. “I have work to do,” he added.

She started to say something else, but he didn’t stick around to listen. Instead he headed for the nearest scaffolding. Hand over hand, he hauled himself twenty feet into the air. Without a look behind, he pounded nails into shingles until anger and fatigue drove thoughts of Summer Thompson, and that stupid green strap sliding down her shoulder, from his mind.



SUMMER STOOD in the middle of the lawn, stunned. She’d brought them cookies. She’d apologized and tried to explain herself. And Damian had thrown her words back in her face and then ignored her. If he’d slapped her, it might have hurt less.

*Well, fine. I won’t bother talking to you again, that’s for sure.* She dusted crumbs from her hands and turned to go. But then she saw a little girl sitting under the trees a few yards away. “Mac, who’s that?”

The stocky man adjusted his tool belt. “Ah, that’s Damian’s little sister. Dinah. She hangs around here sometimes.”

*Dinah?* Summer glanced up to where Damian worked above them. The one he’d mentioned the other day. The one she’d thought was his girlfriend, his fiancée even. Not his sister. Hmm. What else wasn’t he telling her?

She walked over, watching Dinah sing and trace patterns in the grass. The girl’s hands moved in circles, fingers fluttering. In her lap

lay a pile of daisies and dandelions. She seemed to be enjoying herself, but she didn't smile. Rather, a serious look darkened her face, making the expression in her eyes appear much older than the nine or ten years old Summer guessed she probably was.

"Hi, there." Summer knelt beside her. "I'm Summer Thompson."

Dinah didn't say anything for a minute. Her hands continued to orbit an imaginary sun above the grass, skimming the surface in rhythm to her humming. Finally she raised her head. "Hi."

"What are you playing?"

"Just a game I made up."

"What's it called?"

The little girl exhaled at the question, and Summer recalled how she herself had been as a child, impatient of adults who tried to understand her language or pretend they remembered what it was like to be young.

"It doesn't have a name."

Summer leaned back on her heels. *She's carrying around the weight of the world. Why?*

As if she'd read Summer's mind, Dinah looked at her and asked, "Are you going to make us leave our house? Damian said some lady was going to sell it and make us leave."

Guilt stabbed Summer in the chest. "Oh, sweetie. No, I'm not. Not if I can help it." *Terrific.* Now she'd just lied to a little girl. But she hadn't realized Damian lived there with his sister. Actually, she had no idea who Damian lived there with. She hadn't thought much about it. She sat there for another minute without speaking. "Have you seen the inside of this house? The one your brother is working on?"

Dinah shook her head, but curiosity filled her wide brown eyes.

"Would you like to?"

"Okay." Dinah scrambled to her feet.

Summer watched the girl's thin back and long legs move in silence as they walked back to the house. Something about the way Dinah carried herself, the shift of her shoulders and the jut of her chin, reminded her of Damian. No matter how many years separated them, the family resemblance ran strong. Without warning, an old, familiar ache pulsed inside Summer, the wish for a sibling still living. The wish for two parents or a close-knit family like the Hunters'. The simple, impossible wish to go back in time and rewind the events that had shattered her life. *Oh, Donny.* Summer's eyes burned with unshed tears. Just a few days back in Whispering Pines had set those old bruises to hurting.

A cell phone rang as she and Dinah neared the house. Summer checked her pocket, but she'd left her own in the car.

Two stories up, Damian answered his. "Mom? What's wrong?"

The concern in his voice jerked her attention upward. He stuck his hammer in his tool belt and was on the ground in less than ten seconds. A combination of panic and anger contorted his expression. "Slow down. Dinah's right here, with me. Of course I'm sure. I'm looking at her." He wrapped an arm around his sister and drew her close.

"Did you call the police? Well, call them right now. Did you lock the doors? Did you get a number off Caller ID? I'll be right there." He dropped the phone into his pocket. Without looking at Mac, he yelled up, "Gotta take Dinah home and check on my mom, okay? I'll be right back."

From the balcony, Mac grunted assent.

Damian pulled off his tool belt and ran a rag across his forehead.

"Everything all right?" Summer asked, though clearly it wasn't. So Damian's mother lived in the rental house too? But that just raised more questions.



Dinah's lip trembled. "Is Mom okay?"

Damian smiled, but a muscle in his jaw twitched. "She's fine. She just got a phone call that made her nervous, so we're going home to make sure she feels safe." He took her by the hand and led her toward the path that wound around the property to the farmhouse. In less than a minute, they were gone.

Summer shaded her eyes. "Hey, Mac?"

"Yeah?"

"What was that all about?"

He leaned both arms on the balcony railing. "Not sure. Damian's mom has an ex who's bad news. I know they moved here to get away from him, but maybe he's back in the picture. Damian worries about it a lot, the guy finding them and causing trouble."

Summer's shoulders sagged as her guilt deepened. "Really?"

Mac nodded. "He keeps telling his mom to get a restraining order, but I guess she hasn't yet."

She shivered. No wonder Dinah walked around scared of her shadow; no wonder Damian kept one eye on home. *You can't read this place. Closed doors hide so much.*

She made her way back to her car, turning over possibilities inside her head. Maybe she could work something out with Sadie or an engineer after all. She couldn't turn the Knights out of their house, not if some crazy ex-husband was stalking them. If they'd found safety here in Whispering Pines, why should she rip that away from them? She knew enough about ghosts to know they never stopped haunting you.

Summer stared at the mountains. Why couldn't people's lives here match the idyllic hills or the green lawns that formed such perfect patchworks when seen from the highway? Why did shadows

have to carve things up into an ugly, fractured mosaic? Why did pain ride on the heels of happiness?

And why did she care so much about someone she'd met less than a week ago?

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

“M om?” Damian rushed into the house.

“In here.” The voice came from her bedroom. He crossed the hall and pushed open the door.

Hannah sat on the bed facing him. Though white, her face remained composed, with her hands folded in her lap like small, fragile birds.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Her gaze flickered toward Dinah, and she lowered her voice. “I called the police. They’re going to file a report.”

“Did they trace the number?”

“They said they couldn’t. It was a prepaid cell phone or something.” She sighed and turned away from him. “He called my cell phone, Damian, not the house. That’s a good thing. He doesn’t know where we are.”

*But how long until he finds out?* Damian’s hands tightened into fists. “What about a restraining order?”

“He isn’t here. He’s probably a thousand miles away, just making noise.”

“You don’t know that. He could be hiding out in the next town over.” Damian’s knuckles turned white as his anger grew. “File one

anyway. Just in case.”

“I don’t want to turn it into something uglier than it already is. I don’t want Dinah thinking her father is a monster.”

Damian scowled. T.J. *was* a monster. It didn’t matter whether he’d fathered Dinah or not.

She leveled her gaze on him. “Let it be. Please.”

“Maybe we should at least get an alarm system or have the police drive by on a regular basis.” T.J. already had her cell number. A new address and a couple of deadbolts wouldn’t keep the guy away forever.

Hannah sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe.” She leaned against the pillows. “I think I’ll lie down for a while.”

“I’m here if you need anything.” He pulled a blanket over her shoulders.

She murmured a response, already half-asleep. The veins in her eyelids pulsed as she headed toward dreams, and in a few seconds she breathed the silent, steady rhythm of someone far away, lost in slumber and glad to be there.

Damian eased the door shut. Dinah waited in the hallway. He ran a hand over her ponytail and felt his heart tremble. Why couldn’t they live a normal life in Whispering Pines like everyone else? Why did the past have to rear up in their faces? He squared his shoulders. No matter what, he’d protect Dinah and his mother. *No matter what.*

“Want something to drink?” he asked. He didn’t have to go back to the jobsite right away. Mac would understand.

Dinah stared at him with her lips pressed into a straight, silent line. “Okay.” Her quiet understanding broke his heart. They headed for the back porch and sat side-by-side, sipping glasses of iced tea and watching the light change.

“That lady at the house...” Dinah began.

“Summer Thompson.”

“I know her name,” Dinah said with impatience, and Damian forgot that she’d talked with Summer under the trees. “Is she going to make us leave?”

His chest tightened. “I don’t know. I hope not.” How he wished he could comfort her, tell her something else. His cell phone rang and he jumped. He checked the screen but didn’t recognize the number that came up. *Call this number. I dare you. I’ll have you arrested within the hour.* But it wasn’t T.J.

“Hi, Damian.” Joyce Hadley’s soprano tones bubbled across the line.

“Oh. Hey.” He studied the pattern of the sunlight on the floor.

“How’s Dinah? All ready for her big game this weekend?”

“Yeah, I guess. What’s up?” Maybe he owed money for Dinah’s uniform or was supposed to organize the parents’ carpool next week.

“Well...” She drew out the syllable in anticipation, as if she were about to announce the grand prize of a game show. “We’re having some people over for a party on the lake next weekend. Wondered if you could make it.”

*This is a social call?* Damian closed his eyes. *No way. Not on your life.*

“You can bring Dinah if you want,” she added.

He reconsidered for a half-second and then shook his head. Sweetening the deal by inviting his kid sister wasn’t enough to sway him. “Sorry. Mac and I have to work straight through the weekends. No time off during building season.” He tried to sound flip, as if he wasn’t turning down her so much as the notion of partying in general.

For a minute she didn’t say anything, and he wondered if the lie rang as hollow on her end of the line as it did on his. “Yeah, well, it’s okay. I know you’re busy. Let me know if you change your mind.”

Damian shoved his phone back into his pocket. Any guy in town would give fifty bucks to be in his place. Joyce Hadley had been after him for months. She was single. Good-looking. Obviously interested. Why didn't he just go out with her?

He laced both hands behind his head and stared out the window as the answer came to him. *Because I feel nothing when I look at her.* He tried to picture himself kissing Joyce, winding her long hair around his fingers, breathing her in. It didn't work. Instead he saw a painted pink mouth and painted pink nails, a tinny laugh and shallow eyes. As much as he sometimes hated himself for it, he'd never been able to date, or even take a woman to bed, just to scratch an itch. He needed more—a soul to burn for, someone to open up the darkest corners of his mind and heart and make him laugh from the inside out. He'd felt that way once, a long time ago. But something like that didn't happen twice in a lifetime.

Did it?

CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

“Gabe, you want lunch? I’m doing a deli run.” One of the part-time medics stuck his head into the break room of the Heartland Ambulance Corps.

Gabe glanced up from the reports on his desk. “Sure. I’ll take a foot-long Italian sub. Extra pickles on the side.” He fished out a ten and passed it to the newbie, who was stuck with lunch patrol this week.

“You got it.”

“Thanks.” Gabe scrawled a signature across the last report and slid them all into a folder. Quiet morning, which was good for the EMTs on duty, but not so good for the thoughts rattling around inside his head. He reached for the remote and flipped on the TV in the corner. At eleven in the morning, it looked like his choices were talk shows or cartoon reruns. Closing his eyes, he rolled his head from side to side. He tried to believe that seeing Summer Thompson yesterday didn’t have anything to do with last night’s lack of sleep or the tension now squeezing his neck in two. He wanted to call her. He didn’t want to call her. He had no idea what he’d say if he saw her again.

He changed the channel and watched a weepy teenager tell the father of her baby she wanted him back.

The distraction didn't work. All he saw was Summer's face. That night. The accident, and everything that happened after. *Does she know?* He slid open a drawer in the desk he shared with two other guys. A small blue ball lay inside, and he pulled it out. Hand to hand, back and forth, he tossed it in higher and higher arcs.

*"GABE, I'll need you to stand over here." Chief Walters' chin bobbed as he spoke. "Been drinking tonight, son?"*

*Gabe shook his head and chewed furiously on a stick of gum. "No, sir."*

*"Mm hmm. Then you won't mind blowing into this for me, will you?"*

GABE SQUEEZED the ball between his fingers until he thought it might split in two. He'd done his time, come back home and tried to convince Whispering Pines he wasn't a bad guy. Some people in town believed him. Some didn't. Of course, no one knew what had really happened the night Donny Thompson died, and Gabe wasn't sure it was his place to tell them. Summer had long since left town, and she was the only other person who might remember the details. Or she might not. He'd never asked her father. He hadn't wanted to know.

Instead, Gabe had gone about his own business, become a paramedic and blended back into his hometown the best he could. The job came easy, and he liked it most days, which wasn't really a surprise. Rescuing made sense to him. It always had.



His fingers drummed the desk. Today's humidity had sunk into his knees, and they ached more than they had in a long time. Or maybe it wasn't the humidity at all.

*“PLEASE READ over this plea bargain, Mr. Roberts, and then sign at the bottom indicating your agreement...”*

SUMMER WAS LEAVING Whispering Pines soon, that much he knew. Whether she'd agree to have coffee or a meal with him, he could only guess. He turned up the volume and threw the ball across the room, where it hit the wall just beside the TV. His headache grew.

The funeral. The sentencing. The nightmares. He glanced outside at the cars that drove down Main Street and the mothers who pushed their babies in strollers under the morning sun. He retrieved the ball, lay it back in the drawer and ran a hand over his forehead, slick with perspiration.

From what he'd heard around town, Ron Thompson had sent his daughter to Chicago one week after the accident without telling her anything except that he didn't want her to come back to Whispering Pines. No chance to say goodbye to Donny. Or her friends. Or her high school boyfriend, who'd pushed the memory down so deep it had turned into a small, tight ball in a corner of his gut. He wouldn't bring up details if they saw each other again, but if she asked? He wasn't sure he could lie to her. Summer Thompson had always deserved the best Gabe could give her.

In this case, it would be the truth.



“OH, SUMMER, IT’S GORGEOUS.” Sadie Rogers stood in the middle of the kitchen and waved a pen. “You could get much more than you’re thinking of asking. With this square footage, all the acreage, and the rental property out back...” She trailed off and scribbled something on her legal pad. Dots of mascara had fallen onto her cheeks, and her blouse was damp at the collar. A good forty pounds heavier than back in high school, Sadie breathed heavily as she pushed curls off her forehead. A few gray hairs sprinkled her hairline.

Summer took a deep breath. “Speaking of the rental property, I wanted to ask you something.” *This will change things. This decision will slow everything down.* “I want to leave it as a contingency. I want the Knights to be able to stay after it’s sold.”

Sadie stopped writing and clicked her ballpoint pen with a look of consternation. “You’re sure? I think it will be harder to find a buyer that way.”

“But not impossible.”

“No. Of course not. It’ll just take the right person.”

Summer nodded. “That’s okay, then.” Wasn’t everyone looking for the right person to do something?

“Well, okay. If you’re absolutely sure.” Sadie stuck the notepad into her enormous purse. “I’ll have to draw up a new contract, but I’m booked the rest of the day, and I have two showings and a closing tomorrow.”

“It’s okay. I’m not in a rush.”

Sadie pulled out her phone and tapped the screen until her calendar appeared. “I can have it ready for you the day after tomorrow, how’s that? Is nine-thirty okay to meet at my office? The twins have swimming lessons at eight.”

“That’s fine.”

Sadie tapped a few keys and then put her phone away. "I thought you were in a rush to leave and get back to California."

*So did I.* "I'll change my flight if I have to stay to get everything situated. It's not a big deal to stay a few more days." Yeah, like that wasn't the biggest lie she'd told herself all week. And like she wasn't wondering about the look on Damian's face when she told him the good news. Not at all.

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

**A**s soon as Summer stepped inside Zeb's Diner, Joe Bernstein waved from a corner booth. "There you are."  
"I'm sorry I'm late. I was meeting with Sadie." She planted a kiss on his wrinkled cheek and slid into the opposite side of the booth.

"What can I get for ya?" Margaret, the middle-aged waitress who had worked at Zeb's as long as Summer could remember, sidled up from behind the counter. A large wad of gum moved around her mouth, and she jotted down their order with a pencil she pulled from the bun atop her head.

"How's work?" Summer asked after they placed their orders.

"Ah, the office is fine."

"But?"

"But I've decided that this will be my last semester teaching at the college."

"You're kidding." She rolled her straw wrapper into a tiny ball. "I thought you loved working there."

"I do. But I'm getting old."

"Please. You're sixty-five. That's barely retirement age these days."

He smiled. "You didn't let me finish. I meant, I'm getting old enough that I'd like to do other things with my life than convince young adults why they should care about ancient history."

Summer flicked the paper ball with indignation. "Of course they should care! We can't understand where we are, and who we are, unless we know where we've come from."

He chuckled.

"Why are you laughing? It's true."

"Of course it's true. I'm laughing because you sound like me thirty years ago, full of fire and ready to wrestle with anyone who couldn't understand why studying the Civil War or the California Gold Rush was of any importance."

"But you're the reason I love it so much." So many nights at the Thompson kitchen table, Joe had woven stories of long-gone civilizations, of wars fought for love and money and power, as Summer sat beside him and her father and listened with fascination. "You made it matter."

"You flatter me. But I think it's about time for me to move on. Besides, I can't stay up past eight o'clock, and they always give me those god-awful night classes that go until ten. They'll hire someone else, someone younger. It's only one class a semester, anyway."

"It won't be the same."

"Well, I'd like to think I'll be tough to replace."

Margaret delivered two cups of coffee, and Joe passed Summer the plastic box of sugar packets. "Still planning on leaving town soon?"

"Funny you ask. I just changed my flight this afternoon. Looks like I'll be here a little longer."

"Really? Why?"

“I decided to sell the house with a rental contingency, which will take a little longer to work out. I don’t want to evict the Knights.”

“That’s rather kind of you.”

“I’d like to think I’m a kind person once in a while.”

He took a long sip of coffee. “Ever think about keeping the place for yourself?”

One corner of her mouth twitched. *You’re the second person to ask me that.* “Not really. Why would I?”

“You have friends here. A past. It’s the place where you grew up.”

She shook her head. “That—it’s all gone.” Her chest tightened. “My father told me never to come back. He made that clear the day I left.”

“He had a hard time dealing with your brother’s death.”

“And I didn’t?”

“He thought it would be better for you someplace else. Easier.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that’s it. I think he hated knowing I was alive and Donny wasn’t.” She pressed her fingertips to the table to draw strength from its smooth surface. “So why leave me a house here? I still don’t get it.”

“Maybe he was trying to make peace.”

She lifted a brow. “Without saying a word?”

“Your father wasn’t exactly the talkative type.”

“Tell me about it.” She looked outside. “Sometimes I wonder if he wanted to bring me back here and remind me what I did. Remind me that Donny died because of me.” Her eyes filled.

Joe set his mug on the table, hard enough that coffee sloshed over the side. “Your brother’s death was *not* your fault.”

Summer grabbed a napkin and blew her nose. “You don’t know that for sure.” No one did, except Gabe Roberts. No one else could bring back the memories that her own brain had buried. A stone of

grief and regret and something else she couldn't name pressed down on her chest.

"What's this really about? Your brother? The house? Or something else?"

Joe's voice sounded far away and Summer fought against the dots that swirled at the edges of her peripheral vision. "I can't remember," she whispered.

His face, at the end of a long tunnel, leaned closer. "Remember what?"

*"SUMMER, look at me. If anyone asks, this is what you have to say..."*

*She tried to nod and agree. But her head ached, and she couldn't pay attention to Gabe, even though he held her quivering chin in one hand and stared straight into her eyes as he spoke. His words didn't make any sense, anyway. They were mixed up, backwards, not the truth at all.*

SUMMER TRIED to focus on Joe's face. "I can't remember what happened that night."

Before he could answer, Margaret delivered their sandwiches, greasy Reubens with greasier fries on the side. Joe took a few bites. Finally he harrumphed, and his mouth twitched as if he was trying to figure out the right words. "That might not be a bad thing. Not remembering, that is. I think you're very lucky that time, or pain, or a combination of both, has blocked out the accident."

She shook her head. That might have worked for the last ten years. But things had changed. "I *want* to remember," she said. "I

need to know.”

Why the urge now gripped her so tightly, she had no idea. Maybe it was the memories spiraling through her more and more since she'd set foot on the East Coast. Maybe it was seeing the cemetery gate rising out of the trees behind the house. Or maybe it was a combination of all of the above, along with being thrust into her past without realizing she was missing so many of the pieces that made it up.

“Tell me,” she said. “You must remember something that came out afterwards. Something the cops or the newspapers said.”

“I don't know much, really. You and Gabe had taken Donny to the drive-in.”

“I do remember that. We went for ice cream, and then he wanted to see the new Bruce Willis movie with us. Donny thought Gabe was the coolest guy on the planet.” *So did I.*

“Yep. So then it was eleven-thirty or so, and you were all headed home, far as anyone can tell.”

She nodded. *We were going to drop Donny off and then go back to Gabe's lake house...*

“No one saw the collision. Mamie and Herb Talbot were on their way home from visiting their grandkids in Silver Valley. They got to you a few minutes after it happened and called it in.”

“I don't remember them being there.”

“You and Gabe were out of the car by the time they found you, banged up but walking around.” His brows drew together. “At first the cops couldn't figure out why you both got out so fast, but you were looking for Donny, of course. He was thrown from the car.”

Summer closed her eyes and tried to summon the memory. *I thought Donny was in the backseat.* “He wasn't wearing his seatbelt?”



Joe shook his head. "Medics found him a few yards away. Said he probably died on impact."

But that couldn't be true. Summer frowned. "I heard him talking, calling for me, after we were hit."

"I don't know if that's possible."

She didn't speak, though she'd just remembered something else. She and Gabe hadn't gotten out of the car to look for Donny. She would put her hand on a Bible and swear to that. They both thought he was still strapped into the backseat. She'd told her little brother a hundred times to wear his seat belt, even in the back. Then why, bleeding and dizzy, would she and Gabe have unstrapped their seat belts and crawled out of a twisted piece of metal?

*"SUMMER, get out of the car. Now." Gabe pulled at her arm.*

*"I can't." Things hurt, like her head and her left arm. And her ankle.*

*"Yes, you can." The seat belt snapped free from her shoulder. "Come on." He dragged her across the seat and out the open door.*

DID he think the car was going to explode? She didn't recall any smell of gas or smoke. Summer grabbed at it, a murky reason that swam at the very edge of her memory. *There was something wrong that night.* She and Gabe had taken Donny out before. As long as they were home before midnight, her father didn't care. Gabe was the best driver she knew. He never sped or took turns too fast, not with her or Donny in the car. That was part of the reason she hadn't fought too hard when her father made her wait to get her junior license.

But something had happened earlier in the night, something unexpected, that changed their plans. *What was it?*

Joe picked up his sandwich. “You had a sprained ankle and some bad cuts from hitting the windshield. They thought you might have a concussion too, so they kept you at the hospital overnight for observation. He cleared his throat. “Gabe, though—”

“Where is he buried?”

“Sorry?”

“Donny. Do you know where his grave is? My father never told me.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.” And he told her, right down to the last detail about the spread of wildflowers that grew under the biggest pine tree in the cemetery.

THE ROAD CURVED AWAY from town and became more overgrown the farther in she drove. Evergreens arched toward her car and blocked the sun. They scraped their branches along her windows. A dust cloud rose up behind her.

By the time Summer parked in front of All Saints’ black gates, clouds had gathered and turned the afternoon gloomy. Thunder rumbled as she opened the door and tested the ground. Good thing she’d worn sensible running shoes today rather than designer heels. She walked across the road and stopped under the curved wrought iron letters. Her chest tightened.

*“MISS THOMPSON, can you tell us who was driving the car?” Chief Walters put one hand on her shoulder. She stared at a piece of metal*

*at her feet. It looked like it might have been a mirror, or part of a door panel ripped away in the impact. Her head hurt.*

*“Summer?”*

*She looked up. Above them a solitary stoplight blinked, red one way, yellow the other. Of course she knew who’d been driving. What kind of a question was that? She looked past the police chief at the bleary-eyed man who stumbled on the side of the road. The front of his truck was badly dented, and the windshield had shattered. Blood dripped from a cut on his head and his mouth.*

*“Mr. Hartwell,” she whispered. In a breath, she indicted the elementary school custodian.*

*The policeman nodded and closed his notebook.*

**SUMMER STEPPED INSIDE THE GATES.** *Follow the path on the right, Joe had told her. It goes all the way to the back. Two big pines are standing in the northeast corner. Donny’s buried right underneath.*

*It took her less than a minute to find it.*

*She drew in a breath and dropped to her knees. A simple stone with simple printing rose a few inches off the ground. She pulled at the weeds that choked the letters of his name. **Donald Francis Thompson. Beloved Son. Bright Angel. Forever Missed.***

*Here at the back of the cemetery, she heard nothing except a whisper of wind through the trees. She glanced at the stones around her and saw familiar names: Hadley, Simpson, Graves, Bernstein. A few hundred yards away, wilting flowers surrounded a new swell of ground. She leaned over and laid her cheek on Donny’s plain white marker. As she knelt there, the sun came out again. Eyes closed, she felt its warmth on one side of her face, a granite chill on the other.*

“I miss you.”

His stone didn't say *beloved brother*, and yet he'd been just that. The tagalong, the tease, the grass-stained kid who caught snakes and hid them in her closet. The baseball player. The country music lover. The round-eyed face that listened to her problems, the sweet kid who brought her breakfast in bed every year on her birthday.

One week past thirteen, he'd left her. Summer let her fingers trace the letters and dig into the edges that had worn smooth with time and wind. At twenty-eight she'd lived more than two whole lives to Donny's one. Nothing seemed more unfair.

After a long while, she sat back on her heels. At least her father had picked a good spot, quiet and private, surrounded by trees. It overlooked a sloping hill that led down to a stream. Not a bad place, if you had to choose. Of course, Ronald Thompson shouldn't have had to. His son shouldn't have been in the ground at all; he should have been finishing college, starting a job, bringing home a girl, sketching out a life.

Summer stood and glanced over her shoulder. Above the trees rose the top of the mansion. Her mansion. She recognized the outline and the way three stories speared the clouds. She couldn't hear anything, and yet she knew Mac and Damian were working less than a mile from where she stood.

Something inside her chest thawed. *I can see it from here*. She pushed her hair behind her ears and realized for the first time that maybe her father hadn't bought the house so he could stand on the second floor landing and see the ground that held his dead son. Maybe he'd bought it so that someone standing in this open grassy area could look up and catch the glimpse of a familiar silhouette in one of the windows. Or so that someone sleeping here could sense

that family lived and breathed and loved just a short distance away. Maybe that kind of connection went both ways.

So many questions. So many pieces that didn't fit the puzzle inside her head. Summer blinked with realization. She hadn't changed her flight just so she could find a way for the Knights to stay in their farmhouse. She'd changed her flight because she couldn't leave Whispering Pines until she knew exactly what had happened the night her brother died.

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

The following night, Summer and Gabe sat in a corner of Marc's Grille. Around them, plush chairs and elegant place settings waited for the dinner crowd to arrive. She shifted and adjusted her blue silk sundress. She pulled a dinner roll in half and separated it into smaller and smaller pieces without eating it. Crumbs fell onto her plate as she looked past Gabe, through the restaurant's front window. Outside stretched a quarter-mile block of spotless storefronts, manicured landscaping and wrought-iron benches. Posh boutiques and cozy bars had replaced the rambling cornfields of her childhood. This new avenue, Park Place Run, looked like it had been lifted from the east side of some upscale city and transplanted amid the hills and farmland.

She barely recognized it. Then again, sometimes she barely recognized herself these days.

"I won't bite," Gabe said.

Summer felt herself color. "Sorry. It's just been a long day." That was the truth, anyway. She'd spent the morning with Sadie going over paperwork and the afternoon on the phone with the museum. The only thing that had surprised her more than Gabe's message for her at the motel desk was the fact that she'd called him back and

agreed to dinner. Now she wondered if she'd made a mistake in doing so.

The front door opened, and Summer smiled and waved at the couple that entered. The young woman took a step toward their table and then stopped. With a tight smile, she laced her fingers through her husband's and pulled him toward the hostess stand instead.

Summer frowned. "That was weird."

"What?"

"That's Alyssa Reynolds. Or Williams now, I guess. Didn't you play ball with the guy she married? Frank?"

"Yeah." Gabe dug into his salad.

"She just totally ignored me."

"Don't worry about it. You know how people can be in a small town."

"I thought they were nice."

"They still are nice. They just keep to themselves."

"But she didn't even say hello." Surely Alyssa remembered her. They'd sung together in the school choir for three years.

"Maybe she's not sure what to say. You haven't been back in a long time, and you left under, you know, not the best circumstances. People might feel a little awkward."

"I guess." Summer pushed lettuce leaves around her plate. "This is a beautiful place," she said after a minute.

"It is." Gabe set down his fork and studied her. "The owner worked hard to get it going."

Conversation lapsed into silence. She had so many questions she wanted to ask and no idea where to begin. The waitress came and cleared their salad plates. An open bottle of wine sat on the table between them. Gabe split it between their glasses and sent it away, empty.

The front door opened again, and this time Grant Knicke walked in. The former elementary school principal held hands with a little girl decked out in a ballerina's tutu and princess crown. A slender woman followed them, carrying a toddler on her shoulders.

"Oh, there's Mr. Knicke. And Mandy and her kids." With a stash of lollipops in his desk drawer, Mr. Knicke had headed up the only school in town where kids actually tried to get into trouble, just so they could spend ten minutes in his spacious corner office.

He glanced at Summer, and she thought she saw recognition in his eyes. She pushed her chair back, meaning to go over and say hello. He nodded in her direction, looked briefly at Gabe and then patted his granddaughter's shoulder and steered her to the other side of the restaurant.

*What's going on here?* She tried to shrug off the paranoia. Maybe Gabe was right. Maybe people didn't know what to say to her. When her salmon arrived, she speared it with a fork, glad for the distraction. "So how did you end up working as a paramedic?"

Gabe sliced his filet mignon. "They needed more guys in the corps, and they had a program where they paid for my training. Figured it'd be as good a job as any."

"It never gets to you? Especially after what happened to us?"

"That's part of the reason I chose it."

"Oh." Her heart crept into her throat. "Well, you're braver than I am." *Ask him. Ask him what really happened that night.*

He smiled. "Or dumber. Haven't really figured it out yet. How did you get into...whatever it is that you do?"

"I'm a curator for a small museum in San Francisco."

"Ah. That makes sense. You always were a history buff back in school. All those dates and details. You like it?"



“Love it. I get to arrange exhibits, do some research, set up shows and workshops for kids in the local schools...”

“Sounds cool.”

“It is.”

More silence. She pushed away her fish, half eaten, and leaned back in her chair. “So are you dating anyone?” Her gaze dropped to his left hand. No ring. “Girlfriend? Fiancée?”

He chuckled. “Nah. Playing the field, that’s all. No one came close to you.”

She winked. “Of course they didn’t.” But a familiar ache rolled around her heart and fell away. “No one, really? Not even a kinda-sorta once-in-a-while kind of gal?”

He shrugged. “I hooked up with Tara Hadley for a while, if you can believe it.”

“I can, actually. She’s gorgeous.”

He made a face. “It was years ago. She ended up leaving me for some older guy. She got bored with him, so we started going out again. We’d go out for a few months, break up, get back together a few months later...until about two or three years ago. She went on a trip to Jamaica with her sisters and came back married.”

“Seriously?”

“Lasted about a year. Long enough for the guy to get his green card and dump her. Since then, we don’t really talk.”

Summer wondered about that. Relationships that wandered through the years rarely ended with neat corners and final goodbyes. She knew that better than anyone.

They finished dinner and ordered coffee, full-strength for both of them.

“When did you start drinking the hard stuff?” she asked. He’d always hated coffee back in high school, even when all his friends

started drinking it mornings after a big game or a bigger party.

“After the accident.”

And just like that, the ice broke. The past swerved into the present, and everything came rushing back.

Summer sat without moving while Gabe stared into his coffee. Steam rose into the air. She reached for his hand, and he let her take it. “I wished we’d talked. Said something, or seen each other. After it happened, I mean. Before I left.”

He stroked his thumb along the ridge of her palm. “Me too.”

“Did you—this sounds stupid—” She exhaled. “Were you hurt that night?”

“Physically?”

*Or emotionally, or psychologically, or all the other ways something like that can hurt a person.* “Yeah. Physically.”

He pulled his hand away and dumped two packets of sugar into his coffee. “Just banged up. Bruised back. Broken nose. Nothing too bad. You had it worse.”

She sipped her coffee too soon and burned her tongue. “I don’t remember a lot of what happened. I only know what my father told me, and then my aunt when I went to live with her, which wasn’t much.”

He nodded. “I sort of figured.”

Something beeped before she could ask anything else, like why they’d gotten out of the car or where Donny had been when the EMTs found him.

Gabe’s hand moved to his lap and he glanced down. “Shoot. I’ve gotta go. I’m on call tonight. Sorry.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Seconds later, the beeper went off again. He pushed back his chair and flagged down the waitress. Outside, a siren wailed down

the block.

She reached for her purse. "Let me leave the tip."

"Already got it." Gabe signed the credit card slip and tore off his copy.

"I feel like I owe you."

They headed for the exit, and he flashed her the smile she remembered from school. "Oh, you do. In ways you can't begin to imagine." He held the door for her and they stepped into a humid evening.

Summer rummaged around in her purse for her car keys. She felt unsettled, as if they'd only just creaked open the past without daring to look inside. She needed more. She wanted more. "Can we maybe have coffee sometime?"

"I'd like that." They stood there for a moment without speaking, and then he leaned over and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "How long are you staying?"

"I changed my flight to next week."

"Thought you were leaving sooner than that. Any special reason?"

"I'm trying to work out a contingency with the sale so the renters can stay on." She didn't add that one of the renters had kissed her the other night and turned her topsy-turvy with desire. Or that said renter was trying to keep his mother safe from a crazy stalker ex-husband. She didn't suppose either was something you confessed to a former boyfriend.

An ambulance sped up Main Street with its lights flashing. Chills ran down her spine, and she marveled again at the fact that Gabe did this, rescued bleeding people the same way they'd been rescued all those years ago. She could never do it. It would be like staying trapped inside that night forever. She shivered.

He touched the small of her back. "It's nice seeing you. I'm glad you came back. It's good to make peace."

Summer didn't answer. She wasn't sure she had, not yet. She still resented her father. She still missed her brother with a heartache that overwhelmed her. She still wanted to know what had happened that night, and only one person could fill in those blanks.

"I'll call you for coffee?" he asked after a moment.

"Sounds good." She watched him walk away, until he was just a silhouette in the evening and she was left with questions and a longing she couldn't explain.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

**T**heo eased his battered car into the dirt parking lot. *Bill's* read the sign above the door. The neon flickered in and out, making it look more like a strip joint in Vegas than the local watering hole it supposedly was. He smoothed both hands over his hair and took his time getting out.

He was close. He could feel it. Screw that private investigator he'd wasted too much money on. After seven hours of driving north from Baltimore, he'd found the junior college Damian had graduated from, and though the woman in Admissions wouldn't give him any personal info, he had a good feeling the kid and his mother were still around. Tracing her cell phone had turned into a dead end, and the number wasn't much good without a location.

Now he was stuck in this piss-ant Adirondack Mountain region trying to blend in and do a little sleuthing work without getting noticed. He already had a headache from trying to negotiate the winding roads that connected all these stupid blue-collar towns, and he couldn't find a decent place to get a meal, let alone a beer. But he'd found himself a part-time contracting job yesterday, so he could blend in with the locals and do a little spying in the meantime.

Inside, six heads swiveled in unison as he pushed open the door. A ball game played on the television behind the bar. He lifted his chin in greeting and pulled up a stool.

“Evenin’,” said the bartender. His belly hung over his jeans, and arms thick as slabs of meat strained at a faded blue T-shirt.

“I’ll take a light draft.” Theo pointed to the tap closest to him. “Thanks.”

The rest of the bar patrons turned back to their game. In the corner, a couple sat holding hands and staring at each other in a way that made Theo want to gag. He trained his gaze on the television instead.

“You new in town, or passing through?” The bartender folded his arms and leaned in.

Should’ve known he couldn’t just blend in. People in small towns always had to ask questions. “Ah, I’m here part-time, doing some contracting work for a friend.” Theo downed half his beer and prayed the guy wouldn’t ask him which friend.

A toothpick shifted from one side of the bartender’s mouth to the other. “You working on that new development in Cedar Crest?”

Theo nodded. That, at least, was true.

“Them houses gonna be mansions. Don’t know who the hell can afford ’em.”

“Not me, that’s for sure.”

The bartender guffawed. “Damn straight.”

Theo finished his beer and pushed the mug back across the bar. “Another, thanks.”

No one spoke for a few minutes. Theo watched the Yankees score two runs against the Cleveland Indians before he got up the nerve to ask the question he really wanted to. “Hey, anyone know a guy around here named Damian Knight?”

The guy closest to him shifted on his stool. Red-eyed, he looked Theo up and down before answering. “Nope.” His head turned on a thick neck. “Johnny!”

A man in blue flannel and camo pants looked up from his pool game. “What?”

“Know a guy named Damian Knight?”

The man spit into a cup and shook his head. “Nope. He live in Cedar Crest?”

“Not sure,” Theo said carefully. Last thing he needed was to get anyone suspicious. “I worked with him a while back, thought he said something about moving up here. He graduated from Adirondack Community College a couple years ago.”

The bartender leaned over. “Might try Silver Valley or Whispering Pines, then. Them’s the next biggest towns around.”

“How far?”

“Silver Valley’s just over the mountain. Twenty miles or so. Whispering Pines’s between there and the Thruway. ’Bout an hour from here.” He scratched his belly and moved away.

Theo nodded without answering. Easy drive. Maybe he’d try it tomorrow or the next day, see what those towns looked like.

The guy beside him was still talking. “Not much to see that way.” He burped. “Saratoga Springs, farther up the highway, that’s a place worth checking out. Horses, if you’re a betting man, or...” He drifted off as the bartender turned up the volume on the TV. A player in pinstripes rounded the bases.

“Not really into the horses, but thanks.” Sweat beaded across Theo’s forehead. He grimaced and finished his second beer. “Kay, thanks, ’night,” he murmured as he pushed back his stool. The bartender grunted in return. No one else even looked his way.

Outside, pitch black greeted him as soon as the door swung shut. Theo turned around, trying to get his bearings. He could barely make out the treetops and mountain ridges against the ink of the sky. A tiny sliver of moon hung above him, and he tripped finding his way back to the car. Wasn't used to countryside like this, that was for sure. Not even a streetlight out here. He swore out loud as he tripped again. Fresh anger at his ex-wife mixed with desire to see her again. She'd deliberately picked a quiet, dark place in which to hide. *Suburban Philadelphia wasn't good enough, huh?*

He wondered how Hannah would take to Baltimore, because she was coming back there with him. As soon as he found her, he was putting her and Dinah in his car and driving due south. They belonged together, no question about it. He frowned. But if she refused, he'd take Dinah and leave Hannah behind with her smart-ass son. *Damian*. Theo's hands tightened into fists. Last time he'd tried to reason with Hannah, Damian had stepped between them and landed a few lucky punches. Theo would have to take them by surprise, or wait for a time when Damian wasn't there at all. He cracked his knuckles. He still had to find Hannah, and he still had to work out a plan, but it was coming together.

"Damn straight," he muttered, echoing the bartender. "Damn straight."



CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

“So I have this crazy idea.” Summer waved away the café’s teenage waitress and drank the last of her piña colada as she and Rachael ate lunch the following day. Despite the umbrella above them, the sun burned down onto the backs of their necks.

“Ooh, I love crazy. Tell me.” Rachael fished a French fry off her plate.

“I met with Sadie yesterday morning, and we decided to list the house with the rental as a contingency. That means the Knights will get to stay there. But I changed my return flight, so I’m staying a few more days too. I was thinking that maybe I’d stay in the house. If, I mean, the guys say it’s okay.”

“Seriously? That’s so cool.” Rachael clapped her hands, caught the corner of her straw, and sent frozen margarita flying across the table. “Oops. Sorry.”

Summer laughed. “I think you might be cut off. One margarita is your limit.”

Rachael made a face and finished what was left of her drink. “Whatever. You know you could stay at my place, right? We have an empty bedroom. My parents wouldn’t mind.”

“I know. And I thought about asking you.” Summer shrugged. “But I think I’d rather be at the house in case...I don’t know. In case Mac and Damian have questions about things. Or in case I do.” She wondered how obvious her little white lie was.

“What about the museum? You don’t have to rush back?”

“I have great assistants, thank goodness. And I haven’t taken a vacation in almost three years. Anyway, the bedroom on the first floor is almost finished, so I thought I’d ask Mac about it. I don’t want to keep paying for a motel room if I actually own a house.”

“Mm hmm.” Rachael lifted two fingers at the waitress and pointed to their empty glasses. She folded her arms on the table. “Now tell me the real reason you’re staying. And don’t tell me it’s because it’s going to take you another week to get all the paperwork settled. You can list a house in two days. And you don’t need to be here in town to sell it.”

The waitress delivered fresh drinks in frosted glasses, and Summer took a long, deliberate sip.

“Are you staying so you can get back together with Gabe?”

“What? No.”

Rachael narrowed her eyes. “Are you sure? I heard you had dinner with him last night.”

“Didn’t take the grapevine long, huh?”

“Of course not. You should know better.”

“No, I am not staying to get back together with Gabe.” She wouldn’t lie; something about seeing him again had felt warm and familiar, like an old robe she’d pulled on that still fit in all the right places. But ten years had passed. Things had changed. She had slices of time she couldn’t remember. He’d moved on, and so had she. Really, there was nothing left between them but a memory of a place where attraction used to be. The emotions he’d stirred up at

dinner had more to do with sorting through her brother's death than any chemistry left after all this time.

"I just—" She stopped and tried to think of how to explain. They'd never talked about the accident, she and Rachael. "Part of why I feel like I have to stay is because I'm trying to remember what happened the night Donny died. Since I've been back, I've been having these weird flashbacks. I see parts of the night, parts of the accident. But not the whole thing."

"You're kidding."

"The therapist I saw in college told me I probably wouldn't ever remember." She took another sip of piña colada. "So it's weird, now, that I am."

"You have amnesia?"

"Something like that."

"Holy crap. That's crazy. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I don't know. Does it make a difference?"

"I guess not." But a funny expression crossed Rachael's face. "I'm just surprised, that's all. I never knew."

Summer lifted her shoulders. "I had dinner with Gabe because I thought maybe he could fill in the blanks. He remembers, I think."

Rachael's funny expression returned. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he does."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Rachael chewed one corner of her lips. "You don't know what happened to Gabe? After the accident?"

"No. I mean, he told me he was a little banged up, but nothing too bad." Doubt seized her. "Wait, did he lie? Was he really hurt and no one told me?"

"I don't think he was. I didn't see him much afterwards, though." Rachael opened and closed her mouth like she was about to say

something else, but then her cell phone rang, and she grabbed it. "Oops, sorry, gotta get this." Her cheeks colored, and Summer wondered what her friend hadn't told her.

"Sorry," Rachael said when she hung up a few minutes later.

"No problem. What's this guy's name? Seth?"

"Sean. He's a nice guy, owns a shoe store over in Silver Valley."

"How long have you been seeing him?"

"Three weeks."

"Almost a record, huh?"

"Don't see a ring on your finger either."

"Touché."

They both laughed.

"Speaking of nice guys, what about Damian?" Rachael asked.

"What about him?" Summer still felt lousy about the way their last conversation had ended. More than once in the last two days, her thoughts had turned to him. His body, hard with muscle. His eyes, a bottomless blue. She could still taste him inside her mouth, could still feel his hands against the curve of her waist. She wanted to kiss him again. She wanted more than that, actually, and that want surprised her.

"C'mon. He's single, smart, built like a Mack truck, and the sweetest guy in the world when it comes to his mom and sister." Rachael sipped her drink. "If there's nothing going on between you and Gabe, then I don't know what you're waiting for. I would have been living on the bare floor of that house days ago, sawdust and all, just to get a look at Damian first thing in the morning."

Summer laughed. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, maybe, but with very good taste." Rachael stuck her sunglasses on top of her head and waved for the bill. "So when do we get you moved in?"

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

D amian's Camaro was the first thing Summer saw when she arrived at the house later that afternoon. She glanced at the rubber-banded stack of papers on the seat beside her.

"Didn't know there was so much to selling a house," she'd said to Sadie that morning.

"It's easier keeping one than selling one," Sadie had chuckled.

Summer finished the bottle of water beside her. The last buzz of pina colada had faded, but she still felt overheated and on edge.

She picked up the bag of oatmeal raisin cookies she'd bought and brushed through the hedges. She wasn't keeping the house, no matter what Sadie or Joe or anyone else said. That was about the only thing she knew for certain. But that didn't mean she couldn't take advantage of owning it for a few days. Steeling her nerves, she detoured around a pile of paving stones. Talking to Rachael had convinced her, and now she wanted to move in as soon as she could. *If* she could. She just hoped Mac wouldn't laugh when she brought up her idea.

"Hello?" She circled the house and looked up. Scaffolding stood against the back balcony and fresh sawdust covered the lawn, but

she saw no one. Had they left for a late lunch? She found her way through the kitchen and into the foyer. Faint banging and grunts sounded somewhere beneath her feet. A minute later the grunts grew louder, combined with heavy footsteps, and two dust-coated figures emerged from a door behind her.

“Hey, Summer.” Mac raised a hand in greeting. He sneezed and sprayed a cloud of white into the air. Damian coughed behind him.

“Where were you guys?”

“Basement. It’s supposed to rain later. We wanted to get most of the wood and the sheetrock indoors.”

Summer eyed the door. “That goes to the basement?”

Mac grinned. “Yup. Wouldn’t go down there, though. No working lights and plenty of dirt. Probably some rats, too.”

Damian elbowed his boss. “Don’t listen to him.” Dust and dirt covered his face and neck, but something in her stomach stirred upon seeing him again, and Rachael’s words rang in her ears. *I would have been living on the bare floor of that house days ago, sawdust and all, just to get a look at Damian first thing in the morning.*

“Listen, I wanted you to know that I decided to sell the house with a contingency.” She said it quickly, before she lost her nerve. “Whoever buys it will have to let you stay on and rent the farmhouse for as long as you want.”

His eyes widened. She smiled, and in his gaze she saw herself reflected in the light that illuminated his eyes.

“You did that?”

“Seemed like the right thing to do.”

His cheeks colored and his voice turned gruff. “Thanks. ’Preciate it.”

She cleared her throat and held out the white paper bag she'd carried from the car. "I stopped at Lanie's and got a fresh batch of cookies, right out of the oven."

Mac had his hands on it before she finished the sentence. "Awesome! Thanks." He reached in and stuffed two into his mouth. Crumbs fell onto his pant legs. Summer laughed. Damian took a couple, then Mac took another and offered her a crumbled one from the bottom, and before she knew it, the bag was empty.

"We're about done here for today," Mac said. "I've got to run over to Silver Valley, pick up a shipment."

"Before you go, I wanted to ask you...do you think I can move in here?"

He frowned. "What do you mean? Into the house?"

"I can't really afford to stay at the motel for another week."

He folded his beefy arms and considered. "Well, not legally. You're supposed to have a CO."

"A what?"

"Certificate of Occupancy. Piece of paper that means it's safe to live here."

Summer's hopes fell.

"But the building inspector lives in Silver Valley. He doesn't make it over here too often." He winked. "I don't think it would be a problem, 'specially if it's just for a few days. I won't say anything."

"Really?"

"Sure. We'll get you set up. I suppose we can find you a bed someplace, maybe a dresser or somethin' too, if you need one. All the doors are secure enough now, so you shouldn't have to worry about that."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Thanks." She stole a gaze at Damian, but she couldn't read his face. Mac's mention of a bed had turned her

cheeks scarlet, and she thought her best move was to back away until she got herself under control. “Okay, well...” She tucked her purse over her shoulder and turned to leave.

“You don’t have to go.” Damian said. “I mean, I could use the company, if you want to stick around and check out the first floor rooms.”

Want pooled in her belly. “Okay. Guess I can see what I’m getting myself into.” Mac left, and she followed Damian through the foyer and into the bedroom.

Clouds scudded across the sky. In a matter of seconds the sun vanished and thunder grumbled. He flipped on a work light near the door and examined the trim along the baseboard.

“This room’s great. Huge, too.” He hammered and measured as he spoke. When he knelt, the muscles in his calves flexed. Strong arms. Strong legs.

“Everything you guys have done...” Summer tried to look away from him and couldn’t. “...it looks great.”

He stopped and glanced up, knuckling his tape measure. “I really appreciate you letting us stay in the farmhouse.”

“Mac told me a little about your mom’s ex.”

Damian’s face darkened. “Yeah.” He drove three nails into the molding. “No offense, but why are you sticking around? I thought you were heading back to California ASAP.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

Bright blue eyes and a long, knowing look peeled away her outer layer with a single blink. “Nope. Last thing from my mind, actually.”

If he hadn’t been covered with sawdust right then, Summer would have reached down and touched his mouth, just to feel his lips move against her fingertips. “I thought maybe —” she began, but a crack of thunder drowned her words. Outside, the sky had turned black.



“Sorry?” He stood, took a step toward her and closed the distance between them. Their shoulders brushed, and electricity ricocheted between them. His breathing quickened. Her heart thrummed. For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Stillness. Hesitation.

Then Damian bent his head and caught her mouth with his. He stroked the curve of her chin, and she shivered. His tongue parted her lips, and one arm slipped around her waist. This kiss was stronger than the other night at the lake, with more emotion behind it. He pulled her close and lifted her onto her tiptoes. Her hands played over his biceps and she tasted his tongue, something sweet and bitter at the same time, like leftover coffee and chocolate and desire. For a crazy moment she wanted nothing at all between them. No space, no clothes, only white-hot skin.

Someone knocked at the front door.

Summer’s breath caught in her throat as Damian’s hand moved to the swell of her breast. *Please, no*, she willed the unseen visitor. *Please go away, because I want this man to take me right here, on this floor, with the rain pouring outside and—*

She exhaled as Damian’s embrace loosened. He pulled back slightly and after another second dropped both arms and moved away. She bit her bottom lip. She tingled in places that hadn’t tingled in a long, long time.

“You expecting someone?” His voice sounded ragged, and his gaze returned to her.

“I don’t think so.” No one even knew she was here.

The front door creaked open. “Damian?”

It was a female voice, one that Summer didn’t know. The hair on the back of her neck lifted. She straightened her shirt.

Damian's face changed and he hurried into the foyer. A slight, attractive woman hovered on the threshold. Rain and wind blew in behind her. With effort, she pulled the heavy door shut.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just came by to see the place." The woman turned to Summer and held out a thin, delicate hand. "I'm Damian's mother, Hannah Knight. You must be Summer Thompson."

The jealousy that had risen up in Summer's chest vanished. The hood of Hannah's raincoat fell away, and immediately Summer noticed the resemblance between mother and son. Same blue eyes. Same strong jawline. Chiseled features that were beautiful, almost haunting, on her became startlingly attractive on him.

Summer wiped her hands on the back of her shorts and returned the handshake. "Hi, Mrs. Knight. It's so nice to meet you."

"Not Mrs. Just Hannah. Please." She pressed Summer's hands between both of hers. "I ran into Sadie Rogers at the salon a little while ago, and she told me you're letting us stay in the farmhouse." Her eyes filled. "Thank you so much."

"Oh, well...you're welcome." Summer felt embarrassed by the woman's gratitude. She hadn't done much, just put her signature on a couple sheets of paper. "It's really nothing. I wanted to."

Hannah looked around, taking in the grand foyer, the circular staircase, the entrance to the formal front room, the half-open bedroom door. Her eyes widened. "It's beautiful. Beyond beautiful, really. I thought it would be, from the outside."

"It's so big." Summer's gaze moved to Damian, to his hands and his mouth and the way he kept smiling at her. "And it still needs a lot of work."

"Have you ever thought about keeping it?"

Why did everyone ask her that? Summer shook her head. “I don’t think so. It doesn’t make much sense. My whole life is out in California now.”

“I see. Of course. Are you going to do any decorating before you go?” Hannah walked into the front room and ran a hand over the chair rail, the wide bay window, the gilt fireplace mantel. “Change the colors, anything like that?”

Summer followed the woman and pressed the backs of both hands to her face. Damian’s kiss had thrown her off-balance. Again. “I don’t know the first thing about any of it. My father bought the house and willed it to me.” She stood in front of the bay window and let her gaze rest on the cemetery gates in the distance. *Donny*. Her family. Her blood. She supposed her *whole* life wasn’t out in California now.

“But I don’t live in Whispering Pines anymore,” she added. “It would be silly to keep it. I wouldn’t even know where to begin with the interior design or anything like that.”

Hannah waved a hand. “Ah, read a few magazines, spend an afternoon in a home improvement store, and you’ll get plenty of ideas.” She looked around. “I’d do this room in pale gray, maybe, or eggshell. Something soft. Redo the window seat, the mantel...” She wandered to the window. “It certainly has a gorgeous view. Put a couple of chairs here, deep, comfortable ones so you can watch the sunrise—or the sunset, depending on what kind of hours you keep.”

Her voice, musical in the stillness, charmed Summer. A sudden thought struck her. Hadn’t Sadie mentioned something about Hannah working in design before she moved to Whispering Pines?

“Would you like to help me? Pick out colors, choose some light fixtures or something?” *Might make the place feel a little more like home when potential buyers walk through.* That’s what Sadie had

told her, anyway. And Summer certainly wanted the sale to happen quickly. Did the request seem ridiculous? Hannah Knight probably had better things to do with her days than offer color-swatch suggestions to a total stranger.

But the woman's eyes lit up, blue like her son's, bright like her daughter's. "I'd love to. I used to work as an assistant for an interior designer. A long time ago." Her voice rang with an emotion Summer couldn't identify.

"Was that in Poisonwood?"

Hannah looked surprised. "Yes. How did you know?" Before Summer could respond, she answered her own question. "Damian."

"He mentioned it. Sadie too."

Hannah crossed the foyer and inspected the master bedroom. She smiled as she wandered around the room. "Blues and greens," she said, almost to herself. "I'd do this room in something cozy and relaxing. If you'd like, we could go to Walls and Windows over in Silver Valley to get some ideas. It's a cute design place. Very good prices."

"Okay." Summer looked at her watch. She might not belong in Whispering Pines forever, but this would be a good way to fill the next few days. "Would tomorrow work?"

"I can meet you here at ten. Dinah has soccer practice in the morning, but Damian can pick her up and take her to lunch."

"Sounds perfect."

They walked back into the foyer as Damian descended from the second floor. Grinning, he placed one hand on each woman's shoulder. "Someone's talking design down here."

Heat flooded Summer's face at his touch.

"You just stick to your hammering and sawing," Hannah said, "and we'll take care of making the place look nice."

He planted a kiss on Hannah's cheek. "Fine by me, Mom." Then he leaned close to Summer. "*Definitely* fine by me," he whispered into her ear, and she shivered.

Summer wondered if he'd kiss her too. He didn't, and then she was almost glad, because she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep herself from reaching for more.

Much more.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

The following morning, Hannah and Summer sat in the small but beautifully decorated Windows and Walls. Hannah flipped through a book of paint colors. “Mustard or sage for the small bathroom, do you think?” Behind them, the bells on the door tinkled as another customer walked in. Only ten thirty, and already a handful of shoppers filled the shop in Silver Valley.

“I’m not sure,” Summer said. “I’m no good at this.”

“Of course you are. It’s hard when you’re not in the space you’re trying to design, that’s all. Let’s take a couple samples of each.” Within a matter of minutes, Hannah had selected four color swatches, plucked two catalogs from a rack in the corner, and purchased curtain rod finials in a design Summer would never have chosen but had to admit looked perfect in the sunlight.

Outside, they found a coffee shop down the block. “I really appreciate you helping me out,” Summer said as their steaming lattes arrived.

Hannah smiled. “It’s my pleasure. I love color and design, and making someplace cozy. Took me two years, but the farmhouse is almost the way I want it. I’ve bounced Dinah around so much, I want a place she can call home.”

“Does she take after you that way? With the design, I mean?”

“Well, she’s at the age where she thinks pink is the perfect complement for any décor, so it’s hard to tell. Maybe she’ll grow into it.”

“And Damian?” Summer wasn’t sure what she meant to ask.

“You know men. They’re much better with tools than with fabric swatches. Though sometimes he surprises me. He has an eye for detail that pops out every now and then. I suppose spending most of his life with just his mother has rubbed off.” She frowned. “Not in a bad way, I hope.”

Summer blew on her latte to cool it. She knew enough about family relationships not to prod further. She and Hannah had barely met. She had no right to wonder about Damian or his family or how they’d ended up in Whispering Pines.

Hannah sat back in her chair. “Did you know I had Damian when I was just nineteen?”

“Um, no. But wow.” Nineteen? Summer could barely remember that year in her own life, the bridge between eighteen and twenty, between the end of her life in Whispering Pines and the beginning of the rest of it. She’d barely managed to survive the first semester of college and focus on her studies. And heal from the accident, of course. That had made her grow up faster than a normal teenager. But she didn’t know anyone who’d become a parent that young.

Hannah propped her chin in one hand. “After high school, I fell in love with the guy working on the apartment house across the street. That’s where Damian gets his talent. Jimmy was the foreman of any project, the genius. He could do anything with his hands.” She blushed. “You know what I mean.”

Summer smiled. “I do.”

“We dated for almost a year before I got pregnant. We were going to get married.”

Summer almost didn't want to ask. “He left?”

“He died. Fell off a roof and broke his back. He might have survived, but he was by himself, trying to finish up a job after the other guys had left. No one found him for hours.”

“Oh, Hannah. I'm so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” Hannah shook her head. “I thought I might not even make it through the pregnancy, I cried so much. I was afraid I'd give birth to the saddest child in the world.” The emotion in her eyes shifted from sadness to loneliness to resignation and back again. “For a while, I didn't even want to live.

“But you're strong when you're that young. You bounce back. And look what I got—a wonderful, handsome, talented son. He changed my life the instant I saw him. I never knew I could love someone so much. So unconditionally.” Her face brightened. “He looks so much like Jimmy, sometimes I forget when Damian walks in the room that he isn't his father.”

Summer tried to imagine a young Hannah and the man she'd fallen in love with. Did he have Damian's quiet confidence? His mannerism of brushing the hair from his face, his smile that crinkled at the corners? Had he waved at Hannah from rooftops and glowed with the perspiration of a job well done? She guessed so, and she wondered at the difficulty of living with an image of a love lost so many years ago.

*Dad did that, she thought suddenly. After Mom died in childbirth. He lived with me, looked at me, every day for eighteen years.* For the first time she wondered if Donny's death wasn't the only reason he'd sent her away. If after his only son died too, he simply couldn't look at anyone who reminded him of everything he'd lost.



“After Damian was born, I stayed with my mom for a while. That was when I worked for Flora’s Designs,” Hannah went on. “I loved to create a picture in my mind and watch it come to life in a room. I had a wonderful boss who gave me all kinds of freedom with her clients.” She traced the pattern of the glass-topped table. “I worked there until Damian was about ten, and then I met T.J.”

“Your ex?”

Hannah nodded. “Also a construction worker.” She chuckled, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “I guess I have a weakness for them. Our house needed repairs, so Mom and I looked in the yellow pages. Called the least expensive company we could find, and T.J. showed up.”

“What was he like?”

“Oh, your typical good-looking guy who knows it all. Muscles everywhere, cocky, a smile that could melt butter...” She paused. “I look back now and wonder what I saw in him. We dated—oh, I don’t know. Maybe six months. He proposed with a big fancy diamond, and I said yes. I wanted to get out of my mother’s house and have a real father for Damian. I figured it was time I had a life of my own.” She looked straight at Summer. “People say yes for all kinds of reasons.

“I couldn’t get pregnant, though, and that was the beginning. T.J. wanted a child right away, and when that didn’t work out, I started to see the real man I’d married. The one who drank and turned ugly when things didn’t go his way.” She crossed her arms.

“Even when I got pregnant, though, and even after Dinah was born, things didn’t change much. He always found something to get mad about. When Dinah was six, I finally got smart. I didn’t want my daughter growing up in a house like that.” She smoothed her hands over her lap. “So we moved away to start over.”

“But now you’re worried about him finding you?”

“He has a temper. T.J. isn’t used to people telling him no, so when I asked for a divorce, he told me I’d be sorry. That he’d take Dinah from me if it was the last thing he did.”

A car backfired somewhere close by, and Summer jumped. Now she was doubly glad she’d arranged the rental contingency with Sadie. At least the Knights could feel safe no matter what happened with the sale of the house.

“Enough about my problems.” Hannah sipped her latte. The color came back into her face. “How did it go with those people who came to look at the house yesterday?”

“It needed too much work. They wanted something move-in ready.”

Hannah shrugged. “Then they weren’t the right people.”

“I guess.” *But I can’t stay here and wait for the right people forever. I can’t pick out curtains and play house like nothing else matters.* Summer had asked her assistants back in San Francisco to shoulder so much of the responsibility. She’d put that part of her life on hold, thinking she needed all the answers here in Whispering Pines before she left again. But maybe she didn’t. Maybe answers to long-gone nights, to relationships that had barely existed in the first place, were overrated.

Or maybe she was just afraid to face them head-on.

THE RED PICKUP truck gunned through the light, and Theo grabbed the door handle to keep from flying across the seat. “Keep it on the road, would ya?”

The guy behind the wheel grinned. “We only got thirty minutes for lunch, and I still gotta get a new drill bit if I’m gonna finish that job

today.” He careened onto Main Street and slowed down, looking for a parking spot.

Theo cut a glance out the window. They’d ended up doing his boss’s errands in Silver Valley, one of the towns he meant to scout out for signs of Damian. Looked like a pretty la-de-da place, with fancy stores and fancy sidewalk benches and restaurants that had tables outside, complete with umbrellas and tanned teenagers running plates of food back and forth.

The driver stomped on the brakes as a yellow sports car backed out of a parking spot in front of Paul’s Hardware. He maneuvered the truck forward and back, but Theo could have told him from the start that it wasn’t going in.

“Too small.” He slammed the truck into reverse and craned his neck, waiting for a break in the traffic. “Can I go?”

Theo didn’t answer.

“Hey! We ain’t gonna make it back ’less we find a place to park.” He swore under his breath. “Maybe I’ll just double-park and run in.”

Theo barely heard the guy. He was staring at the coffee shop next to the hardware store. One outside table was empty. A young guy with a goatee sat at another, pecking on a laptop. And two women sat at the third, drinking coffee and talking like they were best friends. He rolled down the window to get a better look.

“Well, there you are,” he whispered.

He’d found her. Without even trying, he’d found his ex-wife enjoying a cup of coffee right smack in the middle of downtown Silver Valley. He didn’t know who was with her, but it didn’t matter. If she didn’t live in town, she lived close by. He shouldn’t have too much trouble tracking down where Hannah and Dinah lived and, as long as Damian wasn’t around, convincing them to come back to Baltimore would be easy as pie.

Theo wet his lips and smiled. He could hardly wait.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE

Summer examined the tile samples and closed one eye. Yesterday's shopping trip had turned out better than she'd expected. They'd hit three more stores after lunch, returning to Whispering Pines late in the afternoon loaded down with bags and boxes. *So much for paying off my credit card bill.* It had been worth it, though. Today, rose-colored curtains waited to be hung in the front room, and she stood in the master bath before six different tiles, trying to decide which would look right. Mac had called in three extra guys to help this week, so the exterior of the house was shaping up as well. Sadie had two buyers coming to look at it tomorrow afternoon, and Summer wanted as much as possible done before then.

"Mac?" Damian called from somewhere above her.

"Yeah." Heavy footsteps thundered down the central staircase.

Summer's chest tightened. Despite moving into the house yesterday, she hadn't had any time alone with Damian in two days. She wanted to see him. She didn't want to see him. She didn't trust herself to keep her hands to herself if they ended up in a room together again. And what would be so bad if she couldn't?

“Gotta pick up Dinah from soccer practice,” he called from the foyer. “Be back in a few.”

“Okay.”

A chill spiraled down her spine. Wow, she had it bad. Even his voice turned her into a school girl, crossing her fingers and peeking around corners.

“I think I like the turquoise,” she said aloud. She piled the remaining tiles back into their box and lugged it into the center of the bedroom. Her stomach growled. She’d worked straight through lunch, handling two conference calls and trying to smooth out a mix-up with the Portland State Historical Society. Now four o’clock reminded her that a breakfast of day-old doughnuts and coffee left something to be desired.

A door slammed, and Damian stomped back inside.

“Thought you were leaving,” Mac said from the front room.

“Car battery died. I think I left my lights on this morning.”

“I’d offer you mine, but it’s a mess. The back and the passenger seat are full of stuff.”

Summer peeked into the foyer as Damian checked his phone. “She finishes in ten minutes. There’s no way I’m gonna make it.”

“What about your mom?”

“She went to Albany for the day to visit my great-aunt.”

Summer cleared her throat. “I can pick Dinah up if you want. I’m done here, anyway.”

“Really? You’re sure?” Relief spilled across Damian’s face. “I’d appreciate it. That way I can finish up here. They play over at the elementary school, behind the baseball fields.”

“I know where it is.” She reached for her keys. “You don’t think she’ll mind?”

“Nah. Dinah’s a little shy around strangers, but she likes you fine.”

“Okay. See you in a bit, then.”

“Thanks.” At the bottom of the porch steps, she glanced behind her and waved. Damian stood with both thumbs hooked in his belt loops and the strangest expression on his face.

PRACTICE HAD ENDED by the time Summer reached the soccer fields. An emerald carpet stretched out beneath the afternoon sunlight, empty except for one small figure and Joyce Hadley. Shoulders slumped, Dinah sat on a bench beside her coach and kicked at the grass.

Summer left the convertible running and walked over. “Hi, Dinah.”

Joyce was jotting something on a clipboard. At Summer’s voice, she looked up and shaded her eyes.

“Summer!” The girl darted from the bench and slid one hand into Summer’s.

“Sorry I’m late. Your brother had a problem with his car.”

“It’s okay.” A warm shoulder pressed into Summer’s leg.

Joyce set the clipboard aside. For a minute she said nothing. Then, tucking her hair behind her ears, she smiled brightly and approached them. “I’m not really supposed to let her leave with anyone except her brother or her mother.”

Summer slid an arm around Dinah. “I understand. But it’s sort of an emergency. Damian’s car wouldn’t start.”

“Yes, I heard you.” Joyce nodded and frowned. “Those are still the rules.”

*Oh, come on, Summer wanted to say. This is Whispering Pines. You know me, for goodness sake. Everyone knows everyone.*

"I guess it's all right." Joyce kneeled and smiled up at Dinah. "Just this once, okay? But make sure and tell your brother he should call me if he has to change his plans, all right?"

Dinah nodded.

"As a matter of fact, why don't you have him call me anyway?"

Summer lifted one eyebrow. Joyce Hadley fishing for a guy? Some things in Whispering Pines really did stay exactly the same.

"Okay. Bye, Coach Joyce."

"Did you have fun today?" Back in the car, Summer helped Dinah fasten her seatbelt.

"I guess. Mallory Hawkins hogs the ball, so I don't get to score very much. She and Taylor Boone think they're the best players on the team. They're not very nice sometimes."

"Hmm." Summer had known a few Mallorys and Taylors in her time. Back then, though, the snippy attitudes and cruel slights had taken place in the hallways and classrooms of Whispering Pines High, rather than on the soccer fields. *Different year, different place, same story.*

She found a jazz station and adjusted the volume.

"I like this," Dinah said after a minute.

"The music, hon?"

Dinah traced the stitching on her seat. "Yes. And you picking me up from practice." Her dimples popped as she turned to face Summer. "I'm glad you moved here. I'm glad you own that house." The wind caught her hair and blew it into her eyes, and she laughed.

Summer said nothing. *I'm glad too.* But was she really? Or had everything become much more complicated since she'd stepped off the plane just a few days ago? Questions with no answers. Memories she couldn't pin down. Beginnings and middles and ends of relationships, all looped together and choking the sense out of her.



She wasn't sure that coming back to Whispering Pines, even to collect her father's ashes and sell a rundown house, had been a good idea at all.

*"SUMMER?" A cool washcloth on her forehead. The sterile smell of antiseptic. An ache along the entire left side of her body. She moaned.*

*"Don't move." The voice soothed her, rocked her back toward deep slumber, and she welcomed it. But on the edge of sleep, right before she fell, she heard words she didn't understand.*

*"...can't give a statement to the police. Yes, it's possible. Injuries look like she might have been. But until she regains consciousness, we won't know. The boy's confessed, hasn't he?"*

AGAIN. Always when she least expected it. Summer squeezed the steering wheel tightly as they arrived back at the house. By now she was used to the flashbacks, though they still made little sense. *Talk to Gabe. That will clear things up.* With a heavy heart, she climbed from the car. She could tell herself that all she wanted, but she had a sinking feeling that talking to Gabe again wasn't going to make things easier.

Instead, she suspected it would only make things much more complicated.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-TWO

Summer hung up with Gabe and tore a round loaf of rye bread into pieces.

“Coffee? Sure,” he’d said. “How’s tomorrow afternoon sound?”

So tomorrow it would be, her day of reckoning, of finding out once and for all what had happened to them that night so long ago. She would ask him straight out and hope he told her the truth. She took a long breath and tried not to think about how that might change things.

She eyed the array of breads and vegetables spread across the counter, pulled a brand new knife from its wrapping, and began to slice off the top of another loaf of bread. Damian and Mac had finished all the kitchen work the day before, and she was throwing a dinner party for Rachael and Nate to celebrate.

Hammering sounds came from somewhere above her, and she smiled and moved on to slice a brick of sharp cheddar. Maybe the guys would want to join them for dinner. Her cheeks warmed. Maybe Damian would want to stay longer than dinner, even.

She placed the bread bowl and two plates of cheese in the fridge to chill, then unwrapped a container of fresh strawberries. She was

about to set a pan on the stove to melt chocolate when her cell phone rang.

“Listen, Summer,” Rachael chattered before she could say hello, “I totally forgot I promised Mom and Dad we’d do the family thing tonight. Games, fondue, the whole nine yards. My brother got roped into it too. Can we come over tomorrow instead? I’ll bake a cake, bring some balloons, make it a real celebration.”

“Oh. Um, okay.” Summer tried to hide her disappointment. “Of course. Have fun. Tell your parents I said hi.”

“I’m really sorry.” Rachael feigned disappointment, but Summer knew what family dinners were like at the Hunter home. Stories shouted one over the other, food passed around the table, followed by card games and Monopoly and backgammon. Mr. Hunter took his backgammon very seriously; she’d lost her fair share of quarters to him back in middle school.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.” Summer slipped her cell phone into her pocket and reached across the counter, preoccupied. She wondered if the bread dip would keep. She wondered if she should open the big bottle of Merlot and celebrate anyway. Distracted, she closed her hand on the knife blade by mistake. “Ow!” Blood seeped from between her fingers, and she reached for a paper towel. But then her vision went a little dotty, and she fought to draw a deep breath. *It’s okay. It’s just a little blood.* She reached for the counter but misjudged the distance and tipped over the bowl of strawberries instead. Her fingers closed on air, and she slipped and hit her head against a cabinet. Hard.

“Summer?” The voice came from far away. “Hey. You all right?” She blinked and looked up. Damian’s face sharpened into view. “What happened?”

She touched the back of her head. "I fell. Ouch." Suddenly, she noticed the strong smell that surrounded them. She pulled her hand away and saw red staining her fingers. "Oh, thank goodness. Just strawberries. I thought maybe I'd hit an artery or something." *Idiot.* Every other time she saw this guy, it was like she tripped over her own two feet.

He tore off a fresh paper towel, crouched down, and blotted her hands as she sat up.

"Thanks." His touch, as always, sent shivers through her.

"You're more than welcome."

"I'm not really this clumsy."

He grinned. "Happens to the best of us."

"You're being kind."

He pressed the paper towel to each finger and then examined the cuts along two fingers on her right hand. "Looks okay. I don't think you'll need stitches."

"Well, thank goodness for that." She grew suddenly tongue-tied, aware of the few inches between them as he knelt on the floor beside her. He smelled good, like sawdust and soap. But he kept his eyes on her hand, rather than her face. Or her lips. *Look at me*, she willed him. *Kiss me again.*

But he only helped her up and then began to collect stray strawberries, tossing them one by one into the nearby garbage can. "You have bandages for those cuts?"

"I think so. Somewhere."

"Were you making something?"

"Trying to. Rachael and Nate were coming over for dinner. But they just canceled." She reached for a towel and scrubbed away the red spots of strawberry juice that covered the new floor.

"Don't worry about that. I'll bring in some cleaner tomorrow."

“Oh. Okay.” Summer abandoned the towel, now stained pink. She felt unsteady. Maybe this had been a bad idea, moving into the house. Staying here at all. Every step seemed wrong.

Damian scratched his face and left a streak of dust from temple to jaw. When he grabbed the edge of his T-shirt to wipe his brow, Summer glimpsed rock-hard abs, slick with sweat. Just like that, her mind wheeled again, and desire replaced doubt.

“Would you like to stay for dinner? I mean, I already have all this food.” The words came out almost before she knew it.

“Ah, so I’m your second choice?” He leaned against the new stainless steel refrigerator and grinned.

*If you knew what my choice really was, I wouldn’t be standing here talking about dinner, and you wouldn’t have any clothes on.* “Definitely not. I just figured you already had plans.”

“I don’t, actually. And I’d love to.” He glanced down at himself. “I gotta run home and take a shower, though.”

“Sure.” She busied herself with wrapping a fresh paper towel around her hand. The image of Damian standing naked under a spray of water threatened to turn her dizzy all over again. “No rush.”

“You sure you’re all right? Don’t want to have someone look at that bump on your head?”

*Only you,* she almost said. *You can look all you want.* She bit her lip to keep from uttering the words out loud. Maybe she’d suffered some head trauma after all.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll take an aspirin. Thanks for rescuing, me, though.”

“Anytime. I’ll see you in a few.” He walked through the foyer and was gone.

*Anytime? Hope you mean that.* Actually, Summer could use a shower of her own. A good cold one, to keep her fantasies at bay

until she could fulfill them once and for all.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE

**A**n hour later Damian pulled open the back screen door. “Hi there. How’re you feeling?”

“Better, thanks.” Two Tylenol and a glass of wine had chased away Summer’s headache. She’d wrapped Band-Aids around the two fingers she’d sliced open, and the bleeding had long since stopped. The embarrassment of fainting in the kitchen might last a little longer, but he had come back for dinner. That meant he didn’t think she was a complete idiot, right?

Damian stopped on the threshold, inches away from her, and her gaze traveled downward before she could stop it. Faded jeans hugged muscular thighs. A white polo shirt contrasted with his tanned arms. Faint scents of soap and deodorant mingled above the hint of sawdust and paint she’d come to associate with the house. With him.

“It looks great out here.”

“Thanks.” Summer had dragged the folding table from the kitchen onto the porch and tossed on a new checked cloth. No chairs, but she’d guessed they could sit on the steps. Better view of the yard and the setting sun, anyway. “Help yourself.” Settling herself on the

top step, she nibbled and sipped and waited to see where he would sit. How close.

“Heard my mom spent a lot of your money yesterday.” Damian sank onto the step beside her, his own plate piled high. Their legs brushed, and he didn’t move away. Neither did she.

She laughed. “Probably more than I wanted to, but that’s okay. She was right about everything.”

He cleaned the nachos from his plate. “She’s good at that. Has a really keen eye.”

“Yes, she does. You’re lucky,” she added. “My mom died when I was born.”

Damian whistled. “Haven’t had it easy, have you?”

“Stuff happens to everyone. I never knew it any other way.”

“It’s still a lousy break.”

Summer studied her wine glass. A few feet away, she saw a braided rope of flowers Dinah had made for her earlier. The wildflowers twined around the railing, a little faded in the afternoon heat but still fragrant. “Your sister’s adorable.”

He popped two stuffed mushrooms into his mouth. “Yeah, she is. Tries to set me up with all the wrong women, but she means well.”

“Like Joyce Hadley?” Summer recalled the look on Joyce’s face when she’d picked up Dinah from practice.

“Dinah doesn’t know too many women my age. She thinks we’d make a good couple, mostly because Joyce wears a lot of makeup and has pretty fingernails. Oh, and makes a mean chocolate chip cookie.”

“That’s not what does it for you?”

He glanced over. “What do you think?”

Her stomach tightened in desire. “Well, I do think Dinah has good taste. All the Hadleys are beautiful. You might be missing your



chance. Most of the guys in this town would give anything to go out with one of them.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m not most of the guys in this town.” His gaze steadied on her mouth. “I think I’ve already made it clear who I want to spend time with.” He moved an inch closer to her. “So what was this place like years ago? When you and Mac were kids, I mean.”

“The house? Or the town?”

“Both, I guess.”

Summer didn’t answer for a moment. *Ask me about San Francisco, and I’ll give you a history lesson. I can tell you which restaurants have the best pasta or where to buy designer shoes at half the price. But Whispering Pines? It’s too colored, too shaded, too jaded—or maybe I am—by everything that’s happened. What was this place like? I can’t answer that without remembering what I was like. And I’m not sure I want to do that.*

She took a deep breath. “Well, this house was always a mess. Run-down for as long as I can remember. The story goes that a big steel family from New York City built it as a vacation getaway sometime in the 1800s. Your house was the caretaker’s place. But when the only son died, the daughter who inherited it didn’t want it, so I guess no one lived here after about 1920 or so. Weather and local kids took their toll on it after that. After a while, people just avoided it.”

“The haunted house of Whispering Pines, huh?”

“It really was. In middle school, kids used to dare each other to come up on the porch and look in the windows. In high school, they’d sneak in and drink until the cops came by and threw them out.” She remembered something else. “And sometimes couples came here. You could see the entire sky at night from one of the bedrooms upstairs.”

*I came here once with Gabe.* Summer's knee jittered with the memory, and she twisted her fingers together. She'd almost forgotten the night they snuck in, just before graduation. They'd crept up the dusty stairs, her heart in her throat the whole time, until they reached the very top floor. How ironic. Maybe destiny had a stronger hand in things than she wanted to admit.

"I know that room," Damian said. "It has an amazing view." The early evening sun played across the bridge of his nose, where a few freckles sketched a connect-the-dots from cheek to cheek. A sudden urge to reach over and kiss him seized her.

"Did you like growing up here?" he asked before she could give in to the urge.

"It was tolerable." Summer stretched out her legs. "Same as any other small town, I guess. Lots of stories and rumors, but most people had your back when you needed them to. What was it like growing up in Poisonwood?"

"Bigger than here, but still pretty boring."

They both laughed.

"You like working in construction?"

"It's a job. I went to college for a couple of years, got a degree in marketing. I'd like to use that, someday." He reached over and brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, and Summer's skin sizzled. He left his hand resting against her cheek, and she wanted to lean into it, to feel the impression of his palm deep down, where she'd felt cold and empty for so long.

"You're..." He didn't finish the thought. Instead he leaned over and lifted her chin. Hungry lips met hers, and she wasn't sure in the next instant whose hands moved first. All she knew was that she couldn't get close enough to him.

Their legs tangled. His fingers twined with hers. One thumb stroked the skin of her palm before reaching down to caress the small of her back. She ran a hand over his hair, then his ear and the bulk of his shoulder. Solid muscle, every inch of him. She caught on fire, imagining him without clothes, his massive body beside hers while she let her fingers explore all the parts of him she could only see right now. He murmured something into her skin, and she let her head fall back, let him move his mouth from her ear to her neck to her collarbone in steps so slow and sweet she thought she might die from anticipation.

One broad hand fell to her thigh, then moved upward, and the pressure nearly undid her. Summer moaned and arched into his touch. Everything thrummed. She felt herself pulse with him, rock against his hand. It was exquisite, the storm he pulled her toward, his voice in her ear urging her on. She hadn't let herself go, let herself just *be*, with a man in so long. Not like this. Maybe not ever like this.

Finally she opened her eyes.

"You are amazing." He ran one hand over her face, from her forehead to her chin.

"I, um, can't say that's exactly what I had in mind...when I, ah invited you to dinner." Breathless, her words came out in ragged pieces.

His gaze dropped to her shirt pulled up a few inches, exposing bare skin. He traced her stomach from her hipbone to above her navel. "Me either. But that was one hell of an appetizer. I can't wait for the main course."



SUMMER'S EYELIDS drooped with pleasure. Her cheeks were still flushed, and it was all Damian could do not to carry her inside and peel off every layer of clothing. He felt like a rock star. Like a teenager, on a hormonal high the likes of which he'd never imagined. He wanted to taste her. Hear her cry out his name. Spend the next few hours, maybe the next few weeks, learning all her details.

But her cell phone buzzed in her pocket, and she leaned away to check the message. Within seconds, the expression on her face changed. She straightened her shirt and tucked her hair behind her ears.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes. Just a text from Gabe."

"Roberts?" Desire left him, just like that. "Your boyfriend back in high school?"

"Well, yeah, but that was forever ago." She gave him a puzzled look. "You heard about that?"

"Small town. Stories and rumors, remember?" Damian laced his fingers behind his head and asked the question he didn't want to know the answer to. "Something still there?"

"No." She stood and started carrying dishes inside.

He hurried to follow. "Summer, come on. I'm not a bad guy for wanting to know."

"I guess not." She ran water in the sink and arranged pans to soak. "Gabe and I have a history," she added.

Yeah, Damian knew. But he was a red-blooded male. So sue him for being a little jealous. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to be a jerk. I just heard a few people talking and wondered what was true."

She turned around and leaned against the counter. Her guarded expression relaxed a little. "I don't know. I haven't heard what people are saying these days. But small towns stir up stuff that never

existed. And they ignore what's right in front of them. Yeah, Gabe and I go way back. We've known each other since we were kids, and we dated in high school. What else do you want me to say?"

*Did he really kill your brother? Was he so drunk when the cops cuffed him he could barely stay on his feet?* Damian had heard varying reports about Gabe Roberts and his role in the car accident. But he didn't dare put those questions into words. If half of it was true, he couldn't believe Summer would give that guy the time of day.

He shook his head and turned away. She was leaving town in a matter of days. She had an ex she was still in touch with, and he had his own demons to fight. *End this now. Before it goes anywhere.* "Maybe we should call it a night."

She took his hand. "I'm sorry. I don't mean...it's just—it's complicated, things with me and Gabe." She paused. "He was there the night my brother died."

"I know."

"And there are things I still need to sort out about it." She chewed her lower lip.

"That means seeing him."

"I think so."

He cleared his throat. "Then I think you should do that first and call me later."

Together they walked down the porch steps. Damian stopped at the bottom and stood below her. From here they met almost eye to eye. "Thanks for dinner."

"You're welcome. Thanks for coming over."

He gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sure."

The sun sank another inch below the trees. He wanted to say something else, but everything he worked up inside his head

sounded stupid. “Night, Summer,” he finally said and headed for the path that led back to the farmhouse.

“Goodnight.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FOUR

Summer woke early the next morning. The sheets were twisted around her waist, her pillow tossed to the side. Mourning doves cooed outside her window. She sat up. Perspiration dotted her forehead and her upper lip. Her back ached. She heard no sound of Damian or Mac. *They aren't here yet. Good.*

She crossed her arms and closed her eyes again. A breath of air escaped her lips and she let the night play behind her eyelids. Damian's touch. His kiss. His kindness, his smile, the way he'd saved her from injuring herself more than once. But despite the obvious chemistry between them, he hadn't let it go any further. He made it clear that he didn't want to get involved. In fact, he'd as good as spun her in Gabe's direction with his blessing.

The sun snuck its way over the horizon, and Summer reached for her robe. She couldn't be in the house when the guys arrived. As much as it hurt her ego, she supposed Damian had a point. Yes, she had things to talk about with Gabe. And yes, she had a life on the other side of the country. Why would he want to get involved with someone who was still trying to figure out her past, someone who was leaving town in less than a week?

She dug some running clothes from her suitcase and skimmed her hair into a ponytail. She didn't want to be angry with him. But she didn't like saying goodbye in darkness. She didn't like waking up alone and wanting something she had no business asking for. And because she wasn't sure what she would say when she saw him, she thought she'd better just avoid him altogether.

She fastened her watch, double-knotted her laces and slipped out the back door. Mac had installed a new dead-bolt, but she didn't bother to secure it. Everyone in Whispering Pines knew the house was in the middle of renovations, and if anyone snuck in, there wasn't much to steal. She closed the door firmly and jogged through the backyard. She paused at the path that led to the farmhouse and then turned toward the sidewalk and shaded her eyes against the sun.

No sound. No cars. Only her own thoughts echoing inside her head. Summer headed away from the house and started to run.

DAMIAN LEFT the farmhouse early to pick up nails and screws at the hardware store over in Silver Valley. He didn't mind the drive, despite the fog that hung over the mountains. He needed to clear his head, anyway. On the way back, he stopped at a gas station on the long stretch of road between the two towns. Inside, he managed to spill a stack of plastic cup lids, drop his change and slosh coffee onto the counter.

"You okay?" The tattooed teen at the register asked.

"Yeah." But he wasn't. He hadn't slept much, just stared at the ceiling above his bed, where the memory of Summer looked down and asked him to stay for dinner. He'd wanted to kiss her instead of



leave. He'd wanted to do much more than that. But his stupid integrity had opened its big fat mouth and gotten in the way.

*Did I make the right decision? Or just sound like an idiot with a twisted-up head?* What guy told a woman to go back to her ex-boyfriend?

Back at the worksite he sat in his car for almost ten minutes. His coffee had cooled to lukewarm by the time he joined Mac in the foyer.

"You're late."

"Sorry." A glance at Summer's bedroom door revealed nothing. "She here?"

"Nope. Saw her jogging down by the school 'bout twenty minutes ago with Roberts."

Damian strapped on his tool belt and tried to ignore his jealousy. She hadn't wasted any time getting in touch with him, that was for sure. "Are all the stories true?"

"All what stories?"

"About him killing Summer's brother."

"Happened a long time ago, man. No good comes from digging it up."

"But?" Damian pressed.

Mac shrugged. "He was DWI, word is, and didn't slow down at the flashing yellow. Didn't even try to fight the sobriety test the cop gave him. But the other driver was drunk too, and according to Gabe, he ran the flashing red. So maybe it was more the other guy's fault, you know? That guy died later at the hospital, and Summer never gave a statement, so it was Gabe's word about what happened. He had a good lawyer, so he got a minimum sentence." Mac hefted a box onto his shoulder. "Some people around here hang onto blame, sure. They think he should've moved someplace else

instead of coming back to Whispering Pines. They don't like to see him walking around alive and well while Donny's lying in the ground."

Damian shook his head. No wonder Summer had stayed away for so long. He couldn't imagine how he'd feel if he lost Dinah, and in such a terrible way. He still didn't understand why Summer would be burning to spend time with her ex-boyfriend considering all that had happened, but he might as well give up guessing. Loss and forgiveness came in all kinds of packages.

He just wished he could get her out of his head, instead of dwelling on the shape of her mouth or the taste of her skin or the way he wanted to be with her despite every rational thought that told him to run in the opposite direction.

THEO CRADLED his bleeding hand and jerked the borrowed pickup into a space in front of the Heartland Medical Clinic. This place was farther away than he'd originally thought, closer to Whispering Pines than Silver Valley, but apparently it was the closest thing to a walk-in urgent care center.

"What a hick town." He spat out the open window and hoped it didn't take half the day to get his hand looked at. He suspected these backcountry places had a couple of nurses and one doc who drove in from Albany once a week. The parking lot was almost empty, but a cop stood talking to some old lady in a Cadillac a few spots down. Theo took his time driving to a spot at the other end. He pulled in as the cop waved goodbye to Grandma and pointed his cruiser in the opposite direction. Good. The last thing Theo needed was some local boy nosing around his business.

He peeled the blood-soaked rag away from his left hand. Less than a week on the job, and he'd managed to fall off a scaffolding

and take a stray piece of metal through his hand. Wrenched his back something good too. He cursed his stupidity. If he didn't watch it, people would start paying more attention to him than he liked. With most injuries, he could pop a few aspirin, swig some bourbon and sleep it off. Not this one.

He elbowed open the door and limped through the clinic's lobby. A lady with a dirty brat kid sat in two of the vinyl chairs. Balancing a clipboard on her knee, she filled out a form while the boy whined and rubbed his nose. One hand looked as if it had been badly burned.

Theo propped one elbow on the desk at the reception area. His back screamed with fresh pain. Perspiration trickled down his temples. Behind a glass window sat two women, one with white hair who looked like she was about to kick the bucket, and the other a good-looking girl in her early twenties. Neither looked up at him. After a minute, he rapped his knuckles on the glass. "Hey."

The old lady glanced up through glasses an inch thick, nodded and returned to her paperwork. The blonde spoke into the telephone receiver and held up one manicured finger in his direction. Behind him, the brat began to cry full-scale. Blood leaked through Theo's makeshift bandage and dripped onto the counter.

"Hey!" This time he used his fist to pound. It worked. Blondie hung up the phone, saw the blood and jumped from her chair. Despite the pain clouding his head, Theo admired her firm, full breasts and the creamy skin that flushed as she handed him a towel. She grabbed a clipboard from the stack behind her.

"Nature of your injury?"

"Fell off a scaffolding," he said, gritting his teeth. "Landed on some metal, put a piece through my hand." *Just give me some Vicodin and I'll be fine.*

"Any other injuries?"

“Yeah, my back don’t feel too great right about now.”

She added that to her form.

“Insurance?”

“Don’t have any. But don’t worry, I’ve got cash to cover it,” he added, when he saw her pretty features frown.

“Well, we’ll take care of that after the doctor sees you.”

A nurse came into the waiting room and led away the lady with her screaming kid. Finally. Theo closed his eyes and let out a breath. The pain in his back receded a fraction.

“Sir, are you okay? Would you like some water?”

Theo nodded. “That’d be good.”

She led him to a chair, then patted him on the shoulder and took her clipboard and her fine ass back behind the desk. A minute later, she reappeared with a paper cup of water. Theo drained it in one gulp.

“It’ll just be a few minutes,” she promised.

“Miss?”

She turned.

“What’s your name?”

She smiled. “Joyce. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Theo nodded and closed his eyes. Might as well catch a nap. A waiting room was as good a place as any.

“HOW’D YOU MAKE OUT?” Joyce asked as he left the curtained treatment area two hours later.

Theo held up his bandaged left hand in response.

“How’s your back?”

“They x-rayed it. Nothin’ broken.”

“Well, that’s good.” She tapped the keyboard and studied the computer screen in front of her.

“Say, can I ask you somethin’?” Theo leaned closer and dropped his voice, though the old lady behind the desk had disappeared and no one else sat in the waiting room.

“Sure.”

“Any chance you know someone named Hannah Knight?”

Joyce stopped typing and wrinkled her pretty features in concentration. “I live over in Whispering Pines, so I’m not sure...oh, wait. I do know a *Damian* Knight. I think Hannah is his mom’s name.” She pinked with the confession, and Theo wondered if Damian had spent a night or two in Joyce’s bed. He wouldn’t be surprised.

“Oh, yeah?” He kept his voice as calm as he could. “He live in Whispering Pines or Silver Valley?”

She glanced down. “I don’t really, well...”

He’d come on too eager, he knew in an instant. She typed something and stared at the computer screen, and he knew he wouldn’t get any more out of her. Didn’t matter. She’d as good as spilled the fact that Damian lived in Whispering Pines, and Theo would put money on the fact that Hannah and Dinah weren’t far away. “Hey, you know, don’t worry about it. I think I got Hannah’s cell number somewhere.”

Joyce printed something out and slid the paper across the desk. Her smile seemed a little less warm than before. “That’s the total. You can pay it all now, or we can set up a payment plan if you’d prefer.”

“Nah, I told you I got the cash.” He dug into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and separated some wrinkled hundred-dollar bills. “Here.”

She counted them carefully and handed him a few singles in change. "There you are."

"Thanks."

"Mm hmm." Eyes cast down, Joyce returned to her filing without another word.

Theo lay rubber leaving the parking lot. The effects of the pain medication had already started to kick in. A few more hours on the job, and then he could lose himself in a bottle of Jack Daniels. Might take a drive over to Whispering Pines later on and see what that town looked like. And maybe tomorrow or the day after he'd stop in the local diner, ask around and find out where exactly Hannah was calling home. Or where Damian was working. At this point he'd take either one. Fact was, he almost welcomed the chance to stand face-to-face with Damian and remind him which one of them was in charge.

Theo gunned the truck through a red light. *Patience*, he told himself. *That's all I need.*

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FIVE

“I think your sister’s right about Summer.” Hannah dropped a second pork chop onto Damian’s plate. From the living room came the sound of Dinah’s favorite evening television show and the little girl’s laughter.

Damian ran a slice of garlic bread around his plate and sopped up gravy. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Please. Dinah adores her. Loves spending time at the house. She’s thrilled that Summer picked her up from practice the other day.” She cocked her head. “And it seems to me you keep some awfully long hours on that job.”

Damian reached for the peach cobbler his mom had made for dessert. “Don’t have much choice. Mac wants to have it finished by Labor Day. Even with the guys that helped out last week, we’re behind.”

When his mom remained silent, he glanced up. A smile played on her face.

“What?” He didn’t like that look, the one that speared through his skin and into the deepest part of his heart. Try as he might, he couldn’t keep anything from her. She knew when he hurt, when he

needed space, when sleep evaded him or when he felt like jumping for joy.

Hannah slipped into the chair opposite him and rested her elbows on the table. "Summer seems a little lonely, if you ask me."

"She just lost her father. And she's back in the place where her brother died. With a house she doesn't want." *And an ex-boyfriend who's still in the picture.* He frowned and drank an entire glass of iced tea without stopping.

"That's all the more reason for you to take her out, spend some time with her while she's here and keep her mind off things."

"Ah, I...I'm not really interested," Damian lied. He couldn't afford to be.

"Why not? She's attractive. Intelligent. Successful, too, from what I hear." She laid a hand on his wrist. "You can't shut yourself off forever."

"I'm not." Couldn't his mother just accept that he didn't want to get involved? "She's got something going on with Gabe Roberts, anyway."

"Who's that? Someone here in town?"

"Yeah."

She didn't say anything after that.

Damian pushed his chair back and slammed his knee against the table. His mom meant well, but she didn't understand. Gabe wasn't the only reason Damian was keeping his distance. Summer had no plans to stay in Whispering Pines. She had a whole other life on the other side of the country. The bottom line was, he didn't trust himself to take her out once or twice and then say goodbye. A few kisses had sent his mind reeling. He could only imagine what an entire evening with her would do.



A SLEEPY DINAH smiled at Damian as he poked his head into the living room an hour later.

“Hey, ladybug.”

“Hey.” She’d tucked a blanket around her legs and curled into the corner of the sofa.

“Ready for bed?”

She nodded, eyelids heavy.

Damian smiled and took her hand as they climbed the stairs. Though she seemed to grow an inch every day, this was still their bedtime ritual, the one he’d started when she was only a few months old. Back in Poisonwood, she’d stopped sleeping for a while as an infant. Between a rough bout of colic and his mom and T.J. fighting, she wailed all night in her crib. Only Damian’s voice singing lullabies in the darkness could soothe her.

Now he tucked Dinah into her twin bed and pulled the pink-and-white curtains closed.

“Dame?”

“What?”

“Can I come to work with you tomorrow?”

He switched on the pink nightlight to keep the boogeyman away. “We’ll see.”

“I like it when Summer’s there.” Dinah propped herself up on one elbow. “I hope she stays for a while. Do you think she will?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.” First his mother, now his sister. Seemed like all the women in his life wanted to match him up with the one person he absolutely, positively, could not get involved with.

Dinah lay back down and pulled the sheet up to her chin.

Damian lifted his guitar from its case in the corner and ran his fingers lightly over the strings. He took a minute to tune it, then settled himself in the chair by the door and began to play. He never

needed the light or any music to read. He just listened to his heart and let its rhythm move his fingers. Sometimes he played Dinah's old favorites, children's songs she knew every word to. Other times he relied on the Beatles or Elton John, depending on his mood.

Tonight, he played his own composition, a new tune that had been running around his head the last few days. The notes rippled through the room like slow-moving water, and Damian hummed as the line took shape beneath his fingers.

In a few minutes, Dinah's breathing deepened, but Damian played on. The bridge formed itself. The chorus turned into something in a minor key. Lyrics sharpened inside his head. Closing his eyes, he let the notes fall, painting a landscape of brilliant color in his mind's eye. He hadn't written anything in a long time, but tonight the song almost composed itself.

When the last note hung in the air, he sat in the dark and let his heart return to normal.

PAST MIDNIGHT, the farmhouse's landline rang.

Damian jerked awake, clutching at the sheet. He sat up and looked at the clock. One-fifteen. It rang again and he lunged for the cordless extension in his room before Dinah or his mother woke. Fear squeezed an icy fist around his organs. Telephone calls this late rarely meant anything good.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello!" His fingers, slippery with adrenaline, clung to the receiver.

Still Damian heard nothing. Then something mechanical clicked, and a low panting into the phone ran chills up his spine. He glanced at the Caller ID screen, but it read *Private Number*.

*You son of a bitch.*

“T.J.? That you?”

“Sure is. Been a while.”

Damian hadn't heard the voice in over three years, but it sounded exactly the same as he recalled: slurred and pissed off.

*He found us. How?* Damian crept to the window and peered outside. No moon. No stars. T.J. could have been sitting fifty feet from the house, and Damian wouldn't have known it. He'd never thought much about gun ownership before, but in that moment he wished for a trigger in his hand. He'd point it straight at the guy's head without thinking twice.

“You know she's got a restraining order against you,” Damian lied. “You come anywhere near us, the police'll dump your ass in jail.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. You need a personal invitation to your own funeral?”  
*Come and get it. I'll take care of you before the police ever have a chance.* “I'll kill you myself if I have to.”

“You and whose army?”

“Did you hear me?” Again he scanned the darkened yard. Worse than feeling T.J.'s fists on his back, worse than watching him shove Hannah across the room, was the thought of his threatening presence somewhere out there, close by. “I'm calling the cops.”

At that, the line went dead. Across the hall, Dinah mumbled something in her sleep. The floorboards creaked beneath him, and Damian knew the call had woken his mother too. He threw the phone across the room, where it hit the wall and fell onto the carpet. He punched his pillow, imagining T.J.'s face in the wrinkles beneath his fist. Sleep had fled, probably for good, and in its place rage grew in

his belly. A simmering fire spread to his chest and up through his lungs until he thought he would either scream or vomit in anger.

He retrieved the phone and dialed 911, knowing it probably wouldn't do any good. Wherever he'd called from, T.J. wasn't stupid enough to get caught near their house.

They'd done everything they could—relocated, changed their phone numbers, started a new life under the protection of a custody agreement that prevented T.J. from ever seeing Dinah again. He didn't care about them. He couldn't. All that man cared about was getting drunk and living off the government's money. He couldn't possibly want to be a father to Dinah. Why couldn't he accept the shambles he'd made of his life and move on?

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SIX

“N ice to see you again.” Gabe walked into Common Grounds cafe, pulled out the chair opposite Summer and smiled.

She smiled in return; she couldn't help it. He still had that way of harnessing the sun and turning the whole day bright. “Likewise.” She pushed a cup of coffee across the table as he sat and cracked his knuckles. “I ordered yours.”

“Thanks.” He dumped in two packets of sugar. “How's the house?”

“Better every day.”

“Got any buyers yet?”

“Couple of people looking. It's huge, you know. Big purchase for Whispering Pines, even with the lowball price.”

He nodded. “I remember people talking when your father bought it.”

She wrapped both hands around her mug. “Talking like he was crazy?”

“Nah. Just wondering what he was up to.” He took a sip. “I think it was his way of making amends. With himself, with the town. With you too, I guess, though he never got around to telling you that.”

“That’s what Joe tried to tell me.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“I don’t know what to believe. My father was so angry after the accident. Every time I talked to him, we fought.”

“Then he willed you a house.”

“Exactly. And unless someone around here can communicate with ghosts, I don’t think I’ll ever know why.”

“Maybe you should stop asking why. Maybe if there aren’t any answers, you just have to move on.”

“When did you get so philosophical?”

He grinned. “Spent a lot of time thinking after you left.”

“And?”

“And I decided that we gotta deal with what life gives us. No use looking backwards.” He paused. “I guess maybe that’s harder for you, though, since that’s what you do for a living.”

“Look backwards?” Summer frowned. Maybe Gabe was right. Maybe she needed to turn and start facing forward. Look to the future, and not so much the past. But she couldn’t do that until she knew where she’d come from. All of it.



THE DOOR behind them opened and a teenage couple walked into the coffee shop. They held hands as they glanced at the order board and chose matching skim lattes while barely looking away from one another. Gabe shook his head. Young love, blind to everything else around them. Maybe a thousand years ago, he’d looked at a girl like that. Not in a long time.

“Think we were ever like that?” Summer’s voice echoed his thoughts.

He smiled. "Nah. I was much better looking."

"Me too."

"You still are." Sometimes he felt so far from adolescence, he could barely remember it. The silliness of it. The carefree ways he'd spent his days. No pain and no regrets. Now pretty much everything hurt, from his knees to his hands to his heart, when he let himself think about the things he'd lost. To his surprise, though, sitting across from Summer over a cup of coffee gave him a feeling of peace he hadn't had in a long time.

"Can I tell you something weird?" she asked.

"Sure. I like weird."

She cracked a half-smile. "I don't remember much of what happened the night of the accident. For a long time, I didn't remember anything at all. But since I've been back here, I keep having these flashbacks."

He said nothing.

"All of a sudden, I'm right there in the minutes after the crash. I can hear Donny. I can see you, and me, and the car. Mr. Hartwell standing over to the side. And the cops." Grief filled her eyes. "I remember being at the ice cream stand earlier in the night. And going to the movies with Donny." She paused. "But then there's....all this space. I have no memory of the actual crash or what led up to it. There are like thirty minutes of that night that are completely gone. You were always such a good driver. So was it my fault? Did I distract you? I keep feeling like I did."

Gabe chose his words carefully. He'd come here meaning to tell her the truth. He'd convinced himself that full disclosure was his only choice. If she didn't hear it from him, she'd hear more stories from someone else. But the longer he sat there, the more he lost his nerve. He couldn't bear to break her heart a second time.

“Mr. Hartwell was drunk. He ran the flashing red light. Everything happened so fast. It wasn’t like we could’ve stopped.”

“Does he still live around here? I haven’t seen him since I’ve been back.”

Gabe frowned. “He died in the hospital.”

“Wait—what?”

“Max Hartwell didn’t make it. He had a massive heart attack after he got to the hospital that night. You didn’t know?”

“No. My father and Rachael both said—” Summer raised a hand to her mouth. Her eyes widened.

Gabe tried to read her face. “What?”

“Rachael said once, ‘at least someone went to jail for it.’ No matter what I could or couldn’t remember, at least someone paid for killing Donny. I thought she meant the other driver.” She murmured the words, and tears filled her eyes. “But was she talking about you? Because if Mr. Hartwell died, then it couldn’t have been him.”

Gabe’s chest constricted. He thought somehow she knew that he’d served time. He’d thought someone, at some point, had told her that detail. “Yes.”

“But why? It was an accident. And Mr. Hartwell hit *us*.”

“I’d been drinking that night.” He said the words quickly and simply, without embellishment.

She went completely still. She didn’t even blink.

“I was at a party earlier. When the chief asked me to do a sobriety test, I failed. So yes, I did two years for involuntary manslaughter.”

“You…” Summer had gone almost completely white. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

He cracked his knuckles. “I’m not sure. I don’t think most people were in touch with you. Besides, you’d gone through enough, losing



your brother. You needed to heal.”

She shook her head slowly. “I can’t believe I never knew.”

Gabe rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn’t either. Now he could never tell her the rest. She looked as though she’d seen a ghost. She didn’t need any more of the details of that night. He could carry them around inside his skin forever. It got easier every day, anyway.

Summer’s hair fell around her face, and her mouth trembled. “Oh, Gabe, I’m so sorry.”

That, he found, was enough.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SEVEN

Later that evening, Summer met Joe Bernstein for dinner. He buttered a dinner roll and smiled. “I’m honored to have such a beautiful dinner companion. It’s certainly been nice having you around.”

“Ah, yes. Thanks. I mean, it has been nice.” Distracted, she dropped her fork, then her napkin. Why hadn’t Joe told her about Gabe? Why hadn’t *someone*? Why had everyone assumed she was too weak to know? “I don’t know as I’ll be staying too much longer, though. It was only going to be a few days. Can’t believe it’s already stretched into almost two weeks.”

“Funny how that works out, isn’t it? How the past pulls you back before you realize it.”

*I’m not sure funny is the word for it. Frustrating, maybe. Strange. Not really funny, though.* “I’m not meant to be here, Joe. That house is too big for one person to live in. Sadie has everything in line, and I don’t have to be here to sell it. It needs someone with a family who can fill it up with all the things I can’t. That was my plan all along.”

“Family isn’t always made up of parents. Or brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles.”

“You know what I mean.”

The waitress brought their entrees. Steam rose from their plates, obscuring Joe's face in the dim light of the Corner Lounge restaurant. Summer tried, but she couldn't read his eyes.

"I told you I was retiring from teaching at the college, right?"

She nodded.

"Which means they'll be looking for someone to take over those classes in the fall." With deliberate strokes, he sliced his steak.

"Well, I'm sure they'll find someone, though your shoes are going to be tough to fill." Summer's stomach growled, and she dug into her ravioli.

"I recommended you."

"What?" She waited for the rest of the joke. "Oh, no. I can't. I told you—I'm leaving."

"Let me finish. The Adirondack Historical Society has talked for some time about establishing a small museum in this area. Last week, they got the grant funding they've been working on for almost four years. Who better than you to help get them up and running? You know everything about Whispering Pines, Silver Valley, the entire county area. You might even consider using the house as part of the museum itself. Do some research, use some of the grant money to restore the rooms with reproductions of period furniture. People love touring old homes. You know that. Then you can teach on the side."

"I can't."

"I know you have a job you love out west. But wouldn't you at least consider this? It's a chance to come home."

*Home.* Where was that, any longer? Frustration tied her stomach into knots. "I guess I did come back for more than just to look at the house. I thought I could say hello to some old friends, see Donny's grave, make peace with a few things. I know Whispering Pines's my

home. Or was, anyway.” She drew in a long breath. “But being here has pulled me under. I keep having these flashbacks, and weird half-memories, and...Gabe told me today that he went to jail for driving the car the night Donny died.” She grabbed Joe’s hand. “I never knew.”

“Ah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, I wasn’t in touch with you back then. And I didn’t think it was my place to tell you something like that. Your father didn’t want you to be involved to that extent,” he added. “I wanted to respect his wishes.”

Summer rested her hands in her lap. “He thought he was protecting me, I guess. But all he did was keep me in the dark about things I should have known. I *was* involved. No one can change the past. We can’t undo things or pretend they never happened.”

“True. But the past also only shapes us as far as we allow it to. Yes, there’s sadness here for you. I know that. But there are happy memories too, aren’t there?”

She nodded. Of course there were. Playing at Rachael’s house and dipping her toes in the lake. Telling secrets with Donny late at night while their father worked two jobs. Falling in love with a boy who’d tugged her pigtails ten years earlier. Learning, loving, laughing, losing, letting it go, then doing it all again.

And there was happiness now too, in the form of a man she’d just met but couldn’t get out of her thoughts. Damian had thrown her into a tailspin. The way he looked at her. The way he kissed her. The way he seemed to understand what she was thinking, or how she struggled with her past. Leaving him would be harder than she wanted to admit to herself.

“You’re right,” Joe went on. “We can’t look backwards forever. The past shouldn’t be the way we frame our lives. You know that more than anyone. The present and the future...well, those are up to us.”

A HALF-HOUR LATER, Summer stood on the sidewalk and waved as Joe pulled away from the diner. Stay in Whispering Pines? Help open a museum and take over teaching at the college? *No way.* She had an entire life on the other side of the country. She couldn’t just give that all up.

Could she?

Summer turned toward the center of town, glad she’d left her car a few blocks away. *The walk will do me good.* She kept her gaze straight ahead while a thousand thoughts slipped in and out of her mind. Gabe. The accident. Her brother. Damian. The house. The present. The past. Then back again to Damian. His touch. His smile. His fingers interlaced with hers.

She’d almost reached the public parking lot when a strange man stopped her. “Excuse me.” All her fantasies fled in an instant. Clad in work clothes and heavy boots, the man leaned against the front of Flo’s Fold ’n Fluff with the stub of a cigarette in his fingers.

“Ah, yes?”

He stomped out his butt with a dirty toe. She didn’t know him, had never seen him around town. Of course, a lot of people had moved here in the last ten years, so that didn’t mean much. From the way he was dressed, she guessed he was probably working on one of the many housing developments going up around Whispering Pines and Silver Valley. Or maybe one of the never-ending road construction projects.

Despite his garb, the man was handsome, with a muscular build and steel-colored eyes that crinkled at the corners. He crossed his arms, cocked his head and ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "Can I ask you a favor? I'm lookin' for an address. Old buddy of mine."

"Um...sure." *I haven't lived here in a really long time*, she was about to say, *so I'm not sure I can help you*, but then he went on.

"You know the way to Red Barn Road?"

"Sure. That's about the one place I do know."

"I'm just in town for a couple of days, trying to look up a friend." He held out a hand. "Name's Theo."

Summer took it and squeezed for a quick moment. "Hi. Who's your friend?" Maybe it was one of the neighbors down the road from her place. She hadn't met them all, though she'd been meaning to stop in and say hello.

"You gotta name?" he asked without answering. He ran his other hand over gelled hair.

"Um...Summer." Suddenly uncomfortable, she backed up a step.

Nodding, he let his gaze drop to her waist and back up again.

"Here, let me write down the directions for you," she said, digging into her purse for a pen and trying to finish the conversation.

"Don't bother. I remember everything." Theo stuffed his hands into his pockets and waited.

"Oh." Her hand dropped. "Okay. Turn right at the end of this block, onto Main Street. Follow Main out of town. Turn right onto Hanford, then a quick left onto Red Barn. It's about a mile or so past the ball fields."

Theo's lips moved, and he repeated her directions under his breath. "Got it." In the moment before he disappeared, his eyes seemed to change, to turn gray and cold. "Thanks for the directions."

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-EIGHT

The following afternoon, Summer slipped into the master bedroom and peeled off her shorts and tank top. She stepped into the adjoining bathroom, completely finished now, and ran a washcloth over her face and under her arms. She hadn't seen Damian in more than passing the last two days, but she wouldn't lie: she still felt as though she might break whenever he looked her way. She still felt shaken up and fizzed over when she replayed their kisses in her head, as though no one had ever kissed her before.

*I want more.*

*I want him.*

*Before I leave.*

It was as simple and as difficult as that. She had no business asking him to give her another chance, or even a single night alone, but oh how she wanted to ask, all the same.

She pulled on a pale blue sundress and brushed her hair. In bare feet, she walked out onto the front porch. Beautifully refinished, its cherry steps and railing gleamed in the late afternoon sun. She smiled and looked around. She'd promised to meet Dinah for a tea

party at four o'clock sharp. At least her friendship with the young girl hadn't slipped away these last few days as well.

"Summer?"

She waved as Dinah appeared at the edge of the property. Dinah waved in return, though one hand remained behind her thin back. She skipped across the lawn and took the long way around the tall oak tree. Under its branches, she got tangled up and had to stop for a moment. Summer laughed. Finally Dinah slowed and climbed the porch steps, out of breath. At the top, she pulled her hand from behind her back.

"Here." Dinah presented her with a fistful of wildflowers. The stems were still damp. Purples and yellows and pinks poked out in all directions.

Summer took the bouquet and felt a tightness in her chest. "These are for me? Thank you, sweetie. They're beautiful." An odd lump rose into the center of her throat.

Dinah beamed. Her gangly legs stuck out from her denim shorts, and her elbows were scuffed with grass stains. Her laugh and her strong jawline reminded Summer so much of Damian. *Only their eyes are different.* Unlike his dark blue ones, which matched the color of Whispering Pines Lake at dusk, Dinah's were a deep brown, almost ebony, and her lashes endless.

She crouched to a seat beside Summer. "The porch looks really good."

Summer laid the flowers on her lap and ran one hand along the smooth wooden step. "Yes, it does. Your brother did a wonderful job."

Damian and Mac had finished the front porch last weekend. Dinah was right: it looked good. Actually, it looked more than good. It looked magnificent. The wide steps, the intricate carvings at the tops



of the columns, the long lines of the porch as it stretched from end to end of the house—it almost took Summer’s breath away. She’d gotten so used to entering and exiting through the kitchen door that she’d almost forgotten about the front. This entrance seemed too fine to use everyday. She glanced behind her. Yesterday the double front doors that her father had special-ordered from Chicago had arrived, and Damian had stayed late to hang them. The entire façade of the house was complete.

Dinah leaned against Summer’s knee, and Summer found herself rubbing the girl’s back. Her fingers felt every bump in Dinah’s spine. *Skin and bones. I used to be exactly the same way.* Skinny as the day was long, she hadn’t blossomed until tenth grade, when all the other girls—the Hadleys, anyway, and their friends, the girls who really mattered—had been wearing size 34B bras for years, along with miniskirts that showed off womanly hips and thighs. Summer, on the other hand, had stared into the mirror every day from the moment she turned thirteen, wishing on the stars for curves in the right places. She hoped fate would be a little kinder to Dinah. Sometimes nature wasn’t very nice.

Summer bent down and whispered into the girl’s ear. “I have a surprise for you.”

“What is it?”

“It’s upstairs. It’s a secret.” And really, it was. Summer had discovered it just that afternoon, while wandering through the east wing of the third floor. The guys hadn’t tackled that floor yet, because it needed the least amount of work.

Dinah followed her upstairs, one small hand in Summer’s. The sun slanted across the floor and Summer wondered again about the people who’d lived here all those years ago. Along this hallway, a smooth groove had been worn in the wood. A chip nicked the

otherwise clean lines of the wall. A crack worked its way down the length of the banister. *Marks from another lifetime, kind of like the ones that scar your heart across the decades.*

“Here.” At the back of the far bedroom, Summer slid her fingers along the wall until they found a seam. She reached up with one hand, down with the other, and pushed. A door slipped open.

Dinah’s jaw dropped. “What’s that?”

A round window at the back of the space cast a thin line of sun into the shadows. Summer had tested the floorboards earlier. Though dusty and warped, they held solid. “It’s a secret room.”

In her youth she’d heard stories about this house harboring fugitives on the Underground Railroad. Though pretty far north, the town of Whispering Pines would have made a good final stop for slaves fleeing to Canada. She looked around the room. If it were true, she’d just uncovered a gold mine in the eyes of potential buyers. Most homes that could prove a connection to that historic period were listed on national registries, protected and valued far above regular market price. She’d have to do a little more digging downtown and see what she could find out.

“Neat, isn’t it?”

The ceiling slanted as it met the eaves. From the outside, Summer suspected, it would look as though this back bedroom simply extended the full space; since the hideaway was merely ten square feet, the naked eye would never be able to tell the difference. A familiar thrill coursed through her. She loved discoveries. She loved history that took shape in actual things, wood and stone you could put your hands on. She’d spent her life researching places like this. To own a piece of the nineteenth century, even for a few weeks, thrilled her.

Dinah wandered from one end of the room to the other. She ran her fingers over some ancient marks carved into the wood. “Did people live in here?”

Summer cocked her head. Ten might be a little young to be hearing about the cruel side of the slave trade. “More like kids played in here. Hid from their parents. Made up stories and games on rainy days.”

Dinah grinned. “Like me.”

“Just like you.” Summer rubbed the dust from the streaked glass window. From here she could make out a square of grass and an arc of sky. Something like a chill passed along her arms. Yes, history had taken its toll here. She could feel it.

“I like it,” Dinah said from behind her.

“Me too.”

“Can it be just our secret?”

“Absolutely.” She dropped a kiss onto the top of Dinah’s head. “And now I think it’s about time for our tea party.” They slipped back into the bedroom, and Summer’s lungs expanded with fresh air. She wondered if she’d made a mistake, showing the claustrophobic space to the little girl.

But Dinah giggled as they descended the stairs, and the secret room seemed long forgotten by the time they reached the first floor. She peeked over her shoulder at Summer. “I invited someone else.”

“You did? Who?”

But when they stepped onto the porch, she had her answer. Twenty yards away, Damian was grilling burgers on a portable grill, stainless steel and shiny in the sun. She’d never seen it before. He looked over at her and smiled. Butterflies swooped inside her stomach. He lifted the grill cover, and trails of smoke escaped, floating up to the sky.

“They’re done,” he said.

“I’ll get the salad,” Dinah piped up.

*Salad?* Summer looked from the girl to her brother and back again.

“Dinah, go wash your hands at the hose out back first,” Damian said.

“She doesn’t have to use the hose.” Summer laughed. “Come inside and use my bathroom.”

“Okay.” Dinah skipped inside.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Damian said.

“She’s a *girl*,” Summer said. “She shouldn’t have to use the hose the way you guys do.” She crossed her arms and made a face. “Savages.”

Damian laughed out loud and his dimples winked in the sun. She loved the way it sounded, carefree and full, from way down deep in his belly.

“Yup, that’s me. Guess I’ll go clean up out back, then,” he said, “with the other savages.”

Summer dropped her arms. “I was kidding,” she said, but he’d already rounded the house. She walked inside instead.

Dinah stood in the doorway to Summer’s bedroom, cheeks pink. “Summer?”

“What’s up, ladybug?” Adopting the nickname she’d heard Damian use, she slung an arm around the girl’s shoulders. Dinah wrapped her own arm around Summer’s waist, and together they walked into the kitchen.

“Do you like my brother?” she asked.

Summer pulled open the refrigerator door. Inside sat a wooden salad bowl, overflowing with greens. *When did they plan this?* She saw a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies and wondered if

Hannah were in on the secret tea party-slash-BBQ dinner as well. She bumped the door closed with her hip. "Of course I like your brother, sweetheart. Why?" She steadied her voice.

Dinah studied her with thoughtful eyes. "I think you should be his girlfriend."

Summer kept her face averted as she rummaged in a drawer for some utensils. "Oh, honey, I can't be Damian's girlfriend."

"Why not?"

How did she answer that? "Well, I don't live here, remember? I'm only in town for a little while."

"Maybe you could move here," Dinah said, eyes wide and hopeful.

Now even a little girl was trying to convince her to stay in Whispering Pines. Summer's cheeks flushed. "It's a little more complicated than that," she said, even as a voice in the back of her mind was wondering how complicated it was, when she had a past and friends and a guy she could fall for if she let herself.

"Your brother and I are good friends," Summer said, interrupting the voice, "and that's better than being boyfriend and girlfriend, because friends can be friends for a very long time. Even if they don't always live in the same town." She hoped a ten-year-old couldn't read her face the way her twenty-six-year-old brother could.

Summer found some paper plates and napkins and hefted the salad bowl under one arm. Through the back windows she could see Damian rinsing off his arms and face. He'd removed his T-shirt, and his broad, bare chest glistened with heat and wetness. Water flew everywhere as the hose snaked through his hands. Summer almost dropped the salad tongs.

"Do you think you would be Damian's girlfriend if you lived in Whispering Pines for real?" Dinah followed Summer back through

the house and out onto the porch.

“You have a lot of questions today.”

“Dame says it’s good to ask questions,” Dinah retorted as she laid the cookies on a paper plate. “It means you’re smart.”

“Well, your brother is right,” Summer said, “but—”

“Right about what?” Damian scooped up the burgers onto paper plates, handed them to Summer and Dinah and joined them.

“Nothing. Your sister and I were having a girls’ talk, that’s all.”

Dinah beamed and inched as close to Summer as she could without actually climbing into her lap. For a while, the three ate without speaking as the last rays of sun glowed down on them. Summer glanced at brother and sister. Even the way Damian and Dinah crossed their legs and balanced their plates on one knee matched. A sudden sadness seized her.

*I miss you so much, Donny.*

“That’s Mom,” Damian said when a horn beeped. He glanced down at his watch. “Time for you to go, ladybug.” His gaze lifted and locked with Summer’s.

Dinah helped herself to two cookies. “Okay.” She reached over and hugged Summer. “Bye.”

Summer’s heart warmed at the embrace. “Bye, sweetheart. Tell your mom I said hi, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay.” Dinah skipped down the steps. An unruly ponytail bobbed at the back of her neck as she ran across the lawn. “Hi, Mom.” Her faint voice floated on the air and was lost in the rumbling of the engine. A door creaked open and then slammed shut. The car pulled away from the curb, and they were gone.

Damian turned to Summer and cocked a brow. “So it looks like you’re officially alone with me.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

Summer sat on the top step and stared into the sky. After his teasing comment, Damian had disappeared inside, but she didn't really mind. She needed a few minutes to collect herself and calm her racing pulse. She could still smell his cologne in the air and feel the warmth of his body only inches away.

She inhaled, taking in a good long breath of clear Whispering Pines air. This, she would miss. The air and the view of the stars at night. A San Francisco skyline could never take the place of bright white dots in the black above you. She raised one finger and moved it through the growing darkness, tracing the constellations she knew so well. Wrapping her arms around her knees, she peered again toward the street. Nothing but faint street lights winked back.

"You're quiet," Damian said when he returned.

"Just thinking about how good this place looks," she lied. "About how much you and Mac have done this summer."

"Well, we had some help. But my mom says the same thing." He sat beside her. "She loves coming over here."

"She's terrific. She has so many ideas for the house. We were talking about the bedrooms upstairs, and the library..." Summer

didn't speak for a few seconds. "It's meant a lot to me, to spend time with your mother and Dinah. To feel like I belong here."

"They both think you're great."

Summer reached over and laid a hand on his arm. "And you. I like spending time with you." She left her hand there, and he laid his own on top of it.

"What about Gabe?" His voice was husky with the question.

"What about him?"

"You get things sorted out?"

"I think so."

"I hope so." He laced his fingers through hers.

*Kiss me. Do more than kiss me.* She could lean over, and her mouth would meet his. Just a few inches, and she could lose herself inside his touch. But he didn't move closer, and she didn't dare. She couldn't start something, could she? Not if she was planning on selling the house and going back to San Francisco.

"Do you think you'll ever build your own place?" she asked instead. "You're good at it."

"I don't think I'll build from scratch. I'd like to restore a place, maybe. Do something like this." He grinned. "Well, not exactly like this. This place is huge. I'd do something on a smaller scale."

"I know what you mean."

She thought she heard something in the shadows behind her and turned to look over her shoulder. All she saw was a bulky outline in the dark. "What is that? A guitar?"

He followed her gaze. "Oh, yeah. I was playing a little for Dinah earlier."

"I didn't know you were the musical type." But what did she know about him? A few puzzle pieces, a story here and there, not enough to put together the whole, complex person Damian Knight seemed to



be. Her fingers tightened in his. She wanted to know more. Much more. "Would you play something for me?"

He paused. "Sure." He took a long moment to drop her hand, then moved past her on the steps, and the warmth from his sleeve touched her bare arm. She shivered in the night air.

Damian took the guitar from its case and cradled it. Tuning, tweaking, he strummed a few chords and then began to play "Yesterday" by the Beatles. At first it was only instrumental melody, the strings of the guitar humming the poignant song. But after a minute he began to sing along. His voice was husky but certain, caressing the words as if he'd sung them a hundred times.

Summer leaned against the railing and watched him. The strong, thick fingers that usually wound themselves around a hammer now danced across the strings. The forehead that frowned all day in concentration smoothed. Damian sang, and when the song was over he played "Take It Easy" by the Eagles and sang again.

After the final chord he stopped. The music echoed across the grass, to the hills and back, and Summer let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"You're good." No one had ever sung to her before. Nerves along her spine stretched and splintered. Her heart, over-full with the night and the music and the man beside her, started to dance.

Damian cleared his throat. "I'm not that good."

"Are you kidding? You're amazing. I can't believe I didn't know you played. Do you ever write anything of your own?"

He turned toward her. The movement pressed his thigh against hers, and she thought for a minute he might kiss her. His gaze moved to her mouth and then to the place where the white skin of her breast met the vee of her sundress.

"Yes," Damian said. "Sometimes I write my own songs."

He repositioned the instrument, curved his fingers into place and began to play. The melody was simple, a sweet tune that rose and fell without lyrics. It reminded Summer of a butterfly in the morning, or dawn above the ocean. The notes dropped honey-like into an endless pool of longing. In the middle, it changed, became low and sensual with guttural chords that hovered and hung in the air. His shoulders hunched, and his arms tightened with intensity as he played on. A pause, and then the first melody returned, sweeter than the start, if that was possible. The sun coming out after a brilliant summer storm. A baby waking with a smile to a brand new day. It faded, grew, then faded again to nothing. With the final chord, the notes vanished into the night.

He hadn't sung a single lyric, but he hadn't needed to. Desire rang through every note.

"Oh, that was..." Summer couldn't find the words. "...beautiful," but that wasn't enough to describe the passion or the complexity of the song.

"Thanks."

"Does it have a title?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. "Summer's Song."

He set down the guitar, and this time Summer saw the kiss coming. She felt it, knew it, and wanted it with every part of her. He brushed his lips against hers, reached up with one hand to cup her cheek, and the step fell away beneath her. Sweet lightness flooded her stomach, her chest, her mouth. He pulled away, whispered her name, pressed his cheek to her temple and let her feel the pulse that raced there.

She reached for him, felt the smooth, strong muscles of his chest and drew him close. Kisses moved along her cheek, her chin, down to her collarbone, until she moaned with pleasure. He stroked the

curve of her breast, and she shivered. Burying her fingers in his hair, she pulled Damian to her. Lips parted and tongues searched, until she could hardly tell where she ended and he began.

Inside her head, the days flipped backwards. She had come back to Whispering Pines wanting nothing, expecting nothing. Yet something—everything—had changed. First the house. Then dark memories. Then days of light and laughter, of Dinah and Hannah, of Rachael and Nate, strung together like stones on a string. Summer had never believed she might call Whispering Pines home again, but here she sat, wanting Damian's touch, his kiss, his songs, more than she remembered wanting anything in her life. Maybe coming home didn't mean going backwards, after all. Maybe it meant growing up, making new discoveries, learning to forgive the past and finding that the future held myriad possibilities.

Summer took Damian by the hand and led him inside.



HE TOOK his time peeling her dress over her head and running his hands, then his lips, over her bare skin. “God, you’re beautiful.” He hadn’t been with a woman in so long, but he knew in an instant that he’d waited for the right one. Through the curtainless windows, moonlight streaked the sheets, the floor, the curve of her shoulder. He ran his fingertips from her chin to her waist and watched her shudder. He loved it. It emboldened him, made him a man possessed.

So many years it had been. Forever, really, since Damian had wanted a woman the way he wanted Summer Thompson.

She clutched at his back, her eyes dark with passion, and he surrendered. To lose himself inside her would be the sweetest way to

end this day. To end every day. He met her tongue with his, drank her in, tasted wine and chocolate and want beneath it all. He brushed the hair from her forehead and studied the scars along her temple, reminders of the accident that had torn her life apart.

“I want to know everything about you,” he whispered, and she smiled.

“You sure about that?”

He nodded and kissed her again. He knew pain still coursed through her veins. He knew she still fought demons. They hung around her eyes and turned down the corners of her mouth from time to time. But there was none of that now, and he imagined there was no worry on his face as well. For once. She ran her fingers over his jaw, catching on the rough stubble, and all he saw in her gaze was want.



WHEN SUMMER WOKE, the moon had crested in the sky. She rolled over and reached for Damian, but the sheets beside her were empty. She sat up. Something had woken her. Something out of place. A car backfiring? An animal rummaging in the bushes? She pulled the sheet to her shoulders, chilled despite the humid night air. She still wasn't used to sleeping in the country, even though she'd grown up here. The sounds that stirred in the silence after sundown were so different from San Francisco.

The bathroom door clicked open. “You okay?” he asked as he emerged. “Thought maybe you were having a bad dream. You were moving around a lot.”

“I was?”

“And talking.” He slid back under the sheets. “You kept saying ‘No’.” He nuzzled her ear. “I was hoping you weren’t talking about me.”

“I doubt it.” *I don’t think I’d ever say no to you. For any reason.*

He stopped kissing her and sat up again. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Thought I heard something.”

She followed his gaze to the side yard. “Yeah, me too. The wind, maybe. Or ghosts.”

“You think this place is haunted?”

“No. I was kidding.” She ran her fingers along his arm. “I think we’re all haunted, in some way.”

He didn’t relax. He pulled his cell phone from the pocket of his shorts, tossed on the floor, and checked the time. “I should go home.”

“It’s two in the morning.”

“I know, but I don’t like to leave my mom and Dinah alone.”

“They’re fine. You’re a quarter-mile away. And I know your mom always double-checks the locks before she goes to bed.” She whispered the words along his chest and let her hands drift below the sheets.

“I guess you’re right.” He bent his head to catch her mouth again, and she looped one leg over his. Her skin burned in all the places he touched it.

CLOSE TO DAWN, a cell phone rang.

Summer reached in the direction of the bed stand. She wasn’t used to having furniture in this room. Heck, she wasn’t used to this room, period.

“It’s mine,” Damian said and leaned down to answer it. “Hello? What? Mom, wait—” Panic filled his voice. “How?” He sat up and threw off the sheet. “What did he say? Are the police there? All right, I’m coming home right now.”

“What is it? What happened?” Summer stared as Damian pulled on his clothes. His shirt ended up inside out.

“T.J. was at the house.” His voice shook. “He took Dinah.”

“Wait—what? How?”

“I told you.” He grabbed his shoes and stumbled as he headed for the door. Summer still hadn’t managed to crawl to her feet or find her clothes. “I told you I heard something last night.” His voice broke. “I told you I needed to be at home with them.” He punched the door frame. “I never should have stayed here.”

The words sliced through her.

“But I don’t understand how he found them. I didn’t think he was anywhere around here.”

Damian didn’t answer. Her stomach turned over, wanting him, wanting to help him and not knowing how.

“Let me do something.” She found a T-shirt and shorts and pulled them on with shaking hands. “Let me come with you.” She reached for Damian’s arm, but he pulled away as if she’d burned him.

“Theo James Braxton, I’ll kill you when I find you. I swear to God.”

“Wait—what did you—”

“I knew it,” he said, before she could finish the thought. “I knew he’d find us.” His expression turned dark. “You said it was nothing to worry about. You told me to stay.”

“Did you say Theo James?” Something clicked inside Summer’s head, and nausea washed over her.

*You know the way to County Route 78?*

*I'm lookin' for an address. Old buddy of mine.*

*Name's Theo.*

She didn't want to ask. "He isn't...like six feet or so, muscular, greasy dark hair? Grayish eyes?"

Damian stared at her. "Yeah." His voice was flat. "Why?"

"I think maybe he was downtown yesterday. Outside Flo's." Suddenly she felt like Alice in a black, black wonderland, with everything she thought she knew turned upside down. "He asked me for directions to Red Barn Road."

Damian froze. Still as stone, his mouth twisted in anguish, he waited as she stammered on.

"I didn't think...I mean..."

"You told him where we live?" His eyes changed from sky blue to almost black.

"No. He said he was looking for a friend." Repeating Theo's explanation out loud sounded even more ridiculous than she could have imagined. "I didn't know who he was." Damian couldn't be blaming her for this. Could he? "Damian, I'm sorry. I didn't know. Let me come with you. Let me help."

"No. Just stay here." His face was as empty as his voice. "You've done enough."

He yanked open the front door and took the porch steps two at a time. At the bottom, he broke into a run, heading through the trees toward the farmhouse as fast as he could. He didn't look back.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY

Summer stood on the porch steps, stunned. Minutes passed. She could barely process what had just happened. *Dinah—gone. Hannah—betrayed. Damian—furious, and with good reason.*

Her stomach turned over, and for a minute she thought she might throw up. She stared out across the back yard. T.J., or Theo, or whatever his stupid name was, had taken Dinah. He'd broken into the house on the other side of the trees and kidnapped a child. And she'd given him directions to the front door. Then told Damian not to worry when he heard a noise. She thought she might throw up. *This is my fault.* She pressed her palms to the porch and tried to remember how to breathe.

*“Do you like my brother?”* Dinah's voice echoed in her head.

*“How much do you like Gabe?”* Donny used to ask her. *“Do you like him? Or really, really like him?”*

She pressed her fingertips against her eyelids. They sounded so much alike, more than she'd ever realized. Again she saw Donny in the back seat of the car. Then Dinah dancing in a circle under the oak trees. Donny teasing her with a garter snake. Dinah handing her a bouquet of flowers. Their two voices whispered inside her head,



over and over again, until another voice rose above them and the memory shifted yet again.

*“LET ME DRIVE.”*

*“You can’t. You don’t have your license.”*

*“But you’ve been drinking.”*

*“Only one beer. Maybe two.”*

*He laughed, and in that moment she thought she’d probably let him do whatever he wanted.*

*“No, I’ll drive.”*

*“You’ll get in trouble.”*

*“It’s only five miles. And it’s clear. See? Full moon. Lots of stars.”*

*He kissed her in the front yard, with the party in full swing, in front of her brother, until Donny made gagging noises and pleaded for them to stop. Summer didn’t care. She wanted to kiss Gabe—love him, breathe him in—for the rest of the night.*

*“Let’s go.”*

*“Okay. But be careful.”*

*“I will...”*

SUMMER’S EYES FLEW OPEN. She’d never remembered that part of the night. Never. Her mind had always stuck on the minutes just before and after the accident. It had never rewound far enough for her to see any earlier.

Until now.

Now she remembered everything about the accident. Everything about the crash, Donny’s death, the whole amazing loss of that night, and it wasn’t Gabe’s fault at all.

“It was mine.”

DAMIAN RAN down the path as fast as he could. He gagged and a single string of saliva escaped his lips. His heart hammered so loudly he thought it might explode. *T.J. found us. He took Dinah. It's my fault.*

Like a rhythm, the words beat a terrible staccato against his skull. A branch caught him across the cheek, drawing blood, but he barely noticed. Moments later, he burst from the trees where the path met the driveway of the farmhouse. A police officer stood on the porch, one hand on his holster.

“Whoa! Hold it right there.”

Damian froze, hands in the air. Gravel sprayed around him as he slid to a stop. For a minute, he couldn't catch his breath. “I'm Damian Knight. Hannah's son. Dinah's my sister.”

The officer eyed him but kept his hand on his gun. “Let's see some ID.”

Damian reached for his wallet with shaking fingers. It fell to the ground. He scooped it up and pulled out a dog-eared license.

“Slowly.” The officer beckoned Damian forward.

He climbed the steps. “Please. You gotta tell me what's going on with my sister.”

The officer took an eternity to read his license before handing it back. “I'm Officer Burdick.” He shook Damian's hand and with the other pushed the door open behind him. “My partner's inside taking your mother's statement.”

“How is she?”

“Holding up.”

“And Dinah?” He almost couldn’t ask, didn’t want to hear the response.

“We’ve issued an Amber Alert and closed the roads out of town.”

“Mom?” Damian barreled down the hallway. Every lamp in the house burned. In the living room, an end table lay on its side, with magazines scattered across the carpet. Broken glass crunched under his feet.

The last three years, all he’d worried about was this, T.J. tracing them to Whispering Pines and hurting his mother and sister. He’d been so careful. He’d locked the doors and lain awake at night tense with listening. He’d warned his mother again and again. Yet somehow T.J. had broken through the cracks of their life anyway.

Hannah sat at the kitchen table with another police officer opposite her. He looked to be twenty-five at the most, and Damian wondered what kind of experience he had. Writing a few traffic tickets? Checking for underage drinkers at the town bars? Damian couldn’t imagine anyone in Whispering Pines was equipped to deal with a kidnapping. He sure wasn’t.

The guy stood and offered his hand. He spoke in the same clipped tone as his partner on the porch. “Evenin’, sir. My name’s Officer Wallace.”

Damian didn’t answer. “Mom? Are you okay?” He hugged Hannah’s thin shoulders and tried to stop them from shaking. A crumpled tissue in her hands twirled around her fingers until it shredded and fell to her lap. Her left cheek, red and swollen, was beginning to purple. Tears tracked a path to her chin and dripped off onto the table.

Damian forced himself to pull open a drawer and find a frayed towel. He dumped some ice cubes into it and wrapped it closed at both ends, the way he had so many times in the past. *I’m going to be*

*sick*. Frightened, he leaned down and stared into the depths of her gaze. He held the towel to her bruised cheek and stroked the back of her hair with one hand.

“Mom? I’m right here.”

After a long minute, Hannah blinked, and her eyes readjusted to the light. Her head leaned into his touch, seeking comfort. “Damian.” With an unsteady hand, she reached up and took the makeshift ice pack from him.

“She hasn’t said too much since we arrived,” Officer Wallace began, “but she was able to give me a brief statement.” He flipped the pages of a small spiral notebook. “She was in the kitchen washing dishes when she heard something out in back of the house...” He frowned at the notepad. “When she looked out the window, she saw the suspect. She attempted to secure the door—”

“It was unlocked?” How many times had he told his mother to keep the deadbolt fastened? Not that it mattered. T.J. could have broken it off with one hand.

“I’m not sure if it was locked or not,” the officer answered in a neutral tone. He kept his face down and continued to read. “She attempted to secure the door, but the intruder forced it open before she could. He threatened to hurt her if she didn’t tell him where Dinah was, and when she didn’t, he pushed her out of the way and went through the house looking for the girl. Did some damage in the living room and hallway—”

“I saw.”

Officer Wallace cleared his throat. “He found Dinah upstairs in her bedroom and carried her out to the car. According to your mother, she appeared to be a little confused but not frightened. He looked at his watch, “Happened approximately forty-five minutes ago.” He closed the notepad.

Tears continued to drip down his mother's face, and every so often, she raised a hand to wipe them. "I'm sorry." She pressed the towel to her cheek.

"Don't you dare apologize. You didn't do anything wrong. It's not your fault." *It's mine. I wasn't here to stop him.* Enraged, guilty, helpless with grief, Damian wanted to cut his own throat, tear out his hair, run to the roof and jump off into blackness, as if the pain would somehow bring back his sister and punish him for his negligence all at once. He couldn't believe he'd been careless enough to stay at Summer's after dark.

Again he heard her confession that she'd given T.J. directions. It took all his strength not to punch the nearest solid surface. *I trusted her.* Okay, maybe she hadn't known who T.J. was. But shouldn't she have suspected something? Where was woman's intuition at a time like that?

"What are we doing?" he demanded. "What can I do?"

The cop rested his hands on an ample belly. "Got two patrol cars out in town now. We've notified every department between here and Albany to the east, Syracuse to the west." He cleared his throat. "If you can find a recent picture of your sister, that would help. Not much else you can do, except wait."

Damian found some extra copies of Dinah's school picture and handed them to the officer. Then he trudged to the sink and splashed water on his face. His fists opened and closed. Staring out the window, he pictured T.J. there, waiting in the shadows of the lawn, creeping around the house to find the weak spot. Like a fox sniffing out his prey. He brought a hand to his mouth and retched. His mother turned away, and the cop cleared his throat.

One hour passed. Then another. He paced around the first floor like a jaguar. Restless. Angry. Needing out. Hannah picked up a

sponge and circled it over the kitchen counter in a sweeping motion, again and again, her eyes somewhere beyond the house.

The three of them waited, silent, as the hours marched by. Midnight came and went, but no one slept. The clock on the stove read one fifty. Two thirty. Three o'clock. Hannah returned to her seat at the table, her eyes glazed with fatigue. Damian continued to pace, cracking his knuckles and staring from the refrigerator to the countertops to his mother and back again. The policeman's radio crackled with static.

Suddenly the cop who'd been watching the front door strode into the room. "We have a lead."

Damian fought to keep his heart from leaping out of his chest. *No bad news*, it thudded. *No bad news. If he's done something to Dinah, I'll rip every limb from his body.*

"Apparently the kidnapper called the police station a few minutes ago. Says he wants guaranteed full custody of the girl." He cleared his throat. "We weren't able to get a trace on the call. But right now he's considered armed and dangerous. From what he said, there's a possibility he has a weapon of some sort."

Hannah's face lost all color. "He has a gun?"

"We don't know that," Officer Burdick responded. "Ma'am, we have our best negotiator assigned to this. Odds are, if your ex-husband really wants custody of his daughter, he's not gonna do anything to hurt her."

"But you don't know that for sure," Damian said. Fear choked him. He knew T.J. better than these men did. He knew what the guy was capable of.

"No," the policeman said. "We don't."

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-ONE**

“**D**id you hear about Dinah?” Summer closed the ambulance corps’ break room door. She hadn’t slept much, just laid on her bed fully clothed and stared at the ceiling. Memories and guilt flooded her heart, making it hard to draw a full breath. A couple times, she thought about calling Rachael, but what would she say? Somewhere around two or three she finally fell into a restless sleep, but as soon as the light came through her windows, she was up again. She’d come straight to the ambulance corps as she could function properly, unable to think of anything else. When she walked in the front entrance, the young EMT sitting behind the desk pointed to where Gabe waited in the back.

“I did hear,” he nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“How can this happen? Here in Whispering Pines?” But that was a silly question, wasn’t it? The very town itself held secrets in its name.

“I don’t know.” He sat on the arm of a chair and cracked his knuckles. “Is that why you’re here? To see if I can help? I don’t know if I can. I mean, I’ll try, but the cops know more than I do.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I wanted to tell you...that I remembered. Just last night.” She drew in a deep breath. “I remember what happened the night Donny died.” She looked straight at him. “You lied.”

Gabe said nothing.

“You told the police you were driving the night of the accident.”

He waited an eternity before answering. “Yes.”

“But why?” She could barely breathe. “Why would you do that?”

He didn’t answer.

She walked to him and took his hand. “You let me drive that night because you were drinking. And because I wanted to.”

His chin dipped in acknowledgement.

“I didn’t have a license.” She recalled the arguments with her father over that, night after night. *Too dangerous*, he’d say. *You don’t need to learn. Not until you’re eighteen. I’ll take you wherever you need to go.*

She said the next words quietly, piecing them together as she went, unearthing her own history though it pained her with every breath. “You were at a party. At the Hadleys’.”

“Only until you got off work.”

“I know.” She’d never suspected Gabe of cheating on her, and she didn’t now. “We didn’t go to the drive-in?” That was the only part that remained fuzzy.

“We did, but it was crowded. So we left. It was late, anyway, and Donny was supposed to be home—”

Summer squeezed his hand tightly. She remembered the rest now. Taking the keys from Gabe when she smelled beer on his breath. Insisting she drive his car. Thinking the few times her father had let her practice were enough.



But with her teenage crush beside her, the warmth and excitement of the night and the bright headlights at the intersection had confused and distracted her. “I should have stopped.” There wasn’t a sign in her direction, just a flashing yellow light, but she should have stopped anyway. It was a dangerous crossing, and people blew through it all the time.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

She let herself lean against him and bear the weight of her head and shoulders. *Of course it was.*

“Summer, Mr. Hartwell ran the red light in the other direction. He was supposed to stop. Plus he’d been drinking. Everyone knew that. He’d been a hard-core alcoholic for years”

She couldn’t answer. *That was why we rushed to get out of the car.* Gabe hadn’t wanted anyone to see that she was driving. She, the one without a license. She’d been at the wheel the night her brother died. Not Gabe.

*“SON, come over here, please. Just have a couple of questions to ask you...”*

*As the cop turned his back, Gabe peeled her fingers open and pried the car keys from Summer’s sweaty palm.*

HER MOUTH WENT COTTONY DRY. “You went to jail for me.” The enormity of the thought fell over her.

He sighed, and for the first time, she heard sadness in his voice. “Well, I thought Hartwell was gonna make it. Thought they’d charge him. I never guessed...”

“That they’d charge you instead?”

She felt him nod against her cheek. With one arm around her, he leaned motionless against his desk.

“Why didn’t you just tell them the truth?” She whispered the words into his shirtfront.

He didn’t have to answer. She could tell by the pulse in the hand she still held, and in the way his chest heaved with the weight of the last ten years.

“It was the right thing to do, Summer,” Gabe said after a long time. His voice was rough. “Your dad lost his son that night. I didn’t want him to lose his daughter too.”

SUMMER SAT on a bench in the town park long after Gabe had left for a call in Silver Valley.

*“I didn’t want him to lose his daughter too...”*

His daughter. Like Dinah. What if another child was about to die in Whispering Pines? They hadn’t heard anything yet. No news of Dinah, good or bad, had crackled over the police scanner.

The bench bit into the backs of her legs. An ant crawled over her toe and continued on to climb a blade of grass. She didn’t move. If she did, she thought she might break. She couldn’t go back to the house. She could barely remain upright. The sun burned the back of her neck, but she didn’t care. She was surprised she could still feel anything at all. A horn beeped somewhere over on Main Street. She didn’t look up. Instead she studied the veins on the backs of her hands and the blood that ran through them.

*So much blood that night...*

Now that she’d cracked open that part of her memory, the details wouldn’t stop coming. Her brother’s Yankees hat sitting on the double yellow line. The police sirens screaming in her ears. The

tears that wet her shirt. A single stoplight flashing red one way, yellow the other, in a smear of color that lit up the sky. The blood on her hands and Gabe's face, the shattered glass sprayed everywhere she looked.

*How did I forget?*

It was funny, the way the mind worked. If she hadn't forgotten, she probably would have gone mad.

*It wasn't your fault.*

But it was, of course. Gabe might not have avoided the accident if he'd been driving, but then again, he might have. He would certainly have slowed at the yellow light. And he might have paid better attention. He might have seen the other car, braked sooner, or swerved into the safety of the shoulder.

Or he might not have.

The historian in her whispered something else. *You can study every last detail*, her favorite college professor had once told a full lecture hall. *You can put all the pieces of an artifact back together. You can match up all the edges, mend the lines until they become invisible, but you still won't know it all. You will never be able to step back with both feet to that moment of creation and truly relive it. We can only work with the knowledge we have now. We can only imagine.*

And so, Summer had made a life out of imagining. She'd spent hours putting together the pieces of other people's lives. She'd become fascinated with unearthing clues and determined to write stories that would decipher them. She lived the museum, loved it, made it the career that consumed her. Until now. Until she was faced with her own pieces. Unlike all the rest of history, she didn't have to conjure any part of this story; she knew it front to back and beginning to end.

After a long time, she opened her eyes. Every part of her felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds—her head, her eyelids, her hands, and her feet when she tried to make them work. It took her two tries to make it up. When she did, she took a deep breath and pushed her hair from her face.

She might have ruined her relationship with Damian, she might have endangered Dinah's welfare, but one thing was clear: she couldn't let the residents of Whispering Pines go on thinking Gabe had killed her brother. She had to make that right, anyway.

SUMMER WALKED a half-mile from the ambulance corps to Main Street. Zeb's Diner had been a fixture there for as long as she could remember. As she crossed the street, she gazed with nostalgia at its red-and-white striped awnings. How many heartaches had she and Rachael nursed here? How much gossip had they shared? Not much had changed in ten years. The jukebox sat against the same wall, and the brightly lit menu hung above the same shiny counter. Even the color scheme remained the same—turquoise leatherette booths with silver chrome molding and a black-and-white checkerboard floor. Old photos of 1920s celebrities hung on the walls.

She met Rachael at a back booth and spilled the entire story in a matter of minutes. "...and Damian left as soon as his mom called," she finished. "I haven't heard anything else since then."

Rachael nodded. "My dad told me about the guy breaking in and taking Dinah," she said. "He heard it on his scanner. They'll find him, Summer. Police have all the roads out of town blocked off."

Summer blew her nose. "But what if they don't?"

"They *will*," Rachael said around her straw.

Summer stared at her phone, willing a text from Hannah or Damian. “I think this might be partly my fault.”

“How on earth would this be your fault?”

“I gave him directions to their house.”

“*What?*”

Summer told the story as quickly as she could.

“Stop it,” Rachael said before she had finished. “You told a stranger how to get to Red Barn Road? That’s it? That’s what you’re beating yourself up about?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Big deal. You know how long that road is? How many people live on it? You didn’t know who he was or who he was looking for.”

“But I should have.”

“Why?” Rachael dismissed her with a wave of one hand. “You’re being ridiculous. It wasn’t your fault. If you didn’t give him directions, the next person to come along would have. You know that. And if not last night, he would have taken Dinah another time.”

“Maybe.” Summer still couldn’t shake the guilt or the accusing look on Damian’s face as he stormed away. She took a deep breath. “That isn’t the only thing I wanted to tell you.”

Rachael cocked one brow. “This is turning out to be one heck of a Tuesday morning.”

“Remember how I told you I could never remember what happened the night Donny died?”

“The whole amnesia thing, yeah. I’m sorry. That must be awful.”

Summer took a deep breath. *Get it over with. The first time will be the hardest.* She’d have to tell this story more than once. People needed to know. “This morning, I did remember. I was driving. The night Donny died, I was driving Gabe’s car.”

“Wait—what?” Rachael stared at her. “But you didn’t have your license.”

“Exactly. Which was why I probably caused the accident.”

Rachael sat back in the booth. “I can’t believe it. You’re wrong. You have to be.”

“I’m not. I think maybe what happened with Dinah triggered the memory. I was thinking about her, and about Donny, and then I just remembered everything. I was driving because Gabe had been at a party earlier that night. He’d been drinking.” She gulped. “So I thought it would be better if I drove us home. Safer.”

“He went to jail,” Rachael whispered.

“I know.” Tears burned in her eyes. “But why didn’t anyone tell me that? Why didn’t you?” Maybe she would have remembered sooner, or been able to change the outcome of the sentencing. Frustration and guilt seeped through her. She’d never be able to give those two years back to Gabe. Never.

Rachael shook her head. “You and I didn’t talk for—what? Almost a year, after you left. And when we did, you were so fragile. I didn’t know what you knew and what you didn’t. All you talked about was college or your latest job. Never anything about the accident or your brother. And definitely never anything about Gabe. I just figured you didn’t want to talk about it.”

Summer met her best friend’s gaze. “I have to tell people. They have to know the truth. I was driving, and I didn’t see the other car, and maybe Mr. Hartwell was drinking and didn’t stop either, but I was the one who went through that flashing light. I was behind the wheel. Not Gabe.”

“Oh, Summer.” Rachael got up and slid into the booth beside her. She folded her friend in a hug, and they sat there a long time without speaking.

“I want to go on Channel 6,” Summer said after a while. “As soon as I can.”

Rachael pulled back. “Are you kidding? You don’t have to announce it to the world.”

But she’d made up her mind. The only thing she needed to do was call the local cable station and find out when she could get airtime.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-TWO

**G**inny Jameson, Channel 6 anchor, arranged her face and fluffed her hair. Summer stood across from her, frozen. The clock in the center of town chimed six times.

“I still can’t believe you’re doing this,” Rachael whispered from behind her left shoulder. “You don’t have to.”

*Yes, I do.* Summer looked out at the knot of people that had gathered near the steps of the Whispering Pines Central School. She was still startled that it had happened so quickly. One call to the police, another to the cable station, and a camera-and-lighting entourage hovered around them, ready for the evening news.

“Good evening. This is Ginny Jameson for Channel 6 News, coming to you live from Whispering Pines, where a startling turn of events has stirred up this small town.”

*To say the least.* Summer wound her fingers in her skirt and hoped she didn’t have to move. If she did, she’d catch a heel in the stairs and sprawl out for the entire viewing area to see. She squinted against the camera lights. She thought she saw Gabe standing at the edge of the crowd. She hadn’t told him about the news conference, but she was pretty sure Whispering Pines’s grapevine still worked as well as ever.



“Late last night, ten-year old Dinah Knight was kidnapped from her home by her estranged father...”

Summer pulled in a long breath. *Don't listen. Just figure out what you're going to say.* She could only deal with one tragedy at a time. Better not to think about Dinah, or Hannah and T.J., until later, when they were off camera. And better not to think of Damian at all. Ginny widened her eyes as she told the story of abduction, stringing together scant details. “...authorities have widened their search, but there have been no leads since early this morning.”

A movement at the edge of the crowd made Summer turn. Damian eased his way past the steps and behind a cameraman. The blood left her face. She hadn't expected him to come.

The anchor went on. “Anyone with information about a man resembling Theodore Braxton, or a red pickup truck with Maryland plates, should contact authorities at once.”

They cut to a commercial, and a woman darted in to powder Ginny's nose. Summer smoothed the hair at her temples. She could do this. She had to. She looked across the tops of people's heads, searching for Damian, but he'd disappeared.

“All set?” Ginny asked with a bright smile.

Summer nodded. The cameraman adjusted his light, and then she couldn't see anyone in the crowd. Just as well.

“We're back in Whispering Pines, where a little girl was taken hostage yesterday evening.” Ginny began her recap in a somber tone. Her smile of thirty seconds earlier had vanished. “But that isn't the only cloud hanging over this town tonight, where friends and neighbors wait and pray for Dinah Knight's safe return.”

The newscaster paused and turned to face Summer. “Ten years ago, another youth disappeared, this one the victim of a deadly car accident. A local man served two years for manslaughter in the case,

but today, the sister of the boy came forward to claim responsibility for the accident.”

Ginny thrust her microphone in front of Summer. “Is it true that you were driving the car the night your brother died?”

The voices around her swelled with surprise. Whispers turned into murmurs and became a chaos of chatter. She couldn’t see the residents of Whispering Pines, but Summer knew they stood there gaping at her.

“Yes.” She lifted her chin. “I was with Gabe Roberts, but I was driving his car. We were dating at the time. I went into shock right after the accident, and I didn’t remember anything for years. Until just a few hours ago, really. But…”

She said the rest as quickly as she could. Don’t blame him anymore, she begged the town. It was never his fault. Only once did she try and focus on the faces around her. She thought she saw Gabe, with a restless smile that disappeared when someone moved in and clapped a hand on his shoulder. Within minutes, the crowd had obscured him.

“I’ll be returning to California within the week,” she finished. That had been the only easy part of this whole decision. She didn’t belong here. She could make amends, but she couldn’t carve out a new existence for herself. Just the thought of it exhausted her. Gabe and the town, Damian and everyone else would be fine without her.

Ginny wrapped up the segment with another plea for information about Dinah’s kidnapping, which Summer echoed. It couldn’t happen twice, she thought. This town couldn’t lose two children. The setting sun cast shadows across the crowd, but she saw so many faces she knew. Teachers from the school. Tellers from the bank. Neighbors she’d grown up with. Friends she’d lost touch with.

She walked slowly down the stairs as the news crew packed up their vans and headed over the hill to Silver Valley. No one waited for her, but it didn't matter. She'd done the right thing. Now she needed to do a second right thing. She needed to go back to the police station and see if there was anything she could do to help. Man the call lines. Even make coffee for the cops pulling night duty.

Donny might have died, but she'd do everything in her power to make sure Dinah came back home to Whispering Pines safe and sound.



HE WAS LEANING against the brick wall of the high school, half-hidden by shadows and basketball hoops, as she walked by.

“Hey.”

Summer froze.

A car passed, the lights above them flickered, and Gabe materialized a few feet in front of her. “You didn't have to do that. Say all that, I mean.”

She hugged herself against a chill. “Yes I did. People needed to know.”

“I think most people got over it a while ago.” He took a step closer and she could smell his cologne. She didn't recognize it; it wasn't the same scent he'd worn in high school. *Probably just as well.*

“Doesn't matter. It was still the right thing to do.” The feeling of standing beside him, looking up sideways to catch his grin, tossed her back ten years in a heartbeat.

“Ah, Summer.” He met her gaze.

“Have you heard anything about Dinah?”

He shook his head. She checked her cell and wondered if Damian or Hannah would call or text her with any news.

Gabe leaned against the wall. Their shoulders brushed. "You hungry? You want to grab some dinner?"

"I don't think so." She couldn't think about eating. Again she saw Damian's cool gaze move across her, then away, as he listened to her confession. She turned toward Gabe, meaning to ask him something about the accident, but the words died on her lips when she saw the way he was looking at her.

Curious. Familiar. Caring.

A second later he bent down and kissed her. Gentle, chaste, quiet, searching. She leaned into the kiss for a moment, remembering the dozens of times he'd touched her in exactly the same way. Then she pulled back at the same instant he did.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets, and his smile crooked a little. "Not there anymore, is it?"

She shook her head, surprised. She always thought she would hold a piece of her heart for Gabe Roberts forever.

"You love him? This Damian guy? You've been spending a lot of time with him."

"I don't know." Love didn't happen that quickly, did it?

"You should tell him how you feel."

"I'm not sure it's really the best time."

"You should tell him anyway," Gabe said. "There isn't always a best time, or a best way, or a best anything when it comes to stuff like that. But time gets away from you before you know it. It's tough to say things after too long, especially when there's a couple thousand miles between you."

"Maybe you're right." But where on earth would she begin?

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-THREE

Damian stared out the window of Zeb's Diner, where his mother had finally sent him.

"You can't stay in the house and pace," she'd said. "You're making me crazy. Go do something."

Eating without an appetite didn't really constitute *something* in Damian's book, but he supposed she was right. He'd been wearing a groove in the hardwood with his constant walking back and forth. Now he nursed a cup of coffee and a raspberry danish and thought about the Channel 6 news. He'd watched the whole live segment over at the school, and though he knew in some way Summer's was a noble gesture, he couldn't see past the fact that she'd lied all those years ago and let someone else take the blame. So she was leaving town, huh? Maybe he didn't know her at all. Maybe no one did.

He wrapped his hands around the lukewarm mug and eyed an empty Main Street. As the wind shifted, clouds scudded across the sky. A half-moon glowed down, and from where he sat, he could almost see the end of Main Street where it turned into Red Barn Road. If he squinted, he could make out the third-floor windows of Summer's house. Dark. Silent and empty. Like he felt right about now.

For the first time all day, thoughts of T.J. and Dinah vanished. He forgot the fear and worry crawling up his skin and lingered over the memory of what had happened at that house less than twenty-four hours earlier. Cream-colored toenails. A hand that rested on his shoulder and a smile that asked him to play for her. Lips that melted into his. A body that matched up with his in every perfect, possible way.

*She is poetry. She is music under the moon, pieces of a puzzle I want to curl my hands around and move together with my own.*

Yet he hadn't said a thing to her. He'd stood there at the school, less than ten yards away, and stared at her without words. He'd wanted to take her in his arms. He'd wanted to blame her. He'd wanted to kiss her. He'd wanted to hate her.

He'd simply wanted her. Still did, more than ever.

Damian pushed the images away. He couldn't afford to think about her that way. Not now. He checked his watch. Why hadn't they heard anything? His leg jounced with nerves. He couldn't stay here any longer. Even staring at the gray walls of the police station was better than watching couples hold hands over milkshakes.

"Damian?"

He looked up at the familiar voice. Before he could say anything, Joyce Hadley slid into the booth beside him.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I heard what happened with Dinah." Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying.

"What are you doing here?"

She waved toward the front counter, where one of her look-alike sisters was picking up takeout. "Getting dinner. I saw you over by the school. While Summer was on the news." Her leg pressed against his. "I never knew that, about the accident. I don't think anyone did."

She clicked her fingernails on the table. "Can't believe it. Gabe was a good guy. *Is* a good guy."

But Damian didn't want to talk about Gabe Roberts. He'd watched Gabe while Summer talked. He'd seen the history on both their faces.

"You haven't heard anything about Dinah?" she asked.

He shook his head. He could smell Joyce's perfume. For some reason, it didn't make him gag tonight. She wore less makeup than usual, and without all that eye goop he could actually see light blue pupils surrounded by dark lashes. He tried to speak, but his tongue felt thick, and suddenly Joyce metamorphosed into two faces instead of one. He blinked a few times.

"Have you eaten anything?" Her voice sounded far away.

"Not really."

"Let me order you something else. Something more substantial."

"I can't eat."

Joyce reached under the table and took his hand. "She'll be okay. They'll find her."

But Joyce didn't know that. No one did. "It's my fault," he said.

"What is?"

"That he found us. That he took her. I couldn't protect Mom or Dinah." His knee jiggled. "That's my job, to protect both of them, and I couldn't."

She produced a tissue from somewhere and handed it to him. "You can't have known this would happen. I'm sure he was waiting for the right time, when you weren't there." She ran one finger along his wrist, and loneliness, powerful as a tidal wave, swept over him.

"Let's get some air."

SUMMER STOOD in the doorway of the Whispering Pines Police Station. She felt wrung out, exhausted, as if the little life left in her this afternoon had vanished.

“There’s a statute of limitations on involuntary manslaughter,” the captain had explained to her a few minutes ago. “Plus, we can’t charge someone else with a crime when the first person’s already done time for it.”

Summer stared straight ahead and realized again the enormity of the sacrifice Gabe had made for her. She could do nothing else to repay him. Nothing to give him back the time he’d lost sitting in a jail cell for something he didn’t do. Strangely, the only relief lay in knowing that Whispering Pines finally knew the truth. Anyone who hadn’t watched the six o’clock news would catch the late-night recap in another hour. That person would tell someone down at the gas station, and those people would tell someone else at the beauty parlor or the frozen foods aisle or the hundred other places stories took root. Within a week, everyone living in a fifty-mile radius would know.

And that lifted the burden from her shoulders and her heart. The truth, after all, would count for something.

“You okay?” Rachael stood at her elbow.

“I think so. Thanks for being here.”

“I’ll come back to the house with you,” Rachael offered. “We’ll buy ice cream and stay up all night like we used to. If you don’t want to be alone.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be all right.” This was nothing like the grief they’d nursed in school. Back then, rejection from a boy or a rotten grade on a midterm exam warranted two spoons and a carton of chocolate-chip ice cream. Locked away in Rachael’s attic bedroom, they’d eat away the sadness until laughter replaced tears. Talking into the early



morning, giggling at Nate and his friends, Summer had always emerged on the other side of sunrise with a refreshed heart.

But she didn't think anything would heal the damage this time. "I'm just going to try and get some sleep."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll call you tomorrow."

"You better. First thing."

Summer nodded and waved goodbye. She felt a hundred years old, worn out from the strain of a single day. The moment Damian had sung to her seemed ages gone. She'd had a chance and lost it. That was that, plain and simple. There was no use moping around about it, no use rewinding the day and torturing herself by wondering what she might have done differently.

*I need to go home. She slid into her car. Just bury myself under the covers and find a way to make it through to morning.*

She turned the key in the ignition. A sad, slow blues song filled the car, and she spun the dial to turn it up. She pulled out of the parking space too fast, jerking the wheel and slamming on the brakes as a police car drove by. A few yards away the neon lights of Zeb's Diner shone against the night sky. Beyond that, nothing but dark, quiet homes. No cars appeared, and she was about to press the accelerator and continue the final mile to her house when she saw them.

The woman, petite and blonde, pressed against the man. Summer stared, her heart in her throat. Lights and shadows spilled down on the couple, striping them in yellow and gray, but she would have recognized them anywhere. Damian and Joyce Hadley stood fifty feet away, arms around each other.

Summer's fingers clenched the steering wheel. Without looking in her direction, they stopped near a tree, and even in the dim light she

could see the smile on Joyce's face as she reached up and smoothed the hair from Damian's forehead. Summer bit her lip. She knew how that cowlick dipped down toward his eyes. Every day she watched him push it out of the way while he worked.

*He's going to kiss her.* Summer's breath disappeared. Damian was going to kiss Joyce Hadley, out on the street for all of Whispering Pines to see, and Summer was going to have to watch it happen. *Screw that.* She gunned her car and shot through the intersection as fast as she could. Her tires squealed, but she didn't care. Less than twenty-four hours after kissing her, Damian was flirting with Joyce in the middle of town. She couldn't believe it. Gabe had been wrong. There was no reason to confess her feelings for Damian. Obviously she'd been wrong about them in the first place.

She'd meant every word at the press conference. She would help the cops search for Dinah in whatever way she could. But by the end of the week, she'd be back in San Francisco. She squared her shoulders and forced herself to face the truth: Damian had found solace tonight in the local girl, something Summer had stopped being a long time ago. Whispering Pines wasn't her home. She didn't belong here, and the sooner she came to terms with that, the better.

At the house, she climbed the back steps and let herself in. The massive building groaned and settled around her. Dark. Empty. Sort of like the hole in her chest. When her cell phone rang ten minutes later, she ignored it.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FOUR**

**T**heo tried to put weight on his injured hand and failed. Pain shot all the way up to his shoulder, and he cursed.

Using the other hand to bolster himself instead, he made his way off the sagging couch and shuffled across the room. His buddy snored from a mattress in the opposite corner of the old hunting cabin. He crept into the kitchen. This place stunk to high heaven, and a few things were growing mold inside the refrigerator. Still, he was grateful for a place to hide. The alerts on the radio had him heading for Canada or the New York-Massachusetts border, so he'd stayed put in Wineglass Lake, a tiny town about thirty miles north of Whispering Pines. Ronny, a dim-witted assistant he'd met on the job last week, hadn't asked questions, just let him crash on the sofa when he showed up earlier that morning.

But Dinah had gotten away from him.

Theo stuck his head under the faucet and slurped. He still couldn't believe it had gone so wrong. He'd planned it all out, waited until he knew Hannah and Dinah would be alone in the house. He hadn't intended to belt his ex-wife, but she'd gotten in the way. Shown more spirit than he remembered. Used to be, she'd let him do whatever he wanted and never gave him any lip. Must be a few

years by herself had given her courage. Theo chuckled. He'd put her in her place fast enough, though. After getting Dinah into the car, and promising her an ice cream and a puppy later on if she didn't cry, he'd driven west like he planned, taking the back roads and cruising with the lights off whenever he could. He found an old hiking trail far up Sunrise Mountain where he could park for a while, just in case the cops cruised by. Might have stayed there all night, but Dinah had to get out and pee, and when he turned around for a minute, she took off.

He swore again and ran a wet washcloth over his face. What ten-year old ran away from her own father? In the middle of the night? Just before dawn, he'd ditched the truck and managed to hitch a ride from a broad with no teeth driving a station wagon. He'd been hiding out all day, but he still didn't dare go out and look for Dinah. He'd probably run into a pack of local cops within the first ten minutes.

Man, he missed his daughter. He missed watching her sing and dance around the house. Missed having her crawl into his lap and watch television with him after dinner. Hell, he missed having a family, coming home to a warm meal and a soft woman. Didn't look like he'd be having any of that, though, anytime soon.

There was only one person to blame for that. Theo spat into the sink and reached for the bottle of Jack Daniels on the counter.

The way he figured it, Hannah's son had been the cause for every problem in his life since the day he married her and took them both in. Ever since that brat turned old enough to see what went on behind closed doors, he'd been looking out for his mother and sister. Shoving Theo out of the way when all he wanted to do was talk to his wife. Standing between him and his daughter when the girl deserved a spanking. Theo emptied the bottle down his throat. Every time he tried to discipline his wife and child, that kid had interfered.

To add insult to injury, Damian must have convinced his mother to change their last names back to Knight. As if Braxton wasn't good enough.

"That son of a bitch needs to learn who's boss," Theo muttered, wiping his mouth on a dirty shirtsleeve. "Once and for all." He reached into a kitchen cabinet and pulled out the bottle he knew Ronny kept there. He stroked the fifth of bourbon with care.

"Come to papa," he whispered, and broke the seal. He eased into a stained recliner, propped the bottle between his thighs and checked his watch. Eleven thirty. He took another long drink and turned over possibilities. Forget Hannah and Dinah. This time, he'd go straight to the devil himself. Even with only one good hand, he had no doubt he'd dominate Damian in a fight. Course, having an advantage in the form of a trusty sidearm wouldn't hurt either.

He checked his watch a third time, patted the forty-five on the table beside him and watched the moon move across the inky sky.



DAMIAN STOOD in the front hallway and watched Officer Burdick pace the length of their driveway. Joyce Hadley had left less than an hour ago, after the cops hurried them back to the farmhouse with news about Dinah. They'd found T.J.'s abandoned truck at the base of Sunrise Mountain, and muddy footprints looked as though she'd gotten away from him. Now they were heading back out with dogs and a blanket with Dinah's scent on it.

*Call me*, Joyce had whispered before she left, but Damian knew he wouldn't.

*The suspect's probably miles away by now*, Officer Burdick had repeated. *We still have men looking for him, but we're gonna focus*

*our efforts on finding the girl.*

*How do you know he doesn't have her?* Doubt had filled Hannah's expression.

*Two sets of footprints go in two opposite directions where the truck was ditched.* The cop cleared his throat. *He might have gone after her, yes, but it's more likely he's taken off, afraid of getting caught. Typical M.O. with kidnapppers when something doesn't go according to plan.*

*But don't you think he'll come back here?* Hannah had asked. *Don't you think he'll try to find her again?*

*Possibly. Our plan is to find her first. We're keeping a watch on your house, all the same. Even a fool doesn't push his luck that much.*

The cop's reassurance hadn't convinced Damian. It didn't matter if the police set up a barricade around the farmhouse twenty-four seven. If T.J. wanted to, he'd find another way to destroy their lives. Damian was sure of it.

Hannah sat beside him on the couch. "Have you talked to Summer today?"

"No."

"Don't you think you should? She's probably worried sick."

His throat grew tight. *I don't have anything to say to her.*

"At least call her."

But he couldn't. He hadn't told his mother about Summer giving T.J. directions; he couldn't bear to. *She should have listened to me last night.* He balled his hands into fists. He'd let down his guard, and his worst nightmare had come true. How could he talk to her?

"After what she went through today, I hate the thought of her being all alone in that house. I'm sure she could use a friend."

"I don't know."

She put a hand on his wrist. "She's leaving. You heard her say that at the news conference."

"Exactly. So what's the point in talking to her now?"

"Listen to me." Hannah's voice took on an edge "You cannot spend the next fifty years trying to protect me. Or Dinah, or yourself. There's a whole life out there, starting with someone on the other side of those trees who's waiting for you to come to your senses. She needs someone tonight. Go see her."

He shook his head.

"I don't understand. I see the way you look at her. The way you look at each other."

Damian's shoulders sagged. "It's past midnight." Besides, he didn't want to call Summer. And he didn't want to stand on the other side of a room and try to make small talk with her. He wanted to feel her, to kiss her and wind his fingers into her hair. He wanted to play all the songs stored up in his head, the ones he'd written because of her. But he didn't know how to begin a conversation after everything that had happened.

So he left his phone in his pocket, sank into a chair, and tried to chase sleep that he knew wouldn't come.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FIVE**

Summer sat straight up in bed. Something had woken her. Not the sun rising, because it wasn't yet dawn. She squinted and checked the time on her phone. A little past five. She'd slept barely four hours, after tossing and turning and trying to work things out in her head. But despite the little bit of shut-eye, she felt restless and wrung out. She rubbed her eyes. Then her cell phone beeped.

*A message.* That's what had woken her. *Maybe they found T.J and Dinah. Oh please please please...* She lunged for the bed stand and fumbled with the tiny keys of her phone. But it was only Rachael.

The voicemail message had arrived at twelve-oh-five. "Hey, Summer. The police think Dinah got away from T.J. A witness said they saw someone matching his description walking up past the lake last night. By himself."

Rachael's voice faded out for a moment, replaced by static. "... cops found his truck near Sunrise Mountain."

*Dinah got away?* Summer could barely process the news. But then where was she? Had she just disappeared into the night? Shouldn't searchers have found her? She was a ten-year old girl. She couldn't have vanished into thin air.



“...they think she ran off when he stopped for the night.” Pause. “Just wanted to let you know. Call me when you get this, okay?”

Summer dropped the phone into her palm, stunned. Dinah had gotten away from her father. Thank God. But what did that mean? Was she wandering around somewhere, cold and scared in the dark? Had she gotten lost or been attacked by a wild animal? True, it wasn't like Whispering Pines had rabid grizzlies prowling the hills, but still. What if she fell and hurt herself? What if she—

Summer shook her head to stop the thoughts. They must be organizing search parties. She knew this area as well as anyone else who'd grown up here, and much better than Damian or Hannah. She played Rachael's message again, trying to draw out any clue of where Dinah might have headed. She knew the area Rachael meant. The base of Sunrise Mountain wasn't too far away. Maybe a mile at most.

Something clattered in the foyer, and she leapt from the bed, all nerves firing at one hundred and ten percent. “Mac? Damian?”

Stupid. It was too early for either guy to be showing up for work. She pulled on shorts and a T-shirt and waited another few seconds, tensed and ready to leap for the nearest window. When no other sound came, she crept into the foyer.

Nothing.

Heart in her throat, she crossed to the kitchen. Nothing in here either, except she hadn't turned the deadbolt on the back door last night. She'd been so preoccupied, she hadn't bothered to secure it. She did so now. Then she turned on the coffeemaker and stared over the treetops to where Damian and Hannah lay sleeping. Or waiting, she supposed. She didn't guess they would have slept a wink.

The noise came again, and she turned so fast she smacked her elbow on the counter. Nothing in the kitchen. She peered out to the foyer again and glanced up the grand staircase. Nothing there either.

She hurried back through her bedroom and checked the bathroom. Both vacant. She moved to the window and took a long look at the front yard. Only trees and flowerbeds. Then she saw a beat-up sports car parked beyond the hedgerow. Summer squinted. She didn't recognize it.

"Well, look who's here."

The gravelly voice came from behind her, and she spun to see a wild-eyed, disheveled man standing ten feet away. *T.J.* And he was holding a gun.

"Wh-wh—" Air whistled through her teeth. Her legs gave out and she stumbled, reaching for the window seat.

He took a few steps toward her. "Didn't know anyone was livin' here."

She stared. He smelled terrible—of urine, liquor, body odor and something else. Something evil. She opened her mouth and tried again.

"I'm not lookin' for you," he said, "though this little predicament might work out to my advantage."

"What are you doing here?"

He didn't answer. Instead he let his head fall back, taking in the crown molding, the high ceilings, the chandelier in the foyer behind him. "Nice place."

Summer eyed her cell phone sitting on the bedside table six feet away. It was directly behind the crazy man with the gun.

"Damian did all this?"

"Uh, yeah. And Mac."

“Who?” His eyes flashed, bloodshot, and Summer could tell he’d been drinking. She edged closer to the bed.

“You can stay right there.” Dropping any pretense of kindness, T.J. stepped closer and pointed the revolver directly at her chest.

Summer’s vision fuzzed, and she scrabbled back into the window seat. She eyed the muzzle of the weapon and pressed her spine into the cushion.

“You know what happened.” It was a statement rather than a question.

She shook her head.

“Don’t lie to me! It’s been on the radio, how I kidnapped my daughter.” He laughed, a sinister, choking sound. “She’s my *daughter*. How can I be kidnapping something that’s my own blood? She belongs to me.”

Summer sat motionless. Maybe if she didn’t move, he’d forget she was here.

“I’m just trying to be a father,” he said in a quieter voice. “Trying to keep my family together.”

She wanted to vomit. A father? A family? This guy had no idea what he was talking about. “Mac’ll be here soon,” she said. She hoped T. J. would believe the lie.

“What? Who?” Distracted, he edged toward a window, squinting outside.

“Mac. The guy who’s working on the house.”

Suspicion filled his eyes. “Thought Damian was working here.”

“Well, they both are.”

“So where is he?” T.J. demanded.

How crazy was this guy? How drunk? How completely off the deep end? “I don’t think Damian’s working today.”

T.J.’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

*He's home protecting his mother from you, she wanted to say. Or downtown at the police station, ready to lead a posse and find his sister, then mount your head on a stake.*

"I'm pretty sure he took the day off," she hedged.

"Bullshit!" The gun wavered in his hand, and Summer jumped. T.J. strode to the bed stand and picked up her phone. One dirty thumb poised above the buttons. A grin peeled back his lips, and he shoved it into her hand.

"Call him. Tell him you need him to come over here and fix something. And then do exactly what I say."

DAMIAN TOOK a long shower and let the hot water ease away some of his tension. Though it was barely six in the morning, he couldn't sleep anymore. He was exhausted, and not just because he'd lain awake on the couch waiting to hear news of Dinah. Whenever he closed his eyes, he thought of Summer. Of her house, of a sunset, of a guitar and starlight blinding him. She'd been barefoot in the dream, wearing that sundress cut clear down to forever, and she'd chased him through the house, up to the roof, where she stopped and held out one hand to him. He'd taken it, wrapped his fingers around hers, and they started to float.

He lathered and rinsed until the water turned cool. Maybe his mother was right. Maybe he could find the words to tell her how she twisted him up inside. But she was leaving, he reminded himself. What good would it do to spill his guts and then watch her get on a plane bound for the opposite coast?

Downstairs, he gulped black coffee and called the precinct. "Heard anything?"

“Nothing yet. Sorry. We’re starting up a search again in another half hour or so.”

“I’ll be there.”

He turned over his cell phone in his palm. He itched to call someone—anyone—just to get rid of the thoughts inside his head. He’d decided on Nate and was about to punch in the numbers when the phone rang. One look at the name on the screen and his throat closed up.

“Hello?”

For a moment, there was only static and the faint sound of breathing.

“Summer?”

“Damian.” Her voice sounded strange, and he could barely hear her. She drew in a sharp breath, and he thought he heard strange noises in the background. “Can you come over here? There’s a problem with the plumbing in my bathroom.”

“What?” Damian glanced at his watch. She’d called him for a plumbing problem? At dawn? “I was gonna head down to the police station in a few minutes. Isn’t Mac gonna be there soon?”

Her voice lowered to a whisper. “He has a meeting over in Silver Valley first thing this morning.” A knocking sound echoed in the background. “If you can just stop by for a few minutes and check it out, I’d really appreciate it.”

“I don’t...maybe I could come by later on.” He frowned. No mention of the other night. No affection in her voice at all. Just a plumbing problem and a strange current of fear running across the telephone lines.

“Just for a few minutes?” she pleaded. “If you could—”

The line went dead.

“WHERE IS HE?” T.J. growled. He paced from one end of the bedroom to the other but kept the gun pointed at Summer. He held her cell phone in his other hand. Every few minutes, he pulled back the curtains and peered through them.

“Maybe he isn’t coming. He didn’t say he would.”

A sneer curled back the man’s lips. “Oh, he’s coming. For someone who looks as pretty as you, he’ll show up. Always did like to play the big hero.”

*But he’s angry with me. No, furious. Plus Dinah’s still missing. That’s more important than a broken toilet.* She didn’t need to remind him about the little girl who’d gotten away. She wouldn’t dare mention it. If T.J. was here with her, that meant he couldn’t get to Dinah. Summer pressed her lips together and fought for strength.

The sun continued to rise, along with the temperature in the room. Perspiration slipped between her breasts and she wiped a hand across her forehead. A couple of cars drove by but none stopped. Her hopes dimmed. What if Damian really didn’t come? What if he decided that she could take care of her own problems? His little sister was missing, after all. Why on earth would a leak make him drop everything and rush to Summer’s side?

Tears filled her eyes. It had been almost twenty minutes.

“He’s not coming,” she said. Of course he wasn’t. He blamed her for letting T.J. get to Dinah. Plus she’d announced to the world yesterday that she was leaving town. And if all that wasn’t enough, there was a good chance he’d spent last night with Joyce Hadley. *He’s not going to run over here and be my knight in shining armor.*

“Then you’re gonna have to call him again.” T.J. circled the room.

Summer’s fear ratcheted up a couple of notches. A lonely father seeking revenge was one thing. A crazed man with a loaded weapon was something else altogether.

They both heard the noise at the same time, a sharp crack somewhere nearby. Summer jumped to her feet.

“Sit down!” T.J. hissed, waving the gun in her direction. “Stay right there and don’t say anything unless I tell you to.” He crept to the bedroom door, brushing her bare knee. She cringed at the feel of his soiled jeans and sat back down.

“C’mon,” he muttered. “I know you’re out there.” He stepped into the foyer and looked around.

Suddenly the front door flew open and Damian strode across the threshold. One fist shot out and punched T.J. in the mouth before the man had a chance to cock the gun. He stumbled against the wall. Blood poured from his split bottom lip.

Damian grabbed him by his shirtfront. Another punch. This time, though, T.J. ducked, and Damian’s fist glanced off the wall. The skin on his knuckles split open, and Summer stifled a scream.

*You came.* Summer ran to the doorway and stopped. Damian’s eyes flickered toward her, his gaze dark and pointed. She couldn’t read it. Want? Blame? Uncertainty?

“You sonofabitch,” T.J. slurred. He managed to push himself against the wall and straighten the gun. Squeezing the trigger, he fired.

Summer screamed.

Plaster erupted from a hole ten feet above Damian’s head.

T.J.’s grin slipped a little. He rearranged the gun in his hand as Damian lunged across the foyer. The hammer cocked.

Summer covered her eyes. The gun fired again, and then a third time. Grunts of pain filled the air. Something thudded to the ground. Glass shattered. “No,” she whispered. “Please—”

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-SIX

“It’s okay,” Rachael was saying, but Summer could barely hear her friend over her own pounding heart. They stood on the front porch, a collection of men on the lawn below. T.J., who’d managed to shoot himself in the foot, lay strapped to a stretcher. Two cops and a medical technician stood over him. Damian stood under the oak tree talking to a state trooper. Summer watched him with a heart so full, it ached.

“How did you know what was going on?” she asked Rachael.

“Damian called us after he talked to you. And after he called the cops.”

Summer looked from Rachael to Nate, who stood near the hedges with his hands in his pockets. His blonde hair shone in the sunlight. *T.J. might have tried to shoot them too.* The thought sent her head spinning all over again. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“You think we’d miss all the drama? Please.”

Summer’s breath hitched in her chest. Across the yard, the officer flipped his notepad closed and shook Damian’s hand.

“I told you he was a keeper,” Rachael added.

“He might not be mine to keep. I saw him with Joyce Hadley last night outside Zeb’s.”



“So?” Rachael raised one brow and gave her a look full of doubt. “Obviously he’s not with Joyce now.”

“Sure, he came over here. But I asked him to look at my toilet. That doesn’t mean he wants happily ever after with me.” She looked down at her T-shirt and shorts, torn from struggling with T.J. “I’m a mess.”

Rachael stepped back and held Summer at arms’ length. “How long are you gonna do this?”

“Do what?”

“You already stood up for a public stoning last night because you were determined to tell everyone what happened with you and Gabe in that car ten years ago. Now you’re claiming responsibility for what happened to the Knights. Are you going to turn into the martyr of Whispering Pines? You think you don’t deserve any happiness because you made a mistake or two?”

Summer looked at her, stunned.

“Stop blaming yourself for everything that’s gone wrong around here. You’re not the reason T.J. took Dinah. You’re not the reason Gabe spent time in jail.”

Summer opened her mouth to answer, but Rachael didn’t even slow down. “You always said people had to come to terms with the past in order to understand the present,” she went on. “But studying the past doesn’t mean it defines the person you are forever, does it? It’s just who you *were*. Not who you are.”

Summer stared. All this time, Rachael had been listening. The crowd in her yard thinned. For the first time, Damian glanced up, but she couldn’t read his face.

“They’re putting together search parties to look for Dinah,” he said. “Want to help?”

Summer nodded. "Just let me change." Then she froze. Rachael's midnight message played inside her head. Was it possible? She stared at the house, the porch steps, the back lawn, and the windows on the third floor. One particular window on the third floor. "I think I know where she is."

"Dinah?"

"Yes. Get the police before they leave."

Summer couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it earlier. There was only one place in this town a scared little girl would go, if her home had been violated and she didn't know where else to hide. Only one place safe enough to keep the bogeyman away.

And Summer knew exactly where it was.

"UP ON THE THIRD FLOOR."

The policeman breathed onto the back of Summer's neck as they climbed the stairs. He stopped her on the landing of the second floor with one strong hand around her wrist. "I'll go ahead. Tell me where it is."

But she stood her ground. "I have to go with you. She'll be scared." The front door opened, and Damian, Hannah and a second policeman stepped inside. Damian rushed to the staircase, but the policeman put a hand on his arm and said something she couldn't make out. Summer looked at Hannah and then was sorry. The woman was barely holding herself together. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. In one hand, she held a wad of tissues.

Summer hoped she was right. She had to be right. "It's the next floor up. Back bedroom."

One more flight, and they reached the closed door. The cop put a heavy hand on Summer's shoulder. "I want you to stay back."

This time she listened and stayed where she was. The policeman stepped inside the bedroom while Summer held her breath and counted to ten. Twenty. When she reached twenty-two, the man stuck his head back out into the hall and said in a low voice, "Come on."

Morning light shot the room with gold, and despite the dust everywhere, the walls glowed. She pointed, but she didn't need to. A black seam ran along the back of the far wall. The hidden door remained open a little more than an inch. Summer's heart nearly broke. Dinah had gotten it open but then hadn't managed to close it again.

"Dinah Knight? Are you in there?" The policeman spoke first. His voice was kind. "It's okay, sweetheart. My name is Officer Burdick. I'm here to make sure you're safe." He took a few steps toward the door, but no one answered.

"Ladybug?" Damian's voice broke on the word. "Are you in there?"

"Dame?" Dinah burst from the secret room and came running across the floor at full tilt. She reached out for her brother. Tears wet her cheeks, and both braids had come undone from their ribbons. Her eyes darted from side to side, and she stumbled in her bare feet and called his name again.

In an instant he swept his sister into his arms. "It's okay, ladybug. I've got you. It's okay." Clutching her to his chest, he rocked back and forth, murmuring the words into the top of her head. "It's okay. It's all over."

Summer went dizzy with relief.

"Well, take a look at that," the cop said as he stepped inside the hidden room. "Always heard about these things but never saw one before." He pushed his hat back on his head and kneeled. "Must-a

been pretty small slaves, to hide in a space like that.” He looked over his shoulder. “That’s what it was for, right?”

“Yes.” Summer thought about telling him that slaves hadn’t been that small, just desperate. *People do lots of things when they’re running from evil.*

“Wait ’til the guys at the station hear about this.” He radioed an all-clear down to his partner. “She okay?” he asked Damian. “Gotta get a statement from her, if she’s able.”

Damian nodded. Summer reached out to pat Dinah on the back, but she only brushed the wrinkled cotton shirt before Damian headed into the hallway with his sister in his arms. Once they were all back on the ground floor, Hannah swept her daughter into a hug.

“Oh, my baby...my baby. Thank you...”

Summer descended slowly. She hadn’t said a word to Damian, though she desperately wanted to. But by the time she reached the foyer, the three Knights had disappeared outside. Her fingers rested on the smooth cherry banister until she slid to the first step and sat there, hugging her knees. What on earth had happened in the last forty-eight hours? She’d kissed Damian. She’d put together the pieces of Donny’s death. She’d talked to Gabe. She’d talked to the police. She’d helped find Dinah.

So many things in her life had changed. But Summer still had one thing left to do.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-SEVEN

Damian sat on the bottom porch step with Dinah beside him.

“I was only a little scared when Dad took me away,” she was saying. “I didn’t know where we were going and why you or Mom couldn’t come too. He said if I was good and didn’t cry, we could be a family again.” She sat up and her eyes welled. “But he lied.”

“I know, ladybug.” Damian stroked the back of her hair and tried to contain his anger. “I know. The important thing is you’re back here with us now.” Even as he comforted her with one hand, he squeezed the other into a fist. *What kind of father steals his child away? Then loses her in the middle of the night?* The only thing keeping Damian sane was knowing that T.J. was on his way to a long prison sentence. *Wish he’d shot more than just his foot.*

“Summer told me about that secret room,” Dinah said. “She said it was a place where people used to hide.”

Damian hugged her. “Then it was very smart of you to go there.” His voice broke. Summer might have told T.J. where to find them, but she’d also told Dinah how to save herself. For that, he would be forever grateful.

“Ladybug, run over to Mom, okay? I’ll meet you in a minute. There’s something I have to do.”

RACHAEL STOOD inside the foyer with Summer. “Look at this.” She held up her phone with the time illuminated. “Not even eight a.m. and we already captured a criminal and saved a little girl. Pretty good for a small town like Whispering Pines, huh?”

“I guess.” Summer still felt unsettled and exhausted. Of course she was glad T.J. had been arrested, and Dinah was safe. But—

“Call me later,” Rachael said as she stuck her phone back into her pocket. “You’ll have to tell me what happens.”

“What are you talking about?” Then Summer saw him standing at the foot of the porch steps. Unshaven, unsmiling, with a bruise rising on his jaw, Damian Knight was still the most attractive man she had ever seen. Her heart turned over.

She took a deep breath and walked down the stairs until she stood on the step above him. Electricity jumped between them. *You saved me. You risked your life.* He could have stayed far from the house or left her alone to deal with the problem. But he hadn’t.

He cleared his throat. “So you’re leaving? Going back to San Francisco?” He ran both hands through uncombed hair. “I saw the news conference,” he added.

Tension stretched between them, filled with everything that had happened the last time they’d been this close, on this porch.

She couldn’t speak. Yes. That was the plan, after all. Sell the house and return to her home out west. Yet somehow, after everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, the plan seemed to have lost its appeal. In fact, it made no sense at all.

*...studying the past doesn't mean it defines the person you are forever, does it? It's just who you were. Not who you are...*

*...it's the stuff of history books and museum exhibits. It shouldn't be the way we frame our lives. Learn from it, and then let it go. The present, and best of all, the future, well, that's up to us...*

*Joe and Rachael are right*, she thought suddenly. Once the past floated its way into memory, once people died, houses crumbled, kisses grew cold, no amount of wishing or years of study could bring any of it back. Or change it. It was what you did with the now that mattered.

"Were you going to say goodbye?"

Summer's gaze moved to the Sunrise Mountain, just beyond his shoulder. "I wasn't sure you'd want to talk to me. After what happened with T.J. and Dinah, and then I saw you with Joyce last night, and I thought..." She stopped, not sure how to proceed.

"You thought what?" Damian crossed his arms, and Summer thought the dimple on his left cheek popped. He wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her down the step, so she met him toe to toe.

"Joyce is a good person," he said. "She was there for me when I needed someone to talk to. She listened." Damian brushed the tip of his nose to hers, and all the electricity returned, tenfold. "But I've been waiting for you since before I knew you, Summer Thompson. Since the day you got into town. Since the moment you tripped down those back stairs. There hasn't been anyone else in the world for me since that day. Whatever you saw with Joyce, whatever you thought, it means nothing."

He stroked her cheek, and a longing wider than the heavens swept between them and knotted up her insides. Sparklers went off

inside her skull, inside every pore, and she wondered if he could feel it too.

He bent and kissed her, and sparks flooded her, turned from pale yellow to brilliant orange and red until she saw a blazing rainbow of passion behind her eyelids. She clung to him and wound her fingers through his. In Damian's touch she was safe. More than that, she was swept away, up toward the clouds and beyond, to a place she'd never imagined existed. His hands moved along her spine, down her arms, raising gooseflesh. When he finally leaned back from her to breathe, she didn't want to let him go.

When he next spoke, his breath was a rasp of emotion. "Stay here in Whispering Pines. Please. I can't let you go. I won't." His voice was guttural; his eyes roved her face, searching for the answer he needed to find. "We all love you—Dinah, and Mom, and me too." He smiled. "I think I'm crazy in love with you. So please. Stay." The last words whispered away, and he crushed her lips with his again.

Summer wasn't sure if the warmth she felt on her back was the sun rising above them or the blood spinning her head around. Damian parted her lips with a tongue that needed, wanted, poured out possibility. He caressed the nape of her neck and the small of her back.

The girl of eighteen she'd once been, injured almost beyond repair, felt her heart move up to the top of her head until she thought she would explode with pleasure. Every reason she'd returned to Whispering Pines, every hope she'd nourished, lay here, in the arms of a man she'd just met. Revisiting the past didn't mean going down old paths, then, but saying goodbye to them and forging new ones. Her mind swelled with the realization.

*Don't stop kissing me, she wanted to say. Take me upstairs, climb with me to the roof, show me the stars or the sun or the way*



*the wind moves through the grasses on the hill. I don't care. Just be with me.*

Damian looked down at her with a kind, funny grin, and she saw in his expression the place where she wanted to stay, to make a life and grow a love. He met her mouth with his, touched tongue to tongue in a whisper of desire, and their embrace changed again, from a fire against the sky to a warm glow that bathed her in safety.

Her friends were right after all: she belonged in Whispering Pines, with a man who loved her, a little girl she adored, and a quiet woman who'd filled an ache in her life. She belonged in the place that had shaped her, and she belonged in a house where she could see and remember her brother as well.

There was just one thing left to do.

"I'll be right back." She dropped his hands and darted back into her bedroom. Emerging with the small silver box, she reached for his hand and led him to the oak tree out front. Summer's hands shook as she opened the lid. *Thanks for bringing me back to Whispering Pines, Dad.* Her throat clogged with tears.

The morning breeze lifted her father's ashes. They spun, then sank in a lazy circle and floated to the ground. With one arm around her waist, Damian brushed a kiss against her hair. He laid a hand on hers, and they closed the lid of the box together. For a moment, neither spoke.

He cleared his throat. "So does that mean you're staying?"

She didn't answer. She had no words left beyond the flood of emotion that filled her. Instead, she let her head fall against his chest, strong, certain, safe, beneath her.

*It is home,* she thought in the seconds before Damian lifted her into his arms and carried her inside.

*I am home.*



Reader, don't you just love small town romances? I hope you enjoyed getting to know Whispering Pines and the people who live here. I have a confession: when I finished this book, I desperately wanted to give Gabe his own happy ending. Don't you think he deserves it? So if you'd like to follow his story, it begins in the novella [\*Skipping a Beat\*](#), where Gabe meets his match (and loses his heart) to a stranger who comes to town. This story is actually the first in my brand new small town medical romance series, **Doctors of Silver Valley**.

I hope you'll take a peek!

*Skipping a Beat: Gabe and Jordyn's Story*

**She's mourning an immeasurable loss. He's making amends for his past. Will they risk their hearts for a chance at love?**



Meanwhile, budding love continues in Book Two of the Whispering Pines series, this time with Nate Hunter, Rachael's little brother. If you like surprise babies and fake relationship stories, playboys who are tamed by the right woman and the patter of little feet, then you'll love *Autumn Allure*. Read on and enjoy!



# AUTUMN ALLURE

## BOOK TWO

***It's time for this playboy to face the music. He just never dreamed it would be a lullaby...***



Bartender Nate Hunter enjoys his small-town, no-strings-attached life in Whispering Pines. Then a dying ex-girlfriend tracks him down to tell him he has a daughter he never knew existed. Nate doesn't know the first thing about being a father, but one look at Autumn and he's a goner, so he agrees to take care of her until her aunt returns at Christmas.

When Nate asks the town's librarian, no-nonsense Maxine Abbott, to move in with him and help take care of Autumn, she agrees, but only if he'll pretend to be her boyfriend and get her mother off her back. Their relationship of convenience works perfectly at first, until real feelings begin to invade their false romance. Then Autumn's aunt shows up early, and everything changes.

Will Nate and Maxine's budding love end in heartbreak before the last leaves fall?

CHAPTER  
ONE

“Leave the lights off.”

Even with sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled over his forehead, the August sunlight stabbed through Nate Hunter’s eyelids and set his brain on fire. He buried his face in his arms. The cool wood of the bar eased the pounding inside his skull. A little. Not enough.

“Late night?” Nicki Rodriguez, the other full-time bartender at Jimmy’s Watering Hole, scraped a barstool along the floor.

Nate grunted.

“You go to the Kincaides’ lake party?”

He grunted again. *Mistake*. Actually, the party hadn’t been a mistake. Mellow scene, lots of booze and weed and good-looking girls home from college. Whispering Pines Lake was the perfect place for summer parties, with all the homes strung along both sides of the water. Swimming and water skiing during the day turned to bonfires and barbecues at night. No, the only mistake last night had been his fourth (or tenth?) tequila shot.

He sat up, opened one eye, and scrubbed his face with his hand. “I think I might be gettin’ too old for this.”

Nicki laughed. "Used to be even a hangover wouldn't keep you from opening this place at noon." She straightened a few liquor bottles and began slicing limes and lemons for garnishes. "So yeah, maybe you are."

"Can you do that quieter?"

Nicki raised one eyebrow, pierced with a silver ring, and sliced louder.

"Thanks."

She dumped the fruit into containers along the bar. "You look terrible, by the way."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. No offense, of course." She opened bags of chips and peanuts and began filling small bowls. The bar's front door opened, and Mac Herbert and Damian Knight walked inside.

"None taken. Of course." Nate pulled off his sunglasses to greet his friends. The sunlight, even filtered through the windows, continued to slice into his skull. "You guys are in early." Through slitted eyes, he checked the clock behind the bar. Quarter to four.

"Finished the job at the Randall house earlier than we thought." The two men pulled up stools and rested beefy, tanned arms on the bar. "Anyone in the kitchen?"

"Walter's here."

They nodded and ordered burgers and fries. Nate poured them each a beer. He flipped on one overhead light but left the rest off.

"You look awful," Mac observed.

"So I've been told."

Nicki looked over from rolling silverware in napkins for the dinner crowd. Despite its afternoon emptiness, the place would be filled to capacity and beyond by nine o'clock. All summer long, The Davis

Donaldson Band had been playing hillbilly rock every Saturday night, and the three-man group brought out everyone in Whispering Pines.

“Were you at Kincaides’?” Damian asked.

Nate popped two aspirin and nodded.

“Heard that party didn’t break up until dawn.”

Nate grinned and readjusted his baseball cap. “It didn’t.”

Mac whistled through the gap in his front teeth. “I hit twenty-five and slowed down, man. Looks like you’re just getting started. Misty bring her sorority sisters to the party?”

Nate lifted one shoulder and let it drop noncommittally.

“Don’t tell me. You went home with at least one of ‘em. Maybe two.”

Nate checked the taps and his stock of bottled beer. “Didn’t go home at all.”

Mac guffawed. Damian smiled. “Good for you. Keep it up while you can. You’ll get old and settle down one of these days, and then you’ll wonder where all those late nights went.”

“Not like you care. You got the prettiest girl in town,” Nate said.

Damian grinned. “You’re right. I don’t.” He and Summer Thompson had been living together for almost two years now. Nate wouldn’t lie; he’d been a little jealous that the guy won over his big sister’s best friend when she came back to town. But they were a pretty great couple, he had to admit. Nate couldn’t see himself tying the knot with anyone, so it was just as well Summer ended up with someone more serious.

“Nate Hunter is never settling down,” Nicki said, echoing his thoughts as she took her place at the other end of the bar. “I can’t picture it. Picking just one woman? Working a regular nine-to-five job? No way.”



“Hey.” Nate poured himself a giant mug of black coffee. He’d need two of these, at least, to get through the next few hours. His second wind would hit him around ten, and then he’d sail through his shift until the place closed at two. “I went to college,” he reminded them. “Business degree. Took all that boring stuff. I could get a regular job. Just don’t know why I’d want to.”

The door opened before he could add that they all just envied him. He tossed a towel over his shoulder and peered across the bar. He didn’t recognize the woman who’d stepped inside, which was saying something, because Nate knew all the locals. He’d grown up in Whispering Pines and knew everyone who lived in the hills between here and Silver Valley. Recalling names and faces had always been one of his talents, and it didn’t go to waste as a bartender.

She was an outsider, he knew that at once. She walked with a stiff gait, as if she’d been sitting for a long time, or as if every step hurt. She wore jeans and a sweater, though it had to be about eighty degrees outside, and a scarf wrapped around her head. No eyebrows. Chapped lips. Her eyes, a beautiful blue, stood out above high, sharp cheekbones.

She was pretty—or had been pretty, Nate amended, before chemo ravaged her. She couldn’t have been more than thirty years old. He shoved back his baseball cap. “Hi there. What can I get you?”

She didn’t sit down. Her fingers fiddled with something inside the pockets of her sweater. “Wow. You look exactly the same.”

Nate blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“You don’t recognize me. Do you? Of course not. You wouldn’t.”

He looked closer. Something about the eyes looked vaguely familiar, but the rest of her? “I’m sorry,” he said again.

She nodded with a small, sad smile. "I didn't think you would." She looked down. "I don't even recognize myself sometimes."

He leaned forward and rested his arms on the bar. "Don't hold it against me. I'm brainless when it comes to women. But don't keep me in suspense, beautiful."

A blush touched her cheeks. "Okay. Daytona Beach, spring break, five years ago."

He searched his memory. He'd spent two or three spring breaks in Florida back in college. He took another long look at her. Obviously they'd hooked up. Had he called her afterwards? Had they even exchanged numbers? His stomach turned over, and he wondered how long she'd been sick, and if she'd been searching him out for a while.

"Let me put you out of your misery," she said. "Lexi Francis. I went to Florida State. We met at a beach party and then spent two days at the Marriott. We ordered oysters and caviar from room service and billed it to your friend's room. I don't remember his name. Tall, dark-skinned guy."

"Lexi." He reached over the bar and took one of her chilled hands. "Of course. I remember. Best two days in Daytona I ever spent."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"I'm serious." He tried to keep his gaze on her face, not her skeletal frame or her head wrap. "It's good to see you."

She glanced at the others. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Something went cold and tight inside him. "Sure." He pointed at a door behind the bar. "Office is back there."

She nodded and followed him. He closed the door behind them and then cleared off a chair and pulled it close to the one behind the desk. James Kirchner, owner of Jimmy's Watering Hole, spent most

of his time at his vacation home in the Catskills. Though this office and desk officially belonged to him, he'd turned over the bar's daily operations to Nate and Nicki almost a year ago.

Lexi sat on the edge of the chair with her hands pressed to her knees. "I'm sorry I didn't call. I didn't have your number, and anyway, we said we weren't going to do that thing where we try to have a long-distance relationship or make something out of a spring break fling."

Now he did remember. She'd had long, thick, blonde hair that smelled like Dove. Tiny, perfect boobs and a killer laugh. And she'd said those same words five years ago: *Let's not make more out of this than it is. We had fun. And now we're saying see ya later and have a nice life.*

He'd loved it. He'd returned to New York with some good memories, a few scratches on his back, and a new admiration that women like Lexi really did exist. He'd had trouble finding anyone like her in the years since, though. The vast majority of women he dated wanted to make it *much* more than it was.

"How have you been?" he asked without thinking. *Duh. Look at her.* "I'm sorry. That was a stupid question."

"It's okay." She twisted her fingers in her lap. "I'm not great, obviously. I have stage four cancer. It started as metastatic breast cancer two years ago."

"I'm so sorry." How many times could he say those words? She probably heard them ten times a day. But what else did you say to someone with advanced cancer? "So, ah, are you getting better?" Chemo, radiation, reconstructive surgery—he knew they had all that stuff and more these days. People Lexi's age didn't die of cancer. She looked pretty sick right now, but that wouldn't last.

She shook her head, her eyes so huge Nate thought he might drown inside them. “I’m not, actually. I thought I was, for a while, after the first treatments. But it came back, and it’s spread pretty much everywhere. There are spots on my spine and my brain. It’s in my lungs now, too, which makes it hard to breathe. That’s the hardest, actually. I’ll probably have to go on a respirator soon. Maybe a month. Maybe not that long.”

He wanted to say something, but a lump stuck in his throat. The only other person he’d known with cancer was Rocky, an eighty-year old Air Force veteran who came into Jimmy’s sometimes and joked about how his prostate cancer was ruining his shot with the ladies.

“I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Ah, sure.”

“You might not want to agree until you hear what it is.”

Nate might not have been the most mature guy in the world, but he could certainly promise a dying woman a favor. Especially a dying woman he’d spent a pretty hot forty-eight hours with. He took her hand again. “Lay it on me.”

“Okay.” She took a breath. Nate could hear it rattling in her lungs. “I have a little girl. Autumn. She’s four and a half.” She pinned him with her gaze, and before he could do the math, she went on. “We have a little girl. And I’m hoping you’ll take care of her when I’m gone.”

## CHAPTER TWO

**M**axine Abbott's finger hovered over the mouse. She scanned her application for the Allbright Scholarship once more, her nerves a tight ball in her stomach. Before she could get up the nerve to click, her phone dinged with a text.

*Send it.*

Sienna Cruz, one of Max's best friends, was submitting her own application right that moment across town. Not to strictly study, to teach in one of London's most prestigious private schools. Friends since grade school, the two were hoping they'd end up crossing the pond together.

*Maybe the third time's a charm,* Max thought. Sienna would probably get accepted on her first try. Max hadn't been as lucky. She closed her eyes and clicked Send.

"Miss Max!" a chubby-cheeked boy called from the other side of the Silver Valley Library. He flapped his hand and peered at the rabbit in its cage on the shelf above the nonfiction books. "I think Mr. Floppy is waking up!"

Max closed her browser and walked across the colorful carpet. "You think so, Liam?" Of course Mr. Floppy was waking up. The six-year-old had been staring into the cage and humming at the animal

for the last five minutes. “Oh yes, he sure is.” The rabbit opened pale blue eyes and blinked up at them.

Liam tugged on Max’s pants. “Can I pet him?”

“Sure.” She reached in and lifted Mr. Floppy into her arms, thankful she’d managed to adopt the most laid back rabbit in all of Silver Valley. She sat in the rocker usually reserved for story hour and positioned the rabbit on her lap. “Now, be gentle.”

Liam patted Mr. Floppy’s fur, backed away, squeaked something unintelligible, then moved in and patted again. The rabbit wiggled its nose. Liam’s pats turned into long strokes.

“There you go. Perfect.”

In a matter of seconds, other children had joined them from around the room.

“Can I pet him too?”

“Can I hold him?”

“Can I take him home? I’ll feed him real good food and let him sleep in my bed and everything.”

Max laughed, the way she always did at their bright faces and big questions. “Well, Mr. Floppy lives here at the library, and he doesn’t like to leave.” She scanned the knot of children. Behind them, two moms and a dad watched with bemused expressions. “Think about how you’d feel if you were taken away from your home and went to live somewhere else. Wouldn’t you be scared? And maybe lonely?”

They nodded, eyes wide. “I wouldn’t like it *at all*,” pronounced Kitty Kennedy. “I would miss my mommy.”

“Well, that’s how Mr. Floppy would feel.” Max held him tight to her lap as they took turns petting him, but she didn’t need to worry. Mr. Floppy sniffed, yawned, then buried his head in the crook of her arm and went back to sleep.

“Liam, Owen, it’s time for us to go,” their mother said as she corralled the twins. “Take your books to the desk so Miss Max can check them out.”

The boys trotted over and met Max there after she’d safely returned Mr. Floppy to his cage. “Ooh, good choices,” she said as she scanned each one. She tucked a new bookmark with the library’s upcoming fall events into one front cover. “We have a new story hour starting at ten on Saturdays,” she said. “We’re going to try and add a milk and cookie hour right after, but we’ll need volunteers to sign up and bring things in. I’m also trying for an adult sip and paint closer to the holidays, but that has to be approved by the board.”

“Sounds great. I’ll mention it to the moms in our play group.” The woman tucked her purse over her shoulder. “You know the more activities you have here, the more we’ll all love you.”

“That’s awfully nice of you to say.”

“Nonsense. You’re the best thing that’s happened to this place. The kids love you and the parents love you. You’re a natural.”

“Thank you.” She hoped the people reading her Allbright application agreed. Not that she didn’t love her job too, but she had to be realistic. Working as a children’s librarian in a town the size of a postage stamp wasn’t opening any doors. She needed a break, a change, something to remind her she was twenty-seven, not forty.

*If we’re lucky, maybe we’ll meet some cute British guys, Sienna had said the other day. Maybe even royalty. They mingle among the commoners, you know.*

“...lose you?” the mom was saying.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry,” Max apologized. She banished the image of James Bond wooing her over champagne and caviar in a rich British accent. “What did you say?”

“I just wondered if you wanted kids of your own. You know, someday. Not like I’m rushing you or anything.” The woman laughed. “I’m definitely not rushing you. But you’re so good with them. If you have a family of your own, I’d hate to see the library lose you.”

“No worry of that, not anytime soon.” You needed a partner to start a family, a grounded guy with a job and his head screwed on straight. Max didn’t have one of those. Nor did she really want one, to be honest, even if he did have a swoon-worthy accent or come from royalty. She’d listened to way too many of her girlfriends wail and whine over heartbreak to want it for her own.

Of course, her mother would disagree. She did so on a regular basis, with everything from Max’s “old-fashioned” notion that she needed a husband to raise a child to Max’s decision to apply yet again for an award that would take her out of the country. There wasn’t much her mother did agree with, which made it a hundred times harder to live in the house where she’d grown up in Whispering Pines. But until Max either saved up a bunch more money, or won the Allbright and a ticket out of town, she didn’t have much of a choice.

“MAXINE? YOU’RE HOME?”

Bethany Abbott always greeted her daughter the same way when she walked in the door at the end of the day.

*Well, my car’s in the driveway, you heard the front door open and close, and it’s ten past five, so yes, I’m home.*

“Hi, Ma,” she said. She dropped her sweater on the back of a living room chair and walked down the hall and into the kitchen. Bethany sat at a tall stool, peering over half-glasses at her laptop.

“Do you know how to make this bigger?”



Max looked over her mother's shoulder. She pointed to an icon in the upper right corner. "Click on that. Make it one hundred and fifty percent. Or two hundred."

Bethany sighed in exasperation. "I'm not blind. Or old. I just need to make it a little bigger." She enlarged the font to one hundred and twenty percent and left it there.

"What are you looking at?" Max scanned the screen.

"I've decided to run for the Silver Valley Town Council."

"What? Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Because I think I'd be good at public service."

Max choked back a half-dozen responses.

"I had a whole public speaking tour as Miss New York. I went around to every school in the state and talked about body image and careers for girls."

"Mm hmm."

"Well, I was thinking I could do the same sort of thing as a Council member."

"Talk to girls about body image?" Max's mother starved herself so she could squeeze into clothes from decades ago. She worked at the makeup counter at the mall exclusively for the product discounts. The longest she'd gone without a man had been two weeks, back in July of two thousand eight, which she reminded Max on a regular basis.

"Well, no, not exactly," Bethany said. "I meant, I could be of service to people. There are a lot of issues facing Silver Valley, you know."

"Like what?"

"There's that pipeline they want to run under the mountain. That's very controversial."

“What’s your position on it?”

“I don’t think we should have it, obviously.”

*Obviously.*

“And the animal warden was fired last month because he was rough with one of the families. They need to hire someone with savvy.”

*Savvy? I think they probably just need to hire someone brave enough to deal with aggressive dogs and rabid raccoons.* Max opened the fridge and pulled out a beer. She popped the top and drank straight from the bottle.

“Maxine, really? You can’t even use a glass?”

“I’m thirsty.”

Bethany sighed and went back to studying her laptop. “There are other things I think I’d be good at, too. They’ve been talking about restructuring the whole Christmas celebration downtown. They want to have a parade in addition to the tree-lighting. And maybe a store-front decorating contest. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Actually, yes.” Max could picture the library getting involved with that, holding coloring contests for the kids and maybe window painting one night. Cider for the kids and hard cider for the adults.

“Do you want to know why I really decided to run?” Bethany said over her shoulder.

“I’d love to.”

She pointed at the screen. “Six men. That’s who’s on the council right now. And those same six men have been on the council for the last ten years. Before that, it was a different six men. The last time a woman was elected was the year I won Miss New York.”

“Really?” Max stopped the beer bottle halfway to her lips. That did seem pretty, well, biased.

“Fifty-two percent of the town’s population is women. I looked it up. Sixty-three percent of Silver Valley’s households have kids under the age of eighteen. And out of those sixty-three percent, twenty percent are run by single moms. Don’t you think we should have a woman on the Town Council?”

Max put her arm around her mother and squeezed. Leave it to Ma to surprise her. For someone who relished her role as a beauty queen, who spent hours at the gym and more money each month on hair products than Max brought home in her paycheck, the thought that Bethany might want to champion women’s causes didn’t make a whole lot of sense. Or maybe it did. She was fifty but looked a good ten years younger, and she didn’t lack in the self-esteem department, that was for sure.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Max said.

“Good. Because I want you to be my campaign manager.”

“I don’t—Ma, I can’t do something like that. It’s a full-time job. And I already have one of those.”

“Oh, honey. I know you’re busy, but it wouldn’t take that much time. I know it wouldn’t. Besides, you’re my daughter, and you have a good head on your shoulders. You’re good with people and computers and publicity and all that. I’ve seen what you’ve done with the library. I want you to do that for me.”

Max clutched her beer and said nothing. A campaign? She wouldn’t have the foggiest idea of where to begin. Bethany swept her with a focused gaze, head to toe, the way she had for as long as Max could remember. “Please, Maxine?”

“Okay. Fine. I’ll do my best. But I don’t know the first thing about politics.”

Bethany patted her hands together. “*Thank you.* And don’t worry, I’ll do all the political stuff. I just need you to keep me organized.”

She frowned. "But we might need to work on your image."

"Why?"

"Well, there's probably going to be events. Fundraising dinners and press conferences and such." She raised her hands and framed Max's face inside them. "Maybe some makeup? Just a little mascara and lip gloss, to make your mother happy? And the hair, too, Maxine. Please."

"What's wrong with my hair?"

Bethany sighed. "We've been through this. Let me take you to Ella Ericksen over on Park Place Run. She could put in a few highlights, maybe give you some bangs..."

"I look stupid with bangs."

"Fine. Then no bangs. Maybe you could just wear a dress or a skirt once in a while."

"I'm on the floor with kids most of the day."

Bethany lifted a palm. "I'm not asking for the world here. I'm asking you to be supportive of your mother, who's raised you by herself and always made sure you had everything you wanted, including a place to live."

*Oh, Ma, you really do know how to go for the jugular, don't you?* Max refrained from pointing out that Bethany had done all that mostly by latching onto one guy or another and batting her eyelashes until he moved in and took over the bills. This campaign might actually be entertaining to watch. Max sure didn't envy the opponent.

"I will do my best to wear mascara and lip gloss and a dress if we're at a political event, how does that sound?"

"I suppose that's a start." Bethany smiled brightly. "Peter's taking me to dinner tonight to talk about my campaign strategy. Want to join us?"

“No. But thanks for asking.” Peter Goldstein was nice enough, and Bethany had been dating him for a few months, but his conversation topics extended to the stock market and his dream car collection, neither of which Max could get excited about. “I’ll make something here.”

“Suit yourself.” Bethany tsked as she closed her laptop. This time her judgmental gaze changed to a sad one, which Max had also seen a zillion times over the years. “I wish we could find you a boyfriend.”

*We.* As if it was a joint effort to get Max roped, tied, and hauled to the closest altar. “I don’t need a boyfriend, Ma. I’m very happy all by myself.”

“That may be. But as my campaign manager, you’ll be going to dinners and fund-raising events. It would look better, you know, if you didn’t go alone.”

CHAPTER  
THREE

“How?” Nate shook his head. “I didn’t mean that. I meant...” He didn’t know what he meant. Obviously Lexi was mistaken. A little girl? *His* little girl? *Are you sure?* he wanted to say. Couldn’t be. No way. “Why didn’t you tell me? When you—”

“Found out I was pregnant? I should have. But I just, I don’t know, I was twenty and it was a fling, we said that all along, and I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. I thought I’d give her up for adoption. That was my plan until almost the very end. Then I saw her, and...” Her eyes filled. “She was perfect. *Is* perfect.”

“You’re sure she’s...” He knew he sounded like a callous jerk for asking, but he had to.

“Yes. She’s yours. I wasn’t with anyone else, not during that break or after. Listen, we can do a paternity test if you want. We probably should anyway.” She rubbed her hands together. “There’s a lot of legal stuff to go through. If you’re, you know, willing to do this.”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t, not with a million thoughts swimming through his head.

“It’s not permanent,” Lexi added. “I should have said that before. My sister Penny is Autumn’s legal guardian. But she’s doing

missionary work in Africa and won't be back in the States until just before Christmas. She would come back earlier, she already said she would, but I said I would ask you first. She's been there almost a year. I didn't want to ask her to come back six weeks early unless I had to. And I didn't think...I thought I had more time." She pulled in a breath. Even the simple act of conversation seemed to exhaust her. Nate wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he was afraid he'd break her.

"I'll do it." The words were out almost before he realized it.

Relief spilled over her face. The tense lines around her eyes eased. "Really?"

"Of course. If I'm her father, then..." He straightened. "It might not look like it right now, but I can be a responsible guy." But already the doubt crept in. He didn't know the first thing about taking care of a four-year old. His only sister was single. He had a few cousins his own age, but no one he knew had kids.

She took his hands, and he could feel every bone in them. "Thank you."

"When do you think you'll, um, need me to take her?"

She didn't answer right away.

"Lexi?"

"She's here in town. We're staying at the Gateway Motel on the other side of the highway. A friend drove up with me."

"She's in Whispering Pines? Right now?"

"I didn't—I should have given you more notice, I know, but I..." She dissolved into tears. "I wanted to keep her with me as long as I could. There's a hospice house in Raleigh, where I'm living now. I'll stay in my apartment while I can, but I want to get Autumn settled before..." More tears. Then heart-rending sobs.

Nate's gaze shifted to the window. Outside, the sun sent long beams of light over the ball fields by the high school. Sunrise Mountain crested in the distance. A car drove by. Two teenagers jogged around the track. Typical Whispering Pines in late summer, quiet and sleepy with not much going on.

Except in here. In here, everything was changing.

He squared his shoulders. "Okay. Tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it."

She bent her head and caught her tears in her hands. Her body shook, and her shoulder blades poked through her sweater like the wings of a bird trying to take flight.

"My friend Donna is staying with her until we can make a decision. I have some paperwork already drawn up," she said through hiccups. "If you have an attorney here, we can take care of the rest."

"I can get one." Not on a Saturday afternoon, but he could pull a few strings and get an appointment with someone Monday morning. "What about your parents?"

"They didn't want anything to do with me or Autumn after she was born."

"Do they have any legal rights?" He shifted in his chair. "Like, I don't know. Could they take her? If they knew?"

"My dad died two years ago. I tried calling my mom a few months back. She wouldn't talk to me, even when I told her I was sick. I get it, I guess. My grandmother died of breast cancer when my mom was sixteen. I don't think she could watch anyone else go through it. So I made my sister Autumn's legal guardian, which means no one has any other rights to her." She lifted her head. "Except the father."

*The father.*

The words echoed like a stone inside the room. Nate's lungs grew tight. He didn't know the first thing about being a father. Sure,



he had a decent relationship with his own dad, and the dads of his friends, but they mostly watched football games and drank beer and taught their kids how to drive. The moms did all the hard work, the real work of dinner and laundry and helping with homework and drying tears. How could Lexi possibly trust him with Autumn? He'd screw up. No way he could do this alone.

"Are you still sure you want to say yes?"

He pulled his sunglasses back over his eyes to cut the light and, if he was being honest with himself, so Lexi wouldn't see the doubt inside them.

"You don't have to," she added. "I know this is a really big deal."

So was dying of cancer. So was handing over your kid to a virtual stranger. Nate pulled off his sunglasses and tossed them on the desk. "I'm sure I want to say yes," he lied. He forced a smile. "Do you think you could give me a crash course in parenting before you go, though?"

HE DIDN'T TELL anyone else, not Nicki, not Mac or Damian, no one. He needed to process it by himself first, before he went announcing around town that he'd failed to wrap up his dick five years ago and would now be bringing a daughter home to live with him.

"Can you close up?" he asked Nicki around eleven-thirty. The band was hammering nails into his skull, and whether it was Lexi's appearance or his hangover or a combination of everything, he could barely function behind the bar. He mixed a whiskey sour, looked at it, poured it out, and then mixed a new one before he realized the customer had ordered an amaretto sour instead. He poured twenty-ounce draft beers instead of twelve-ounce. After he gave out the wrong change for a third time, he finally gave up.

“Yeah, I guess.” She scanned the crowd. Two waitresses home on college break were handling the dining room, and Nicki knew the bar customers well enough that they’d cut her some slack if things got hectic. “What happened with that woman who was in here? Is that why you’re leaving?”

“Can’t really say.”

“She looked pretty bad.”

“Yeah.”

Nicki flipped a towel over her shoulder and headed down the bar. “No problem, Nate. Go home and get some sleep.”

Sure. Like he’d be able to sleep tonight. Or ever again.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” his older sister Rachael asked from the screened-in front porch of the farmhouse when he stepped inside. She wiggled her bare toes. Outside, fireflies lit up the lawn. The tree-lined lawn sloped down to the road, and just beyond, Whispering Pines Lake was a smooth, glassy surface that reflected the moon and stars. A swimming float was anchored fifty yards out. On the opposite shore, a few lights pricked the darkness. Nate could name all the neighbors belonging to those lights, because no one ever left Whispering Pines. The marina sat dark at the east end. A dam with a waterfall, the best place for fishing, sat at the west. He’d looked at it all a thousand times over the years. He could picture it in his dreams, with his eyes closed, from outer space if he had to.

Tonight it was like he’d never seen any of it before.

“Hey.” Rachael swatted him on the leg. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you home so early?”

He sank onto the chair beside her, his legs shaky. This pattern of orange and yellow flowers on the cushions was familiar too. It

screamed late seventies decor, and he and Rachael had made fun of it for years, but when their parents moved to South Carolina, neither he nor his sister had bothered to buy new cushions or covers.

“Nate?” She swung her legs over the chair. “Your shift isn’t over, is it? What happened tonight? Was there a fight? Did you get fired?”

*We have a little girl...I’m hoping you’ll take care of her when I’m gone...*

Where would Autumn sleep? In the guest room? Would he have to take her to school? Did four-year olds even go to school? Would she have clothes? Would he have to take her shopping?

Would she hate him?

“No,” he finally said. A fight or getting fired would be a piece of cake compared to this. He lifted his gaze. “I just found out I have a daughter.”

Rachael dropped her beer. The bottle rolled under her chair and left a brown puddle at her feet. “What? This is a joke, right?” She looked over his shoulder. “Like one of those hidden camera shows or something? Did someone come into the bar tonight and put you up to it?”

“It’s not a show. I’m serious.”

“Stop it.”

He didn’t say anything. Sometime on Monday, if everything went as planned with his attorney, he’d be bringing Autumn home to stay with him until Christmas. And Lexi would be going home to die.

“Tell me you’re kidding.”

“I’m not. Her name is Autumn. She’s four.”

Rachael’s eyes got wider than he’d ever seen them. “You’re kidding me. How did you not know about her? Why is she here? Who’s the mother?”

“How about you don’t ask me ten different questions at once?”

“Mom and Dad are gonna flip out.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You’re sure she’s yours?”

“Pretty sure.”

“That’s not a hundred percent.”

“No.” He pulled his phone from his pocket. “I’m getting a paternity test as soon as I can.” He flipped through his text messages to the newest one, sent to him by Lexi a few hours earlier while they sat knee to knee in the office. “But take a look at this and tell me what you think.” He zoomed in on the picture of Autumn, taken two months ago at the beach. She wore a pink bathing suit and held a red bucket in one hand. She had hair so blonde it looked white in the sun, blue-green eyes, and a gap-toothed smile.

Rachael leaned over. When she looked up, her face had gone white. “Don’t bother with the test, Nate. She looks exactly like you.”

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

“...**A**nd that’s how Robert the retriever made it home.” Max closed the book and laid it on her lap. A dozen kids ages five to ten sat on the carpet at her feet. She wasn’t sure she could do the kid thing twenty-four-seven, but she did love story time at the library.

“Can you read another one?”

“Please? Pleeeeeeeaaaaaasssee?”

They sure had the begging down, Max thought, and the wide, innocent eyes.

“Next time, sweethearts. It’s four-thirty now, which means check-out time.” She pointed at the books displayed along the low shelves of the children’s section. “Look at all the new ones we have to choose from.”

The distraction worked. In a matter of seconds, the kids were on their feet, flipping through the pages of the shiny new books. She loved their wonder. At some point between ten and adolescence, they lost that. They became enraptured with their phones, or the opposite sex, or sex in general, or something else more exciting than books. Max had to hand it to her mother. Despite growing up with next to nothing, Bethany always made sure her only daughter had a library card and an active imagination. Max had lost herself in books

from the time she could read. Sometimes—most times—they were the only place she could escape. School bored her, kids made fun of her, but books always welcomed her. In their pages she ran away to make-believe lands. She scaled mountains and saved burning villages and married the handsomest man in the world.

“I know you love to read, Maxine, but would it kill you to go to the movies or out for dinner once in a while?” Bethany had implored her in high school and college. “You do have friends, don’t you?”

“Of course I have friends.” *Make that one good friend, Sienna.* She liked to read too. Or talk about what she read. Or sit in silence by the lake and watch the sun go down. Max’s mother didn’t understand her. Nor, Max had to admit, did she really understand her mother.

A bustle of activity at the front door drowned out the little voices around her. Max looked over. “Ma?” *What are you doing?*

Bethany stood in the library’s foyer clutching two lawn signs. One read *Abbott for Town Council*. The other proclaimed *Bethany is the Best!* Bethany herself wore a tight pink sundress, matching pink stilettos, and a wide-brimmed hat with a pink ribbon on one side and the American flag on the other.

The kids stared. The parents stared. Max hurried over and shuffled her mother toward the door. “What are you doing here?” she hissed under her breath.

“I came to ask your opinion.” She held out one sign in each hand. “What do you think? Which do you like better?” *Bethany is the Best!* had a large picture of her face beneath the words, a glamour shot from last year courtesy of a former boyfriend who’d been obsessed with photographing Bethany in and out of all kinds of outfits. Max glanced over her shoulder. Some of the children and their parents had already lined up at the desk with armfuls of books, ready to

check out. A few stared in her direction, but most kept their eyes politely averted. Thankfully, Max's summer intern, a shy, pimpled girl named Cassie, knew the routine by now and began checking them out.

Max looked back at her mother. "I don't know. Either one is fine." She scanned the *Abbott for Town Council* sign. No picture on this one, just a website address and large, bright letters. "I like this one better."

Bethany held up the first one to her face. "Not the one with the picture?"

*If you're running for another beauty pageant, then maybe.* "I think the other one is more...serious."

Bethany sighed. "You're probably right. I have my picture on my website, anyway. And most people know what I look like, right?"

"Yes." For better or for worse, pretty much everyone in Whispering Pines and Silver Valley knew what Bethany Abbott looked like. She'd made a name for herself years ago by winning Miss New York and going on to compete in the Miss America pageant. No one remembered that she'd placed forty-second at Miss America. Everyone remembered that she'd put this tiny town on the map by winning Miss New York, though, and Bethany wouldn't let anyone forget it.

"Good. I'll order five hundred." Bethany fished in her enormous designer purse and pulled out some flyers. "Can you put these on your desk?"

"It's a children's library, Ma." Max pointed at the kids. "They can't vote. They're not really your target audience."

Rather than answer, Bethany propped her signs against the wall and strutted over to the parents standing in line. One by one, she handed them each a flyer and said something. Max wondered if

she'd come up with a catchy slogan or a slew of campaign promises. They hadn't talked much about the election since Bethany had announced her intentions the other night. Max had actually hoped her mother might put it out of her mind or reconsider, but it didn't look like that had happened. The beginnings of a headache settled in behind her eyes. Bethany trotted back a few minutes later, with at least one of the dads trying not to watch the sway of her behind.

"There." She brushed her hands together. "Ten flyers given out, and ten potential voters who now know I'm running for Town Council. How about that, Miss Smarty Pants?"

"Fine. You were right. A children's library is the perfect place to solicit votes. I'll put some out."

Bethany beamed, either oblivious to or ignoring Max's sarcasm. She pulled out a huge stack of flyers and handed them over. "Thank you, sweetheart." Then she lowered her voice. "That man over by the fish tank is awfully good-looking. Cute little girl, too."

"That's Damian Knight, Ma. With his sister Dinah."

Bethany's perfectly manicured brows lifted. "He's single, isn't he?"

"No."

"He isn't wearing a wedding ring."

"He's been dating Summer Thompson for almost two years. I think they live together."

Bethany flipped her hand, as if those details hardly mattered. "Well, you see that guy at the end of the line? With the sweet little red-headed boy?"

"Malcolm Swisher? Yes."

"Rumor has it his wife is leaving him—" Bethany paused for dramatic effect. She did this on a regular basis, so Max waited. "—for another *woman*."



“Ma.”

“I’m serious. I heard some of the girls talking about it when I was getting my nails done the other day.”

Well, if it was nail salon gossip, it had to be truth. “ I didn’t hear that.”

“You don’t go to the nail salon.”

“True. But I haven’t heard anyone else talking about that. And he’s still wearing his wedding ring.”

“Sure. For right now. Probably so people don’t talk.”

Max waited for her mother to catch the irony of her own comment. She didn’t.

“All I’m saying is, if Malcolm goes on the market, you should put yourself out there. He’s a catch. An engineer or something that makes a good salary. Plus look at him. He’s so good with his son.”

“I’m not really looking to put myself out there right now, Ma.” But Max had to agree with her mother. She had a soft spot for any dad who brought his child to the library. She especially loved the ones who sat on the carpet to read or played in the indoor treehouse set up in the back. Malcolm Swisher did that on a pretty regular basis. He also talked about his wife on a pretty regular basis. “I have to go.”

“You’ll be home for supper? So we can talk about the campaign? I have some other advertising ideas.”

“I will, yes. Want me to pick up anything?”

“Maybe something from that new Greek place. A salad, though. Nothing heavy or full of fat.”

Max nodded and was about to return to the desk when Bethany grabbed her arm. “There’s another one.” Bethany jutted her chin in a not-so-subtle motion in the direction of the sidewalk outside.

“Another one what?”

“Eligible man.”

“Ma, I just told you—”

Bethany made a tsking sound with her tongue. “On second thought, I don’t know about Nate Hunter.”

“Why not?” Nate was a nice enough guy. Max had gone to school with his older sister Rachael.

“Didn’t you hear the news?”

Max’s headache grew. “No, Ma, I did not. Fill me in.” Last time she’d checked, Nate wasn’t married, so his wife couldn’t be leaving him for another woman.

Bethany lowered her voice. “Apparently he just found out he has a daughter he never knew about. And the mother died. Or is dying. Or something.”

“What?” Max frowned. She and Rachael didn’t talk that often anymore, but this was pretty monumental news. Max would have heard something if Rachael’s little brother had become a sudden dad.

Just then, the library’s front door opened, and Rachael and Nate walked inside. A young blonde girl with a sad expression and a teddy bear in one hand walked behind them. Rachael reached back and took the girl’s other hand. Nate tugged at his collar and looked confused, like he’d never been inside a library before. Now that Max thought about it, she wasn’t sure he had. He’d been a playboy in high school, from what she remembered. He dated girls so they’d go to the library for him. She’d never seen him in the Silver Valley Library, even upstairs in the adult section.

“Isn’t she *precious*?” Bethany gushed out loud. She wiggled her fingers at the trio. Rachael smiled. The little girl stared at her feet. Nate looked like he wanted to die. “And just the spitting image of her father.”

CHAPTER  
FIVE

“You didn’t tell me your brother had a daughter.” Max kept her voice low and glanced over her shoulder as she took books from the children and scanned them.

Rachael sat on a stool behind her. “That’s pretty epic news.”

“I didn’t know. Until like two days ago.”

Max dropped a stack of bookmarks. They scattered everywhere, and she dropped to her knees to pick them up. “Seriously?”

Rachael rubbed her nose. She looked exhausted, with tiny lines at the corners of her eyes that Max didn’t recall seeing before. “Seriously.”

Max stood, rearranged the bookmarks, and finished checking out the last family. Only Nate, his little girl, and Bethany remained in the library. “Give me a minute,” Max said. She hurried over to where her mother had cornered the two of them. The little girl stared into Mr. Floppy’s cage. Bethany was talking about her campaign. Nate had jammed his hands in his pockets and nodded without speaking. His chin bobbed up and down in politeness every few seconds.

“Ma, I’m getting ready to close up.”

“Oh. Well, I was just talking to—”

“I’ll pick up some dinner at the Greek place and meet you home in an hour, how does that sound?”

Bethany’s nose wrinkled, the way it always did when something didn’t go according to plan. She didn’t like being interrupted. She certainly didn’t like being interrupted while talking to a man, any man, anyplace in the world. Finally she blinked a few times. “Yes. Fine. I have to drop off flyers downtown, anyway.” She reached over and squeezed Nate’s arm. “So good to see you.” She patted the girl on the head. “And to meet you, darling.” *So cute*, she mouthed to Max before she left.

“I’m sorry.” Max locked the door behind her mother and flipped over the Open sign. “She has a talent for that. Cornering people.”

Nate shrugged. “It’s okay.” The little girl had wandered over to the play area, which had a large green carpet and six miniature fuzzy chairs. She climbed into one and clutched her teddy bear to her chest. Nate followed her, went to sit down, apparently realized he’d never fit into a child-sized chair, and crouched next to her instead. Neither of them said a word.

“You have to give me details.” Max said to Rachael. She leaned one hip against her desk. “How and when did this happen?”

“It’s like something out of a movie.” Rachael rubbed one hand over her forehead. “I still can’t believe it.”

“My mom said—” Max stopped. She hated gossip. She hated that Bethany engaged in it.

“Nate met the mother on spring break years ago. Lexi something. You know my brother, right? Love ‘em and leave ‘em. And apparently, in this case, impregnate them.”

“And she never told him? Especially when she decided to keep the baby? Isn’t that, I don’t know, incredibly weird?”

Rachael shrugged. "I thought so, but whatever. He took a paternity test, and he's definitely the father. Lexi got breast cancer a couple years ago, pretty much the worst diagnosis, Stage Four, very little chance of survival, so she came here last weekend and asked Nate to take care of Autumn when she's gone."

"Which is soon?"

"Yeah."

"Did you meet her? Lexi?"

Rachael nodded.

"Autumn's a pretty girl."

"She is. She's also four and scared of the world and is now living with two strangers who have no idea how to take care of her."

"I'm sure that's not true. You babysat all through school."

"Not the same, Max. Not even close." Rachael blew out a long breath. "And I got a job offer in Manhattan just last week. Assistant buyer for Macy's."

"You're kidding! That's fantastic."

"Yeah. Except how am I supposed to leave my little brother alone now? He barely knows how to get himself out of bed and fed. How's he gonna take care of a four-year old?" She barked out a short laugh. "We went shopping yesterday so we had more than beer and eggs and bread in the house. I have no idea what he'll actually feed her when I'm not around."

Max watched the two, still in the play area, still silent. "Lexi's already gone?"

"She has probably less than a month to live. She looked—I can't even explain it, Max. It was horrible. So sad. Like a walking skeleton. I don't know how she held on as long as she did. Nate said she was going into hospice care as soon as she got back to North Carolina."

Max whistled. "So this is permanent? Wham, all of a sudden Nate's a full-time dad?"

"For now. There's an aunt living overseas somewhere. She's coming back to the States just before Christmas. Nate agreed to take care of Autumn until then."

"So at least it's not forever."

"No." Rachael shook her head. "I still don't know how he's going to function."

"What about your parents? Would they come up from South Carolina to help out?"

"They would, yes, except my mom just had knee replacement surgery and my dad's taking care of her full time. They flipped out when Nate told them, anyway. They probably need a few weeks to come to terms with it."

"Does Nate still bartend at Jimmy's?"

"Yes. Although he called Walter Crawshaw at American Insurance the other day. You know that new place on Park Place Run? He heard they had some openings for salesmen. My brother does have a college degree. It's about time he used it."

Max could no sooner picture Nate Hunter selling insurance than she could picture Bethany going to medical school, but she kept that thought to herself. The longer she watched the two of them across the room, the more her heart ached. "Does Autumn know what's going on with her mother?"

"To a certain extent, I guess. Nate hasn't told her any details. I don't think she'd understand them."

Max agreed. She'd taken three semesters of psychology in college. Four year olds didn't grasp the concept or permanence of death, though they certainly understood separation from their parents. "Have you taken her to a social worker, a therapist? Anyone

to talk to?” She thought of the moms who came to the library on a regular basis. “I might be able to give you a name or two if you want.”

“That would help, thanks. We’ve barely set up a bedroom for her in the farmhouse. Haven’t even thought about what else she might need.”

In the meantime, Max thought, at least she could save this poor child from utter, uncomfortable silence. She wasn’t a social worker by any stretch of the imagination, but she interacted with kids all the time. She walked over to the play area and sat down next to Autumn.

“Hi, there. My name is Miss Max. I’m the librarian here. Would you like me to read you a story?”



“SHE’S ASLEEP.” Nate walked into the farmhouse kitchen a little after nine. His eyes burned. He hadn’t slept more than three or four hours a night in the last week.

“Did she eat anything?”

“Some cheese and crackers, finally.” Autumn had spent most of the afternoon and evening sitting on the front porch or in the middle of her bed. He looked at the chicken nuggets, the pieces of hot dog, and the grilled cheese sandwich, now cold, on the kitchen counter. They’d tried everything. She wouldn’t sit down at the table and eat. She’d only drink water from a blue Barbie cup left by her mother. She never let go of her pink teddy bear, and she barely spoke. The first time she’d said more than a sentence had been today at the library, when Max Abbott read her a book.

*I like dinosaurs.*

*You do?* Max asked, eyes wide. *Well, so do I.*

*Could we read another book about them? Next time?*

Nate had almost fallen over in surprise at their conversation. So *she does talk. Just not to me.* If nothing else worked, he guessed he could start spending his days at the Silver Valley Library. He wondered if they had babysitting there, play groups, anything where he could leave Autumn for an hour or two and just get a break. “How do single moms do this?”

Rachael cracked open a beer and offered it to him. He shook his head. He couldn’t risk it. What if something happened in the middle of the night and he had to drive Autumn to the hospital?

“I have no idea,” she said in response to his question. “Although they do, every day, in large amounts all over the world. So do single dads.”

“I don’t have any idea what I’m doing.”

“Have you talked to Autumn’s aunt? Maybe she’d come back earlier.”

“I thought about that.” But to ask for help, to give up on Autumn less than a week after she’d arrived in Whispering Pines, seemed cruel. And cowardly. “She’s my daughter. I feel like I should be able to do this.”

Rachael leaned against the counter. Nate poured himself a glass of water. “I think you can do this. You just need to get used to it. To her.” She took a long drink. “Max asked about taking Autumn to a social worker, someone to talk to about her mom. It’s not a bad idea.”

Nate stared out the window into darkness. An owl hooted. A car drove by. From next door came the voices of the Houlihan family, four boys between the ages of ten and twenty. He knew all these sounds, had heard them for years, but tonight they put him on high alert. Maybe living outside of town wasn’t the best idea. They didn’t



even have deadbolt locks on the doors of the farmhouse, not like anyone in Whispering Pines had been robbed in Nate's lifetime, but still. And what about pedophiles, people who snuck around and followed blonde little girls until their parents weren't looking and then snatched them to sell on the black market? That crazy guy had broken into Damian Knight's house a couple years back. It could happen.

Rachael jabbed him in the side. "Hey."

"What?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"No." He was thinking about the million ways he could screw this up, the million things that could go wrong.

"I said, I think you should talk to someone too."

"I don't need a shrink."

"Are you sure about that?"

Nate didn't answer. He finished his water and set the glass in the sink. "I'm going to bed."

"Try and get some sleep."

*Sure.* For a half-second, he thought about popping a couple Tylenol PM, but then he'd probably never wake up. He climbed the stairs and stopped at the top. Autumn's bedroom door sat open, the way she'd requested, with a nightlight plugged in near her bed. She lay on her back with the teddy bear clutched in one arm. Her mouth was open, and her cheek rested on the pillow. Nate walked in and looked at her, and a lump rose in his throat. She had his nose. His white-blond hair. The tiniest gap between her front teeth, like his. And when she was awake, he saw his own eyes looking back at him. The enormity of this, of creating a likeness, a life, washed over him. Maybe he'd been a screw-up until now. Maybe he hadn't been there

for the first four years of Autumn's life. But she belonged to him. She was part of him. And he'd protect her no matter what.

He just had no idea where to begin.

## CHAPTER

# SIX

**M**ax squinted at the sign over the door. *Springer Fitness*. “Well, this’ll be a first,” she muttered. She scanned Main Street and saw no one she knew. At almost six o’clock on a Tuesday evening, she didn’t expect to. She didn’t spend a lot of time in Whispering Pines, even though she’d gone to high school here. Her job kept her in Silver Valley most days, and a gym was about the last place she’d be caught dead. A guy walked out wearing some kind of muscle shirt and baggy shorts. Large sweat stains ringed his neck and armpits. He grinned at Max. She nodded and gritted her teeth. If she hadn’t promised Bethany to meet here before dinner...

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Hi, there! Welcome to Springer Fitness.” A tall, broad-shouldered man stood behind the front desk. “Is this your first time here?”

“Is it that obvious?”

The man grinned. “Nope. I just haven’t seen you before.” He pushed a clipboard across the desk. “Are you interested in joining? Or taking a tour? We like to get the names and phone numbers of visitors.”

“Ah, that’s okay. I’ll skip the tour. I’m just meeting my mom.”

“Oh.” He took the clipboard back. “Well, you can wait over there if you want.” He gestured at three red chairs pulled up to a low table. Fitness magazines covered the table, along with a plastic cup that looked like it held some kind of gross protein shake.

Before Max could decide whether it was worth it to sit down, Bethany came trotting over, followed by the gym owner himself. Max remembered Dashiell Springer vaguely from high school, a stocky guy with a wide smile who went to class about half the time and partied all the time. He’d gotten some tattoos since then, along with a crew cut and a few more pounds of muscle.

“Hey, Max.”

“Hi.” She had to admit, Dash had done well for himself. There’d been some rumor about him going to jail years ago, but since it had come from Bethany’s lips, Max hadn’t put much stock in it. Now he owned a successful gym, from the looks of the many people inside and the expanse of equipment along every wall.

“Maxine, you remember Dashiell Springer, don’t you?” Bethany took a towel from around her neck and patted her forehead, though she didn’t look like she’d broken a sweat.

“I do, yes.”

Dash gave her another polite nod and smile. *Not like we traveled in the same circles back at Whispering Pines High*, Max almost added, *but yes*.

Bethany climbed onto a stool and crossed one black spandex-clad leg over the other. She wore a bright yellow tank top and matching yellow sneakers. Her hair bounced in its ponytail, without a single strand of gray. “Hans, could I have one of those low-cal super fruit smoothies?”

“Sure thing.”

“Aren’t we going to dinner?” Max asked.

“Well yes, but I have to replace my electrolytes *now*, not in thirty minutes, which is when we’ll actually get served at the diner.” She beamed at Dash, who’d walked behind the desk and was standing at the computer. “Right, coach?”

“Right,” he said without looking up.

“Maxine, you should come here.” Bethany patted her forehead again.

“What do you mean? I am here.”

Bethany huffed out a cross sigh and then flashed Hans a flirtatious smile as he handed her a bright pink smoothie. “Thanks, darling.” She turned to Max. “I mean, you should work out here.”

Dash looked up from his computer with a bemused expression.

“Ah, I’m not really sure working out is my thing.”

“It should be. It’s good for your cardiovascular system, and your flexibility, and…” Bethany waved a hand at the rest of the room. “And socially it’s good for you, too.”

*And there it is.* The real reason Ma wanted Max to work out here had nothing to do with her physical fitness and everything to do with finding a man. As always. “I’ll think about it.”

“We’re running a back-to-school special next week,” Dash said. He handed her a flyer. “Ten dollars off a month when you purchase a year membership.”

Max tucked it in her purse without looking at it. “Thanks.”

Bethany took a long sip of her smoothie. “Mmm. Hans, you are the best.” She closed her eyes as if in the throes of ecstasy. Or an orgasm. “Mmm.”

Max’s cheeks flushed. “Ma, how about I—”

Bethany’s eyes snapped open. “Let me go change, Maxine, and then we can go to dinner. In the meantime, why don’t you take a look around? You might like what you see.” She slipped off her stool and

picked up her smoothie. Then she walked in the direction of the locker room, taking her time and stopping to talk to at least three different men on her way there.

“I’m sorry,” Max said when Bethany was out of earshot.

“For what?”

“My mother.”

Dash and Hans both chuckled. “She’s harmless. No worse than most of the other middle-aged women who come here. And she’s not wrong,” Dash said. “It’s not a bad place to meet people.”

“I guess.” The door opened, and Nate Hunter walked inside, with a gym bag on his shoulder and no little girl behind him. “Well, hi, there,” she said.

“Hi.” He looked exhausted, with bags under his eyes and a stoop Max hadn’t noticed the other day.

“Hey, man, you okay?” Dash asked.

“Yeah. Just not sleeping much.”

“How’s Autumn?”

“She’s doing alright.”

“She get settled into your house?” Max asked. She’d thought of that poor little girl with the sad expression and pink teddy bear more than once over the last few days.

“Getting there.” Nate dropped his bag on the floor. “I’ll take an espresso protein jammer,” he said to Hans. “I need all the caffeine I can get.”

“Is she with Rachael right now?” Max asked.

Nate nodded. “My sister’s moving to New York next week, though, so I’m out of luck there. Figured I better get my workouts in while I can.”

Dash winked at him. “We got a few women here who wouldn’t mind playing house with you.”

Nate took a long drink of the concoction Hans handed him. “You think I’m gonna let some gym bunny near my daughter?” He slapped one hand over his mouth. “Sorry, Max,” he said. “No offense. Didn’t mean that like it sounded.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t come here to work out. No offense taken.”

“So you just hang out at Springer Fitness when you’re not at the library?”

“I’m meeting my mom. She’s getting changed.” At least, Max hoped she was. Bethany might also be campaigning her way around the room. Max craned her neck but didn’t catch a glimpse of her mother.

One corner of Nate’s mouth tugged up. “Your mom’s a character, isn’t she?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Heard she’s running for Town Council over in Silver Valley,” Dash said.

“That’s her plan.”

“You live in that township? But you went to school in Whispering Pines.”

“Our house is on Merrington Lane. It literally runs along the border between the two. We have a Silver Valley mailing address. But we’re in the Whispering Pines School District. It’s weird, I know.” She climbed onto a stool. Bethany would probably be another ten minutes. At least. For all Max knew, she was taking a shower, washing her hair, and reapplying a full face of makeup before they went to the diner up the block. In that case, she would be close to an hour. Max squirmed on the stool and tried to get comfortable.

“I’d rather just get a place in Silver Valley,” she added. “So I could walk to work.” *And so I didn’t have to live with Ma.*

“Your mom has a nice place, though,” Nate said. “My buddy Joe grew up down the block.” He chuckled. “When we were eleven or twelve, we used to hang out on the porch and hope she would mow the lawn in her bikini.”

“Ew.”

“Sorry. We were kids.”

“She’s in good shape,” Dash added.

“Could we please stop talking my mother?” Max wiped one hand over her face. “She drives me crazy. The sooner I can move out and get my own place, the better.”

“It’s that bad?” Nate finished his drink.

“I love her. I just can’t live with her. She wants to change everything about me. My hair, my job, my name—”

“Your name?”

“She doesn’t like that people call me Max for short. It’s too masculine for her. She thinks it means secretly I’m going to turn into a lesbian one day when she isn’t looking.”

All three men laughed.

“And it kills her that I’m twenty-seven and still single. I think that’s the worst. She’s always trying to fix me up.”

“Been there,” Nate said. “At least when my parents moved south, it was harder for my mom to play matchmaker.”

To Max’s amazement, Bethany emerged from the locker room a few minutes later, changed into a pair of slim jeans, a white t-shirt, and black stilettos. *For dinner at Zeb’s Diner, Ma? Really?* Then again, Max supposed she ought to give Bethany some credit, because tromping around in heels all day wasn’t for the faint of heart or the weak-legged. She’d learned that the hard way at a black-tie event for the library last year in the dead of winter, when she’d been



forced to wear a dress and heels to a fancy-schmancy party at the Villa Venezia. She'd had tendonitis for two days afterwards.

"I'm ready!" Bethany trilled. She fluttered her fingers at Dash and Hans and then stopped and put one hand on a hip when she saw Nate. "Nate Hunter. What a nice surprise."

"Thanks, Miss Abbott. You too."

"Oh, good Lord. Bethany. Please. Not Miss Abbott. Never Miss Abbott." She winked. "How's that beautiful little girl of yours?"

"She's alright. Thank you for asking." Nate hefted his gym bag onto his shoulder. "Nice to see you again," he said to Max. Then he dropped his voice. "If I hear of any cheap rentals in downtown Silver Valley, I'll let you know."

Max smiled. Nice guy. Too bad he was over his head in becoming an insta-parent. She opened the door for Bethany as the strangest thought occurred to her. *No*. She couldn't suggest it. He'd think she was off her rocker. She tilted her head and considered it for another second. *Would* he think she was off her rocker? Or would he appreciate the offer? She followed her mother, who was chattering on about an upcoming fundraiser at the Elks Club. Maybe it wasn't the strangest idea in the world. Max needed a place to live. Nate needed help with Autumn.

Maybe, just maybe, they could solve each other's problems.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

Nate loosened his tie with one hand as he steered into the last empty parking spot at the library. He still couldn't get used to wearing this thing. Couldn't get used to working a nine-to-five job, either, but Walter Crawshaw had taken pity on him and given him a sales job ten minutes into the interview. Now he pulled the tie over his head and tossed it on the seat beside him. He checked the rearview mirror. Autumn sat in the car seat, teddy bear in her hands.

"Ready for story hour with Miss Max?"

She nodded and wriggled.

"Hang on a minute." He got out and fumbled with the buckles and straps of the car seat, still not used to how this contraption worked. He'd thought four-year olds could just sit in the back seat of a car, but apparently not. Apparently there was some kind of height or weight or age requirement, and Autumn didn't come close to meeting any of them yet.

When he finally released her, she stood on the curb, waiting as he locked the car. He held out his hand, and she took it. It still startled him, the tiny warm weight of her palm in his. They crossed the parking lot, and Nate squinted against the late afternoon sun.

*Should've worn my sunglasses.* He looked down at Autumn. Did they make sunglasses for four-year olds? Lexi had left him two large suitcases filled with Autumn's clothes and jackets and shoes, but no sunglasses. Not enough underwear or socks, either, he and Rachael had discovered the other day. Thank God Rachael had taken care of buying those. What else would he discover Autumn needed? An umbrella? Rain boots? A father who knew what he was doing?

Nate pulled open the front door of the library, his shoulders and neck pinched with tension. This place had turned out to be a saving grace. Autumn loved coming here, as close as he could guess, anyway, because she still didn't talk much. But her eyes lit up whenever he mentioned story hour or Miss Max, so he figured that counted for something.

She dropped his hand as soon as they got inside and hurried over to the rug in front of Max's chair. As soon as Max saw Autumn, she gave the girl a hug and settled her on the rug. Five or six other kids were already there, but for a summer Friday at four, the library was quiet. On the last weekend before Labor Day, people were probably traveling or barbecuing or enjoying the late summer weather.

Nate rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt and wandered around the perimeter of the room. It was large and brightly colored, each wall a different primary color, with murals of animals and cartoon characters painted at kids' eye-level. The book shelves, tables, and chairs were all miniature as well, which left him feeling out of place. At the back of the room was a treehouse with different levels of climbing platforms. Looked like fun to him, but Autumn hadn't shown the least bit of interest in it. Beside the treehouse were two doors, one labeled *Restroom* and the other labeled *Private*.

Between the doors, a staircase led up to the second floor and the adult section of the library.

Nate perused the bulletin board beside the stairwell. Flyers advertised everything from lawn mowing services to rental homes to babysitters. He looked closer. *Babysitters*. He should probably think about hiring one of those, for the times he needed to work late or the occasional bartending shift he was hanging onto at Jimmy's. He glanced over at story time, now in full swing. Max was making shapes in the air with one hand, and the children laughed. All the children. Even Autumn.

Nate turned back to the bulletin board. How on earth would he hire a babysitter? How could he find someone he could trust? Most of the young women in town he knew from Jimmy's, so forget that. Anyone he'd seen tipsy wasn't being left alone with his daughter. He supposed he could ask around. Actually, he supposed he could ask Max.

Nate stuffed his hands in his pockets as a strange thought occurred to him. *I could ask Max*. He watched as she finished the first book and picked up the second. Autumn had moved even closer to her rocking chair, and her gaze rested on Max as if no one else was in the room.

*Stupid thought.*

She'd never agree. She'd probably think he was crazy. Still, Max had spent a fair amount of time complaining about her mother the other day. He watched her for another minute and tried to catalog the things he knew about her. Maxine Abbott had never been one of those girls who stood out in high school. Thinking back, he couldn't even say what groups she'd hung around with. She was good friends with Sienna Cruz, who'd graduated second in the class. That meant she was smart. She'd probably been on the yearbook committee or

in Honor Society. She'd gone to college. She was obviously good at her job. She rarely went out to the local bars, and he'd never seen her drunk.

She was way out of his league.

She might laugh at him.

Nate shrugged. He'd been laughed at by enough women in his time. He sure didn't have anything to lose. If she said no, he'd ask Rachael or one of the women who worked in the salon next to the insurance company. He leaned against the back wall and watched Max finish the second book and start the third. She had a way of reading that lit up her entire face. He wondered if they taught that in librarian school. He hated reading. Always had. It took him forever, and he got bored easily. But as he stood there and watched her, he could understand why the kids loved it. She told the story with her eyes and mouth and hands, her whole body really, until you got swept away by the plot.

Max finished and the kids clapped. They jumped up and trotted to the shelves, pulling out books to take with them. Autumn remained sitting. Nate walked over.

"Did you have fun?"

She nodded.

"We should look into getting her a library card." Max said as she stood. "Unless—do you have one already, upstairs? She can be under your name if you do."

He flushed. "Ah, no."

"No problem. Usually we ask for some form of ID and proof of address, but I know who you are." She held out her hand to Autumn. "How does that sound? Would you like a library card so you can take some books home with you?"

"Yes, please."

Her tiny, thin voice still surprised Nate when he heard it. A faint Southern accent colored it, one of the few things that reminded him of Lexi. A pang touched him. He hadn't heard from her in days. He should probably call, see how she was doing, but he was afraid of hearing the answer.

"Will you come home and read the books to her?" Nate asked under his breath as Autumn walked over to a bookshelf.

Max smiled. "Sure."

"You mean that? I was kidding."

She started to say something and then stopped. "I'm sure you'll do fine with her."

"I'm not sure at all." He watched Autumn pick out a book and flip the pages. She set it aside and looked at some others. "I don't know the first thing about taking care of a child."

"It looks like you're doing fine so far." She patted his arm. "You'll figure it out as you go."

He took a deep breath. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"This might sound crazy." He didn't look at Max. He kept his eyes on Autumn. "But would you like to move in with me?"



"I CAN'T BELIEVE you're agreeing to this," Rachael said. She, Nate, and Max sat on the front porch of the Hunter farmhouse. A collection of beer bottles lay scattered on the table between them.

When Max really thought about it, she couldn't believe it either. Still... "It's not the worst idea in the world."

"Are you sure?" Nate said.

"It's only for a couple of months. You need help with Autumn."

“That’s for sure,” Rachael said. Nate elbowed her.

“And I’d love to be out of Ma’s house, even short-term.” As crazy as the plan seemed, it also made sense. “Do you want me to pay rent? I have some money saved up. I could.”

“Of course not. You’re helping me out. Otherwise I’d be hiring a babysitter or bribing my sister to stay here.”

Rachael looked at the bags already packed and sitting in the corner of the porch. “And we all know that’s not happening.”

“Rachael’s room is right next to Autumn’s upstairs,” Nate said. “It has its own bathroom, too. So that can be all yours.”

“Believe me, you will not want to share a bathroom with this guy,” Rachael said.

Nate pointed over his shoulder. “I took over the guest room after Mom and Dad moved out. It’s on the first floor and bigger. And has its own bathroom too.”

“Is she going to preschool?” Max asked. “There are a couple places in Silver Valley. I could take her in with me when I go to work.”

“I enrolled her in Precious Little People yesterday,” Rachael said. “It’s across the street from Nate’s new job, down on Park Place Run. She’ll start after Labor Day.”

“Oh.” Max fiddled with a loose string in her shorts. “So what exactly do you want me to do?”

“Just help out,” Nate said. “Mostly at night, when I can’t get her to eat dinner or take a bath or go to bed. And sometimes I’ll have to work past five, so if you could pick her up from preschool, that would help.”

“Sure. Summer hours change at the library next week. I’ll be done at four-thirty.”

“What’s your mom going to say?” Rachael asked. “Will she totally flip?”

Max hadn't thought about that. "I don't know. Maybe. Probably."

"She might be thrilled that you're moving in with a guy," Nate pointed out. "Didn't you say she's always trying to set you up?"

"True." Max took a sip of her beer. She didn't drink often, but this seemed like an event that called for it.

"You could tell her the two of you are dating," Rachael said. "That'll really throw her for a loop."

Max laughed. "She'd never believe it."

"No? Why not?"

Max didn't answer for a moment. "Actually, that might not be a terrible idea."

Nate stared at her over the lip of his own beer bottle. He raked his hand through his hair, and all the white-blond spikes stood up on end. In his Yankees t-shirt and faded shorts, he looked like a kid, almost not old enough to be anyone's father. Still, Max thought, Bethany might buy the lie. She'd *want* to buy it. She'd want to believe her daughter had finally landed a man, and that would make the lie work more than anything.

"Ma wants me to help her with her campaign for Town Council. One of the things that bothers her the most is that she has all these events coming up, dinners and meet-and-greets and fund-raisers and stuff, and if I go, I'll be alone."

"And being alone in the eyes of Miss New York is one of the biggest sins you can commit," Rachael said. "Especially at twenty-seven. You might as well be dead in the grave."

"Exactly." Max eyed Nate. He grinned and lifted his bottle in her direction. He needed her. She needed him. This might work out perfectly. "What do you say? Want to be my fake boyfriend for the next couple of months?"



CHAPTER  
EIGHT

**T**his is crazy.

Max tried to keep herself from thinking those words, but they came into her brain a dozen times that Saturday. She rearranged books, changed a display case, and placed three separate orders for new titles. She helped the Dawson kids pick out books about baseball. She cleaned Mr. Floppy's cage. She handed out Bethany's flyers, surprised when she ran out late morning.

Through it all, those words filtered through her brain. *This is crazy.*

She barely knew Nate Hunter. They had nothing in common—except, of course, a four-year old child they were going to take care of. Together. What happened when Social Services came? She'd sat straight up in bed last night with that thought. A little girl didn't get uprooted and placed with a father she didn't know and not have a caseworker come check on her. Max wondered if Nate had thought of that.

"Here you go, sweetheart," she said as she slid three chapter books across the desk to Sadie Bonner. Sadie was ten but read about four grade levels up. The girl looked at Max through wide-

framed glasses and nodded. Max would be surprised if Sadie didn't finish reading them all over the weekend.

What about meals? They hadn't talked about that either. Good Lord, what *had* they talked about? Max started cataloging a list in her mind of things she and Nate needed to sort out. She glanced at the clock. The library closed at noon on Saturdays. By twelve-thirty she'd be home, by one o'clock she'd be telling her mother her plans, and by one-oh-five she expected shock followed by disbelief followed by exhilaration.

Her palms grew clammy, and she pulled her hair off her neck. Labor Day weekend always seemed to bring excessive heat and humidity to upstate New York, and today was no exception. She wondered if the farmhouse had air conditioning. Or even fans. *Add that to the list.*

"...going to have the Back-to-School Open House again?"

Max jerked up from the desk. "I'm sorry. What?"

Summer Thompson stood on the other side of the desk, with Dinah Knight beside her. "No problem. You look like you're deep in thought. Didn't mean to startle you."

"No, no, it's fine. And yes, I'm planning the Open House again." She jotted a note to herself and stuck it to her calendar.

"You okay?" Summer asked. Dinah, Damian's young half-sister, had her nose stuck in a book. She'd grown another two inches over the summer.

"I'm fine. Thanks. Just a lot on my mind."

"Have a good long weekend." Summer waved goodbye, Max did a quick survey of the room, gave Mr. Floppy extra food, and locked the doors tightly behind her.

*Here goes nothing.*

She hoped maybe Bethany would be at Peter's house, but no luck. Both her Mercedes (leased by Peter as a Valentine's Day gift) and Peter's mid-life crisis Jeep sat in the driveway. Max took a deep breath and walked inside. She was twenty-seven years old. She had a college education and a full-time job. She could certainly tell her mother she was moving out.

*"WHAT?"*

As soon as Max uttered the words, Bethany dropped the handful of campaign buttons she'd been holding. They scattered everywhere. Peter blinked from his roost on the stool at the breakfast bar. Bethany's eyes went enormous. "Since when are you dating Nate Hunter?"

Max dropped to her knees to retrieve the buttons. "Since a few months ago." She kept her gaze on the floor.

"Maxine."

She snagged one button that had scooted under the fridge and another under Peter's feet. Finally she stood.

"You are not dating Nate Hunter. I would know if you were." Bethany's gaze turned hopeful. "Are you?"

"Why else would I be moving in with him?"

"But he has a child."

"Yes, I know."

"But when I told you last week, you seemed like you had no idea."  
"

"We were keeping it low-key," Max said, hoping her mother would buy the lie. "Especially with Autumn in the picture."

"I..." Bethany faltered. "I don't know what to say."

*That's a first.*

“I thought you’d be glad,” Max said. “This house is pretty small for two grown women.”

“I am. I mean, you’re always welcome to stay here. This is your home too. It’s not that small.”

“But don’t you think it’s about time I got a place of my own?” Not that the farmhouse was her own, not by any stretch of the imagination. She hoped Bethany wouldn’t point that out.

“Living with someone is a big step in a relationship.”

Max prayed her mother wouldn’t take this opportunity to have a mother-daughter heart-to-heart. She didn’t have a lot of details made up to fully explain the situation. She supposed she could have opted for the truth, but Bethany probably would have disapproved of Max becoming a live-in babysitter even more than this ruse.

“I know,” she said. “That’s why we’re still going to keep it low-key. We’re not going to tell a bunch of people. If you could, you know, kind of keep it quiet, just for now, that would be great.” By the time Autumn’s aunt returned to take care of the little girl, Max could fabricate a fight with Nate, move out, and that would be the end of that. No reason to shout her new living arrangements from the rooftops.

“Of course.” Bethany patted her arm. “I’m just...” She blinked, and if Max didn’t know better, she’d think her mother was about to cry. “I’m very happy for you.”

For just a moment, Max felt a twinge of guilt. Their lie couldn’t hurt anyone, could it? If thinking Max had a boyfriend made her mother happy for a few months, what could be the downside? Of course, when she and Nate ended their faux relationship, there would be the natural mourning, but Bethany would probably also rise to the occasion of Mother Hen and take Max back into the fold while soothing her hurt feelings.

“Thanks, Ma.” Things would work out. Nothing catastrophic would happen. What on earth *could* happen in a handful of weeks? Max leaned over and gave her mother a quick hug. “I should probably get packing.”



NATE LIFTED the last of Rachael’s bags into the trunk of her car. “Can you even see out the back?”

“No. That’s why cars have side mirrors.” She hugged him, quick and hard. “I better go. I want to get there while it’s still light.”

“Be careful.” He didn’t say the other words, *I love you* and *I’ll miss you*, but he hoped she heard them anyway. He stuck his hands in his back pockets and watched her go. Rachael’s blue Corolla bumping down the driveway left a hole in his gut. First his parents had moved out. Now his sister. Nate pulled his baseball cap low over his eyes and walked up the front steps. Max would be arriving any minute now, which was good.

He glanced inside. Autumn sat on the floor of what used to be his mother’s craft room, a small space off the living room. She had a few stuffed animals Lexi had left with her, and he could see she’d lined them up along the sleeper couch. She said something to them and then opened one of the books she’d gotten from the library. She held it on her lap, facing out, the way Max did during story time, and began to read.

Nate grinned. She probably wasn’t reading, he thought as he watched her. She was probably just making up words as she went along. He realized he had no idea if she could read, or if she knew all the letters of the alphabet or could count to ten. Or one hundred.

Panic washed over him, and he was about to grab a beer from the fridge when a sleek silver Nissan turned into the driveway.

Max pulled up beside his red Mazda and got out. She shaded her eyes against the falling sun and looked across the lawn. "You have a beautiful view. I'd forgotten. I haven't been here in the daytime in ages." She turned to him. "Does Autumn swim?"

His head started to ache with the things he didn't know. "I'm not sure. I didn't ask her."

Max flashed him a smile of reassurance. "It's okay. You don't have to know everything about her."

But he kind of felt like he should.

"Where is she?"

"Inside. Playing. Actually, I think she's reading to her stuffed animals."

"Ah. A girl after my own heart."

Nate tried to picture Max as a little girl, lining up her toys and dolls and reading to them in the same way. It wasn't that hard.

"Have you told her I'm moving in?"

He shook his head. "Wasn't sure what to say."

She gave a sort-of half-smile. "I'm not sure / know what to say." She took one step toward the house. "But I guess we better figure it out, huh?" She hesitated and then reached out one hand to him. "Let's do this."

CHAPTER  
NINE

Max walked inside on her tiptoes and then wondered why she was bothering to be quiet. Autumn would see her in a minute. She stopped inside the kitchen of the farmhouse, taking stock. It was bigger than the one at her mother's. Actually, the whole house was bigger, probably by almost half, but it was also older, with crooked walls and creaky floors and a front door that didn't close securely. The kitchen itself looked out onto the front lawn and Whispering Pines Lake. Wallpaper with fruits and vegetables covered every inch. A wooden table sat in the middle of the room with three matching chairs. One had two phone books on it.

"Let me guess. That's where Autumn's sitting."

"Kind of pathetic, right? I wasn't sure what to get. She's so short."

Max walked through the kitchen and past the screened front porch. The living room stretched almost the entire length of the first floor, with a small half-bath to the right, stairs to the second floor, and French doors that she guessed opened into the guest room and bathroom, where Nate said he slept.

A funny feeling washed over her. She'd be sleeping upstairs, just above Nate. She wouldn't see him, of course, but he'd be there. Did he sleep in the nude? She usually did, although for the next two

months it would be pajamas all the way. She flushed at the thought and then put it out of her head. *We're roommates, that's all.* It was practically a business arrangement. That meant in no way should she be thinking about Nate Hunter sleeping in the nude.

Even if he did have a pretty good body and a smile that lit up the room.

She shook the thoughts from her head and walked over to the only other room on the first floor. Autumn sat inside, her back to the doorway. Her tiny voice recited a story Max had read the other day.

*She remembers almost all of it,* Max thought with surprise. She knocked on the open door. "Autumn?"

The little girl turned. Her mouth fell open, and she dropped the book. "Miss Max!" She scrambled to her feet and wrapped her arms around Max's legs.

"I guess that's hello?" Nate said from behind them.

"I guess so." She hugged Autumn back and sank to her knees.

"What are you doing here?" The girl looked from Max to Nate and back again.

"Well," Max said as she crossed her legs, *your dad and I*— Did Autumn call Nate Dad yet? She had no idea. "I'm going to be staying here in the house for a little while," she said instead. She'd worked out a reason on the drive here, an explanation that a child would understand, but now the words tied her tongue. "Do you think that would be alright?"

Autumn nodded, her eyes wide. "Do you think you could read to me sometimes? Like at the library?"

She smiled. "I'm sure I could." She waited, but there were no other questions about sleeping arrangements or how long Max would be staying. She supposed to a four-year old, those details didn't matter.



“You can finish this book if you want.” Autumn picked it up and handed it to Max before sitting on the floor beside her. She wore the same yellow shirt as last Friday, with a smudge around the neck. Max wondered how often Nate did laundry. Actually, she wondered if Nate knew how to do laundry. Autumn wriggled closer, until she was practically sitting in Max’s lap. They couldn’t see Nate from where they sat, though Max could feel his gaze on the back of her neck.

She finished the book a few minutes later. As she set it aside, her stomach rumbled. Autumn looked over with a giggle. “Your tummy is rumbly.”

“Yes, it is.” She touched Autumn’s belly. “What about yours? Is it rumbly too?” Nate had mentioned something about having a hard time getting her to eat.

“A little. But it’s not making noises like yours is.”

“Well, I think that’s a good thing.” Max stood. “How about I unpack some of my things, and then we’ll have dinner?”

“Okay.”

“I already brought your bags in,” Nate said. He stood in the kitchen doorway. “Took ‘em upstairs.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Her stomach rumbled again, and she realized she hadn’t eaten lunch. “Sorry. I’m not usually the obviously starving type.” Unlike Bethany, Max didn’t count calories or follow fad diets. She liked food. She had meat on her bones, hips and boobs of average size, and her legs had once been roppy with muscle, as a runner in high school and college. She hadn’t run in years, though, and her thighs and calves had turned soft with inactivity. Her mother’s words echoed inside her brain. *You should come here and work out.* But Max couldn’t picture it. Maybe she’d just start hiking. Silver Valley had a system of trails that ran adjacent to downtown. So she’d heard, anyway.

“Rachael bought a bunch of groceries yesterday.” Nate broke into her thoughts. “We can come up with something for dinner.”

“What do you like?” The question sounded heavy with sexual innuendo, and Max felt herself blush. *Get a grip.* “Or maybe I should ask what Autumn likes? Four-year-olds tend to be pickier than grown men.” She looked over her shoulder. Autumn stood in the spare room with her teddy bear held tight to her chest. “Honey, do you like chicken nuggets?”

Autumn shook her head.

“How about hot dogs?”

Another head shake.

“Try a cheese sandwich,” Nate said.

“Grilled cheese?”

“No. Just a piece of white cheese in between two slices of bread.”

“Really? I could grill it, make it a little more interesting.” Max walked into the kitchen and opened a cabinet. “Where do you keep the pots and pans?”

“To your right. But I don’t think she’ll eat it if it’s warm. She seems to have an issue with that.”

“I can give it a try.” Max squatted and opened another cabinet. She found one frying pan and one medium-sized pot. Neither had a lid. “Do you have anything else to cook in?”

“I think there might be a baking sheet somewhere.”

She looked up. “Your parents still come up here, don’t they? I’m surprised your mom doesn’t keep this place fully equipped.”

Nate leaned against the refrigerator with a sheepish expression. “I, uh, kind of threw a few things away.”

“Like pots and pans?”

“And maybe a few plastic containers. And a couple of plates.”

Max stood and started unwrapping a loaf of bread. “Why on earth are you throwing dishes away?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t feel like washing them.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or run for the hills. Instead she bit her lip and tried not to smile as she took the package of cheese and carton of milk he handed her from the fridge. “I see. Well, I don’t mind washing dishes, so maybe I’ll pick up a few things next week to restock.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No. But it’ll make things easier.”

“You think I’m an idiot.”

“I don’t.” At that, she did laugh. “I think you’re a bachelor who’s used to living by himself and whose sister or mother took care of the household chores for most of your life.”

He smiled. “That’s about right.”

She glanced over her shoulder at Autumn. “What do you say we change that up a little? Be good for her to see her father using a little elbow grease in the kitchen.”

He tugged at the bill of his baseball cap. “I guess I could try. If you’ll help me.”

“Deal. I’ll help you learn your way around a kitchen, and you convince my mother I’m not a lost cause when it comes to men.”

At that, his smile disappeared. His gaze moved from her face to her hips, lingering for longer than a second on her breasts. “I won’t have any trouble doing that,” he said, and a squiggly feeling moved through her.

*Is he flirting with me?*

No. He was being nice, the way he probably was to people at the bar, the same way she was being nice by moving in here and helping out with Autumn. Silly to think it could be, would be, anything more.

She found some paper plates in a cabinet and proceeded to make them each a cold cheese sandwich. Nate opened a bag of corn chips that weren't too stale, Max sliced an apple, and the three of them ate outside as the sun went down.

CHAPTER  
TEN

Max had to read Autumn three stories, the last one twice, before the little girl's eyelids finally closed and she curled up on her pillow. Max left the door open, as Nate had instructed, and crept downstairs. It was almost ten.

"How'd it go?" Nate sat on the front porch in darkness. He held a beer in one hand.

"Okay." Her eyes burned, and unfamiliar tension pinched the back of her neck. She hadn't unpacked a thing, and all she wanted was to crawl into bed.

"Thanks. I couldn't read *Summer Sunshine* one more time without my eyes bleeding."

She eased herself into the chair beside him. "That's how kids are. They like to hear their favorite ones over and over. It's comforting. And it's how they learn."

He nodded and tipped back his bottle. "Want a drink?"

"No, thanks. I'll be asleep in ten seconds if I do."

He chuckled and drank again. "It's nice having someone here."

She watched fireflies dance outside. "I hope I can help."

"You already have."

The words fell over her like a warm sweater, easing the tension in her neck. She closed her eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How much does she know about her mom?"

"You mean about the cancer? About Lexi dying?" His voice caught on the last word.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up." She opened her eyes and turned to look at him, but he stared straight ahead.

"It's okay. We talked to her before Lexi left. Well, Lexi did most of the talking. I sat there like an idiot." He went to drink again, but his bottle must have been empty, because he put it aside and opened a new one. "She told Autumn she wouldn't see her for a while, that soon it would be time for her to go live with the angels. That her aunt would come back to get her in time for Christmas, and that she'd be staying with me until then."

"How did Autumn take it?"

"It's hard to tell. She seemed to know what Lexi meant, but I guess living with the angels is a nice way to put it."

Max nodded. "Four's a tough age to comprehend death."

"I think any age is tough to comprehend the death of a twenty-five year old." His voice grew rough, his profile still as a statue.

She went to touch his hand and then drew back. Anything she could say or do seemed hollow. From what she gathered, he barely remembered Lexi, but still, knowing someone you'd slept with years ago was dying of cancer had to be depressing. Someone set off fireworks across the lake, and starbursts of red and yellow filled the sky.

"Murphys are having a barbeque."

"You know that from here?"

"They have one every year."

Nate was so ingrained in the fabric of Whispering Pines. He knew every person in and around town. He fit seamlessly into the town's social groups, from white collar to blue collar to college students to the unemployed and everyone in between. Everyone knew him. Everyone liked him. And she was a librarian who'd lived with her mother until six hours ago. Pretty unlikely couple, if there ever was one.

"How's your mom?" Nate asked as the fireworks faded. "She didn't fall over in shock when you told her you were moving in with me?"

"I thought she might. But Bethany Abbott prides herself on poise. She was Miss New York back in the early eighties, you know."

"Really? I had no idea."

She looked at him, startled, until he laughed. "Come on. Everyone knows that. Isn't her name still on a sign outside of town?"

Max rolled her eyes. "Yes." The Rotarians had erected the bright blue and yellow sign in Bethany's honor years ago. *Whispering Pines, Home of Bethany Abbott, Miss New York 198\_*. The last number had peeled off, or, Max suspected, been scraped off by her mother so no one knew the actual year or could pinpoint her age.

"How's her campaign going?"

"Okay, I guess. I haven't done too much to help her yet. I did tell her to set up a website and gave her the name of the guy who does the one for the library."

"I've seen her flyers and signs all over the place."

"That's a good thing." Max scratched a fresh mosquito bite on her leg. "She has a fundraising dinner next weekend. It's at the Elks Club."

"Behind the Catholic church? I've done a few parties there. Dee jayed them, I mean."

“I knew what you meant.” But her face went a little hot at the idea of Nate Hunter *doing* anything or anyone. She pulled her fingers through her hair. “And about that. I was wondering...”

“If I’d go with you?” Nate took a long drink of beer. “Of course. It’s part of our arrangement, right? Act like the devoted boyfriend, smile for the camera, put my arm around you, that sort of thing?”

“Yes. If you still think, you know, that you can.” Now that she thought about it, she hoped they could pull it off. Acting like a happy romantic couple in public might be harder than she’d imagined. She hadn’t really dated a lot of guys, just Jacob Guirt back in college and Les Meeks, the nice local professor who volunteered upstairs in the library. Both seemed like ages ago.

“I’m not going to run into any jealous ex-boyfriends on the campaign trail, am I?” Nate asked, as if reading her mind.

“No.”

“No?” He frowned, as if doubtful. “Why is that?”

“What? That I don’t have any jealous ex-boyfriends around? I don’t know. I’ve always broken up with guys on good terms.”

“Ah.” He eyed her over his bottle. “So you do the breaking up?”

“I guess. More like it was mutual.”

Nate yawned. “Boring, Maxine.”

She swatted him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that if you’ve never had your heart broken, or never broken anyone else’s heart, then you haven’t been in love.”

“This from the playboy bartender who dates a different woman every month.”

“Hey, I’m just telling you what I’ve heard. I never said I’ve lived it.”

“Do *you* have any jealous ex-girlfriends we might run into?”

“Sure. A half-dozen or so.”

“I’m serious.” She didn’t know why she cared.



“Nah. I’ve never been that serious with anyone, tell you the truth.”  
That didn’t surprise her.

“So what should I wear to this fundraising dinner? Tuxedo? Suit and tie? Shorts and polo shirt?”

“Whatever you want, I’d say.”

He lifted a brow. “Might be sorry what you ask for, Abbott. Because I look good in a Speedo.”



HE BET she looked good in a bikini, too, but he refrained from saying that out loud. He still wasn’t sure how to take Maxine Abbott, or how she might take him or his comments. He finished his beer and set the bottle on the floor.

“How’s the new job?” she asked. She wore blue shorts and a plain white t-shirt and stretched out her bare feet on the chaise lounge.

“It’s okay.”

“That good?”

He screwed up his face. “It kind of sucks, to be honest.”

“At least the Crawshaws are really successful. I mean, if you have to sell insurance for anyone, it might as well be them. I think they’ve been around Whispering Pines for a hundred years or something crazy like that.”

“Feels like everyone there is a hundred years old, so I can believe it.”

Max smiled in the shadows. He liked her smile, white teeth just a little crooked and pink lips that bowed in the middle. “It can’t be that bad.”

“It’s good money. But I miss bartending.”

“Really? I don’t know how you stay up past nine.”

“It’s past nine now, and you’re still up.”

“Barely. And you know what I mean. I’m not pouring drinks and serving food and talking to twenty people all at once.”

“Ah. So you have been to Jimmy’s.” He didn’t recall seeing her there, but Max wasn’t the kind of woman who stood out in a crowd.

“Once or twice. I think I used my first fake ID at Jimmy’s when I was eighteen.”

He pretended to look horrified. “No.”

She smiled again. He liked it even more this time. Or maybe that was the dull warmth of two beers, or the relief of having someone else in the house to help out with Autumn. He wasn’t sure. He couldn’t be crushing on Max. That didn’t make sense. Theirs was a practical agreement, nothing more.

“I’m not a total prude, Hunter.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“You thought it.”

“Did not.”

She laughed and got up. “I’m going to bed.” She stood beside him, hands on her hips, and he got a whiff of shampoo or perfume, the barest scent of flowers. His groin tightened in arousal, and he dropped a hand over it. He needed to get laid. And not by the very nice librarian who’d just moved into his house.

“Okay.” He kept his gaze on the fireflies outside. “Hope you sleep all right.”

“Thanks.” She paused, as if expecting him to say something else, but he didn’t. He needed a cold shower and about eight hours of sleep, and then he’d think about whether or not he’d made a mistake by letting a strange woman move into his house. A woman who, by

the way, looked awfully good in plain old shorts and a t-shirt. Who had a sexy smile and probably didn't even know it.

“I'll see you in the morning.”

Nate raised a hand as she walked away, the floorboards creaking in all the familiar places. “See you.”

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

The following afternoon, Max backed up the driveway of the farmhouse. Late afternoon shadows slanted across the water, the road, the expanse of green lawn. Nate and Autumn sat on the front steps. Autumn had drawn something on the ground in chalk, large looping lines and circles over the broken pavers and into the grass. Her cheeks were pink, her hair falling out of the braids Max had put in that morning before she left. *At least she's playing.* That was a good sign. Max got out and popped the trunk.

"What did you buy?" Nate walked over. "The whole store?"

"Don't be silly. I just picked up a few things. What have you two been doing?"

He pointed at the chalk squiggles. "As you can see, we had a very complex game of hopscotch earlier. Then we went down to the water and discovered Autumn has no interest in swimming." He yanked on his baseball cap and lowered his voice. "Good thing no one was close enough to hear her scream. The neighbors would've called Child Protective Services on me."

"Really?"

"Really. I guess she doesn't know how."

“She’s still young. You could teach her.”

“Water won’t be warm for much longer.”

“Maybe not in the lake, then.” Max pulled two large bags out of the truck and walked toward the house. “But the Y has lessons.” She smiled at Autumn. “Hi, honey. Want to see what I bought?”

The girl nodded and trotted ahead. *She’s so blonde*, Max thought as she followed. *Almost exactly the same color hair as her father*. Inside, Max put the bags on the kitchen floor. Nate followed with a cardboard box and studied the glossy picture on the outside. “Pots and pans?”

“Just a three-piece set. Nothing fancy. Don’t worry. I won’t make you use them.”

“Good.”

“I won’t let you throw them away, either.”

Nate chuckled, put the box on the table and went back outside. “Hope you didn’t spend a lot on all this.”

She followed him and took four smaller bags from the back seat. “I didn’t. And I lived with my mother until a day ago, remember, so I have a little cash saved up.” Not quite as much as before her shopping spree, but it had been more fun than she expected, buying new curtains for her bedroom, blinds for the bathroom, and paint for Autumn’s play room.

Ten minutes later, they stood in the middle of the living room. Nate whistled. “Didn’t know I was gonna be on an episode of *House Crashers*.” He peered into a box that held dinner plates and a set of silverware. “We do have forks and knives, you know.”

“Plastic ones.” She’d found them this morning in the kitchen, along with a single bottle of cleaner, a handful of paper-thin napkins, and a cracked porcelain water pitcher. She opened another box and pulled out four placemats.

“That’s Digger,” Autumn said. She stood on her tiptoes, a shy smile on her face.

“Who’s Digger?” Nate asked.

“Only the most famous dog in all of Dogland. Right?” Max said. Each placemat had a different character from the popular children’s series.

“Right.” Autumn’s gaze roved over the mats, her eyes wide with pleasure.

“I got this too.” Max took the phone books off Autumn’s chair and replaced them with a sturdy blue booster seat.

“Oh. Good idea,” Nate said.

“Thanks. I just have some groceries in the front seat to bring in, and then I’m done.”

“Are you sure there’s not a shipment of furniture or a moving van full of boxes on its way?”

She stuck out her tongue and bounced down the porch steps. She felt oddly giddy at buying such domestic things, and yet once she’d gotten into the swing of it, she’d had a hard time stopping. *Autumn would love that book*, she’d think in one aisle, *or we could really use a new side table for the porch*. Then she’d stop herself for a few seconds, because the *we* wasn’t a real *we*, but a false one, a temporary one. She wasn’t buying any of this with Nate. She was only buying it because he needed someone to keep his house in order and his child safe for a few months. But the sobering thoughts never lasted long. *Might as well enjoy it while it lasts*, she’d decide, hearing Bethany’s voice in her head. Her mother certainly knew how to live in the here and now. Maybe it was time Max tried to do the same.

“Here’s the last of it,” she said a few minutes later. Eggs, juice, and fresh fruits and vegetables went into the refrigerator. Another

bag held rolls and bagels from her favorite bakery near the library.

“Healthy stuff?” Nate asked. He made a face. “Where are the potato chips? And the cookies?”

Autumn giggled, and they both looked at her in surprise.

“You can eat whatever you want. But Autumn gets the good stuff.” Max winked at the girl, who remained at the table on her new booster seat, tracing Digger’s features. “What do you say we try some real chicken tonight, grilled outside, instead of those breaded chicken nuggets?”

“Okay,” Autumn agreed.

“See? She likes healthy food.”

“Fine. But I’m stashing some Oreos and ice cream for myself.” Nate helped her put away the rest of the groceries and then took two beers from the fridge. He popped the tops and offered her one. “Don’t tell me you’re too tired this time. It’s only five o’clock.”

“I’m not. And thank you.” She wiped her forehead, sticky with sweat. The cool, bitter liquid slid down her throat, breaking the heavy heat of the day. She could do this. She could help Nate with Autumn, freshen up the farmhouse, and still manage her job and her mother’s crazy notion to run for Town Council. She could live in the moment.

There was just that one little issue of convincing Bethany that Nate was actually Max’s boyfriend.



“WILL SHE BE OKAY?”

The Tuesday after Labor Day, Nate stood in the doorway of Precious Little People Preschool. Panic crawled up his spine. “I mean, if she gets upset or anything, or wants to leave early, I’m right across the street.” He pointed, just in case the woman with the kind

face and the alphabet-lettered shirt didn't know where he worked. "At American Insurance. I can be here right away."

"I know, Mr. Hunter."

*Ack.* Nate wanted to throw up. Mr. Hunter was his father, a responsible middle-aged adult who owned a home and had raised two children to adulthood. Not him. Nate pulled at his collar. "I'm just saying, in case anything happens—"

"Look at her." The woman, Miss Candy or Miss Katie or something like that, pointed across the room. Autumn was sitting at a table with a book open in front of her. Another little girl with bright red hair sat beside her. "She's already making a friend."

Nate exhaled and wondered again how people did this day in and day out. Parenthood seemed like an inordinate amount of worry, coupled with exhaustion and guilt and rare moments of happiness when you almost did something right. Not that he was feeling that way this morning.

"She'll be fine." Miss Candy or Katie patted Nate's shoulder. "And now would be a good time for you to go, while she's distracted."

"But I didn't say goodbye."

"You did, actually."

"I did?"

The woman nodded and steered him toward the door. "A few minutes ago, when she was putting her things in her cubby. But you can call anytime during the day to check on her."

"Can I stop by?"

"It's not really advised. That'll make it harder for her to get settled, if you're always popping in."

Nate nodded. He didn't really see how visiting Autumn every so often would be bad, especially since she was new in town and knew



almost no one, but he supposed he'd leave it to the teachers. "What time do I pick her up?"

"Three o'clock is the first pick-up, four-thirty the second, and we have extended hours until six."

"I work until five."

"Then I imagine we'll see you at five-oh-one."

Nate blinked. Was she making fun of him? This woman wearing embroidered letters and dancing kittens on her chest? "I'll be here." He took one last look at Autumn, who continued to talk to the red-haired girl. To his surprise, a lump lodged in his throat. She'd been living with him for less than two weeks. How could he possibly feel so attached to her, so responsible for her, already? He swallowed, backed through the door, and almost stepped in front of an SUV driving too fast down the street.

"Son of a ..." Nate backpedaled, caught himself, and was about to flip off the driver when the SUV pulled into an *Employees Only* spot in front of his office building. *Oh, you're kidding me.* He crossed the street and waited to see who emerged. Probably some uptight white collar guy who worked upstairs, in one of the law or accounting firms on the second floor. *Watch your speed,* he got ready to say. *There's a preschool on this block, in case you hadn't noticed.*

But a long pair of legs clad in leather boots was the first thing he saw when the door opened. The second thing was a leather mini skirt, then blonde hair that fell halfway down the driver's back. Not an uptight white collar guy after all. "Hiya, Nate. Heard you got a job with Crawshaw."

"Ella? Seriously?"

"What?" Ella Ericksen locked her SUV and headed for Divine Designs, the salon next door to American Insurance.

"You were driving like forty miles an hour. You almost hit me."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Since when are you a middle-aged man who’s worried about how I drive?”

“Since I have a daughter.” The word, that had sounded so awkward and foreign on his tongue a few days earlier, felt powerful now. *A daughter.*

“Oh, right. I heard about that.” Ella looked over his shoulder. “She’s at Precious?”

“First day. And I’d appreciate it if, you know, you didn’t hit her. Or any of the other kids.”

“No problem.” Ella flashed him a bright smile. She hadn’t changed at all since high school, still good-looking and still on the ditzy end of the spectrum. Nate could’ve predicted years ago she would’ve ended up here, doing hair and nails on Park Place Run, selling beauty services to the town’s middle and upper classes. He waved goodbye and stared at the tinted front window with *American Insurance* written on it in plain block letters. Solid. Strong. Boring as all get-out.

He never would’ve predicted he’d end up here too.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

“When is Summer getting here?” Nate called up the stairs.

Max stood in the bathroom trying to get her hair to lay flat. Thanks to the lovely September humidity, and living this close to the lake, her normally straight hair was now curling up in random places. *This is ridiculous.* “Six o’clock,” she called back. She gave up and pulled it into a ponytail, secured by a black scrunchy. Her mother would probably look at her in horror—“*Maxine, why won’t you let me do something with that hair?*”—or maybe she’d be so distracted by Max’s date that she wouldn’t even notice. Max hoped for the latter.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs, and Nate appeared in the doorway behind her.

“What are you doing?” Max wrapped her arms around herself, even though she was fully dressed. Her cheeks heated as her gaze moved across him in the mirror. He wore a pair of khaki dress pants but no shirt or shoes. The overhead light bounced off the flat, taut planes of his chest, and fine blond hairs led a path straight down to his navel. And probably beyond. Yes, definitely beyond. She knew

without doubt it led past the waistband of his pants, below his boxer shorts, and...

*Oh, Max, you are in a world of trouble if you don't look away right now.* She'd heard all about Nate Hunter's reputation when it came to women. She knew probably half the female population of Whispering Pines had explored the chest she couldn't keep her eyes off. She was here to help with Autumn. And to get out of her mother's house. Nothing else.

*Yeah, right.*

He grinned and looked her up and down. "Nice dress."

"Thanks." With effort, she stopped staring at his tanned skin and the muscles that stretched down his torso. She'd never really noticed his arms before, the definition of his biceps and the broadness of his shoulders. His very bare shoulders.

"What's Autumn having for dinner?"

Max blinked. "That's what you came up here to ask me?"

"That, and have you seen my shoes?"

"Seriously?"

"I thought I put them by the front door yesterday. Now I can't find 'em."

"I haven't seen them. Give me ten minutes and I'll come down and help you look. And I put out sandwich meat and bread for Autumn. And baby carrots. She loves those."

"Okay." He gave her another long look. "I don't think I've ever seen you in a dress."

"Probably not."

"I like it. It's not tight enough, though."

She made a face at him in the mirror and waved him away. "Get out of here. I don't need to look like a hooker at an Elks Club dinner, thank you very much."

Ha laughed and backed out the door. "I don't think anyone would mistake the local librarian for a hooker."

Max looked down and smoothed the skirt of her plain black dress. It fell to her knees, with a simple scoop neck and cap sleeves. Too girly for her taste, but Bethany had picked it out as a Christmas gift years ago. She put on some blush and eyeliner, followed with a dab of mascara, and then applied clear lip gloss. She slipped silver hoops through her ears and a solid silver bracelet onto her wrist. *There*. That was as close to hooker look as she would get.

Someone knocked on the front door, and she grabbed her shoes and purse and headed downstairs. "Hey, Summer," she said when she got to the door. "Thanks so much for coming."

Rachael's best friend from high school walked inside with a tote bag over one shoulder. "No problem. I've got books and games and snacks. I'm ready."

Autumn stuck her head out from the playroom. "Hi, Miss Summer."

Max straightened Autumn's shirt and ran a hand over her flyaway hair. They'd run into Summer and Dinah a few times at the library, and Summer had agreed to babysit as soon as Max asked. "She'll be ready for dinner as soon as we leave, and a bath after that,"

"Okay." Summer dropped to her knees and hugged Autumn. "Good to see you, honey."

Autumn hugged her back, a quick little squeeze around the neck, but it was definitely progress, Max thought. The girl smiled more often these days and didn't clutch Teddy twenty-four seven. "We shouldn't be too late. The dinner goes until ten, so we'll be home after that."

"No problem. Take your time."

Nate emerged from his bedroom. He had a shirt and tie on now, but still no shoes. "I can't find them."

"You don't have another pair?"

He looked at Max like she'd grown a second head. "Who needs two pairs of dress shoes?"

Summer chuckled. Max looked around. "You left them by the front door?"

"Yeah."

She did a quick sweep of the living room. She walked onto the front porch, back into the kitchen, then stopped outside the playroom. "Here they are." But she almost didn't want to move them. Nate's black wingtips sat by the worn sofa, with two of Autumn's stuffed animals sitting atop them.

"Aw, geez. Why'd she do that?" Nate came up behind Max, so close she could feel the heat from his body.

"I don't know. But it's adorable."

Nate went to move the toys and then stopped. "You do it."

"Autumn, honey, come here."

The little girl walked over, eyes wide.

"Mr. Nate needs his shoes for dinner tonight."

"Where are you going?"

"Remember? We told you we were going out for a little bit."

Autumn's lower lip trembled.

*Oh, no. Please don't do this.* Bethany had called Max three times today, checking and double-checking that she'd be at the Elks Club early to help set up. They were already pushing it, with Nate's MIA shoes. She couldn't bear it if Autumn dissolved into tears.

"We'll be back before you know it. And Miss Summer is here to keep you company."

Autumn looked up at Nate, then at Summer, then back to Max. Her lip continued to quiver, but she didn't cry. Now that Max thought about it, she hadn't seen Autumn cry once. But the pain and fear on the girl's face were clear. Max put one arm around her. "Would you like to come with us?" She had no idea if the fundraiser was child-friendly. Probably not, considering Bethany—or rather, Peter—was footing the bill for an open bar. But this child had just lost her mother, and Max would be damned if she was going to leave her behind.

"Can we bring her?" Nate asked.

"I have no idea." She looked at Autumn again. "What do you think? Would you like to go?"

Autumn nodded. One thumb snaked into her mouth, and she grabbed Teddy from the floor.

"Want me to come along?" Summer offered. "I can watch her if you need to do campaign things."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

And so they piled into Max's car a few minutes later, three adults and a sniffly four-year old. Not the way she'd planned for the night to go, but maybe Bethany would welcome the whole family vibe. Or maybe she'd flip out entirely. *Here goes nothing.* Max squeezed her eyes shut for a moment before starting the car and heading for town.

MAX SNUCK a half-dozen looks at Nate on the twenty-minute car ride over the mountain into Silver Valley. They'd talked briefly about how tonight might unfold, but she'd counted on having some time alone in the car to go over the details. With Autumn in the back seat and Summer making small talk, that wasn't going to happen now.

"You okay?" he said one time when he caught her looking.

She nodded. They passed the library, the YWCA, a strip of boutiques, and then turned off Main Street. Bright lights a half-mile away marked the Elks Club. Less than a minute later, Max turned into the parking lot. Looked like a few guests had already arrived, but they'd beaten most of the crowd.

"Go ahead," Summer called as she opened Autumn's door and unbuckled the car seat. "Go get settled. We'll be right behind you."

Max nodded, her mouth suddenly chalky with nerves. A giant, life-sized poster of Bethany greeted them at the front door. *Your Next Town Council Member!* read the words along the bottom. The real thing, dressed in a low-cut, bright red dress and gold stilettos, stood just inside.

"You're here!" Bethany grabbed Max's arm. "I need your opinion about the seating. Right now we have the press set up—" She stopped. "Well, excuse my manners." Her voice went honey-sweet as she batted her eyelashes at Nate. "I am so glad you could make it." She looked from him to Max and back again. "I still can't believe you two kept this a secret for so long."

Nate slipped one arm around Max's back, and she almost jumped at the contact. *Control yourself. You're dating, remember? Play along.* As best as she could, she leaned into him and smelled cologne. *Hmm. That's rather nice. Understated. Yummy.*

"Maxine?" Bethany's voice went up the octave, and Max jerked upright, practically ripping herself from Nate's grasp.

"Sorry, Ma?"

Bethany gave her a funny look. "I said, I didn't realize you were bringing Autumn with you."

"Oh. Yes." She glanced behind her. Summer held the girl by the hand in the doorway. "I hope that's okay. She was upset at being left behind. I'm sure you understand, what with her mother..."



“Of course. It’s fine.” But Bethany’s mouth went tight at the edges. “I’m just not sure where we’ll put the two of them. Every seat is, you know, taken.” She took teeny-tiny steps into the hall and stopped, hands on her hips. A low stage stretched across one wall, with tables set on either side of a podium. “We’re up there,” she pointed. “You and Nate and Peter and me on the right, and Carter and Willis on the left. And Parvati from the *Evening Post*.”

“The *Post* is here?” Nate said into Max’s ear. She jumped again. Good Lord, she’d need to get a handle on that. *You live with him. He touches you all the time.*

Yeah. Right.

“Parvati’s new to the paper,” Max said. “Her mom knew my mom from school or something. She agreed to follow Ma around and do a bunch of stories about the campaign.”

“That’s awfully nice.” Nate dropped one arm around Max’s shoulders. He didn’t blink or jump. He didn’t even look over, like he’d done this a hundred times or more. He probably had, Max reasoned, between his bartending job and his steady stream of girlfriends over the years. Really, she’d picked the perfect person to play her fake boyfriend. Her growing concern was that she wasn’t the perfect person to play the fake girlfriend.

“We can sit in the back,” Summer offered. “I saw some extra chairs in a closet. We’ll just pull them up near the door, and that way if we need to slip out and get some air, we won’t bother anyone.”

Bethany nodded. “That’s fine, fine, of course.” She steered Max toward the tables at the front. “Carter is doing the welcome address, then we’ll have dinner, and then Willis is introducing me.” She stuffed a piece of paper into Max’s hand. “Here. Can you read this? Tell me if it sounds okay?”

“Ah, sure.” She plopped into her seat. Nate remained standing and pointed at the bar in the corner. *Drink?* he mouthed. She nodded. A drink couldn’t come fast enough.

Guests began arriving as the waitstaff set the remaining tables in the hall. They filled water glasses and placed silverware in white napkins on each plate. Max watched as Nate carried two glasses of what looked like ginger ale over to Summer and Autumn. Summer had found a small table somewhere, and Autumn was leaning on it and drawing with crayons. Max’s phone beeped with a text.

**We’re fine**, Summer had written. **Just focus on keeping your mom happy.**

Max sent back a smiley face and relaxed a fraction. More guests filled the hall. Voices echoed against the paneled walls and high ceiling. Two fans blew the air around, to little avail. Sweat began dripping down Max’s back, and she shifted in her chair. *I could really use that drink.* But Nate had disappeared, and when she caught sight of him, he was leaning against the bar, chatting up a middle-aged couple she didn’t recognize.

“How does it sound?” Bethany swooped in close, her perfume nearly choking Max.

“Ah, it’s fine.” She’d barely looked at the speech. She scanned the paragraphs and saw phrases like *...bring a fresh face and new ideas...* and *...ready for a change...* She pushed the paper back into Bethany’s hand. “You’ll be great. Don’t worry about it.”

Bethany ran one hand through her hair and shrugged. “I’m not worried. This is a cakewalk compared to a beauty pageant.” She looked around. “Where’s that handsome boyfriend of yours? I want to get some pictures for the *Post*.” As if on cue, Parvati squeezed through the growing crowd, flanked by a tired-looking man with a grizzled beard and a wrinkled shirt. In contrast, the petite reporter

wore a gorgeous red and black print dress and strappy heels. She looked fresh out of school, with perfect makeup and smooth hair. She didn't look at all like she had succumbed to the effects of the humid, cloying air in the room. Max pulled at the fabric around her own waist, damp with sweat.

"Nate!" Bethany called across the room. "Picture time!"

Max cringed. Now their charade would begin in earnest. She closed one eye, afraid to see his expression as he walked over. He handed her a glass of chilled white wine and winked. "Here I am. Ready for the camera." He leaned over and planted a kiss on Bethany's cheek. "How's the prettiest Town Council candidate in town?"

Bethany wriggled and cooed like a schoolgirl. Then she stopped, and her eagle-eyed gaze zoomed in on the table. "Why did you give my daughter a glass of wine?"

Max froze. Nate didn't know, of course, that she was allergic to wine. And bananas and kiwi. The fruit allergy, they'd found out about years ago, when Max swelled up in first grade after eating banana bread from a classmate. The doctor hadn't bothered to tell her she might develop a wine allergy someday too. She'd found out about that one after ending up in the hospital her freshman year of college.

A boyfriend would know that. *Bethany* knew a boyfriend would know that. Max pushed the glass away and forced a laugh. "Sweetheart, I think you mixed up our drinks." She reached for whatever he held, something that looked like scotch or bourbon on the rocks, and took a swallow.

*Oh dear God, I've set my mouth on fire.* She looked at Bethany, Parvati, and the cameraman, who seemed interested for the first time all night, and forced herself to swallow before she spit it out. "That's your wine."

“Of course it is. Sorry, babe. Got caught up in the moment, what with all the guests.” He took a sip and watched her intently over the rim of his glass. *What else haven't you told me?* his gaze seemed to ask.

Max continued to sweat. They needed to sit down and make a list ASAP. They could start with food allergies and go from there. Likes, dislikes, favorite colors, favorite foods, and anything else they could think of. Max scolded herself for not doing it earlier. Bethany's general intuition and desperation to marry off her daughter meant she'd be watching the two of them like a hawk.

Right now, though, Max needed to do something to wipe the look of puzzlement off her mother's face. She thought about taking another sip of whatever horrible drink she held in her hand, but she couldn't make herself. *I never drink in front of Nate*, she could say, but Bethany wouldn't buy that excuse. *My allergies never came up*, she could say, but that seemed unlikely too, for a couple that lived together.

Nate solved the problem for her. He ran one hand over his white-blond hair, gelled into haphazard spikes. His blue eyes caught hers and twinkled. Then, with the Elks Club filled to capacity and the press looking on, he put down his glass, leaned over, and kissed Max squarely on the mouth.

CHAPTER  
THIRTEEN

Max flinched under his touch, and Nate immediately regretted it. He shouldn't have kissed her, not in public, not their first time out together. Then her lips softened against his, and he stopped being sorry. *She tastes good.* She smelled good, too, and he wondered if that was her perfume or her shampoo or something else. But the kiss lasted only a second before she pulled back, flushed. Her gaze caught his with a mix of confusion and gratitude.

"Sorry," he said to Bethany and the reporter from the *Post*. "Sometimes I can't resist."

The comment made Max blush harder, but it seemed to soothe Bethany, who'd turned all Mama Bear the minute he set down a glass of wine. *Have to ask Max about that,* he thought as an elderly man made his way to the podium and tapped on the microphone.

"Thank you," Max said through a tight smile.

"No problem." He passed her the bread basket. "Thought maybe I'd crossed a line."

"Just caught me a little off guard."

He scanned the room and hoped Autumn hadn't seen the kiss. Not because he hadn't enjoyed it, but because it might confuse her.

It was one thing to have Miss Max the librarian living in their house. It was another thing altogether to go around kissing her in public. From the back corner, Summer gave him a thumbs-up and a broad smile. She was in on the ruse, though they hadn't told anyone else besides Rachael. No reason, they both figured, because in six weeks Autumn and Max would both be moving out.

Geoff Carter, current Town Council Supervisor, began speaking, and Nate zoned out almost at once. Politics bored him to death. He never voted. He never watched the news. He supposed he probably should, but everything seemed so crooked when it came to politicians and elections. Why bother? At least Bethany didn't seem driven by questionable, underlying motives.

"...our very own former Miss New York will be a welcome addition to the Town Council..." the old man rasped. He grinned through his dentures, and Nate wondered how much his endorsement had to do with Bethany's politics and how much with the way she filled out a cocktail dress.

Carter made a few more equally flattering comments, the crowd applauded, and Kevin Willis, another Council member, walked to the microphone. "We're so glad to see such a good turn-out..." he began.

"This is a good turn-out?" Nate whispered to Max.

"There's probably a hundred people here. I'd say that's good."

"I wonder how many of them are over the age of seventy-five?"

"I'm betting half."

Nate grinned and pulled at his collar. "How bloody hot is it in here? The Elks Club doesn't have air conditioning?"

"We're lucky the Elks Club has running water." Max took a sip of water. "What are you drinking, anyway? Lighter fluid?"

"I was trying to drink scotch until you took it away from me."

The corners of her mouth tugged up. "I'm allergic to wine."

"Seriously?" He'd never heard of such a thing.

She nodded. "Sorry. I should've mentioned it."

A waiter arrived with their salads, and radio music from the '40s played over the speakers. "What else do I need to know?" he asked. "I mean, about your food habits. Or any other kind of habits."

Her fork hovered over her plate, as if the question startled her. *I didn't mean your sexual habits*, he almost added, but he wasn't sure how she'd react to his joke. *You're not behind a bar anymore*, he reminded himself. He needed to act like a grown man. A father. An insurance salesman.

"Not too much," Max said. "I was thinking we should probably sit down and go over some things, though. Make a list."

"Oh, boy. You're a list maker?"

"Of course. They keep me organized." She narrowed her gaze. "Let me guess. You're not."

"I like to let things happen. Lists are, you know, confining. Restricting."

She cocked her head. "Well, letting things happen might be a good life philosophy for a bachelor, but you might want to think twice now that Autumn's living with you."

He winked. "I thought that's why you moved in. To keep me in line. And to make lists."

"You're impossible."

"I know," he said with a grin. "I still can't believe you're dating me."



THE NIGHT PASSED IN A BLUR. Waiters served dinner, people mingled, Bethany gave her speech, and to Max's surprise, people applauded loud and long. A few got to their feet, and several pulled out their checkbooks as she circled the room, batting her lashes and nodding left and right.

"Looks like your mom is building herself a following," Nate said. Bethany looked over at that precise moment, and he snaked one arm around the back of Max's chair. "Pretend you're happy to be with me."

Max leaned in and gave her mother a thumbs-up. "Think she's buying it?"

Nate nuzzled her earlobe, and it took everything she had to keep herself planted in her chair. "Sure," he said. "As long as you stop jumping every time I touch you."

"Sorry. It's still a little weird." But not unpleasant, she had to admit. His body heat radiated over her, and the memory of his kiss made her fingertips tingle. She couldn't remember the last time a kiss had turned her topsy-turvy. *It was a pretend kiss, not a real one.* Although she wasn't sure her lips could tell the difference.

"We should probably go," Nate said a few minutes later. He motioned at the back of the room, where a sleeping Autumn sat nestled in Summer's lap.

"I can't believe she fell asleep."

"I can't either." His expression softened. "She's really beautiful, isn't she?"

Max tucked her hand inside his elbow, even though her mother was nowhere to be seen. She loved watching his expression change when he looked at his daughter. She saw it at night sometimes before they went to bed, or when Autumn let Nate read to her, which



happened only occasionally. “She really is.” A flashbulb went off in her face, and she blinked as white lights peppered her vision.

“How about one more of the happy couple?” chirped Parvati. Her cameraman positioned himself closer and took aim.

Max pressed her cheek to Nate’s and smiled. *Hope that’s convincing enough.* The flash went off a few more times, and then they said their goodbyes and walked to the car.

“Nice night,” Summer said as she tucked Autumn into her car seat. “I think the last time I was at the Elks Club was for a Sweet Sixteen party back in high school.”

“Obviously, it is still *the* place to be,” Nate said. “I’m surprised the nursing home gave so many of its residents release time to come out.”

Max jabbed him on the knee. “Hey, those people have money.”

“I know. I’m just teasing. I’m happy for your mom.”

“Me too. There wasn’t an empty seat, so that’s good.” Max started the car and headed over Sunrise Mountain, back toward Whispering Pines.

“Did I play the part of devoted boyfriend convincingly enough?” Nate yanked off his tie and rolled down the window.

“Looked good from where I was sitting,” Summer said.

He let his arm dangle out the window. “Max is gonna make me a list of her allergies. And her likes and dislikes and what I should and shouldn’t do and say.”

“You make it sound like I’m scripting the next six weeks.”

“It might be better if you did. That way I won’t run the risk of screwing up again.”

Max smiled. Aside from the wine mistake, he’d been just about perfect tonight. She was the one who needed to work on her act. *I didn’t think it would be that hard, pretending to be involved with*

*someone I'm not.* But touching and joking and kissing—the kissing!—required much more familiarity and ease than she'd imagined.

They reached the farmhouse, sitting silent under a sky filled with stars and a half-moon hanging over the lake. Max pulled in and parked. “Thanks for coming tonight,” she told Summer. She unbuckled Autumn, still sleeping, and hoisted the girl into her arms.

“No problem. And put your wallet away,” Summer said to Nate. “You’re not paying me for babysitting. I got a free dinner out of it. And a pretty good show.” She winked. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell a soul. You’re both good actors.”

“Think we can pull this off?” Nate asked as they walked inside. He flipped on the kitchen light and turned to take Autumn. “I can put her to bed.”

Could they pull it off? She hoped so. It would make the next few weeks a lot easier. Already, Bethany seemed happier than Max had seen her in years, and she guessed at least some of it came from seeing her only daughter dating someone.

“Good night,” she said as they walked into the living room.

“Night. See you tomorrow.”

Max watched Nate’s back, strong and steady, as he walked up the stairs with Autumn in his arms. *He’s a good man. He’ll make someone a good husband someday.* A funny feeling swept over her, and she turned off the lights before she could analyze where it came from or what it might mean.

CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

“So how’s it going at home?” Nicki pushed up her sleeves and poured two shots of tequila. She slid one across the bar, but Nate shook his head.

“It’s going.” He poured himself a glass of water instead. A couple guys sat at the bar, and two families finished a late lunch in booths in the back, but otherwise Jimmy’s Watering Hole was quiet. He’d agreed to help out this one night, since Nicki was taking night classes and the boss hadn’t hired another bartender yet.

“She settling in?” Nicki asked. She did a shot, followed by a slice of lime popped into her mouth.

“Who? Autumn?”

She gave him a funny look around the lime. “Of course. Who else?”

He forgot not everyone knew about Max moving into the farmhouse. So far they’d kept it on the down low. No reason to shout it to all of Whispering Pines or Silver Valley, since the arrangement was temporary. People would find out eventually. Actually, they’d probably find out sooner rather than later, thanks to the *Post’s* coverage of Bethany’s Town Council campaign.

“She is,” Nate answered. “Finally sleeping through the night. She’s at Precious Little People too, five days a week. That’s a preschool, before you ask. It’s on Park Place Run across from my office.”

Nicki sucked on another slice of lime. “Funny hearing you talk like that. Used to be, this was your office.”

“Tell me about it.” The smells of disinfectant and fried food, the sounds of barstools scraping and the dishwasher running in the kitchen, instantly brought him back to his prior life. Man, he felt about a hundred years old, getting up at six and making cold calls to hawk insurance policies and then driving home to eat dinner, give Autumn a bath, go to bed, and do it all again. He yanked down his baseball cap. “You know what, gimme one of those.”

Nicki grinned and toasted him with the tequila bottle. “Now you’re talking.”

He tossed back the shot and reached for a lime. The tequila tasted fine going down. Max had taken Autumn to some kind of play group at the library, followed by dinner with Bethany, which gave him the night off. He looked around. *Maybe I’ll pick up a couple shifts a week here.* The extra money wouldn’t hurt. Neither would reconnecting with his former life.

“Hey, man.” Someone clapped him on the back. “Or should I say, hey *dad?*”

He turned to see Dash Springer and Zane Andrews standing at the bar. Dash wrapped him in a headlock while Zane stole his baseball cap. “Where you been?” Dash asked. “Haven’t seen you at the gym in a while.”

Nate struggled to a stand and grabbed his hat. “Got a new life, man. Nine-to-five job and a kid, in case you forgot.”

“She’s cute,” Zane said. The two men climbed onto stools. Nate walked behind the bar and poured them two tall drafts. He thought about taking another shot of tequila but left it alone for the moment. “Saw her at preschool a couple times.”

“Yeah, she is. Thanks.”

“What’s up with Max Abbott?” Dash asked.

Nate’s cheeks went hot.

“She moved in with you, right?”

Nicki whistled and swatted him with a bar towel. “Hunter! You didn’t tell me that.”

“I don’t talk about my personal business.”

“Like hell you don’t. Last I knew, you were sleeping with that redhead over in Stanton. Need I remind you, I had to hear every last detail of how great she was in bed.”

“I thought you might want some pointers.”

Nicki hooted and threw the towel over her shoulder. She piled a tray high with dirty dishes and turned for the kitchen. “Thanks for the reminder of why I love women. Guys are jerks. Every last one of them.”

“How would you know?” Dash called after her. She flipped him off and disappeared. He chuckled. “Best-looking lesbian I know.”

“She’s the only lesbian you know.” Zane took a long drink. “Seriously, Hunter, what’s up with Max Abbott? You’re really hitting that?”

Nate didn’t answer.

“She’s pretty fine-looking,” Dash said.

“She was smart in school, right?” Zane added.

“She still is smart, if she’s a librarian,” Nicki said as she reemerged from the kitchen.

Zane chuckled. "What is it they say about librarians? They're wound up tight, but get those nerdy glasses off and the hair down, and—"

"She doesn't wear glasses," Nate interrupted. Talking about Max felt like a violation of privacy. Zane and Dash didn't need to know why she'd moved in. They sure didn't need to know how she looked with her hair down, sitting next to Autumn as they read to stuffed animals at night and the farmhouse creaked and settled around them. He picked up the bottle of tequila. "How 'bout you two quit talking and start drinking?" Nate poured four shots and passed them around. "Bottoms up." He lifted his glass in a toast and led the way.

FOUR HOURS LATER, his feet hurt, his head hurt, and if he had to listen to why the Yankees' rookie pitcher was ruining the team's shot at the playoffs one more time, Nate was going to stab his eardrums with a fork.

"Don'tcha think, Hunter?" A group of his former classmates sat at one end of the bar, three pitchers in. Crushed nachos and salsa covered the bar and the floor around them, and all Nate could think about was how long it would take him to clean up after them.

*I am an old man.* He shook his head. "Don't I think what?"

"Alfonso should-a been sent back to the minors. He's got a three million dollar contract and..."

Nate nodded some kind of agreement and went back to washing glasses. He didn't care much about baseball. Nicki had left a while ago for her night class, and while business had been slow, he'd had a steady stream of locals and a tip jar he'd already emptied twice. *Nothing better than coming home with a pocket full of cash,* he used to tell his sister. He'd spent most of it this summer on stupid stuff like

water skis and video games, but now he was thinking about buying Autumn a new set of bedroom furniture, something that fit a four-year old girl. Pink and purple and glittery. She seemed to like glitter.

His cell phone buzzed on the bar. **She had a hard time getting to sleep**, Max texted. **Think she misses you.**

His mouth quirked up. **Doubt that. You probably didn't read Gilly Go Home enough times.**

She sent back a row of smiley faces followed by **I read it 3 times!!!**

**Have a good time tonight?**

**Yes. She loved the library.**

Nate grinned as the guys at the bar booed at something on the television. Autumn would spend her entire day with books if she could. She must have gotten that from her mother. It sure wasn't in his blood.

**Dinner OK?** he asked.

**Can't believe it but yes. We went to Chicken Chalet on 4th St. Owner has Ma's posters and flyers everywhere.**

Nate was pretty sure the owner had slept with Bethany at some point, but he didn't mention that to Max. The guy owned a chain of six Chicken Chalets and was made of money, so if Bethany had him on her side, then good for her.

**She asked a lot of questions**, Max texted. **About us.**

**Us.** Nate ran his thumb over the screen. There wasn't an *us*, was there? Not in the traditional sense. Of course, nothing was really traditional about the situation he now found himself in.

**What did you tell her?**

**That we just started dating at the beginning of the summer. And that you'd known about Autumn for a while.**

Nate swallowed around a lump in his throat. He wished he had, not only for Lexi's sake, but for his own. He wondered sometimes what Autumn had looked like as a baby, what her first words had been, where she'd taken her first steps. He'd missed all of that.

The Yankees must have done something halfway decent, because the group at the bar cheered and finished off their pitcher. One of the guys whistled at Nate and held up the empty container, and he went to fill it again. "Last call, boys," he said as he put it down.

When he got back to his phone, Max had sent a question mark followed by a **Guess you're busy** text. Finally she wrote, **I'm crashing. See you tomorrow.** He didn't bother texting her back. He hoped she'd locked the front door of the farmhouse. He'd never thought twice about it before, but with his little girl living there now, they couldn't be too careful. He was about to stuff the phone into his back pocket when it rang in his hand.

Out of Area. No number.

At almost eleven on a Tuesday night? He thought about answering it, but over the bar noise, he wouldn't be able to hear much. Might be a telemarketer, anyway, or a wrong number. But a chill that ran along the back of his neck made him think otherwise. *It's Lexi.* He didn't think she'd be calling—he didn't think she was well enough—but the call had something to do with her. He'd put money on it.

An hour later, after the last of the crowd had left and he was done wiping down the bar, he listened to the voicemail message and found he was right.

"Ah, yes, hello? Nate? This is Donna Natterly. We met last month when I was up there with Autumn and Lexi. I know Lexi told you she'd be going into hospice. But I don't think we realized—" Long



pause. Then a deep sigh. “I wanted to let you know she passed away earlier this evening.”

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

Nate couldn't sleep. He got home close to midnight, took a shower, drank a beer, and still his pulse pounded like he'd just run a marathon. In bed, he flipped from his back to his stomach, then to his back again. He laced his hands under his head and stared at the ceiling. Wild dogs cried in the woods. An owl hooted closer to the house. Above his head, every so often, the floor creaked as Autumn or Max rolled over in bed.

*...she passed away earlier this evening...*

Cruel words. A terrible, cruel world. He balled his hands over his eyes. His chest ached with the finality of Donna's call. He'd hardly known Lexi, but that didn't matter. Grief rolled over him, grief and guilt and fear, too, of what to tell Autumn and what happened next. He'd have to talk to Penny, the aunt. He'd have to call Donna and see if there were things he still needed to get for Autumn. Was he supposed to contact Lexi's mother? Go to the funeral? He couldn't leave Autumn here in Whispering Pines if he did. Nor could he bring her along. Could he? Would she understand what it meant to see her mother in a coffin?

"No." Nate sat straight up. Moonlight slanted across his bed. Lexi had left him a manila envelope labeled *For after*, but he'd set it aside

without thinking. Now he realized she'd meant *For after I die*. Nausea tightened his bowels, and he leaned over and clutched his knees. Unrelenting cancer. Unrelenting unfairness of life. He took a deep breath, but it didn't reach his lungs. He took another and saw Lexi's face behind his closed eyelids. The two of them on spring break, laughing and drinking and screwing like they didn't have a care in the world.

He dry heaved as the memories rushed over him, fast and painful. Finally he threw off the covers and stumbled to the bathroom just in time to throw up dinner. He clutched the toilet and closed his eyes, letting everything come up until there was nothing but bile. Again and again he vomited. The room spun. His whole body hurt with the effort. He wasn't sure how long he stayed crouched there, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth until the skin felt raw.

"Nate?" Max rapped on the open bathroom door. "Are you okay? Are you sick?"

He leaned back on his heels but kept his face averted. "Go away." He didn't need anyone seeing him like this.

"Do you want some water? Or ginger ale?"

"I'm fine. Just leave me alone."

She left without another word.

NATE STUMBLED into the kitchen hours later, before the sun came up. Max was already there, pouring coffee and making toast. He wore a pair of sweatpants and no shirt and yesterday's stubble. "I'm sorry."

She held up a mug of steaming coffee. "Want some?"

He nodded. Outside, the sun had just begun to crest the trees on the opposite side of the lake. His eyes burned. His mouth tasted as

though someone had used it as a garbage disposal. He added milk and sugar to the coffee and took a long sip, letting it warm him.

“You want to talk about it?” She leaned against the counter, still in a pair of pajama shorts and a black t-shirt. Her hair was pulled into a sloppy bun. The toaster pinged, and she took out two slices and spread butter on them. “I got a text last night from the woman Lexi was friends with. Donna?”

Nate nodded, his neck stiff.

“I’m so sorry. She told me about Lexi.”

He kept his eyes on the horizon. Drank some more coffee. Wondered what he was supposed to tell Autumn when she woke up.

“We can tell her together,” Max said, as if reading his mind. “If you want. If it would be easier.”

“Maybe.” He turned to look at her. “I just feel like such a shit. Like I should’ve been there.”

“She didn’t want that. You told me that.”

“Still.”

“I looked up how to do this, last week. How to tell a four-year old about a parent dying.”

He wanted to laugh. Of course she had. Leave it to the librarian to do her research. “Did you make a list? Things we should do and say?”

Her features creased. “Don’t be mean.”

“I’m sorry.” He dropped his chin. All they did was fill the kitchen with apologies. He refilled his mug. *Not enough coffee in the world to get through today.*

“We’re not supposed to know how to do this,” she added. “It’s not like either one of us has been through something like it. It’s okay if we don’t say exactly the right thing. We just need to make sure Autumn feels safe.”

“How?”

“By telling her the truth, and then by telling her neither one of us is going anywhere.”

He nodded.

“She might regress. Have trouble sleeping, or going to the bathroom, or...”

Nate grimaced. He could identify with that. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She laid a hand on his arm, and the warmth seeped into him. “Neither do I.”

“We got ourselves into a hell of a situation, huh?” He didn’t want her to take her hand away. He liked the feel of it there, her skin against his.

“That’s one way to put it.”

“You’ll be here tonight when I get home with her? So we can tell her then? I can’t do it this morning.” Autumn deserved one more blissful day without knowing her mother had gone to live with the angels for good.

Max nodded and poured the remainder of her coffee down the drain. “Of course. I’ll have Cassie close up at the library, make sure I’m here before five thirty.”

“Thank you.”

Her gaze met his, and suddenly he wanted to take her in his arms and hold her. Thank her for being here. Then do something that had nothing to do with thanks and everything to do with feeling her pressed against him. He needed her comfort, her body inside his embrace, alive and pulsing with life. Something sizzled in the air between them. She drew a circle on the floor with her bare toe.

Then Autumn called out from upstairs, and the moment was gone.



“THIS IS WEIRD, YOU KNOW,” Sienna told Max over lunch. They sat at the coffee shop across from the library.

“Which part? That I’m living with Nate Hunter and his daughter, or that I’m telling my mother that he’s my boyfriend?”

“Both.” Sienna pulled her thick dark hair off her neck. “Are you sure you’re not in over your head?”

Max pushed away the last of her chicken salad. Sienna would never have gotten herself into a situation like this. If Nate thought Max was a list-maker, he hadn’t met Sienna and her spreadsheet approach to life. “Of course I’m not.” She’d asked herself ten times that day if they’d made a terrible mistake, playing house without considering the consequences. Her cheeks flushed as she thought of how Nate had looked at her that morning. Beneath the fatigue and grief, she’d detected desire. That hadn’t been part of the plan.

“You think he’s gonna make it through this? Actually step up and be a responsible dad? Nate Hunter was never the model citizen back in high school.”

“I know. But he’s changed.” Even in the last couple of weeks, he’d shouldered more of the housework, and more of the bedtime routine with Autumn. She loved watching them together. “You’d be surprised.”

Sienna scanned the check, did the math inside her head the way she always did, and divided up their amounts, plus tip, to the penny. “You hear anything from the Allbright Foundation?” She drummed her fingers on the table. “The anticipation is killing me.”

Max shook her head. She hadn’t given her application so much as a thought in the last month. “We still have weeks before they tell

us. I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. You're the perfect candidate. They'd be foolish not to take you."

Sienna looped her pinky through Max's. "And you too."

Max nodded, but it was funny that the thought of leaving Whispering Pines didn't give her a thrill the way it always had in the past. Used to be, she couldn't wait to get out of town. Now she was pretty content right where she was. Anyway, the Allbright Scholarship didn't matter that afternoon. In a few hours, she needed to focus on telling a little girl that her mother had died.

MAX PULLED into the driveway at a little after five that afternoon. She'd stopped at the farmer's market to pick up some things for dinner, in case any of them felt like eating. All day, she'd thought about this conversation, and all day, the muscles in her neck had grown tighter with anticipation. Would Autumn weep uncontrollably? Withdraw and hide in her room? Blame them for taking her mother away?

Max chewed her bottom lip as she put the groceries away. She opened the fridge, thought about opening a beer and then settled for water instead. She kicked off her shoes and had just sat down on the front porch when she heard Nate pull up. A minute later, Autumn skipped into the house.

"Hi, Miss Max."

"Hi yourself." She hugged Autumn and opened the oversized pink backpack they'd bought the day before preschool started. "How was school?" She pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper, artwork that looked like it might be trees and a body of water. She held it up to the window. Whispering Pines Lake? Glitter covered the painting and fell to the floor. "This is very nice."

Autumn nodded. One braid had come undone, and she pulled at the other.

“Where’s Mr. Nate?” They didn’t yet call him Dad. Lexi hadn’t encouraged it, and Nate still looked like a deer in headlights whenever the word crossed Max’s lips. Autumn had a vague idea of what Nate as her father meant, but since they’d met less than a month ago, they were sticking with Mr. Nate for now.

As if on cue, he appeared in the doorway. He’d pulled off his tie and the rest of his clothes looked wilted. His expression was tight with nerves.

“Long day?”

“You could say that.”

“I picked up some things for dinner. Want to eat first? I thought we could grill. It’s nice tonight, not too hot outside.” The words fell from her mouth, trying to fill up the silence and delay the inevitable.

He rolled his head from side to side and wiped one palm over his face. “Maybe we should talk to her first.”

Max nodded and took a deep breath. “Autumn, honey, come here.” She patted the bottom of the chaise lounge. “Sit down for a minute.”

“I’m hungry.”

Max handed her the glass of water. “Have some of this. We’ll have dinner in a few minutes. Mr. Nate and I wanted to talk to you about something first.”

The little girl’s eyes widened, and Max wondered how much she knew. She’d been living in a house with a dying woman up until three weeks ago; she couldn’t be blind to the fact that her mother had been very, very ill.

“You remember when Mommy brought you here to stay with Mr. Nate?”



Autumn nodded. She handed the glass back to Max. One thumb worked its way into her mouth.

“Do you remember what Mommy told you then?”

“She was sick.” The words came out in a whisper.

“That’s right.” Max glanced up at Nate, who had tears in his eyes. “And she was going to live with the angels.”

Autumn nodded. “Did she go?”

Max’s own eyes filled at the simplicity of the question. *Did she go?* “She did, honey. Last night.” She ran her hand over Autumn’s head and down her back.

“I won’t see her ever again?”

Max was tempted to say something along the lines of *You’ll see her someday in heaven* or *You can see her every day if you close your eyes*, but those both sounded like something out of a Disney movie. So much for looking up the right way to do this. She didn’t have a clue.

“No,” Nate said, surprising her. “You won’t.” He knelt next to Autumn. “But every time you think of Mommy, and every time you look at her picture or we tell stories about her, she’ll be with you. Does that make sense?”

Autumn’s lips tightened around her thumb. She nodded.

“We also want you to know, me and Miss Max, that you’re safe here with us. We aren’t going anywhere.” His eyes met Max’s over Autumn’s head. “So we don’t want you to worry.”

Autumn took in a long, shaky breath. “I miss Mommy.”

“I know you do,” Max said. “It’s okay to miss her. And to feel sad that she’s gone.”

“Do you remember your Aunt Penny?” Nate asked. “I talked to her on the phone today.”

Autumn blinked in surprise. “You did?”

*You did?* Max wanted to echo. How on earth had Nate tracked her down in the Serengeti bush?

“I did. She’s coming here to see you in December, right before Christmas. That will be nice, right? Something to look forward to.”

Autumn nodded. She looked at Nate, then at Max. “I’m still hungry.”

The tension in the room eased, and Max smiled. “Why don’t you go change your clothes, honey, and we’ll have dinner in a little bit.”

Autumn wriggled off the chaise and disappeared inside.

“That went a lot better than I thought it would.”

Nate unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt. “Yeah, it did. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. She might still, you know, have trouble with it.”

“I know.” He took the spot on the bottom of the chaise that Autumn had abandoned. Max drew up her legs to give him room, but he dropped one hand onto her bare ankle. “I really appreciate you being here.”

Her mouth went dry. Since the Elks Club dinner, every time they occupied the same space her hormones went wacky. Her skin tingled where he touched it. Actually, her skin tingled where he wasn’t touching it. “Ah, well, of course.”

His thumb moved in circles on her ankle, but he looked out to the lake. “Is this what it’s like, do you think? Being a parent? Constantly second-guessing everything you do?”

“I don’t know. I think there’s a fair amount of that.” She held her breath. “But from what I’ve seen so far, you’re doing a good job. You should believe in yourself more. You have good instincts.”

He inched closer. His gaze moved from her eyes to her mouth and stopped there. *He’s going to kiss me.* This time, they didn’t have an audience. No reporter waited for a photo opportunity. Bethany

wasn't wiggling her fingers at them across a crowded room. There wasn't any reason for Nate to kiss her right now except—

“Maxine?”

She sat straight up. *What the—*

“Maxine! Nate!” Bethany tromped across the front lawn, wearing a low-cut denim dress and fringed boots.

*You have got to be kidding me.* “I’m so sorry,” Max said under her breath. *Great timing, Ma. Thanks a lot.* Nate chuckled and got to his feet.

Bethany waved as she let herself in the unlocked screened door. “I’m so glad I caught you here! I’m not interrupting anything, am I? I brought some steaks for dinner, and I thought Mr. Handsome here could grill them while we talk about the debate next week. I’m not sure if I should wear my black suit or go more glam with the...”

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

The next morning passed without incident, to Max's surprise. Autumn got up at her usual time of seven-thirty and ate breakfast without a word about her mother. She colored her Digger placemat, laughed when Nate pretended not to see her in the chair, and walked to the car holding his hand.

*They'll be all right,* Max thought as Nate beeped the horn and pulled away. She hoped they would be all right, anyway. She wiped the breakfast dishes and set them in the sink to dry. Another beautiful morning, clear and cool, with the leaves just starting to turn. The farmhouse had quite a view, as Bethany had pointed out last night. Max shook her head as she went upstairs to dress for work. *Thanks a lot for ruining the moment, Ma.* There *had* been a moment, hadn't there? She hadn't entirely imagined the chemistry between her and Nate. She couldn't have.

Bethany had stayed through dinner, through coffee, and long after Autumn went to bed, talking about her campaign and about Autumn and finally about how the farmhouse would be a perfect place for another photo shoot. "Don't you think?" she said as Max tried not to sneak looks at Nate from across the room. Bethany gestured at the wide lawn, the lake, the trees arching overhead. "I'm

trying to get across that I'm one of them, a regular country girl with roots in Silver Valley the same as the next person."

*I'm not sure you'll ever be one of them*, Max thought now, as she showered and changed into a practical pair of jeans and a short-sleeved red sweater. A childhood spent on the pageant circuit, then raising a daughter by glomming onto man after man, wasn't the way her target voters lived. Still, people seemed to respond to Bethany, if only because she was honest and called things like she saw them. Max gave her credit for that.

"A new shipment of books came in yesterday after you left," Cassie said when Max arrived at the library. "I had them put in the back room."

"Perfect. Thank you." That was probably her order of Young Adult books that came every year at the start of school, to parallel whatever the Silver Valley English teachers were teaching. She turned on the computer behind the desk and scanned her emails. Only a handful had arrived since yesterday: two order confirmations, one thank-you from a first-grade class who'd visited last week, and a form letter confirming her application for the Allbright Scholarship. She knew the words of the last one; she'd read them twice before. Another email would probably follow six weeks from now, thanking her for applying, praising the highly competitive field of applicants, and encouraging her to try again next year.

"Cassie, I'll be in the back for most of the morning. Call me if you need anything."

"Sure thing." The girl bent over her cell phone.

Max headed for the storage room with a box cutter and a clipboard. She had two major events planned for next month, a teen discussion group and a Play 'n Paint that the mothers had begged her for.

She needed to get ads out ASAP for both of those. The local papers were good about giving her space for library events, and a graphic design class at the high school made posters if she gave them enough lead time. She flipped to a new sheet of looseleaf on her clipboard and started a to-do list. Nate might make fun of her, but she didn't care. Lists kept her organized. They kept life manageable and predictable, and after growing up in a house where life was anything but, she'd keep making lists as long as she needed to.

Her phone buzzed with a text, and she pulled it from her pocket. Part of her hoped it was from Nate. She'd woken a half-dozen times last night thinking about his touch on her ankle, his gaze moving over her mouth. *Did I imagine it?* He'd been cordial this morning, with no indication he'd been about to kiss her last night.

But the text was from her mother. **Can we meet tonight? Just for an hour or so? I need to practice my responses for the debate.**

**What about Peter?**

Bethany sent back a series of frowny-face emojis followed by a thumbs-down.

"Oh, no," Max said aloud. **Did you break up with him?** she texted back. She should have seen it coming. Bethany and Peter had just passed the eighteen-month mark of their relationship, which was when boredom usually set in for her mother. Bethany would find something wrong, start picking fights or criticizing things, and the guy would disappear.

**We're taking a break. He didn't understand the time I have to commit to this.**

**To the campaign?**

**Yes.**

Max ran her thumb over the screen. She didn't know what to say. Break-ups were a regular occurrence in Bethany's life. Usually she let men go because she grew tired of their predictability, or they finally stood up to her demands, or she met someone younger or with more money. But for the first time Max could remember, her mother had a project that didn't involve makeup or the gym or men. Despite her over-the-top appearance on the campaign trail, she had good things to say. She had ideas to share. Early numbers showed she had the potential to challenge incumbent Dom Lonesca, a popular businessman who owned three bakeries throughout two counties. If Peter really hadn't understood, then maybe Bethany was right in taking a break from him.

**Can you come over? Bring Autumn if you want.**

Max relented. **I'll stop by after work. But only for a little bit.**

**THANK YOU.**

Max chuckled and returned her phone to her pocket, where it remained silent for almost an hour. The next text that came, from Nate, made her heart skip, but only until she opened it and read his full message.

**Autumn's sick at school & I have a meeting I can't get out of.  
Can you pick her up?**

**Of course.** She leapt to her feet.

"Cassie, I have to go. Call you later," she said as she rushed to the door. "The inventory's unpacked and just needs to be stickered and shelved. Can you start on it?"

"Um, yeah, I guess," said the girl with a confused expression, but Max didn't stick around to explain.

Instead she jumped into her car and drove the ten miles to Precious Little People as fast as she could.

“I THINK she just has an upset stomach,” Miss Katie said when Max got there. She’d parked in a handicapped spot out front and hoped the local police were patrolling someplace else. “But she said she wasn’t feeling well after snack, and she does have a slight fever. I thought it was better to let you know.”

“Should I take her to the doctor, do you think?” Max took Autumn’s hand.

“I don’t think you need to.” Miss Katie lowered her voice. “Nate did tell me when he dropped her off about, you know...” *her mother*, she mouthed. As if Lexi’s death was a secret Autumn wasn’t supposed to know about.

“Yes.” Max nodded and dropped to her knees. “Want to go home, sweetheart?”

Autumn nodded, her expression sad. She held Teddy in one hand and dragged her backpack on the ground with the other.

“Okay. Let’s just get this on you—” Max began to loop the backpack straps over Autumn’s shoulders, but to her surprise, the girl tore herself away and ran for the door.

“No!” She shook her head. “I don’t wanna.”

Max stood, stunned. “Okay. You don’t have to.”

Miss Katie patted Max’s arm. “Give her some time. Children process things in different ways. She might throw a bit of a fit, or she might just shut down. If she needs to take a few days off from school, that’s fine.”

Max wasn’t sure any of this would be fine, and she half a mind to ask the woman how much experience she had with preschoolers who’d lost a parent to cancer, but she bit the inside of her cheek instead. “Wait for me, Autumn.” She walked to the door and took Autumn’s hand firmly in hers. They crossed to the car, and the little girl climbed into her seat without protest.



Max glanced at the American Insurance office building and wondered if Nate's meeting was there or someplace else. He hadn't mentioned any details. She was about to slide behind the wheel and send him a text when the sunlight shifted, and she was able to see through the tinted front window. Two people stood in the foyer, talking and laughing. Max squinted and looked harder. *That's Nate.* She couldn't make out the other person, but in another moment, she didn't have to. Blond, statuesque Ella Ericksen pushed open the front door, blew Nate a kiss, and strutted next door into Divine Designs.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

“**T**hanks again for the haircut,” Nate said to Ella as they headed for their cars. “It was looking pretty shaggy.”

“No kidding. And no problem. Anytime you want to take care of that unibrow, stop in and see me.”

He laughed, said goodbye, and headed for home. He called Max twice on his way, wanting to check on Autumn, but she didn’t answer. When he pulled into his driveway and parked next to a silver Volvo with an *Abbott for Council!* sticker on the bumper, he knew the reason why.

“Evening,” he said as he loped up the front steps and into the kitchen. Max and her mother sat at the table with a plate of cheese and crackers and a pile of papers between them.

“Hello, handsome,” Bethany cooed.

“How’s Autumn?” He dropped his jacket on a chair.

“Her stomach’s still bothering her. She’s resting upstairs in bed,” Max said without looking up. Her voice sounded a little chilly, but that was might have been because of her mother. Or having to leave work early to pick up Autumn. He’d felt bad about that, but Walter Crawshaw had told Nate in no uncertain terms that attendance at the afternoon training seminar was mandatory. Max hadn’t sounded

peevish when he texted to ask if she could get Autumn, but now he wondered.

He took the stairs two at a time. At the top, he peeked into Autumn's room. She wasn't in bed. Instead, she sat on a narrow window seat looking into the back yard. Her teddy bear rested in her lap, and she had one thumb in her mouth. "Autumn?"

She didn't turn at his voice. She didn't register that she'd heard him at all. He took another step into the room. "Honey, how are you feeling? How's your tummy?"

She continued to stare outside, and Nate had a sudden flashback of himself as a kid, doing the exact same thing. The pine trees behind the farmhouse held all kinds of wildlife, from birds to squirrels to the occasional groundhog or fox. He used to spend hours either out there or in here, watching. Now he walked over and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "See anything good?"

She shook her head and sucked her thumb.

"Did you eat any dinner?"

She shook her head again. When he looked closer, he saw tear stains on her cheeks. A lump rose into Nate's throat, and he walked out again.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he said when he reached the kitchen.

"Ah, sure." Max pushed back her chair. Bethany gave them a puzzled look, and Nate realized he hadn't greeted Max the way a guy would greet his live-in girlfriend. Whoops. He reached over to kiss Max's cheek, but she shrank from his touch.

*What the hell?*

He followed her onto the front porch and lowered his voice. "Did she eat anything?"

"She had some peanut butter on crackers when we got home."

“Do you think that’s enough?”

She sighed and stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “Probably not, but I’m not about to force food down her throat. If she gets hungry enough, she’ll eat.”

“Is that what your research said?”

Anger flashed in her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t you think we should try and get her to eat something more than crackers? Her teacher said she didn’t eat snack, she left school before lunch, and now she won’t eat dinner. I don’t want her to starve.”

“Would you like to try?”

He gritted his teeth and turned away. Long ropes of tension stretched between them. Finally he exhaled sharply. “I’m sorry. I know it cut into your day, having to get her.”

“I’m not mad about that.”

“But you’re mad about something.”

She wouldn’t look at him. Even when he put both palms on her shoulders and turned her toward him, she averted her gaze. “Max, what did I do?”

“You told me you had a meeting.”

“I did. All afternoon in the third floor conference room, which has no windows and no ventilation. It sucked.”

“Then why did I see you flirting with Ella Ericksen when I came to get Autumn?”

Nate ran one hand over his now-short hair. “That’s what this is about?”

“You didn’t look like you were on your way to a meeting, that’s all.”

“Well, I was. I asked Ella to trim my hair because I realized I looked like some kind of skater punk from the nineties and not like

an insurance salesman. There were bigwigs at this training. I wanted them to take me seriously.”

Her mouth twitched. “A skater punk?”

“Something like that.” On impulse, he grabbed her hand. “I would never blow off Autumn. You have to know that. Or you,” he added. “I wouldn’t lie and do something like that. If there was any way I could’ve left work early to get her, I would have.”

She curled her fingers inside his palm, warm and secure, and an odd feeling moved through him. *I could get used to this.* Then Bethany rapped on the doorframe. “Am I interrupting?”

He wanted to laugh, because it seemed like Bethany was always interrupting. Instead he pulled Max into his embrace, one arm tight around her. “Nope. We were just talking about the day.” He kissed the top of her head and hoped he looked like a devoted boyfriend.

“Maxine told me Autumn came home with a tummy ache. Did you try flat ginger ale? That always helped Maxine when she was little.”

“I don’t know if we have any,” Max said.

“Actually, I do. Out in the garage.” Nate hadn’t told Max, but he kept all kinds of mixers in the spare fridge there, leftover from the days when parties at the farmhouse happened every weekend. He was almost positive he could dig up some ginger ale. With that, he hopped down the porch steps and escaped into the cool darkness of the garage.

IT DIDN’T HELP. Thirty minutes later, they stood in Autumn’s bedroom as she curled herself into a ball on her bed. She refused to drink ginger ale or eat anything at all. Max sat on one side of her, Nate on the other.

“She hates me,” he said in a low voice.

“She doesn’t hate you.” Max ran one hand over Autumn’s flyaway hair.

“How do you know?”

She didn’t answer. Downstairs, Bethany talked to someone on the phone. She’d popped into the bedroom once to check on them and then disappeared again. *Why doesn’t she go home?* Max had told Nate the boyfriend was out of the picture, but still. That didn’t mean Bethany had to hang out here at the farmhouse.

His shoulder blades pinched together, and his stomach growled. “I’m going downstairs.”

Max nodded.

“You want anything to eat?”

“Maybe later.”

He felt like a jerk for walking out, but he didn’t know what else to do. Then he stopped in his tracks.

“Hello, Princess Autumn.” Bethany stood in the doorway with a feather boa wrapped around her neck and a tiara on her head.

“Ma, what are you—” Max began.

“Shh! I’m here for Princess Autumn.”

Autumn rolled over. When she saw Bethany, she began to giggle. Bethany produced a second tiara from behind her back, and Autumn sat up and wiped away her tears. “Is that for me?”

“It is, yes. I’m Princess Bethany.” She placed the tiara on Autumn’s head. “I understand you’ve had a sad day.”

Autumn nodded. Bethany sat on the bed beside her. “Did you know I used to have a little girl about your size? Her name was Maxine.”

Autumn looked up at Max, then back at Bethany. One little hand went up to steady her tiara.

“When she had sad days, I used to sing to her. Then we would have tea and crumpets like princesses in England, and we would always feel better. What do you think of that? Shall we give it a try?”

Nate swallowed a chuckle. Bethany began to sing, a little off-key, and no song Nate had ever heard before, but Autumn must have liked it, because a minute later, she put her hand in Bethany’s and began to hum along. Five minutes later, the two princesses in tiaras descended the stairs.

“I can’t believe it,” Nate said as he and Max stood there and stared. “I take back everything bad I ever said about your mother.”

“Did you say bad things?”

“Hmm. I may have thought them. Regardless, I take it all back.”

She nudged him in the ribs.

“Did she really used to sing to you when you were sad?”

Max nodded. “I’d forgotten. But yes. When I was sick or upset, she’d sit on my bed and make up songs.”

“Can I ask where she got two tiaras and a boa?”

“I have a box of them downstairs in the kitchen. They’re playthings for the library.”

He chuckled. “I thought maybe a former beauty queen carried them around in her car or something.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Seriously?”

“No.” Max laughed. “But I got you.” She started down the stairs.

*Yes, you did.* Nate followed, taking his time to admire the view.

CHAPTER  
EIGHTEEN

“She’s finally asleep.” Max dropped into a chair on the porch beside Nate. Then she shivered. “It’s cold out here.”  
“Summer’s officially over.”

“You think? I was hoping for a few more warm days and nights.” She rested her head on the back of the chair. “I’m sorry about earlier. About getting all mad and jealous.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure it looked a little weird from across the street.”

“When did Ma leave?”

“Right after you went upstairs with Autumn. And right after she made sure we were coming to her debate next week.”

Max laced her hands over her eyes. “I’m not sure why we have to be there. I can’t imagine there’ll be much of a turnout.”

“You never know. I heard some people talking at work.”

“About my mother? Terrific.”

“They didn’t say bad things. More like, they want to see if she can stand up to Dom.”

Angst tightened in Max’s stomach. She wasn’t sure what to expect when Bethany stood up at the Silver Valley Civic Center and debated the popular incumbent. Schmoozing people out of donations



was one thing. Articulating intelligent thoughts about issues was something else altogether. “I hope she doesn’t fall flat on her face.”

“She’ll be fine. I’m pretty sure she can hold her own.” He paused. “Kind of like someone else I know.”

She opened one eye. “Meaning what?”

“Nothing. Just that you speak your mind the same way she does.”

“I hope that’s the only way we’re alike.”

“She really gets under your skin that much?”

Max sat up. “She drove me crazy the entire time I was growing up. I could never do anything right, not the way she wanted me to. And yes, that got under my skin.”

“But you’re successful now.”

“Not in her eyes. She still thinks I should have a better job, better clothes, better prospects in general.” She shot him a grin. “Although having a pretend boyfriend has definitely won me some favors. So thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Think she’s buying it?”

“I hope so. You’re pretty convincing.” Her voice went squeaky at the end, because he’d settled his gaze on her mouth the same way he had the night before. *He’s going to kiss me. Oh please, please, let him kiss me.* She leaned forward. So did he. Their knees touched.

“Miss Max!” A bloodcurdling scream came from Autumn’s room. “Miss Max!”

Max jumped up, knocked Nate in the jaw with her elbow, and sent him flying backwards.

“Ow!”

“Oh no. I’m so sorry. So, so—”

This time, Autumn just screamed. No words, no names, just the terror of a four-year old left alone in the dark.

“Go,” he said, one hand to his mouth.

Max took the stairs two at a time. Nate followed close behind. “Honey, what is it?” She turned on the light by the bed. Autumn was sitting straight up in bed, clutching her teddy bear to her chest, face red, tears streaming down her face. *This is it. This is the breakdown, the real one, the moment she tells us she hates us, we took her mother away, and she wants to go home.*

Only home was here now. Home was living with her father, a virtual stranger, and a local librarian. How did they explain that to a child? Max sank onto the bed and took Autumn in her arms. “What’s wrong?”

Her breath hitched. “I saw a monster in the closet.”

“A MONSTER,” Nate said as they closed Autumn’s door an hour later. She’d made them keep all the lights on and promise to stay until she fell asleep. Max rubbed her arm, stiff from where Autumn had clung to it while she read story after story. “Not her mother dying, not an upset stomach. A monster is what’s keeping us all up past midnight.”

“Is it really that late?”

Nate held out his watch, illuminated in the dim light of the hallway.

“I should go to bed.” Her eyes burned, and she couldn’t stop yawning. Still, a tiny part of her wanted that moment on the porch back, the breath of anticipation, the almost-kiss. She touched his chin where she’d accidentally knocked him. “I’m really sorry for hitting you. Does it still hurt?”

“Nah. I’m a tough guy.” He took her fingers in his, and she thought he might pull her close. But he didn’t. He just nodded,

smiled, and backed toward the stairs. "Sleep well, Max. See you in the morning."



THEY DIDN'T TALK about any of it the next day. Autumn woke and ate breakfast without incident, and by the time Max had finished the dishes, Nate was grabbing a travel mug of coffee and whisking her out the door. "Sorry, overslept," was all he said. "See you tonight."

Max stood in the doorway and watched them go. It was better this way, not to dwell on anything that had happened the night before. She was silly to think he might kiss her. Theirs was a relationship of convenience and show. In a couple more months, they'd be living apart again, friends at best. Anyway, Nate Hunter wasn't Max's type. She sure wasn't his. And if she kept repeating those words inside her head, maybe her heart would start to believe them.

Thankfully, work became a madhouse of finishing inventory, planning the teen discussion group, and meeting with her contacts at the newspaper and the graphic design class. She didn't have time for lunch, and she checked her phone only once.

**Teachers say she's fine today,** Nate had texted around noon.

**Good.** Max looked at the piles of paper and books on her desk. Usually well-organized, the last few days she'd fallen behind in her daily tasks, and not only because of Autumn. The library was always busier in the fall, with a steady stream of kids and their parents during the day, and then school-age patrons as soon as three o'clock rolled around. To make matters worse, Cassie only worked twice a week now, which meant Max's extra set of hands wouldn't come in until the weekend.

“Maxine!” Bethany trilled from the doorway at half-past four.

Max sighed. Not exactly what she needed today. She pushed her hair from her eyes. “Hi, Ma. What’s up?”

Bethany held a shoe in each hand, one a bright blue open toe, the other a sedate black pump with a small bow on the heel. “What do you think? Which one?”

*I think I don’t have time to give you shoe advice.* She blew out a long breath. “For the debate?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think anyone will be looking at your shoes?”

Bethany looked at Max like she’d grown three heads. “Of course they will. They’ll be looking at the whole package.” She walked over to the desk. “Speaking of which, honey, and I didn’t want to say anything the other night, but have you thought about doing anything with *your* wardrobe?”

Max frowned. “I said I’d wear a dress anytime we go out for a political event. And I did, at the Elks Club. I will for the debate, too.”

“I’m not talking about political events.”

Max looked down at herself. Okay, today’s outfit was a little less put together than usual, but clean jeans and a white button-down shirt worked for a children’s librarian. Didn’t it?

“I’m not talking about work, either.” Bethany arched her brows.

“Ma, I give up and I’m too tired to guess what you’re hinting at.”

“You have a man now.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re living with a man. A good-looking man with a lot of female friends and exes in town, I might add.”

“You’re telling me to change my wardrobe for Nate?” A half-dozen responses, all laced with a snarky feminist attitude, flew through Max’s mind.

“I’m just telling you to keep the magic alive. Don’t think because you’re living with him, you can wear ratty old shorts and no makeup and think he won’t start looking in other places.”

*I don’t think I’d want a guy who’d do that,* Max almost spit out. *And besides, Nate isn’t who you think he is. I don’t care if he goes looking in a hundred other places.* Well, she definitely couldn’t say that. Nor, strangely, did she mean it. But she refused to give that niggling thought the time of day. She couldn’t go and fall for Nate. It would complicate everything.

“Maxine?” Bethany gave her a strange look. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, Ma. And I appreciate your concern.”

Bethany tapped one long fingernail on the desk. “Just invest in a nice robe. Something for the evenings. And some lingerie. It doesn’t hurt to have your hair and makeup done when he gets up in the morning, either.”

“In the—” Did women really do that? Get up early to put their faces on? Good thing Nate wasn’t really her boyfriend, then, or he might have run screaming from the house when he saw her in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, with her hair sticking out in all directions. Max returned her attention to the stack of books that needed shelving. “I think the black ones are better for a debate,” she said.

“Thank you. That was all I needed to know.” Bethany turned and flounced away.

A nice robe. And lingerie. Max’s face heated at the thought. Then again, maybe it wasn’t the worst idea in the world. *...he has a lot of female friends and exes in town...* She twisted a strand of her straight, plain brown hair around one finger and thought of Nate tending bar and flashing his signature smile to all the women. Nate having one hell of a spring break fling. Nate flirting with Ella Ericksen at his office building. Max had seen a picture of Lexi before she got

ill, gorgeous and blonde and curvy from head to toe. Not unlike Ella, now that Max thought about it. He'd said they were only friends, but maybe he liked that look. Maybe he liked high heels and curly hair and tight clothes.

What guy didn't?

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

“It’s ridiculous that I’m even thinking about this,” Max said into her hands-free phone as she drove home. “Right?”

“Of course right,” Sienna agreed on the other end of the line. “When did you start taking relationship advice from your mother?”

“I’m not. It just drives me crazy that she gives it to me unsolicited.”

Sienna laughed. “She’s been that way your entire life.”

“I know.” Max turned into the driveway of the farmhouse, the argument still going on inside her head.

*Call Divine Designs and make an appointment. Get a few highlights. What’s the big deal?*

*The big deal is that I like my hair the way it is.*

*Maybe Ma’s right about getting a decent pair of pajamas, though.*

*Your pajamas are fine. You’re not trying to impress Nate.*

That was the bottom line, Max reminded herself. She wasn’t. Or at least, she hadn’t thought she was, until the other night when she found herself acting like a sixteen year old at a school dance, wishing and hoping for a kiss that didn’t come.

“Thanks for listening to me vent,” she said, and then almost ran into the back of an unfamiliar silver Subaru.

“Anytime,” Sienna said, but Max didn’t hear her.

Gravel sprayed everywhere as she jammed on the brakes. Whose car was this? She didn’t think Nate had invited anyone over for dinner. A parent from the preschool? Someone selling Girl Scout cookies? She grabbed her purse and headed inside.

She pushed open the kitchen door and stopped. Nate sat at the table across from Autumn and a woman Max had never seen before. Blonde. Rosy-cheeked. Bethany’s warning about Nate’s past flashed in and out of her mind. Was this an ex-girlfriend? “Hello. I’m Max,” she said. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Sonya Sevrensen. I work for Child Protective Services. It’s nice to meet you.” The woman gave Max’s outstretched hand a quick, non-sense shake.

Any trace of jealousy fled, replaced at once by apprehension. CPS? Max dropped her purse and joined them at the table. How long had the woman been here? Had she gone to the preschool first? Why hadn’t Nate texted, called, given Max some kinds of heads-up? When she glanced his way, he just shrugged and folded his hands on the table.

“I’m doing a quick home visit. Could I have your full name and relation to Autumn?”

“Ah, Maxine Abbott. I’m—” Relation to Autumn? How did she answer that question?

“Max lives with me.” Nate folded his hand over hers.

Sonya wrote something on her clipboard. “No biological relation to the child?”

Max shook her head. Ordinarily she might have enjoyed Nate’s touch, but this felt like a warning rather than anything else. *Don’t say*



*too much.*

But Sonya didn't seem bothered by their answer. She nodded and smoothed her hair from her face. "I want to assure you there hasn't been any report of abuse or neglect. It's simply protocol in a situation like this one. Whenever we have a child's custody turned over to someone besides the primary parent, we do a home visit. Especially when the primary parent has died."

A lump rose in Max's throat. Still so raw, Lexi's death. So still wrong.

"We know that Autumn is staying with you, Mr. Hunter, her biological father, until the return of her legal guardian in December."

"Does Autumn need to be here for this?" Max asked. The girl's thumb had begun working its way toward her mouth, and her gaze moved around the table, from Nate to Max to Sonya and back to Nate.

"No. Not for this part. I do have a few questions to ask her directly, but we can do that later."

"Good." Max lifted Autumn from her chair, got her a juice box, and led her into the playroom. "Mr. Nate and I just have to talk to this lady about a few things, okay? Nothing to worry about."

Autumn looked up and said nothing.

"How about you practice reading to Teddy and his friends? And then you can tell me about your day when we have dinner."

Finally, she got a small, sober nod in response. Max leaned down and hugged her. "Everything's fine," she whispered and hoped it truly was.

"...and Max or I pick her up from preschool every day," Nate was saying when Max returned to the kitchen.

"How is she adjusting to school?" Sonya said as she scribbled notes on a form.

“She likes it a lot.”

Sonya nodded. “Any issues with bedwetting? Anger or depression?”

Nate looked at Max.

“No bedwetting,” Max said. “She was a little upset when we told her about her mother. She had a hard time sleeping that night.”

Sonya lifted one drawn-on brow. “You told her? About Lexi dying?”

“Well, yes. She’s almost five. She needed to know.”

Sonya nodded. “I agree with you, for what it’s worth. Not everyone’s able to have that kind of conversation with a child, that’s all. I see avoidance, even lies, more often than you’d think.”

Max hoped their forthrightness counted in the positive column. She tried to read Sonya’s notes upside down, but all she saw was *two adults* and *preschool* and something that looked like *short-term* or maybe *summer-time*.

“Could I see the rest of the house? Her room, specifically?”

“Sure.” Nate led the way upstairs. They passed the playroom and Max held her breath, but Autumn was deep in concentration over *A Rainbow for Ryan* and didn’t even look up.

Sonya took her time examining the bedroom, Autumn’s closet, and the bathroom she shared with Max. More notes. A few more lifted brows. Finally she walked back downstairs. “I just have a couple questions for Autumn now,” she said. “Alone, please.”

Max nodded, her throat tight. Sonya stepped into the playroom and shut the door behind her.

“When did she show up?” Max asked in a whisper as she and Nate returned to the kitchen.

“Just before you got home. We weren’t out of the car ten minutes when she knocked on the door.”

“Think we have anything to worry about?”

He shrugged for about the fourth time in the last half-hour. “I hope not.”

Max busied herself with emptying the dish drainer and defrosting hamburger meat for dinner. She hadn't expected this. She should have, of course, because social workers checked on children all the time, especially children who'd been uprooted from their lives, but somehow it had slipped her thoughts.

Less than five minutes later, Sonya emerged from the playroom. She packed up her things and put her purse over her shoulder. “I'm all set here.”

“Really?”

For the first time, the woman gave them a true, wide smile. “Yes. I don't think you have anything to worry about. Autumn has a place to live, she appears well cared for, and there's no sign of neglect or even, to be honest, undue reaction to her mother's death. Bedwetting would be normal, as would other types of regression or acting out. But you both seem to be level-headed adults who are providing well for her. Plus, of course, this is a temporary situation.” She pushed open the door. “Take care now. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Max sank into a chair.

“See?” Nate grabbed her shoulders and squeezed. “I told you we had nothing to worry about.”

“You were right.” But the words *temporary situation* echoed inside her head. Yes, it was. All of it. Autumn living here, Max living here, and their ruse about being romantically involved. Who was she kidding? She didn't need to change her hair or buy a sexy robe. In another two months, she'd be living back at her mother's house and waking up to the birds and Bethany and no one else.

“Max?” Nate leaned down. “You all right?”

“Yes. Sure. Of course!” She bounced up again as Autumn wandered into the kitchen.

“Is that lady gone?”

Max nodded.

“Good.”

“Why? You didn’t like her?”

“She asked me about Mommy and it made me sad.” Autumn climbed onto her booster seat and rested her chin on her hands.

“Well, I have an idea to get rid of sadness,” Nate said. “What do you say we have french fries and ice cream for dinner tonight? As a special treat?”

Autumn’s eyes lit up.

“*Seriously?*” Max mouthed. She hoped Sonya wasn’t following them. She might change *well cared for* on her notes to *fed junk food* instead.

“*One night won’t hurt her,*” Nate mouthed back. “It’s the last weekend before Andy’s Stand closes for the season,” he added out loud.

“Please?” Autumn begged.

“Okay. Fine. You two won me over.” And not only when it came to french fries and ice cream for dinner, she realized as she followed them to the car a few minutes later. This man and his little girl were fast working their way into her heart. She only hoped they wouldn’t break it when winter rolled around.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

A utumn sat between Nate and Max at the picnic table, her face covered with chocolate ice cream. “This is my favorite,” she proclaimed.

“Really?” Nate said. “I wasn’t sure.”

She crinkled up her nose at him.

“She’s four,” Max reminded him. “Sarcasm is lost on her.”

He shrugged and took another fry from the basket they shared. Andy’s Stand, a fixture in Whispering Pines for as long as Max could remember, made some of the best food around. It looked as though others agreed on this mild night, because every picnic table was taken, and several families stood around the wooden building or sat on blankets on the ground. The sun sent out brilliant orange light as it settled into the peak of Sunrise Mountain.

Suddenly, a black Mercedes zipped down the dirt lane and stopped just short of the row of picnic tables. It didn’t quite fit in with the pick-ups, SUVs, and other sedans in the lot, and Max waited to see who would emerge. She didn’t have to wait long. Bethany climbed from the passenger side. Parvati the *Post* reporter got out from behind the wheel, and the rumped cameraman climbed from the back.

Max ducked her head. Maybe her mother wouldn't see them.  
*Sure. Right.*

"Maxine!" Bethany waved and picked her way across the uneven ground. Tonight she wore yellow heels that matched a strapless yellow dress. Totally out of place for a local ice cream stand. And totally form fitting and flattering. Heads turned as she went.

"How does she do that?" Nate asked under his breath. "Find us and show up?"

"Mother's intuition?"

"Hello, sweetheart," Bethany kissed Max, then Autumn, then patted Nate on the shoulder. "This is a nice surprise. We've been doing meet-and-greets at a bunch of local places this evening." She smoothed her hands over her hips. She did look pretty fabulous for a woman pushing fifty-one. She certainly had more defined curves than Max did. "I'm so glad we ran into you here. This is perfect." She waved over Parvati and the cameraman. Then she wriggled her way onto the bench between Nate and Autumn. "Maxine, honey, come over here. So Gus can get a couple good shots of us all together."

A small crowd gathered around them. Max's cheeks burned, but she got up and circled the table.

"Here, sit on my lap," Nate said without a trace of sarcasm in his voice. Before Max knew it, he'd pulled her down on top of him.

*Oh...*

Strong, broad thighs. Warm torso at her back. She balanced on his legs, her fists tight in her lap.

"Relax," he said into her ear.

But that was easier said than done. Desire surged through her at his touch, his words, the bare skin of their legs touching as half of Whispering Pines looked on. She tried to do as he said, but that only resulted in touching more of him as her back settled against his arm.

A very strong arm. Attached to fingers that began moving up and down her spine.

“Smile,” Gus growled.

The setting sun blinded her, but she tried to follow his direction. He took a few shots and then walked closer. “Lemme get you up close now.”

Nate’s fingers continued to move along Max’s back. Her breath went shallow. She snuggled a little closer, and the scent of his shampoo came to her, clean and masculine and urging on her desire.

Finally Gus grunted and dropped his camera to his side. “Kay.” Parvati walked among the picnic tables and blankets, chatting and pointing back at Bethany and occasionally stopping to write something on a notepad.

“And how is Princess Autumn this evening?” Bethany asked as she bounced to her feet.

“Good. I had ice cream for dinner.” Autumn licked her spoon and added to the chocolate moustache above her lip. *Oh, boy. Ma’ll hate that.* Bethany had forever been smoothing Max’s hair into place as a child, or wiping her face, or straightening her clothes. Even in high school, Max had to dodge her mother on the way out the door, or Bethany would find something to fix or change or correct. *Appearances count for a lot,* she used to say.

But her mother only smiled and patted Autumn on the head before moving into the crowd. Max watched Bethany circulate among the patrons. Didn’t look as though much had changed. Appearances still did count, especially when you were trying to win an election. Suddenly she realized she remained on Nate’s lap, cozied up to him like they were teenagers on a date. She jumped up, ignoring his chuckle.

“She’s ever the campaigner, isn’t she?” he said.

“Looks like it.”

Bethany walked from table to table, taking her time, smiling and laughing and sometimes growing serious. She shook hands and posed for pictures until the sun went down. Finally she turned, blew kisses in their direction, and climbed back into the Mercedes with Parvati and Gus. With the sun gone, Max shivered. *Better get back soon.* Autumn wore only a short-sleeved shirt and a flowery skirt she’d picked out for herself that morning.

Nate picked up his paper soda cup and touched it to hers. “Cheers.”

“What are we toasting?”

“Getting through that visit with the social worker. And your mother’s impromptu photo shoot.” He glanced at the striped button-down shirt and dark dress pants he still wore. “Thought I was a little overdressed for a night at Andy’s, but maybe I’m glad I didn’t change.”

“You look good no matter what you wear.” The words came out before she realized it.

“Well, thanks, darlin’.” He winked, and she couldn’t tell whether he was teasing her or not. He took a sip of his soda, and she tried not to watch his lips wrapped around his straw, or the flash of blue when his eyes caught the fading light. Both sent squiggles through her, the likes of which she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Or maybe ever.

“Sorry about that,” she added, to distract herself. “The pictures and Bethany and all. I know it’s...weird.”

He shrugged again. “It’s not a big deal.”

*Not a big deal.* Max cleaned up their wadded napkins and empty paper trays and tried to decide how to process that.



“Nate? I thought that was you.” A young, attractive blonde woman walked up to their table with two kids in tow, one that looked around Autumn’s age, the other a couple years older. “This must be Autumn,” she added. “Hi, honey. Trevor talks about you all the time.” She turned to Max. “I’m sorry. Lisa Steele. I don’t know if we’ve met.” Her gaze returned to Nate and remained there. “Nate and I went to college together. I’m not from around here,” she explained, “but my husband and Nate were good friends in college. I got married and ended up in the hills of northern New York.” She chirped out a laugh. “Never thought a city girl would live in a place where my biggest worry is a groundhog digging up my flowers, but here I am.”

“Maxine Abbott,” Max finally said when Lisa stopped talking. “I’m the children’s librarian over in Silver Valley.” She thought about adding that she’d lived in Whispering Pines her whole life and loved it, but she didn’t.

“Oh. How nice. Jessie, my oldest, loves the library at school.” Lisa looked from Nate to Max, as if trying to figure out their relationship.

“Your son is in preschool at Precious Little People?” Max asked.

“Yes. Trevor. And he just adores Autumn.” She turned to her son, who was staring at the ground and scowling. “Don’t you, honey? Did you say hello?”

But Trevor was either afflicted with painful shyness, or his mother was lying about the adoration, because he looked everywhere but at Autumn.

“Hi, Trevor,” Autumn piped up. “Do you want some ice cream?”

“Trevor’s lactose-sensitive, unfortunately,” Lisa said. “We only stopped by to get some sorbet.”

“Better get in line, then,” Nate said. He reached over and took Max’s hand. “Two minivans just pulled in.”

“Oh!” Lisa took one last look at the two of them, her gaze zeroing in on their joined hands. Then she hurried toward the growing line, tugging her sons with her. “Nice to see you!” she called over her shoulder. “Nice to meet you, Marilyn!”

*Maxine*, she opened her mouth to say, but the woman was gone before she could. Max waited for Nate to release her hand, but he didn't. *We don't have to put on a show anymore. The paper isn't here. Bethany isn't looking over our shoulders.* His thumb brushed her skin, once, then again. Her pulse stutter-stepped inside her wrist, and she wondered if he felt it.

“You ready to go?” he asked after a long moment.

Max nodded. She didn't trust herself to answer.



### *WAS THAT A MISTAKE?*

Nate had pulled that move of taking Max onto his lap for the benefit of Bethany and her cameraman, but he wouldn't lie: she felt good there. Like she belonged there. Everything, from the cute, tense way she wriggled at first, to the way she settled into him, had turned him on a hundredfold. If Gus had taken any longer with those shots, Max would have felt much more than Nate's arm pressing against her.

He wiped one palm over his brow as he pulled into their driveway. Autumn had fallen asleep on the way home, and he glanced into the rearview mirror and smiled. “*Look,*” he mouthed.

Max peeked into the back seat. “She's out, huh?”

He nodded and took pains to unbuckle Autumn and put her over his shoulder without waking her. Her tiny body fit perfectly there, her cheek warm against his neck and one arm clutching his even in

sleep. A rush of love moved through him, overwhelming and sudden. He'd proclaimed love a half-dozen times in his life, but he'd never meant it. Not truly. Not down deep. He knew that now, and it scared the hell out of him. How could forty pounds of little girl make him feel like no one else in life ever had?

Max held the door and followed them in, and his thoughts shifted. She was part of this, part of the way his life was changing in subtle but sure ways, and he didn't know what it meant, except that he wanted her. Badly. Her scent, her smile, the way she made everything into a series of lists to be checked off—it followed him through his days. Sometimes it kept him awake at night, thinking of her in the room above him and wondering what she wore to bed.

He carried Autumn upstairs without turning on the lights. In her room, her eyes fluttered open.

"Are we home?"

"Yes." *Home*. He liked the way it sounded in her voice. He helped her out of her shirt and shoes and let her peel off her skirt by herself. Forget the bath. She could take one tomorrow. She climbed under the covers.

"Where's Teddy?" she asked with a yawn.

Nate looked around. He couldn't make out much in the dark, but if she didn't have her faithful bear, she wouldn't sleep. He grabbed something that looked like Teddy and handed it to her. If it wasn't right, he hoped she wouldn't notice in her overtired state. "Here you go."

She was already breathing in soft snores. *Good thing*. He nestled the bear beside her and backed out the door.

"She's still out?" Max said. She stood in the doorway holding a bottle of beer in each hand.

"Like a light." He reached for both bottles and set them aside.

“What are you—”

But he didn't let her finish. Instead, Nate slipped one arm around Max's waist and pulled her into him. Ran one thumb over her bottom lip. Took one last moment to lose himself in those smart, soulful eyes. Then he bent and kissed her the way he should have the first night at the Elks Club. The way he'd wanted to earlier at the ice cream stand. The way she was meant to be kissed, up against the wall with his hands in her hair, until he left them both breathless.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE

She didn't hesitate or twitch or tense this time. Max's arms went around Nate's waist and pulled him close too, as if she'd been waiting for this moment as much as he had. He couldn't get enough of her. His mouth skated over hers and their tongues twined. He tugged her hair the smallest bit, until her head fell back and he could taste her neck, the heat of her skin where her pulse beat an erratic rhythm.

Her hands found their way beneath his shirt, untucked and ruffled, and her touch on his bare skin burned him. "I want you," he whispered. He hadn't planned this, didn't know where it might go, but he didn't want it to stop. She bit her bottom lip and her eyes turned dark, lids heavy. He loved it, wanted more of it, wanted to watch the always-in-control librarian lose it at his touch. He skimmed his fingers beneath the neckline of her shirt and found the strap of a plain black bra.

"I would've dressed for the occasion," she said, her voice unsteady. "If I'd known, I mean..."

"You're dressed perfectly." In all honesty, Nate didn't care what women wore. He never had. He only cared about the package underneath. He clasped her waist, pinning her against the wall so

she had nowhere to go, nothing to do but respond to his touch with tiny gasps of pleasure. He kissed her again, his need blazing hotter with every passing moment. Forget play acting for the camera. Forget everything except soaring with Max, kissing her and touching her and turning this whatever-it-was arrangement into something more. Something infinitely better.

Suddenly Autumn let out a bloodcurdling scream above them. Max jerked her head and caught Nate squarely under the jaw. He bit his tongue, tasted blood, and saw stars.

“Oh, no.” She touched his face. “I’m sorry. Again.”

Another scream. They both turned toward the staircase. “Miss Max! Daddy!”

*Daddy?*

Nate took the stairs two at a time. “What’s wrong, honey?”

Autumn sat straight up in bed, weeping. “I—don’t—have—Teddy.”

*Oh, hell.* In his hurry to get her settled earlier, he’d grabbed not the favored pink teddy bear, but a yellow monkey instead. Now his little girl looked at it as if it were flea-infested and about to attack her.

Max turned on the light, cheeks flushed. “Here it is, sweetheart.” She rescued Teddy from his spot on the window seat and handed it over. Autumn wrapped her arms around Teddy but continued to cry. Her entire body heaved with sobs, and her bottom lip quivered.

“Are you missing Mommy tonight?” Max sat beside her and rubbed her back. She used her soothing voice, the one she read with at the library, calm and low. Autumn shook her head.

“Does your belly hurt?” Nate asked. With the earlier combination of chocolate ice cream and french fries for dinner, he wouldn’t be surprised. His own gut felt a little uneasy right now.

Another head shake.

“Can you tell us what’s wrong?”

Autumn sniffled. "I saw a *monster*." At the word, she broke into open sobs all over again.

Max stood and put her hands on her hips. "Really? Another one?" She stretched her arms overhead and lifted onto her tiptoes. "Was it tall, like the Martian monster in *To the Stars*?" Then she dropped to her hands and knees. "Or was it tiny, like a shrimp in *Bobby and the Beach*?"

Autumn stopped crying.

Max popped up from the side of the bed. "I don't see any monsters under here. Did you see it in the closet?"

Autumn nodded slowly. Max walked over, flung open the door, and went through the clothes hangers, shaking each one before moving on to the next. Then she picked up the shoes on the floor, making a big show of sticking them as close to her face as possible. Autumn giggled. Nate hoped his daughter hadn't inherited his own smelly feet. He couldn't help smiling at Max's performance.

"No monsters in the closet," she finally proclaimed. "Did you see it at the window?" She went there next, examining the frame and the glass with the same silly, overdone gestures. By now, Autumn had buried her face in Teddy and was laughing.

Part of Nate wanted to laugh too. The other part wanted to put Max over his shoulder, carry her back downstairs, and show her in no uncertain terms how grateful he was for all of this. *She's good with Autumn. Really, really good.* He couldn't have picked a better live-in helper if he'd tried. But he wanted her to be good with him too. Or rather, very very bad. In his bed. With the lights out and no clothes on.

"Do you think you can try and sleep now?" Max returned to the bed. Autumn leaned against her, thumb close to her mouth but not quite going inside. She looked up at Nate.

“I want Daddy to stay with me.”

*Daddy.* The word went straight to his heart. She'd never called him that, since the day she'd arrived in Whispering Pines. He wasn't even sure she knew the word.

“You do?”

Autumn nodded and reached for him. At that, he was a goner. Nate sank down beside her, kicked off his shoes, and pulled her little body close. Max arranged the covers over both of them. “Good night, you two,” she said as she turned off the light.

*I'll be down in a few minutes, as soon as she goes to sleep,* Nate thought about saying, but the dark of the room and Autumn's quiet breathing beside him lulled him to dreams, and he didn't wake up until hours later.



MAX STAYED up until nearly midnight, nursing a beer on the front porch and watching the moon rise over the lake. At some point she fell asleep in the chaise lounge, only to wake up with a stiff neck and a keen sense of disappointment. She'd thought Nate might sneak back downstairs after Autumn fell asleep, and they could pick up where they'd left off. But he must have been more tired than she'd guessed. She rubbed her arms. She was chilled through, since the temperature now dropped to fifty or so once the sun went down. On stiff legs, she walked upstairs and peeked into Autumn's bedroom. Nate snored beside his daughter. Autumn had one small hand wrapped in his shirt and her cheek pressed to his chest. In the moonlight, Max could see a faint drool spot above his pocket.

She stood there for a few minutes, watching them sleep, two tow-heads whose faces relaxed in the exact same way. She saw the



resemblance between them often, in their eyes and laughs and similar strides. But in sleep she saw more of Nate in Autumn than she'd realized before. The shape of their noses. The angle of their jaws. Her heart flipped over. How amazing, to have a little person made in your image. She wondered if she'd ever have that. She hadn't thought about it much in the past. She'd never understood the power of parenthood, even watching all the moms and dads at the library. Until now.

A lump rose in her throat, and she backed away and went to her own room. Autumn didn't have only her father's traits, though. Genetics didn't work that way. She had a funny, quirky personality and a keen love of language. She would read books all day long if she could, whereas Nate would probably use the books in the house for doorstops if Max wasn't living there. Autumn was a lefty while Nate was a righty. Max wondered if he missed Lexi, thought of Lexi, when he looked at his daughter. How could he not?

The following morning, she took her mother's advice and got up a half-hour earlier than usual to do her hair and put on some mascara and lip gloss before going downstairs.

"Mornin'." Nate sat at the table, showered and shaved and dressed for work. He drank a cup of coffee and watched Autumn eat a slice of toast.

"Good morning."

"You look nice."

She kept her eyes on the lawn and the lake outside. "Thanks."

"You don't usually wear a dress to work."

*He noticed.*

"I know."

"Special occasion?"

*Yes, you, idiot,* she wanted to say. *I dressed up for you.* Instead she turned and smiled. “Couple of meetings with the newspaper. I have a new teen discussion group starting today after school, too. Figured I should try to look a little trendy.”

“Well, you do. You look good.” His gaze moved over her, and his mouth curled up at the corners. There it was, the flash of desire she’d hoped for, sealed a few minutes later when he grabbed her around the waist and whispered into her ear. “You taste good, too.” Then he gave her a wicked, wonderful wink that curled her toes and left her dreaming about him all day long.

“OH MY GOD, this picture is *adorable*,” Summer said later that afternoon. She handed Max the local paper, folded open to page ten. “Did you see it?”

Max shook her head. She’d barely had time to eat lunch and go to the bathroom. Some people might think librarians sat on a high stool with their nose in a book all day, but in her world, that couldn’t be further from the truth. She pulled her hair off her neck and studied the picture of her, Nate, Bethany, and Autumn at Andy’s Stand. Gus had caught them all in a rare moment of smiling and looking at the camera.

“You look like quite the happy couple.”

A flush crawled over Max’s cheeks. Had Nate seen this?

“Actually, you look like quite the happy family,” Summer added. “I’m sure your mother is thrilled.”

“I can’t believe she hasn’t called me about it. Or stopped by three times to ask what kind of frame she should put it in.”

“When’s the debate? She’s busy preparing for that, right?”

“It’s next week. And yes.” Max ran her fingers over the picture, a quarter-page in size, full-color. *All in the Family*, read the caption, which seemed like a bit of a stretch, but Max didn’t mind. Everyone in the picture was related to someone else, one way or another.

“She sure looks like her dad, doesn’t she?”

“She does.” Max almost told Summer about last night, about watching the two of them sleep together, but at the last minute she decided to keep it to herself, a little gem held close to her heart.

“Oh, hey, your teen crew is here.” Summer plopped her purse over her shoulder. “Dinah,” she called across the library. The girl had her nose stuck in a book.

“How old is she now?” Max asked.

“Ten.”

“Couple more years, she’ll be in that group.” Max nodded toward the gangly kids milling around near the front of the room, tapping into their phones and pretending not to notice the opposite sex.

“Great. I can’t wait.” Sarcasm laced Summer’s voice. “And keep it,” she said when Max tried to return her newspaper. “I already read it cover to cover. All fifteen pages of it.” Summer laughed and led Dinah out the front door, and then Max only had sixty more minutes before the library closed and she could go home.

And see Nate.

And tell him that maybe, just maybe, she wanted to turn this fake arrangement of theirs into something real.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-TWO

“Leave the lights off.”

Max stood at the top of the stairs. She'd finished reading Autumn not their usual two bedtime stories, but a full four, followed by a monster check of the entire room, before the little girl finally settled into bed and closed her eyes. Now she watched Nate's silhouette move toward her, one slow step at a time. Every inch of her tingled. She still wore the dress she'd put on that morning, though she'd discarded her shoes at the front door. She'd even thought to put on perfume and reapply her mascara before Nate got home from work. *Ma would be so proud.*

“She's asleep?” he said as he reached the step just below where she stood.

“She will be.” Although how long Autumn might sleep this time, Max had no idea. *Please no nightmares tonight. No tantrums.* At least not for the next hour or two.

He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. Max held her breath.

“I've been thinking about you all day. About *this* all day.” He kissed her without an ounce of hesitation, and everything went away except the dark of the staircase and Nate's arms around her and his body against hers, long and lean and hard.

She clung to him, wrapped her arms around his neck and let him lift her off her feet. He cupped his hands around her face and kissed her again. “You’re amazing. You know that, right? The way you are with her—and with me—with us here—I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

“I think you could,” she said. “When she called you Daddy—”

“I know.” He leaned against the wall, his fingers still linked with hers. “It got me right here.” He touched his heart.

She wanted to kiss him again. Actually, she wanted to invite him back to her room, where they could do a lot more than kiss. She didn’t know her skin could burn with anticipation, had never dreamed that desire could make her crave a man’s touch. And oh, she was craving Nate Hunter on a regular basis. She held her breath. Yet something about sleeping with him felt wrong. He had a daughter. And a playboy reputation. And their whole relationship was built on a convenient white lie. If this turned into something real, would everything change? Would they tell Autumn something different about why Max was living here? What happened when she returned to live with her aunt?

She looped her fingers inside his pockets and pulled him closer. Maybe she didn’t have to decide right this minute. Maybe she could just let herself go, deal with the consequences when they happened.

*Yeah. Right.*

Nate kissed the tip of her nose. “You’re definitely the epitome of the quiet librarian who has a wild side when she lets her hair down.”

She frowned. “I don’t like being an epitome.”

“Oh Max, I didn’t mean it as a bad thing.”

“Can I ask you something?” They remained on the stairs, in the dark, with only an inch between them.

“Yes. As long as it doesn’t involve making a list.”

She gave him a soft jab on the shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with list-making."

He smiled and said nothing.

She cleared her throat. "Does this change things?"

"This' meaning us kissing? Getting involved?"

She nodded.

"Do you want it to?"

"That's such a guy response."

"What can I say? I'm the epitome of a guy."

"I'm serious."

"I don't know, Max. Of course it changes things. I liked it. I'd like to do it again. Tonight, if you want. And tomorrow, and the next day. I'd like to do it outside on the lawn. Maybe on one of the porch lounge chairs. Out on the dock? Yeah, I like that idea. And definitely up against the kitchen table." He pulled her closer. "And I'm not just talking about kissing, for what it's worth. Part of the epitome of being a guy is that it's taking everything I have not to tear off your clothes and make love to you."

Her breath caught.

"Tell me you don't want to."

She didn't know what she wanted. She had no intention of being a notch on Nate's bedpost. But living here with him, she saw a side no one else knew. A sweet, insecure, goofy side. A worrisome side when it came to Autumn. And a taut, muscular body that felt more than good pressed against hers. Did she want to sleep with him? *Oh, yes.* But that would change everything a hundredfold.

"I do. But I just think it would complicate things."

His expression turned thoughtful. He placed another light kiss on her lips. "Okay. Then I should let you go now. Because in another minute I won't be able to."

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE

Max floated through the next week. She jumped into the shower each morning before the sun rose and met Nate in the kitchen for good morning kisses that set her on fire.

“You know, I could get used to this,” he said as he pressed her against the counter and nibbled her earlobe.

*You aren't the only one.*

Everything in the world seemed brilliant and new. The weather was perfect, the leaves turning beautiful golds and reds with each passing day. Max adopted a new rabbit for the library, a companion for Mr. Floppy, and reorganized the entire storage room in the back. She issued sixteen new library cards, did a radio interview about the teen discussion hour, and went home each night to have dinner with Nate and Autumn.

Even the Town Council debate went better than anyone could have expected. Bethany impressed both the moderator and the crowd with her answers about a proposed solar farm and a contentious sale of a deserted school building.

*“I believe we need to take a good long look at what's best for everyone in the town, not just a few who have been making*

*decisions for far too long...*

*“As a single mother, I learned early on how to stretch a dollar, and I’ll do the same for the taxpayers of Silver Valley...”*

The next morning, polls showed her dead even with Dom Lonesca. And as Bethany had surmised, Gus had gotten a full-body shot of her standing at the podium, black pumps included. Life was fantastic. Life was more than fantastic. It was a word Max couldn’t even conceive, full of vibrancy and secrets and promises and beauty.

“You sure are happy this week,” Sienna said Thursday morning at the library. “Is that a new dress?”

“Yes.” Max twirled in a circle behind her desk. She never twirled, but somehow this cute red and white striped number was made for showing off.

“What’s going on with you?” Sienna narrowed her gaze.

“Nothing. Why?” *Everything. Just ask me.* She was bursting to tell someone. She couldn’t believe she’d gone almost five days without doing so. “Okay, I have a secret.”

“Ooh, tell me.”

She looked around and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Nate kissed me. It’s...we’re...” She didn’t know how to explain what was happening.

Sienna’s brows flew sky-high. “For real? Or like, of course he did, because that’s what you do when you’re living with a pretend boyfriend?”

“For real.”

“That’s awesome. I love Nate. He’s such a good guy.” Then her brows furrowed. “Just be careful.”

“Of what?” But she already knew.

“Do I have to remind you about Nate Hunter’s history with women?”



“No, you do not. So please don’t.” Max already spent enough time trying to not think about it. That’s why she kept drawing a line in the imaginary sand, telling herself she wouldn’t end up like all the rest.

“Having said that, though, I still want the details,” Sienna said with a wink. She got up and tucked her purse over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get them.” Max checked her phone for the tenth time that hour. Thirty more minutes until she pulled into the familiar gravel driveway, passed the ceramic rooster sitting on the stoop, and felt Nate’s gaze on her again. Three more hours before Autumn got ready for bed. After that, the whole night stretched ahead of her and Nate, waiting to be filled with kissing. And touching. And talking. And laughing. Maybe a midnight snack. Then more kissing. At quarter to five, three kids straggled into line to check out their books. Max turned off the back lights in the library. Eight more minutes. She scanned the last few books and waved goodbye to the group. Five more minutes.

“Maxine!”

“Ma?” Max scurried past Bethany to flip the sign on the door from Open to Closed. “What are you doing here?”

“Do I need a reason to see my only child?”

Max grabbed her purse and shut down her computer. “Of course not. I just didn’t expect you. I thought you’d be busy campaigning.” She set the library’s alarm and waved Bethany outside.

“That’s true.” Bethany followed Max into the parking lot. “Everything’s a campaign, you know.”

Max was beginning to understand that. She stuck her arms into a sweater and unlocked her car. Bethany had parked beside her.

“But no, actually I just wanted to stop by and invite you and Nate and Autumn over for dinner this weekend.”

“Just us? Or will there be a not-so-small group of voters and reporters there too?”

“Well, yes, I invited Carter and Willis. And probably their wives. The local Democrats. Sort of a party-party, if you know what I mean.” She laughed, as if pleased at her own play on words.

“I guess so. Sure. I don’t think we have any plans. Let me know if I can bring anything.”

Bethany waved away the offer. “I’ll probably just have it catered. Easier that way.” Her gaze homed in on Max’s dress. “I like that, by the way. Very nice choice.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re finally taking my advice?”

*Not exactly*, Max wanted to say, but she knew she owed her mother some credit for her revamped, more feminine appearance. The rest of the credit belonged solely to Nate. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I still think you’d look amazing with some highlights.” She rubbed a few strands of Max’s hair between her fingers.

“Ma!” Max jerked away. Here she was, twenty-seven years old, and her mother still fussed over her hair.

“Fine.” Bethany pulled out a tube of lipstick and applied a coat of bright pink. Today it matched her pink pantsuit and nude high heels. Despite the October chill, she wore peep-toe shoes and had a bright pink pedicure. “Can I at least ask if there’s an engagement in the near future?”

“An *engagement*?”

“A ring on your finger.”

“Why would there be a ring?”

Bethany dropped the lipstick back into her purse with a huff. “I thought maybe Nate would propose to you. Is that so ridiculous to imagine?”

“I don’t think an engagement is happening anytime soon, Ma.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Someone pulled into the parking lot, but Max didn’t turn around. The library was closed. And she wanted this conversation over as soon as possible. “Where is this coming from, anyway?” Her mother had lived with a dozen guys over the years. She’d never married any of them.

“I’m running on a family values platform, Maxine.”

“I thought you were running on a make-Silver-Valley-better-for-everyone platform. Lowering taxes and improving property values and attracting more small businesses and all that.”

“How nice that you’ve actually listened to the things I’ve been saying these last few weeks. Yes, I am. But I’m also trying to position myself as a woman who’s in touch with the everyday family, who knows what it’s like to raise a child alone or put food on the table or find a home to buy that’s actually in my price range.”

“So what does my situation with Nate have to do with that?”

“I would like it if my daughter actually had a commitment from the man she’s living with, that’s all,” Bethany said tightly. “That way, I could show the world I’ve raised you right, and you won’t settle for being the cow who’s giving away her milk.”

Max yanked her keys from her purse. “I’m done with this conversation.”

“Why?”

“Because you just called me a cow.”

“Oh, Maxine.” Bethany sighed. “It was a figure of speech, that’s all. I don’t want to see him take advantage of you. I’ve seen far too many men live with a woman for years, get their rocks off, even make babies together, but never commit. Next thing you know, the

woman's left high and dry with bills and kids and no man to help her. If Nate loves you, then he'll marry you, plain and simple."

"Well, it's not going to happen, so stop holding your breath."

Bethany's face fell.

"Don't be upset. We're not that serious, okay? I'm just living there—God, why do you do this? Why do you push me into—" She stopped, frustrated and tired of lying. "I'm just living there to help out with Autumn. When she leaves next month to live with her aunt, so do I." She didn't know if that was true any longer. She and Nate hadn't talked about it. But that was the easy answer right now. Max had never confided in her mother about men. She wasn't about to start now.

"Oh." Bethany's mouth became a thin, tight line. "I didn't realize that was the situation."

"It is."

"Well, I'm sorry I pried. I won't ask again. Your business is your business." With that, Bethany turned to go.

Only then did Max see Nate standing a few feet away, leaning against his car. From the look on his face, she knew he'd heard every word of the conversation.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FOUR

Nate got back into his car before Max could say anything. Bethany hadn't even noticed him standing there, which was just as well. *Why are you mad?* he asked himself as he pulled away from the parking lot. She hadn't said anything terrible. She hadn't badmouthed him. No, it was the look on Max's face, the casual, confident way she told her mother *We're not that serious*, that dug into his skin. As if she was just killing time. No emotions needed or included.

The thing was, Nate usually didn't care about emotions. Usually, he was in bed with a woman a few hours after meeting her. Emotions complicated things, and he rarely gave in to them. But Max was different. She made him want to be different. So he kissed her tenderly. He touched the skin of her neck, her hair, the curve of her hip. He didn't push her into sleeping with him. And somehow, all the hours they'd spent together in the farmhouse, eating breakfast, drinking on the porch, talking about Autumn, laughing over Bethany, had led to absolute, crushing desire. Max wasn't a woman he'd picked up in a bar. Or an ex-girlfriend who could scratch an inch at the end of a party. This smart, list-obsessed, kind, sexy-without-

even-knowing-it librarian filled up a room, his room, his head, and spun it around until he wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve her.

Maybe he didn't. *Obviously* he didn't, because she didn't feel the same way about him.

"Where are we going?" Autumn asked from the back seat. "I thought we were going to surprise Miss Max."

He'd thought so too. He'd gotten out of work a few minutes early and thought he'd stop by the library, maybe suggest dinner out. Looked as though the surprise was on him.

"We're going home, honey. We'll see her there instead." He tightened his fingers on the steering wheel and resisted the urge to drive a hundred miles an hour out of town.

"Can we have turkey pots for supper?"

*Turkey pots.* Max had made turkey pot pie the other day from scratch, one of the best things Nate had ever eaten, and now Autumn asked for them every chance she got.

"I'm not sure." He glanced into the rearview mirror. Autumn's solemn face looked back at him.

*"I'm just living there to help out with Autumn. When she leaves next month to live with her aunt, so do I."*

He stomped on the brake as a squirrel dashed into the road. Good to know Max's plans. Of course, they'd been his plans too, up until a few days ago. He'd thought things had changed since then. But maybe not. Clearly not. He exhaled and pressed the gas again, more gently this time. Wouldn't do him any good to wreck on the way home.

He pulled into the driveway a few minutes later and parked behind Max's car. Nate unbuckled Autumn and let her run ahead into the house. He took his time and got the mail, pulled a few dead branches off the lawn, and checked the fluid levels in the mower.

Probably needed to do one more pass on the property before putting the machine away for the season.

“Nate.” Max stood in the open kitchen door.

“What?”

“Are you coming inside?”

“In a minute.”

“Listen, I’m sorry. About that whole conversation. Ma was driving me crazy, and I just wanted to get rid of her.”

“Uh huh.”

She glanced behind her and then took a few steps down the walk. “But we should probably talk about...”

“Your plan to move out when Autumn’s gone?” Every word in that sentence stung him.

“Well, yeah.” She twisted her hands together. “We really haven’t.”

“Nope, we haven’t.” He loosened his tie. “Not sure I’m really in the mood right now, though.”

She nodded.

“Actually, I think I’m gonna take a drive. You okay taking care of her for a while?”

“Of course.” She paused. “You don’t want dinner? Spaghetti and meatballs. It’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

“I don’t think so. I’ll grab something while I’m out.”

“We can talk later?”

“Sure.” He got back into his car and spun his tires as he backed down the driveway. Stupid punk move, spitting up gravel, but he didn’t care. He didn’t know where he was going, but it didn’t matter. He just didn’t want to be here any longer.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Nate pulled into the parking lot of a place called The Back Door, situated at the end of a strip mall on the far side of Silver Valley. Nicki had mentioned it a couple of times, a new grunge bar with outstanding burgers and cheap drinks and a down-to-earth crowd. He killed the engine and headed for the door, passing everything from Mercedes to Hondas to jacked-up Dodge trucks on his way in. Looked like a blended crowd, confirmed when he opened the door and saw a half-dozen faces he knew from different walks of life.

Two nurses from the medical center.

A truck driver he'd gone to high school with.

The cook from Zeb's Diner, Ella and Becca Ericksen, and Walter Crawshaw himself.

And Nicki, passing out shots at the bar. When she saw Nate, she whistled through her teeth and handed him a glass. "Well, look who the cat dragged in."

He tipped the shot down his throat, not caring what it was. Cinnamon. Chased with nothing but heat. He eyeballed the empty glass. "Fireball? That's dangerous for six o'clock on a weekday."

"You sound like you're about a hundred," she said. "Since when don't you drink on a weekday?" She handed him another shot. He did it.

Walter Crawshaw pounded him on the back. "How's it going, my man? Hey, ya'll. This here's my newest sales associate." Guys that Nate didn't recognize whistled and thumped the bar. "Doin' a fine job so far," Walter added.

"Thanks. 'ppreciate it." The liquor and the friendly faces did their job minute by minute, drowning out the doubt and disappointment inside Nate's head. He wouldn't stay long. He'd just have a burger



and a beer or two and remind himself that he'd had a damn good life before Max Abbott showed up in it.

"Hey, Nate." Ella sashayed over and batted her eyelashes. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Why?" He grabbed a menu and scanned it. Two bartenders worked alongside two waitresses, though they could probably use more, the way this place was filling up. It had a handful of booths, a few high-top tables, and a small stage in the corner. Clean. Low-key.

"You don't get out much these days," Ella said.

"Tell me about it." He ordered a pint of draft beer and a bacon cheeseburger from a bartender with a long dark ponytail and beard.

Ella touched her shot glass to the new one Nicki handed him. "Well, good to see you. Bottoms up."

"You too." He tossed it back, not quite as quickly as the first two, since the room had taken on a slow spin, but he could still handle three shots.

"Where's the kid tonight?" Nicki asked as she sidled up to him a few minutes later. She wrapped one arm around his neck and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Home with Max."

"Ah." She scanned his face. "You're looking a little peaked, my friend."

"Feeling a little peaked."

She nodded and took a swig of dark beer. For someone five foot two and a hundred-ten pounds, she could drink most men, including Nate, under the table. "It's a lot to take on, what you're doing."

Nate didn't answer. His beer arrived, and he drank a third of it without stopping. A cute blonde with a nose ring walked up to Nicki, and the two started making out. Nate chuckled. "Didn't know you

were datin' anyone," he said when they finally came up for air. He nodded at the girl with her hand in Nicki's back pocket. "Hiya."

"This is Dawn," Nicki said. "And the reason you didn't know is because you never come around anymore."

Nate shrugged. He'd meant to. He'd thought about taking on an extra shift at Jimmy's. But a full-time job and the demands of a four-year old had gotten in the way. Now he wondered why he'd let them. He looked around the room at the growing crowd, the jovial conversation, the heaping plates of food emerging from the kitchen. He needed to be in a place like this every so often. He needed a night off.

"Max doesn't mind that you're here?"

Just like that, his brain slammed back into reality. He tightened his hand around his glass. "Nah."

"That's cool." Nicki went back to sucking on her girlfriend's face, and the two wandered off after another minute.

Nate's burger arrived, and with it a basket of fries big enough to serve everyone sitting around him. Max would make a face if she saw the grease dripping off his fingers. He took a few huge mouthfuls. Then again, he didn't much care what Max thought tonight. She was only sticking around for the short-term.

"Nate Hunter?" Jonas, Terry, and Tyron, a trio of his high school buddies, walked up to him. "Haven't seen you in forever, man."

"No kidding." He pumped their hands and bought them a round of drinks, along with another beer for himself. It was still early. He had plenty of time to sober up before driving home. "What're you all up to?"

They relived the glory days of high school for a while and then moved on to the here and now. Turned out Jonas was a big-shot attorney in Silver Valley. Terry owned his own landscaping business.

And Tyron was still taking business classes and trying to figure out what he wanted to do when he grew up.

“Where are you?” Jonas asked. “Last I heard, you were tending bar in Whispering Pines.”

“I was. Got a real job at American ‘bout a month ago. Selling insurance.”

Tyron guffawed. “Seriously? I figured you’d be a politician or a motivational speaker or something. You always did know how to talk your way around and out of everything.”

Nate grinned but didn’t answer. He didn’t think he’d end up selling insurance either, but things changed, and you had to change with them.

“No girlfriend?” Terry asked.

His last french fry stuck in his throat. “No one serious.”

“You’re better off,” Jonas said with a scowl. “Found out mine was cheating on me back in the summer. Screwing some paralegal in my office.”

“Sorry, man.”

Jonas did another shot. “Hell, I don’t care. Now he can deal with the nut-job.” Terry and Tyron laughed. Someone fed the jukebox in the corner, and mellow rock music filled the bar. Nate tapped along in rhythm. People came and went, danced, ate, drank, and filled the place. *Good decision, coming here.* It was full but not packed, just right for hanging out and forgetting life for a while. He pushed away his empty dishes and finished his beer. Another few minutes, and he’d head home. Probably close to eight or nine by now, anyway. The earlier sting from Max’s words had faded a little, and all he wanted now was some solid sleep. They could talk in the morning.

He yawned and pulled out his phone. “Ten-forty?” Sobriety slapped him square in the face.

“You want somethin’ else, my man?” asked the ponytailed bartender.

“What time is it?” Nate shook his phone, as if trying to get the clock to change on its own. Maybe he’d set it to a foreign time zone by accident.

The guy pulled out his own cell phone. “Gettin’ on to eleven. Kitchen closes then, so if you want somethin’, let me know. We got about ten more minutes to put an order in. Last call at the bar is quarter to twelve.”

Nate hadn’t meant to stay out so late. He tossed some bills on the bar and turned to go. Then he stopped. What difference did it make? Max and Autumn had long since gone to bed. Max hadn’t called or texted him, which meant an uneventful night at the farmhouse. He didn’t need to rush back; he could stay until closing. Six hours of sleep was more than enough. He’d existed on less than that for most of his adult life.

Nate waved down the bartender and ordered another beer. “Gimme a round of shots for my friends down there, too.” He gestured at Jonas, Terry, and Tyron, who looked like they’d started an impromptu poker game at the other end of the bar. He made his way through the crowd, stopping every few feet to chat up the people he knew. This felt good. This felt right. He missed his bartending lifestyle, the easy, uncomplicated way each night unfolded. You poured drinks, you delivered food, you made sweet tips, and you talked most of the night away. Didn’t require lists. Or early hours. And you rarely got your feelings hurt by a customer.

Nate joined his buddies in the middle of their card game. “You got room for one more?”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FIVE

Max stayed up until eleven. She did the dishes, ordered a new shipment of books, and watched three different reality shows before opening a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. *I thought he'd be back sooner.* Truly, she'd thought Nate would drive around the hills of Whispering Pines and Silver Valley and then return, tired and out of sorts, but wanting to see Autumn before she went to bed.

But eight o'clock came and went. Max read two stories to Autumn, tucked her in with Teddy, and descended the stairs alone. She wandered out to the front porch, but it was too cold now to stay longer than a few minutes. She hugged herself and looked at the moon, a sliver over the lake. Her heart ached. She'd screwed up and said the wrong thing, and all she could see was Nate's sad, surprised face as he stood in the parking lot of the library.

Finally she climbed the stairs, checked on Autumn one last time, and locked herself in her bedroom. She pulled off her clothes and climbed under the covers without showering or brushing her teeth. She turned over her phone in her hand. She'd resisted calling or texting Nate, but she thought he might have reached out to her. Checked in. Sent an emoji. Sent something. *You could text him.* But

pride wouldn't let her. She set her alarm, put the phone aside, and buried her face into the pillow, hoping sleep would come soon.

A CRASH WOKE Max out of dreams. She sat straight up in bed and fumbled for her glasses. *What the*— Another crash, more muted this time, and a voice. Nate's voice. She jumped out of bed and pulled on her robe. A glance at her phone revealed the time as three-fifteen.

"Miss Max?"

*Terrific.* She hurried to Autumn's room and gathered the girl into her arms. "It's okay, honey."

"Is that a monster downstairs?"

She resisted the urge to nod and instead smoothed Autumn's hair. "No. Just Mr.—it's just Daddy." Out of the blue, Autumn had gone to calling him that.

"Why is he awake in the middle of the night?"

Why, indeed? She didn't know where he'd been for the last nine hours, and she wasn't sure she wanted to ask. Max tapped Autumn on the nose. "I'm not sure. But I do know that you need to try and go back to sleep."

Autumn's bottom lip pushed out. "I wanna see him. I want him to tuck me in."

"Why don't you lie down and I'll ask him to come up, okay?"

The girl nodded.

Max looked down at herself as she descended the stairs. She didn't wear the sexy robe Ma had recommended but rather an old pilled blue one that reached to her ankles. She'd owned it since high school, against her mother's attempts to burn it on more than one occasion. It was warm and covered everything, which seemed appropriate right now.

Nate sat at a chair in the kitchen, one hand around a glass of water. He rubbed his knee, and another chair lay on its back near the fridge. "Sorry about the noise. Tried to keep the lights off, but..." He shrugged.

"What happened to you tonight? What's on your shirt?"

He glanced down and rubbed at a grease mark. "Oh. I think that's from the french fries." Circles underlined his eyes, and his hair, normally gelled and spiked, lay mashed flat to his head.

"Autumn asked for you to come up and see her."

"Okay."

"Were you at Jimmy's?" She didn't want to know. It wasn't her business. But she couldn't help asking. He smelled like beer and weed and fried food and, underneath it all, women's perfume.

Nate wiped the back of his wrist across his mouth. "Place called The Back Door. It's in the strip mall over on Route Eight."

She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her robe. "Please tell me you didn't drive home drunk."

"Do I look drunk to you?" His voice took on an edge. "I had some to drink, yeah. Earlier. When I left I figured I'd sleep it off in my car. Just woke up." He pushed back his chair. "I don't want to be lectured, Max. Not now. I needed a night to myself."

"I don't have a problem with that."

"Really? Because the way you're looking and acting right now, it sure seems like you do."

"You have a daughter living with you, that's all."

"You think I don't fucking know that?"

"Please don't swear at me."

He raised both palms. "So sorry. I forgot. The librarian would prefer I use appropriate language at all times. Well, we're not at the

library right now, and if I want to swear in my own house, I'm damn well going to."

"I'm going to bed." She didn't want to, but his words stung. She wanted him to apologize, or her to apologize, or him to just take her in his arms and kiss away the seeds of doubt growing inside her. She'd heard all the stories about Nate Hunter, Whispering Pines's lifelong bachelor and perpetual party boy. Heck, she'd grown up watching him build that reputation, starting back in high school. She'd listened to Rachael talk more than once about the pieces of broken bottle and broken heart she'd had to pick up for her little brother. And she wondered for the first time whether Lexi hadn't ever told him about Autumn because she knew being a father wouldn't jive with the way Nate spent his days and nights.

"I know I should've—what?" Nate went on, as if reading her mind. "What would you like me to do next time Call? Text? Set a curfew so I'm home when you need me to be? Last time I checked, we weren't married. According to you, we're not even serious." He set the glass in the sink with a hard clink and brushed by her on his way upstairs.

"You don't have to be mean," she said, but he didn't answer. She climbed the stairs to her own room, locked the door, and stared at the ceiling until her alarm went off hours later.



NATE GRUMBLED his way through a breakfast meeting, a client meeting, and three cold calls before Walter Crawshaw summoned him. Nate took his time walking to the second-floor corner office. He rapped on the open door. "Hey, boss?"

"Come on in, son."



*Son*. Didn't sound promising. Men in positions of authority only called other men, younger men, *son* if they were about to lecture them.

"Have a seat."

Nate sank into the heavy leather chair opposite Walter's desk.

"How're you liking this work?"

"Ah, it's fine." He folded his hands in his lap and tried to ignore the headache that had plagued him all morning.

"Never pegged you for an insurance man, I'll be honest," Walter went on.

"No?"

"I'm not sure you did either. But I'll tell you, I've got good instincts when it comes to my employees, and I meant what I said last night. I think you'll do well in this field. If you stay. You're a people person, Nathan. People like you. They gravitate to you."

Nate nodded, not sure he was supposed to answer.

"But it's a demanding job if you do it right, nine to five in the office and more than that on nights and weekends. Put that on top of a family at home, and it can be tough. I know. I was in your shoes when my twins were born."

Walter hadn't exactly been in Nate's shoes, since as a Crawshaw he'd been born into the company and guaranteed a management position from age twelve, but Nate got the gist of his lecture. "I understand, sir."

"S all right to cut loose and have a few drinks every now and then, but I can't have you coming to work the next day like you want to take it out on the rest of the world."

"I'm sorry."

Walter waved his hand. "No need to apologize. Just keep your head on straight. And remember what's important to you," he added

as Nate rose to go. "Might not be this job. Might not be the next one. Your loved ones, though, they're the ones that matter. Keep them in your sights, first and foremost."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. Why don't you take an early lunch and cash in one of your vacation days for the rest of the afternoon? Looks like you could use it."

WALTER HAD BEEN RIGHT. Nate could use an afternoon off. He finished some paperwork and then walked down the street to Marc's Grille, one of the fancier restaurants in town. He didn't really care what it looked like or served, but it was close by and he was hungry. He pulled up a stool to the bar as his cell phone buzzed.

**How r u feeling today?** Nicki texted.

**Like hell.**

She sent back two smiley faces with their tongues stuck out. **U r out of practice.**

He ordered a soda and a sandwich from the bartender and loosened his tie. **I know.**

**Boss says he's looking for someone a couple days a week at Jimmy's. Not 4 drinking LOL. Just 4 tending bar. If ur interested let me know.**

Nate took a long few seconds to consider the offer before typing his response. **Not now.** Walter might not have said the words straight out, but the boss's message was clear: he needed to get his head straight and stop spending nights in bars. **But good to know,** he added. **Thanks.** He put his phone away and sucked down half his soda. He needed the caffeine and sugar, because his headache had gotten worse.

*Your loved ones are the ones that matter...Keep them in your sights...*

He drummed his fingers on the bar. He'd always thought of his loved ones as Rachael and his parents, his immediate family, the ones he could turn to no matter what. They joked around and drove each other crazy, but they had roots tying them together. Blood. Now he had a little girl added to the mix, and it was like Nate had never known love before Autumn walked into his life. Talk about a loved one. She was it, a piece of himself he'd do anything for, and he knew that as certain as he knew the color of his eyes or the size of his feet. His blood beat inside her veins, and every time he looked at her, he saw himself.

*Max was right to be mad.*

He'd gotten over his selfish, superficial hurt at her words late last night. She told Bethany she wasn't serious, but how could Nate be upset with her for that? He'd spent his entire life bouncing from girlfriend to girlfriend. He was so incapable of commitment that he hadn't even known about his own daughter until she was walking and talking and well out of diapers. He couldn't blame Max for being cautious. He'd do the same thing if he was her.

His turkey sandwich arrived, and he took a large bite, savoring the mayo that dripped down his chin and between his fingers. He'd never tell Max this, but even in the middle of their fight last night, he'd been aroused by her, by the fullness of her breasts under that frumpy robe, her mussed hair, and the way her voice rose in concern when she asked where he'd been.

*She wouldn't have asked if she didn't care.*

The realization came to him from nowhere. She'd been mad and jealous and hurt, anyone could see that, and maybe a little worried. Nate broke out in a smile. Somehow, in the last few weeks, Max had

become a loved one too. They didn't share blood, but they shared a lot of other things, including a house and concern over Autumn and a mutual appreciation for late-night kisses. That meant he needed to clean up his act and start treating her the way she deserved.

Nate left a twenty-dollar tip on the bar and drove all the way to Whispering Pines Florist in search of the biggest bouquet of flowers he could find.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SIX

“I’m sorry.”

They spoke the words at exactly the same time. Nate handed Max an enormous vase of flowers. “I was a jerk,” he said with a glance at Autumn. “I won’t do that again. I promise.”

She set the vase on the kitchen table and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I was a jerk too. I didn’t mean to put you on the defensive.” She kissed him full on the mouth, and it was all he could do not to grab her and carry her into the bedroom.

“Daddy, I’m hungry.”

They broke the kiss, both laughing. “So much for romance,” he said. He brushed his nose over Max’s.

“Later,” she said with a grin.

“I’m getting in the shower,” he said as he pulled off his tie.

“*Want some company?*” she mouthed.

“*I wish.*”

“Okay.” She turned back to the counter and an array of vegetables. “I’m making kabobs for the grill. Too cold out, do you think?” She rubbed her arms. “Can’t believe it’s already October.”

“My teacher says October is the prettiest month of the whole year.” Autumn climbed onto her booster seat. She dragged her pink

backpack with her and pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper. “See what I made?” When she shook it, orange glitter fell everywhere.

“That’s beautiful, honey,” Max said, and Nate had to agree. Everything was beautiful, from the trees turning color to his little girl recreating them in glitter to the woman standing in the kitchen.

“I don’t think it’s too cold,” he said with a chuckle. In fact, as far as he was concerned, everything was just about perfect.

LATER, after Autumn went to bed, Max left the dirty dishes in the sink and pinned Nate up against the counter. She wanted to feel him, all of him, against her. She wanted to erase their mixed-up feelings from the last twenty-four hours.

“Hey, you,” he said against her mouth. He settled his hands on her hips and held her tight.

“Don’t talk.” Max closed her eyes and pulled his lips to hers, trying to make up for all the hurt of the last twenty-four hours. Her tongue slipped over his, and she savored the way he kissed her back, the way he lost his hands in her hair until she turned lightheaded.

He drew back and kissed the tip of her nose. “Let’s not fight again.”

“Okay.” They didn’t need to talk about the future, about when Autumn might leave and what might become of the two of them. You couldn’t predict things. You just dealt with them as they happened. She laced her fingers through his. *Six months ago, who would’ve predicted this?*

“I hate when you’re mad at me,” he added.

“I wasn’t mad.”

“Okay, then disappointed.”

“I wasn’t that either.”

“Liar.”

She smiled. “Alright, maybe I was. A little.”

“I’m not the guy I used to be. I promise. I wasn’t out doing anything stupid, smoking weed or getting crazy with anyone else. I just lost track of time. I’ve changed.” He kissed her knuckles. “You’ve changed me. You and Autumn.”

The words caught her off-guard. “I didn’t—” she began, but he shook his head.

“That’s not a bad thing, Max. It’s not a bad thing at all.”

THEY FELL into an easy rhythm the next few weeks, eating breakfast and dinner together. They went to Autumn’s preschool Open House, had dinner at Marc’s Grille, and decorated the library for Silver Valley’s first-ever Fall Festival Parade, thanks to Bethany, who organized the event from beginning to end. Max was in such a good mood, she didn’t even mind the life-sized cardboard cutout Bethany placed on the library’s front lawn. She even helped by attaching balloons and a huge “Abbott for Council” sign guaranteed to catch the eye of everyone who walked by.

“This is nice,” Nate said as they stood in front of the library and watched the floats and Boy Scout packs and cheerleaders march by. The air had a definite October chill, and Max and Autumn were wrapped in wool coats, as were most people around them. Max also had two crock pots of hot cider simmering inside, for the sip ‘n paint event later that evening.

“It is nice,” she agreed. She waved at Silver Valley’s mayor, a jovial gray-haired man who walked by with his Great Dane on a leash. Autumn wriggled in excitement, and Max let her venture close

to the curb to get a better look. “She’s so much more confident around people,” she said to Nate as they watched Autumn. The girl smiled and waved at the marchers, her cheeks pink in the cold. “Look at her. It’s amazing.”

“The preschool’s good for her.” He put his arm around Nate. “And you. I think you’re pretty good for her too.”

“Mmm.” She lifted her chin to steal a quick kiss. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Get a room, you two,” Sienna said as she walked up.

Max colored, but before she could think of a witty response, the Silver Valley soccer team jogged by. The front two players held a banner, while the rest dribbled soccer balls or threw candy to the spectators. Autumn darted out and grabbed a lollipop.

“Look, Daddy!” she said.

“For me?” Nate feigned taking it away. “Why, thank you. Grape is my favorite color.”

Autumn shrieked and buried the candy in her pocket, and they all laughed. Max’s heart swelled, and she leaned against Nate’s warm chest. Life was back to being fantastic.

The final float belonged to the Democrat Party, and though Max had an idea of what to expect, her jaw still dropped when she saw it. A brand new, sleek truck pulled an enormous silver trailer. Red and white banners covered both vehicles. Helium balloons formed the American flag at the back of the float, and a brass quartet played “God Bless America.” Bethany herself sat on a chair made up to look like a throne. Despite the temperature, she wore a bright red dress with sequins and matching gloves. No coat. She beamed and waved and blew kisses to the crowd.

Nate whistled. “Man, she is something else. Is she running for Town Council or Queen?”



Max wasn't sure whether to shrink in embarrassment or clap with pride. Ma had always known how to make an entrance, that was for sure, but she'd pulled out all the stops this time. Everything looked perfect, from her hair to her clothes to the carefully selected group of people around her. The lesbian couple that owned a bicycle repair shop stood beside a Hispanic man carrying a boy on his shoulders, a gray-haired postal carrier, and Father Dan from Lady of the Lake Catholic Church. *Put our Families First*, read a few signs affixed to the float.

"Maxine! Nathan!" Bethany caught sight of them and waved extra hard.

"Why is Princess Bethany in the parade?" Autumn asked, eyes wide.

*Princess Bethany is the parade*, Max almost answered. "She wants people to vote for her in an election. She wants to be on the Town Council and help make decisions about what happens in Silver Valley."

"Oh." Autumn's brow furrowed. "She looks sparkly."

"Yes, she does." Max waited until the float had turned the corner and then ushered them all back inside the library.

"What time does your sip'n paint start?" Nate asked. He lugged one crock pot from the back room and set it on a shelf near the front.

Max had moved the rocking chair and carpet from the story time area, and now she arranged coloring books, pens, pencils, crayons, and a few easels into the space instead. She added large sheets of paper, brushes and watercolor paints. "Seven o'clock."

Nate opened the lid and sniffed. "Any alcohol in here?"

"No. And don't add any."

"You do need an adult version of this," Sienna said. She carried the other crock pot to the front while Nate helped set out trays of

cookies. “Chug ‘n Scribble, or something along those lines. You’d probably sell out in one afternoon.”

Max smiled. “Maybe closer to Christmas. This one’s a special request from my most faithful moms.”

“Who need something to do with their kids on a Friday night.”

Max shrugged. “That’s okay. I like having them here.”

Nate nuzzled her neck. “I know you do. It’s part of what makes you an amazing librarian.”

She melted, the way she always did when he touched her, and wished for just a moment they could skip the sip ‘n paint, go home, and slide under the covers together. Until morning. Without sleeping.

“What else do you need me to do?” Nate asked.

“I think I’m all set. But thank you.”

“Okay if I take Autumn to the diner, grab something to eat?”

“Of course.”

People began arriving at the library a few minutes later, mostly moms and their kids, though Malcolm Swisher showed up, along with another man Max didn’t recognize and three adorable girls in matching outfits and pigtails. She’d capped the attendance at twenty, but by a quarter to seven, the place was filled with excited kids and their parents.

Max hurried around the room, making sure everyone had enough crayons and paper. She gave some of the older children classic paintings to follow if they wanted to, but most of the kids just wanted to draw their own creations. The adults clustered on the periphery, talking in small groups about the weather and school and the election.

“The cider’s delicious,” one mom said. “Perfect for tonight.”

“Except it needs a shot or two of rum,” said the woman standing beside her.

“Next time,” Max promised with a wink. Her stomach rumbled, and she realized she hadn’t eaten anything since lunch. Nor had she thought to ask Nate to get any take out for her. She leaned against the circulation desk and pulled out her phone to text him.

“What did you think of that spectacle tonight at the parade?”

“Bethany Abbott?”

The voices came from behind Max, spoken in hushed tones. Her thumbs froze over her phone.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have expected anything else. She always looks like that. You should see her at the gym. She’s always got full makeup and some kind of glamorous outfit going on.”

One corner of Max’s mouth tugged up. *True.*

“Yeah, but you think people are gonna vote for her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. You know the thing that bothers me the most?”

Max kept her eyes on her phone, but her ears perked up.

“She’s not real. She was a beauty queen, sure, but that was what? Twenty-five years ago? No one looks that good all the time, especially past forty.”

“She’s probably had work done. Boobs, facelift, Botox, stomach stapled...”

Both women giggled. Max didn’t recognize their voices, but she didn’t dare turn around to see who they were.

“My point is,” the first woman went on, “she’s running on some kind of family platform, right? Like she’s a regular person who knows what it’s like to struggle and not be able to pay the bills and all that.”

“Shoot. You believe that?”

“Nope. When I look at her, all I see is someone who’s come from money her whole life. If she didn’t have it, she knew where to get it.

She says she's like the rest of us, but all I see is she's like every other politician out there, doing whatever she can to get elected.

“If you ask me, Bethany Abbott's just a phony.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SEVEN

“**A**ll I’m saying is maybe you want to tone it down,” Max said the following evening. She and Bethany sat in her mother’s kitchen with papers and charts and poll results strewn on the counter. Nate and Autumn watched a Disney movie in the living room.

“Tone what down?”

“The overall effect. The ball gowns when you’re out in public. The false eyelashes.”

Bethany looked at her in horror. “Because a couple of catty women at the library think I’ve had Botox done?” She ran her fingers down one cheek. “I did think about it. Haven’t done it yet.”

“Those catty women talk to other women. If they think you’re a phony, they’re not going to vote for you.”

“They’d rather vote for Dom Lonesca? A grumpy old man with one foot in the grave?”

“Dom comes across as honest.”

Bethany blew a raspberry. “Please. You know as well as I do that he’s been cheating on his wife for years.”

“I don’t know that. The women in your salon think half the men in town are cheating on their wives.”

Bethany rolled her eyes.

“Listen to me. When Dom talks to people, he plays the good old boy. Salt of the earth. He doesn’t wear pin-striped suits or dye his hair.”

“No, he certainly does not. Even though he’d benefit from both.” Bethany scanned an article in the paper, a review of yesterday’s parade. “Look. The town loved this.” A full color spread of pictures filled the paper’s center section.

“They did.”

“And my numbers show I’m even with Dom right now, so I don’t know what you’re so worried about. A month ago I was ten points behind.”

The kettle whistled on the stove, and Max took it off and poured steaming water over tea bags for them both. “I know. And I’m proud of you for catching up to him. But don’t you want to be ahead of Dom by now? The election’s in one month.” She pointed at the black yoga pants and plain white t-shirt her mother wore. Bethany’s hair was piled on top of her head, and she’d taken off most of her makeup except mascara and eyeliner. “See, like this. This is a good look. A down-to-earth look.”

Bethany huffed. “Maxine, you’re ridiculous. No one wants to see a politician in yoga pants. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to discount your advice, but this time I just think you’re wrong.”

*Obviously.*

Max leaned against the kitchen counter and blew on her tea. “Okay. It’s your campaign.” She wouldn’t bring it up again.



“HERE,” Nate held the iPad in front of Autumn’s face a few days later. They sat beside each other on the couch in the playroom. “Can you see Aunt Penny?”

Autumn leaned close to the screen and wrinkled her forehead. Then she smiled and waved. “Hi, Aunt Penny!”

“Hello, Autumn.” Lexi’s older sister waved back. She stood in front of a wooden building with a wide stretch of desert behind her. She had freckles and windblown hair and a smile like Lexi’s that made Nate’s heart hurt. Penny already had seen five birthdays her younger sister never would. She’d traveled the world. She could run and laugh and draw a full breath. It made him want to hit something, hard, until his knuckles split and the pain distracted him from the unfairness of a twenty-five year’s old death.

“How are you doing?” Penny asked Autumn.

“I’m good.” Autumn touched a finger to the screen. “You look like Mommy.”

The pain moved from Nate’s heart to his throat.

“I do, don’t I?” Penny smiled, and if the observation bothered her, she didn’t let on. “How’s school?”

“Good. I was the line leader today.”

“Ooh, that’s exciting.”

Autumn’s head bobbed in agreement. “I got to choose the book for story time and be the first person at snack. And the first person on the playground.”

“How’s the weather there?” Nate asked.

“Hot. And dry.” Penny’s gaze shifted to look at him for a second only. Nate supposed he couldn’t blame her. He was the schmuck who’d knocked up her sister, who’d lived blissful and carefree until a few months ago, while Lexi raised a child and succumbed to cancer.

“I can’t wait to see you,” Penny told Autumn. “I miss you so much.”

“Are you coming here to my house?”

“In a few weeks.” Another quick glance at Nate. “Can you let me talk to your father for a few minutes, honey? Alone?”

Autumn nodded and slid off the couch.

“Go find Miss Max,” Nate said. “And then I’ll read you a story before your bath.” He waited until Autumn was back in the kitchen and then toed the door shut. “So what’s up?”

“Have you told her she’ll be coming back to North Carolina to live with me?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. She just got used to being here. Max thought it would be better to wait. Until we knew more details about where and when and everything.”

“Who’s Max?”

“Maxine Abbott. My—” He stopped. His what, exactly? Girlfriend? Father’s helper? “She lives with me. She’s terrific with Autumn. She works at the children’s library in town. She knows a lot about kids, their development and all that.”

“Oh.” Something screeched in the background, a wild animal or maybe just the tires of a beat-up jeep that appeared behind Penny a second later.

“Well, I guess that’s probably a good idea. We can talk to her together when I’m there.”

“And that’s when, exactly?” Suddenly he didn’t want to know. He wanted Penny to stay in sub-Saharan Africa and take care of the lions or the bush people or whatever she did there. He didn’t want her to come back to the States. Or take his daughter away from him.

“...flight lands in New York on December fifth,” she was saying. The reception on the iPad had gone screwy, and he only caught part



of her words. "I'll call you then."

"Uh huh." He gave a halfhearted wave before disconnecting.

"How did it go?" Max asked when he walked into the kitchen. She stood at the sink washing dishes. Autumn perched on a chair beside her with a towel in her hands. She wiped the dishes dry and set them in haphazard piles anywhere she could reach.

Nate rescued a plate before it hit the floor. "It went okay. Here, honey, why don't you let me take over?" *Before the rest of the dishes wind up on the floor.*

"Did she give you a date?" Max asked.

"She flies back December fifth."

"My birthday's December *first*," Autumn proclaimed. She climbed down from the chair and handed Nate her towel.

"Shit—shoot, that's right," Nate said. He'd seen that date on all the paperwork Lexi gave him, but he'd filed it away and forgotten about it. "Sorry," he said. "Don't use that word," he told Autumn. "The first one I said. It's a bad word."

She didn't seem to hear him. "Do you think I could have a party for my birthday?" she asked.

"Sure, honey. What kind of party would you like?"

"A pink pony party."

"What the heck is that?" Nate said under his breath.

Max grinned. "Don't you watch any of those shows with her? Lila and Lacey are best friends who live in a pink castle at the Equator and travel around the world on their pink ponies." She rinsed the last pot and set it in the sink to dry. "All the girls are having pink pony parties these days."

"Oh. Good to know. How much is that gonna cost me?"

Max chuckled. "More than you'd think, if you pull out all the stops and buy all the accessories."

Nate groaned. Autumn had skipped back into the playroom, so he pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table. “A pink pony party. Okay. What kind of accessories are we talking about?”

Max rattled off a half-dozen things, including a life-size pink pony he could rent if he put in the order tomorrow. “We could use the library if you wanted to,” she finished. “The back room’s big enough.”

Nate massaged his temples.

“It’s a lot,” Max said as she pulled out the chair opposite him. “Even though she asked, I’m sure she’d be fine if we toned it down. We don’t need all the bells and whistles.”

Max wasn’t one for bells and whistles of any kind, Nate had discovered. She didn’t like flashy clothes or loud music or fast cars or anything that made a person stand out. Maybe it was a backlash to Bethany, or maybe she took after the father she’d never met. Nate had never broached the subject, though he’d heard through the grapevine that a pageant judge knocked up Bethany sometime after she’d been crowned Miss New York. In many ways, Max was just what you’d expect of a librarian: quiet, smart, and happy to blend into the background, to read books in silence while a parade marched by outside. Nate, on the other hand, liked parades. He liked parties. And he’d seen enough of human nature over the years to know that other people liked to live large too, like great big shooting stars that flamed through the sky.

If his daughter wanted a fancy birthday party, then by God she’d have it. She’d have all the bells and whistles she wanted and then some. She’d be a shooting star and dazzle the people in this town just like Bethany Abbott.

“Let’s do it,” he said. “The whole she-bang.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.” If this was the only birthday party he got to throw his daughter, he’d give her a day she’d never forget. Pink ponies, castles, cakes, whatever. He hadn’t had a chance to do that for Lexi. They hadn’t celebrated anything together, except maybe a good time as the sun came up. Any chance he had to make up for that, he’d do in spades. His heart walked around outside his body now, three feet of blonde hair and one bright smile. An extravagant birthday party was nothing.

He’d harness the moon for Autumn if he could figure out a way to fly that high.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-EIGHT

The temperature dropped steeply over the next two weeks, and plans for Autumn's birthday party were pushed back as Halloween neared.

"I know you want to be a mermaid," Max said one night during bath time. "But it's going to be very cold on Halloween. I think we should come up with a warmer costume."

Nate leaned in the bathroom doorway. "Do they make mermaid sweaters? Or mermaid turtlenecks?"

She gave him a searing look. "I don't think so. I think mermaids wear bathing suits and not much else."

"Like this, Daddy!" Autumn held up one of her toys, a plastic figure painted in green from the chest down.

"Exactly. And if you dress like this on Halloween, you'll freeze to death." Max helped Autumn rinse off. "And that would make me very sad."

Autumn hopped up and reached for her towel. "Would you be sad if I froze to death, Daddy?" She looked to him for every reaction now, every answer and every bedtime story. She'd grown so attached to him in the last few weeks, it astounded Max.

“Of course I would, silly goose.” His expression darkened, and Max wondered how much he thought of Lexi in times like these. As Autumn grew up, she’d likely resemble her mother more and more. Did the thought pain him? Comfort him?

She rubbed Nate’s arm, trying to send him silent comfort. He never talked about Lexi. He seemed focused on the here and now, on Autumn and Max and his job. He often worked late at the office or brought files home with him. Sometimes when she went to bed he remained sitting up in the kitchen, with spreadsheets and his laptop open on the table.

“I want to do well at this,” he said last week. “Make decent money. Better than decent. Just because Autumn won’t be living with me doesn’t mean I won’t support her forever. She shouldn’t want or need for anything. Ever.”

Autumn toweled off and pulled on her pajamas. Then she skipped down the hall to her room. “Are you coming, Daddy?” she called back. Her birdlike voice echoed against the hardwood.

“In a minute.” Nate pulled Max into his arms.

His kiss melted her, pulled her onto her toes and set off fireworks behind her eyelids. It always did. A small, scared-to-admit-it part of her hoped it always would. Even after Autumn left. *Don’t think about that. Don’t think about long-term.* Instead she opened her lips to his tongue, and to the things it teased and promised inside her mouth.

“You’re a bad boy,” she said when he released her a few moments later.

“Not yet.” He winked and ran one warm palm down her torso. “But I can be in about an hour, if that’s what you’d like.”

HALLOWEEN BROUGHT with it a frost on the front lawn and a predicted high temperature of thirty degrees. “Good thing we decided on Mary Poppins,” Max said as she pulled pointy black boots onto Autumn’s feet. She tugged a hat over the girl’s head. “Right?”

Autumn patted the long green skirt of the dress they’d found online. Mary Poppins was one of her favorite characters, and she’d made Nate read the story every night at bedtime for a week. Thankfully, she’d agreed to this costume instead of being a mermaid. Mary Poppins had nice thick leggings, boots and a long-sleeved jacket that matched her dress. Perfect for sub-freezing temperatures in upstate New York.

“My umbrella!” Autumn said in a panic. She looked around the kitchen.

“This umbrella?” Nate twirled a kid-sized black umbrella from the foyer.

Autumn squealed. “Daddy! That’s mine.”

Nate opened it and held it over his head, though it barely covered him. “I thought it was mine.”

Max laughed and handed him Autumn’s backpack. “Don’t you know it’s bad luck to open an umbrella indoors?”

“Is it?” This time he twirled around and did a dance step as Autumn laughed and reached for the umbrella. “I didn’t know.”

“Can you make it to the parade at her school?” Max asked. “It’s at eleven.”

He nodded and blew her a kiss over Autumn’s head. “Wouldn’t miss it. You?”

She nodded. “Cassie’s coming in to cover for me.”

“Then I’ll see you there.” He took Autumn’s hand and led her outside. Max shivered in the gust of air that blew in behind them. Fall

was definitely giving way to winter. She wouldn't be surprised to see snow soon.

She washed the breakfast dishes as sadness darkened her earlier mood. Winter and snow meant Autumn would leave as well. Penny would return from Africa and take Autumn back to North Carolina. Max leaned against the sink and stared across the lake. And what then? She and Nate hadn't talked about it, as if talking would make it more real. But she supposed they needed to. Her nose itched, and she rubbed it, chalking up the tingle to late-season allergies.

By the time eleven o'clock arrived, she stood beside Nate in the central room of Precious Little People, determined to enjoy the here and now. Miss Katie and her assistant Miss Rae stood on either side of the room as fifteen four-year olds strutted, walked, and skipped around the rug. They dressed in costumes ranging from Luke Skywalker to Kermit the Frog to pirates and princesses and one traditional ghost. No other Mary Poppins, Max was glad to see. Autumn's blonde braids stuck out from under her black hat, which had taken a blow at some point during the morning and now sat at a crooked angle on her head.

"There she is." Max smiled as Autumn followed the cowboy in front of her. She was smaller than most of the other kids, but she had the brightest smile, and her cherry lips curved in glee when she saw Nate and Max.

The parents snapped pictures and laughed and clapped. When the kids finished two laps, Miss Katie and Miss Rae led them outside and up the block. They tromped along the sidewalk and stopped first at Divine Designs, then at American Insurance, and finally headed down the block to Marc's Grille. Nate and Max watched from the

preschool's front door. The businesses all had candy to give out, and after each stop, the trick-or-treaters' bags sagged a little more.

"She's going to be wound up on sugar tonight." Max rubbed her arms against the cold.

"Yeah, she is."

"You didn't want to stay at the office and hand out candy?"

"Nah. I'm not great with little kids in large groups."

"Just one on one?"

He wrapped one arm around Max's shoulders. "Exactly."

She rested her head on his shoulder and watched the preschoolers and their teachers turn back at the end of the block. Nate's hands moved in her hair, and she could feel his breath against her cheek.

"You smell good," he said. He nuzzled her earlobe.

Max leaned against him, loving the weight of his body.

"Don't tempt me."

She turned the tiniest bit. "What if I do?"

He lifted a brow. "You want to find out?" He traced small circles on the small of her back until her insides hummed.

Reluctantly, she stepped back and broke the connection. "You love doing that, don't you?"

"Teasing you? Or making you squirm?"

"Both."

He gave a wicked grin. "Guilty as charged. Do you hate me for it?"

*I think I love you for it*, she almost said. But she'd never said the L-word to anyone she'd dated. Not ever. Her mouth snapped shut. "I don't think I could hate you for anything," she said instead.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Good. Because I couldn't stand it if you did." He pulled her close again, his arm safely around her



shoulder and not anywhere close to places that could melt and vibrate if he touched them.

“Are you staying late at the office tonight?”

“I think so. I have a ton of paperwork to take care of. Are you taking her trick-or-treating?”

Max nodded and felt the rough fabric of his coat under her cheek. Comforting. Familiar. “Just to a couple places around the library.”

“You’re okay by yourself?”

“Of course. She’ll probably pass out after the first two stops. This is a pretty tiring day for a kid. Bedtime’ll come sooner rather than later.”

“I shouldn’t be too late. Just have one account to wrap up.”

“Should I wait on dinner?” The simple words, their whole casual conversation, sent a wave of heat through her. A preschool parade. Trick or treating. Dinner and work and bedtime and all the things a regular couple, raising a regular child, might talk about.

They weren’t a regular couple, of course. And there wasn’t anything regular about the way their time with Autumn would end. But she could still close her eyes and imagine.

“Better not. I’ll grab something on the way home.”

“Okay.”

They parted ways a few minutes later, after a peek at Autumn’s candy and a promise not to eat any of it without her.

“I should be home by seven-thirty,” Nate said. “I’ll do my best, so I can put her to bed.”

“See you then.” Max’s breath came out in white puffs. She scanned the sky. Gray. Slate clouds. Snow coming for sure.



NATE ENTERED the last figure into his spreadsheet and saved the damn thing for the last time. There. He'd show Walter Crawshaw he wasn't just passing time at the company. He could rise to the top of the insurance sales pyramid and make a living out of pushing policies. In fact, he needed to get his own policies in order, now that he had a child.

He scrolled through the pictures on his phone, stopping at the ones he'd taken earlier in the day. Even in her old-fashioned Halloween costume, covered from head to toe, Autumn was the prettiest kid in the parade. No question. He grinned, amazed as always at the way she'd changed his life.

A text popped up on the screen from Nicki. **Hey R U home? No, still at work.** He checked the time. Almost seven. **Why? New bartender didn't show up tonight. It's Halloween.**

Nate had worked more than one Halloween at Jimmy's. It was his least favorite night aside from New Year's, thanks in large part to the skimpy costumes the women wore and the copious amounts of liquor everyone drank. No matter the day of the week, Jimmy's stayed open until two in the morning on Halloween, the only place in town to do so. That meant crowds of drunken people in masks and weird clothes tried to outdo each other in every way possible.

**I'm not helping out,** he answered before Nicki could ask.

**Can u give me 2 hours? Please? I'm desperate. I called a friend & she can be here by 9.**

Nate looked at his watch again. That, he could probably do. He'd miss putting Autumn to bed, but if Max was right, she was already passed out after the excitement of the day. **OK. I'll be there in a few.**

**You're the best!!!**

Nate didn't know about that, but he didn't want to leave Nicki high and dry on a night he knew would suck for a bartender working solo.

**Nicki asked me to help out at Jimmy's**, he started texting Max. Then he stopped. After the night he'd pulled at The Back Door, she might not be happy. **Working later than I thought**, he typed instead. It was a little white lie, not even really a lie at all. He'd still be working, just not at the insurance company. Plus, bartending on Halloween usually resulted in pocketfuls of cash, and considering the cost of a pink pony party, Nate would be a fool to turn down Nicki's offer.

He still hated lying to Max.

**No problem**, she wrote back. **Autumn's already in bed.**

**She have fun?**

He got back a smiley face, then one with hearts in its eyes and its tongue sticking out.

**Don't stick it out unless you're gonna use it**, he wrote.

**Waiting on you for that.**

Nate grinned and sent back a thumbs-up just as his battery icon turned red. He'd have to plug it in when he got to Jimmy's. He'd text Max from the bar, too, and tell her the truth. He pulled on his coat and shut down his computer. He'd tell her he was helping Nicki until nine, it was a one-time deal, and then he'd come home with enough tip money that she wouldn't mind.

He hoped.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

“Hey, man, good to see you.”  
“Where you been, Nate? Place isn’t the same without you.”  
“Nice to have you back. Nicki needs a sidekick.”

Up and down the bar, the comments flew. Nicki flipped off the regulars. Nate grinned and made the drinks extra strong. Despite the chaos, he’d missed this. He saw the faces of people he rarely ran into these days. He shook hands and pounded old friends on the back and slid more and more bills into his pockets as the minutes ticked by.

“Kitchen’s backed up,” Nicki said as she squeezed by him with a tray full of food. “Better tell the guys by the pool table. They’ve been waitin’ a while.”

Nate nodded and tossed a towel over his shoulder. He poured a pitcher of beer and delivered it compliments of the bar. He didn’t think the guys would mind. They’d picked up a couple of women in skimpy witch costumes about a half-hour earlier, and it didn’t look as though their minds were still on food.

“Thanks, man,” one of them said as he handed Nate a five as a tip.

“You got it.”

“Nate?” A buxom woman wearing a Marilyn Monroe-style wig and a slinky white dress stopped him. “It’s me. Lisa Steel.”

“Oh. Hey, how’s it going?” He looked around for her husband.

“Robby’s home with the boys. It’s a girls’ night,” she said with a flip of her hand, and Nate saw two look-alike Marilyn Monroes standing behind her.

“Ah. Well, enjoy yourselves.”

Lisa slid her hand around his elbow before he could leave. “How’s everything going with Autumn?”

Just like that, reality slammed Nate back into place. *Autumn*. His daughter. Sleeping at home while Max waited for him. And he’d forgotten to text. *Damn*. “She’s good.”

“She’s a beautiful girl.”

“Thanks. Takes after her mother.” It almost didn’t hurt him to say it this time. Day by day, the sadness faded and the memories of Lexi became mostly good ones.

“I’d say she takes after her father just as much.” Lisa batted her false eyelashes at him. He could smell the tequila on her breath.

With as much care as he could manage, Nate extricated his arm from her grasp. “Gotta get home to her, actually,” he said. “I’m only helping out tonight for a little while.”

She stuck out her bottom lip, painted bright red.

“Have fun with your friends,” he said before she could protest out loud or grab him again. Funny. Six months ago, even three months ago, her actions would have flattered him. *Too bad you’re married*, he’d say with a wink. Then he’d let her hang on his arm and introduce him to her friends and do a few shots with them all, because what was the harm?

Now all he thought about was Max. And Autumn. And a creaky old farmhouse with dated furniture and a gravel driveway and the best memories of his life.

“Where’s my phone?” he asked Nicki. He’d plugged it in under the bar.

“I put it in the office. Didn’t want it sitting out.”

Nate darted into the office and grabbed it, fully charged and sitting on the desk. And announcing three missed calls from Max. “It’s ten o’clock?” How had the time gotten away from him? He hurried back to the bar.

“I gotta go,” he told Nicki.

“Now? I got a room full of people.”

“I said a couple hours. Been here almost three. I gotta get home.”

She blew out a breath. “Fine. Tandy’s supposed to be here any minute. Guess I can hold it together.”

“I’m sure you can.” He squeezed by the bar and waved goodbye to the regulars.

“Leaving already?” Lisa asked as he passed her table.

“Yup.” But before he reached the door, she stood on her tiptoes and gave him a loud kiss on the cheek.

“In another time and place,” she whispered into his ear. “I always wished I’d met you before Robby.”

Nate managed a cordial smile and got the hell out of Jimmy’s. Max had called three times but left only one voicemail. He put the phone to his ear as he climbed behind the wheel of his car and turned the key in the ignition.

“Hey, where are you? It’s after nine-thirty.” Her voice sounded strained. “The social worker called a little while ago.”

Nate’s heart jumped. On Halloween night? That probably wasn’t good. He tried to calm himself as he headed for home. Or maybe it

meant nothing. Maybe it was a routine call to check on Autumn's progress. Except Max's voice didn't sound like it had been routine.

"Penny's coming back from Africa early," her message went on. "Like three weeks early. She wants to come get Autumn next weekend."



MAX SAT at the kitchen table, worrying at a hangnail. Almost twenty, and Nate hadn't returned her calls. Or made it home from the office. She was about to drive downtown and make sure he hadn't wrecked somewhere on the side of the road when headlights lit up the room. A moment later, he burst through the front door.

"I'm sorry."

She stared at him. His shirt was untucked, his tie had disappeared, he smelled like a distillery, and a smudge of red lipstick covered one cheek. *Working late at the office, my ass.* "Where were you?"

"I was bartending at Jimmy's."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I'm sorry." He pulled out the chair beside her and reached for her hand, but she yanked it away. "I was helping Nicki. She was strapped and the place was packed."

"Or you missed your old life and decided to stop by for a drink or two."

"No."

"Then what's with the lipstick?"

He jerked one hand up to his face and rubbed. "Oh. That was Lisa."

She wracked her memory. “The blonde from the ice cream stand?”

“Yeah.”

“She just happened to be there? Or did she drop by the office and drag you against your will to Jimmy’s?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Please don’t get mad at me. It was nothing.” He stuck his hand into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of cash. “Look. I made, I don’t know, probably way over a hundred dollars tonight. In just a couple of hours.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She didn’t know what bothered her more, that he’d lied about working at the office or that he’d obviously spent time talking to another woman. Maybe many other women. She knew what happened in the bars on Halloween night. Trampy witches and French maids and Playboy bunnies drank too much and fell out of their costumes as they giggled over whatever man paid attention to them.

And Nate liked paying attention to women. He always had.

She folded her hands tightly together and rested them on the table. “Penny is coming to get Autumn next weekend.”

“She can’t.”

“Of course she can.” The thought devastated her. They had plans for Autumn’s birthday party, for Thanksgiving, for two play dates the week after next. She’d made lists. She’d made deposits and reservations.

She’d fallen in love with the little girl sleeping upstairs and her father.

*You are not in love with him.*

*Oh, yeah? Then why is your heart breaking right now?*

The thoughts warred inside her head as they sat there, silent. She hadn’t said those words aloud. Nate certainly never had. Yet



sometimes when he looked at her, the open conviction and affection in his gaze scared her. *You and me. This. It's right.* She felt the words as clearly as if he'd spoken them aloud.

"I don't want her to leave yet." His voice cracked. "How can Penny take her almost a month early? That wasn't the plan. It wasn't the—" He scrubbed one hand over his eyes.

Max ached to comfort him, but she couldn't. All she could do was look at the lipstick on his cheek and think of the way she'd called and he hadn't answered. *Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he doesn't love me.* Maybe it was better that Autumn was leaving, before this went any further and she lost her heart completely to someone who was bound to break it. She swallowed and kept her hands folded. "The social worker said she and Penny will be here next Saturday morning. We have to tell Autumn before then."

"How? I mean, how can we pull her out of school just when she's getting adjusted and making friends and everything?" He buried his head in his hands.

Unshed tears burned in her eyes. "We knew it was only short-term. She's known Penny, and lived in North Carolina, her whole life. That's the best place for her." She thought maybe saying the words out loud would make her believe it. "She probably still has friends down there. Maybe it's better that it's sooner rather than later. The longer she stays with us, the harder it'll be for her to leave."

Nate nodded, his gaze on the table. "You're right." He dropped his hands. "I'm sorry I wasn't here. Sorry you had to talk to the social worker. It should've been me."

"Yeah, well..." Where did they go from here? She didn't want to ask. She'd thought they still had time to figure out those details. Or rather, she'd thought maybe they wouldn't have to, that her relationship with Nate would knot itself into something solid and

lasting whether or not they had a child to take care of. After the way tonight was unfolding, she wasn't sure.

Her cell phone buzzed on the table. *Ma*. She didn't answer it. Why would Bethany be calling this late? To talk about that evening's meet and greet at the Center City Mall, probably.

"You don't want to—" Nate began, with a glance at the phone.

"No." Her mother was the absolute last person Max wanted to talk to right now.

Bethany didn't leave a message, so it couldn't have been that important. But the phone buzzed again a moment later, this time with a different number Max didn't recognize. She pressed the button to silence it and stood. "I'm going to bed."

But her phone dinged with a voicemail. Before Max could listen to it, the same unknown number came up on the screen again. "Oh, for God's sake." She grabbed the phone. "Hello? Ma? It's not really a good time."

"Maxine?" Her mother's voice sounded strained and far away.

Max sat back down. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I am, I just..." She said something muffled away from the phone.

Nate was mouthing words at Max across the table, but she shook her head and tried to make out her mother's conversation. "Ma?"

"Maxine, I took a little tumble tonight."

"At the mall?"

"Well, yes. It was right at the end, and I was leaving the stage and—"

"What happened? Where are you now?"

"I'm at the Medical Center. I'm fine, just a broken ankle, but I can't drive myself home."

"Ma!" Those damn stilettos. She wore them everywhere. Of course she'd broken an ankle. Max was surprised it hadn't happened

earlier. Exhaustion and frustration set into her bones. Tonight, of all nights? After a perfect day, Halloween had turned into a joke. “Do you need me to come get you?”

“Could you?”

“Of course.” She hung up and took a long, deep breath.

“What happened?”

“She tripped down the stairs at the mall and broke her ankle.”

“What do you want me to do?” Concern creased his features.

Max shook her head. “Nothing. Stay here with Autumn.” She had no idea what she’d find at the Medical Center or how long she’d be there.

“She’s okay? Or she will be?”

“I assume so. It’s probably her ego that’s hurt more than anything.” And if Gus had caught her fall on camera, it would likely make tomorrow’s front page of the *Post*. That would devastate Bethany more than the cast or crutches.

Nate took her hand and squeezed it, and this time she let him. Then she pulled her hair into a ponytail and looked around for her shoes. Ma wouldn’t approve of her frayed t-shirt and jeans, but she didn’t care.

“I don’t know how late I’ll be,” she said as she slipped her purse over her shoulder. “You don’t have to wait up.” She wasn’t even sure he would. She took one last look at Nate, the kitchen, the moonlight puddling on the counter. “You still have lipstick on your face.” Then she opened the door and walked out into the night.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY

For the first time Max could remember, her mother didn't look perfectly put together. In fact, as she sat in a plastic chair in the Medical Center waiting room, she looked, well, normal, considering what she'd been through. Tired eyes. Flyaway hair. Mascara dotted one cheek, and her lipstick had feathered at the edges. Her left foot remained in its gold high-heeled shoe. The right was encased in a large soft cast that reached up to her knee.

"Hello, Maxine." She brightened when Max walked in. "Thank you for coming. I'm sorry for bothering you so late."

All her earlier frustration disappeared. "Oh, Ma, don't apologize." She sat down. "How did it happen?"

"Silly. I caught my toe, that's all. It was right at the end, after my speech, and I was looking the wrong way." She blinked away tears. "You told me I should show people the real me. Guess that's what they saw tonight." She pressed her lips together and shook her head. "All my years in pageants, I never once tripped. Never *once*."

"You're human, Ma. People trip and fall all the time. I'm just glad it wasn't anything worse."

Bethany reached for the crutches beside her. "This is bad enough." She wiggled forward on the chair and then lurched to a

stand. Max grabbed her at the last minute to keep her from pitching over.

“Did they give you painkillers?”

“Oh, yes.” Bethany pointed at her purse on the floor with a wide smile. “In there.”

Max looked around. The place echoed with emptiness, including the reception desk. “Should I talk to anyone? You’ve been cleared to go home, and all that?”

“Yes. The doctor was a cute little Asian man. Dr. Wong or Hong or something. He had very soft hands.”

“Oh, Lord,” Max muttered. Thank goodness Parvati from the *Post* wasn’t here recording every word.

“...said I just needed to keep off it whenever I can and take pain pills if it bothers me. And I have to come back for a follow-up appointment in one week.”

“Perfect. Then let’s get you home.” She followed her mother to the parking lot, lugging a purse filled with flyers and buttons and two bottles of water and who knew what else. “Let me get the door,” she said as Bethany swayed next to the car. One crutch dropped to the ground. Bethany giggled.

Ten minutes later, with her mother finally strapped into the front seat, Max passed the farmhouse and headed for home. Her childhood home, not the home she’d made by the lake with Nate and Autumn. *I will not cry*. Her fingers tightened on the wheel. *I will not think about any of that until tomorrow*. She couldn’t afford to.

“How’s that handsome man of yours?” Bethany mumbled as they passed the road that would take them to the lake.

Pain stabbed Max just below the breastbone. “He’s fine.” Thankfully, her mother’s chin bobbed in sleep, and she didn’t ask anything else.

It was after midnight by the time Max turned out the living room light. Her mother snored softly, stretched out on the couch and lost in the dreams of good drugs. Max pulled a blanket over her and set a bottle of water on the end table. She breathed in the familiar scents of the house, Lysol and cinnamon candles and her mother's perfume. For the first time in hours, her heart settled. She climbed the stairs to her room but didn't bother turning on the light. Nothing had changed here. She hadn't rearranged her bedroom furniture since high school. And while that might have depressed her a few months ago, now the sameness brought her comfort. If Autumn left, and if her relationship with Nate was over, she could still go back in time and return to a less complicated life.

At the very least, she could sleep here tonight. She took out her phone. No calls from Nate, but two text messages, an hour apart.

**How is she?**

**Let me know when you're home safe.**

She ran her thumb along the edge of the phone. He'd known she would come here. He probably guessed she'd stay here, too. *Home* to him meant Bethany's house, not his. Was she reading too much into his word choice? Maybe. Maybe not. Finally Max typed **Home safe** and sent the message. Then she crawled under the covers, still dressed, and fell asleep.



“MAXINE? MAXXINNNNEEEEE!”

Max woke to her mother's cries sometime after the sun came up. She tried to jump out of bed, twisted one foot in the sheets, and went flying. She landed on the floor, chin and palms breaking her fall, and

bit down hard on her tongue. “Ow!” She swallowed blood as she sat up. “Be right there, Ma,” she called down the stairs.

She got to her feet and ducked into the tiny upstairs bathroom long enough to rinse her mouth and see a horrifying image staring back at her from the mirror. She’d forgotten to take off her makeup last night, and now most of it resided on other parts of her face, like her cheeks and upper lip. She had a huge pillow wrinkle under one eye, and her hair stuck up on one side and lay mashed flat on the other.

Max didn’t bother trying to fix any of it. Her mother had certainly seen her looking worse, and she had no one else to impress.

Except Nate, who stood in the middle of the living room.

She froze. “What are you doing here?” Seriously? She hadn’t heard him pull in or ring the doorbell or anything. She thought about running back upstairs, except he’d already seen her. *Terrific*. Max pulled her hands over her hair in one desperate attempt to improve it and then rubbed her face instead. “I thought you needed me,” she said to her mother. “I thought that’s why you were calling me.”

Bethany took one long look at her, an up and down glance full of disapproval. “Well, no. But I guess I should have been clearer.”

*You think?* Max steadied herself on the chair by the door, as far away as she could get while still remaining in the room. “How are you feeling?”

“Well, my ankle hurts, but other than that, I slept pretty well. I forgot how comfy this couch is.” She patted the cushion beside her. “Sit, Nate. You’re making me nervous standing there like that.”

He ran one hand over his spiked blond hair but remained on his feet. He wore a pair of jeans that hugged his hips and thighs and a soft blue hoodie that Max had spent more than one night snuggled up to. Her cheeks burned. He’d obviously gotten a full night’s rest.

He didn't have circles under his eyes, though she did see a smudge of guilt inside them.

"Hey," he finally said.

"Hey yourself. What are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I wanted to check on you. Both of you. I tried calling before I came over, but you didn't answer."

Because she'd been in a dead sleep until ten minutes ago. Because all the emotions from yesterday were still mixed up inside her head and her heart, making it hard to know what to think or do.

"Ma'll be fine. She's one tough cookie."

Bethany beamed at the compliment. "Thank you, sweetheart. I like to think I have a little steel under this girlish exterior. I've certainly been through worse." She pushed herself to a stand and grabbed her crutches. "Now, I've got to use the bathroom. I'll leave you two lovebirds alone." She hobbled past Max. "If you hear any loud bangs, though, like I've fallen and wedged myself between the toilet and the tub, or if I don't come out for a good half-hour, come and check on me, will you?"

Max cracked a smile, the first in a very long twelve hours. "Yes, Ma. I will." She waited until she heard the first floor bathroom door close before she finally looked back at Nate.

"Long night," he said.

She nodded and picked at a bare spot in the chair's upholstery.

"You doing okay?"

She shrugged. She hadn't allowed herself to think about it last night. She'd barely opened her eyes this morning, let alone registered why she had woken up in her mother's home and not in Nate's. But now the details came back. The phone call from the social worker. The phone call from Ma. Nate's lie. Penny's impending



arrival. Her heart, splintering from all the ways life was pulling it apart.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I know.” She didn’t think he’d lied out of malice. But he hadn’t told her the truth either. He’d gone to Jimmy’s without mentioning it, and that still stung. “Where’s Autumn?” she asked suddenly.

“Summer took her for the morning.”

“When are we going to tell her?”

“About Penny? I don’t know.” He paused. “You’ll do it with me, though? Help me tell her?”

“Of course.”

Long pause. Max leaned against the chair.

“And after she leaves?” Nate asked in a low voice.

“You mean what happens with us?”

He nodded. “I feel like I screwed up. Bigtime. I know we didn’t fight last night, not really, but I just...you left, and now Autumn’s leaving, and you’re standing there like you don’t even want me here, and I don’t know what any of it means.”

*Tell me you want me to stay. Tell me you love me.*

But he didn’t. Neither did she. It was far too scary, saying those words out loud.

She cleared her throat. “I think I’ll probably have to stay here with Ma for a few days.”

“I figured.”

“After that, I don’t know.” She watched his Adam’s Apple move up and down. *Tell me what you’re thinking. Tell me what I mean to you.* “I think maybe I need some time to think about things.”

A muscle in his cheek twitched, the only indication he’d heard her. After another moment, he nodded and jammed his hands into his pockets. “I understand. I know Autumn will want to see you,

though. And Bethany. Maybe we could stop by one night and all have dinner together before she goes?" His voice was tight.

"Sure." It was the only word she could get out. He walked toward her, and she thought he might take her into his arms. She ached to touch him. To kiss him. He smelled like shampoo and soap and morning air. He stopped. Max held her breath. But he only patted her shoulder on his way to the door.

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-ONE**

**N**ate called himself every curse word in the book on his way home, every lowdown, no-good name he could think of. He'd walked out of Bethany's house without so much as telling Max how he felt. Okay, maybe he didn't know exactly how he felt. He wasn't sure he had words for the heaviness in his heart. But he hadn't even kissed her, or hugged her, or let her know in any way, shape, or form that he cared and worried and would be there as they dealt with whatever came down the next few days. What kind of man did that? He stomped on the gas and barreled over Sunrise Mountain. A man who was scared of losing everything, that's who.

*Scared?*

Nate coasted over the ridge of the mountain and stopped. A light coating of frost had turned all the trees silvery white, and they glittered in the morning sunlight. He couldn't remember ever being scared in his life. Not like this. Sure, he avoided brown recluse spiders, and black snakes thicker than his wrist, but those were physical fears.

Until this fall, he'd had no idea the depth of emotional fear. He'd had no idea that loving someone came with the risk of losing them

too, or that opening his heart, putting it right out there on his sleeve for the world to see, meant it could shatter in one fell swoop.

*You love her.*

Autumn? Hell, yeah he did. Like he'd never loved anyone else in his life. She made his days brighter. She made him laugh. She made him feel needed. She also made him feel safe, as if whatever mistakes he'd made up to now didn't matter. The idea of giving her up, just letting her move six states away, tore him in two.

*No. You love her. Max.*

He slowed as he descended into Silver Valley. On a Saturday morning, the town still slept. A single runner jogged down Main Street, and a few pickup trucks were parked in front of the deli, but otherwise, he saw and heard nothing. One turn took him onto the side road that passed the library.

Did he?

He cared for her, he knew that much. He craved seeing her at the end of the day. He adored watching her with Autumn, telling her about his workday over the kitchen table, kissing her neck in the moonlight. He valued her opinion. He marveled at the way she dealt with her mother.

Was all that love? He pulled into the parking lot of the library and thought of the first time he'd walked through that door with Autumn. He'd never guessed Max had so many sides to her: librarian, storyteller, daughter, cook, list-maker, babysitter, friend, sexy housemate. He loved them all.

He loved her. The realization settled over him in stages. *I love Maxine Abbott.*

And now he might have lost her, based on a bad decision and a set of circumstances beyond his control. He watched the sun break through a thicket of trees. He tried to sort through the jumble of

thoughts in his head. He tried to find words. He'd never had a conversation about anything this serious before. He'd never *felt* anything this serious before. Nate rubbed his temples. The clock on his dashboard read a quarter to ten, which meant he needed to get back home. Summer had agreed to babysit Autumn, but only for an hour or two. Whatever Nate needed to work out with his feelings for Max, that all came second to his daughter. The hours he had left with her were slipping away as he sat here, and in one lousy week, he'd have to tell her goodbye.

With a burning sensation in his eyes and a stone inside his chest, Nate turned around and headed for home.



FOR A CHANGE, Max was grateful for her mother's constant demands. The next few days, she got up before dawn to help Bethany hobble into the shower, dress, and eat breakfast. Then they sat at the table and pored over the latest polls, newspaper articles, and Bethany's upcoming appearance schedule. She'd agreed to cancel her Meet and Greet at the Senior Center the day after her fall, but she stubbornly insisted on keeping all other engagements. They had a large calendar spread out on the kitchen counter, with everything color-coded in red, green, and black.

*Election!* was circled in orange, the second Tuesday in November.

Max routinely left for work around eight-thirty, returned home by five, made dinner, and then helped Bethany practice speeches or answer interview questions. She had one last radio interview at the end of the week, two small gatherings in private restaurants downtown, and a pancake breakfast at the Silver Valley Firehouse

on Sunday. After that, Silver Valley's citizens would visit the polls, and she and Max would sit with their fingers crossed and await the outcome.

All of which made it a tiny bit easier not to think about Autumn and Nate a thousand times a day.

Max did stop by the preschool the following Tuesday to deliver snack, a promise she'd made over a month ago, when multi-colored Rice Krispy treats were her biggest worry. Autumn hugged her and then looked at her with those solemn blue eyes. Nate's eyes. "Why aren't you living with us anymore, Miss Max?"

"I, ah..."

"Daddy reads to me an' Teddy at night, but it's not the *same*."

Max's heart splintered inside her chest.

"Autumn, honey, why don't you pass out plates to everyone while we put out the treats?" Miss Katie directed Autumn toward the tables and gave Max a small, sad smile, as if she'd heard the rumors circling Whispering Pines.

Max knew people talked. She knew by the looks she got at the library from some of the moms. But it couldn't be anything too juicy, she figured. She and Nate hadn't fought. She hadn't found him in bed with another woman. Really, they hadn't officially broken up. They just weren't spending time together right now. She blinked back tears and cut a glance at his office building as she pulled away. No sign of him inside.

He didn't call. He texted occasionally, sent her pictures of Autumn reading to her stuffed animals or singing to Teddy in bed. He didn't write much, just a few words like **Here's another one** or **Hope you're doing well**. She always answered politely, with a **Thanks** or **Ma's getting around**, and tried to ignore the giant gaps in both their messages.

**I miss you.**

**Come back to me.**

Three days before Penny was scheduled to arrive in Whispering Pines, Max stayed late at the library. She flipped over the Open sign, locked the front door and spent two hours reorganizing the back room. She ate half a sandwich leftover from lunch and an apple that had seen better days. Finally she pulled out her phone and sent Nate the text she'd been dreading.

**When do you want to tell Autumn?**

His response came almost immediately. **I don't.**

A lump clogged her throat. She typed a message, deleted it, and finally called him instead.

"Hey."

That single word, his deep voice across the lines, brought a hundred emotions to the surface. She fought back tears and dragged her finger down a crack in the wall. "Hi."

"How's your mom doing?"

Max cleared her throat. "She's okay. Gets around better on her crutches now."

"That's good. Election's next week, right?"

"Uh huh." For God's sake, could they stop this stupid small talk? "Nate, we have to tell Autumn. Penny's coming this weekend."

"I was thinking about that."

"And?"

"What if she stays here with me?"

Max closed the door to the storage room and returned to her desk. "For good?" Most of the library sat in shadows, except for one light near the foyer. "How could she? Isn't Penny her legal guardian?"

"Yes, but I think if I told her I wanted to adopt Autumn—"

“That she’d say yes? She’s coming back from the other side of the world. To do what her sister asked her to do.”

He made some kind of choking sound. “I know that. Don’t you think I know that?”

She bit back a response.

“I talked to an attorney about it. He said I’d have to petition the courts and show that I was the better choice. That I could provide a stable home and raise her just as well as, or better than, her aunt.”

“Do you really want to do that? Fight over her?” Max could only imagine Autumn’s sadness and confusion. “She knows she’s going to live with Penny. Maybe not this soon, but her mother told her that. *You* told her that, when she first moved here.”

“I know.” The words sounded so full of despair, Max wanted to weep.

She fiddled with the computer, shutting down open programs and double-checking her calendar. “I could come over tomorrow after work. Say five-thirty? We could talk to her then.”

“I guess.”

“Nate, it’s the right thing.” It didn’t feel that way right now, and she wasn’t sure she believed the words even as she said them, but the alternative seemed daunting. “Raising a child alone is hard. If she stayed with you—”

“She’d have her father. And I’d have my daughter.”

Max didn’t say anything for a few moments. “Why don’t you text me tomorrow and let me know, then?”

“Okay.”

She waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t. *I think about you. I miss you. I miss us.* She could’ve said the words too, but she didn’t. They stuck in her throat and refused to move. “Goodbye, Nate.”



“See ya, Max.”

She clicked End and set her phone on the desk. One last check of her email, and she'd be on her way. She'd promised Bethany takeout from the Greek restaurant, and then they had one last mailing to proofread before tomorrow. She opened her personal account. Two emails advertising winter cruises. One hello from a college friend. And one from the Allbright Scholarship Committee, announcing its recipients from the latest round of applications.

*I totally forgot.* With everything that had happened over the last six weeks, she'd put the scholarship out of her head completely. *What if...*

It couldn't be. Could it? Maybe three times really was a charm. Max held her breath and opened it.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-TWO

**C**an you be here for dinner?

Nate sent Max the text around noon, so she guessed he'd talked to his attorney at some point that morning about Autumn's custody. And probably gotten an answer he didn't want to hear. The library had been busier than usual, so she'd only managed to send back a quick **Yes, see you then.**

She had a large group at story time, more than the regular wiggly bodies, and they dragged their feet when leaving, wanting extra time to pet the rabbits and pick out books. By the time she flipped over the Open sign and set the alarm, the sun had set, and a raw November wind picked up. Max shivered as she hopped in her car. Always a gray month, November brought dark and cold and the promise of a long winter. This year, it seemed especially bleak. No pink pony party. No first Thanksgiving with Autumn. No—

*Stop torturing yourself.*

She turned up the radio and forced herself to sing along, arriving at the farmhouse almost before she realized it. Every light on the first floor blazed. Max parked, got out, and stood for a moment in the driveway, pulling in long, cold breaths. She could do this. It was the

right thing for Autumn. She was young. She'd adjust well. Children always did.

She stopped outside the kitchen door, unsure if she should knock. Silly. She still had a key to the place. And some clothes and toiletries upstairs. Finally she opened it while rapping on the frame. "Hello?"

"Miss Max!" Autumn jumped down from her chair and ran to hug her.

"Hi, sweetheart." Oh, those little arms felt good around her legs. "How are you?"

"I'm good." She pointed at Nate. "Daddy said you were coming back for dinner. I saved a book for you to read to Teddy."

"Well, that was awfully nice of you." She smiled at Nate, trying to read his expression. She couldn't. It looked like a blend of happiness and pain. Light in his eyes. Tightness around his mouth. "Hello."

"Nice to see you." His gaze moved over her, drinking her in, and she savored it. He'd always given her tingles, from the first moment she moved in. Maybe they hadn't lost this connection entirely.

"Smells good in here."

At that, he leaped up. "Shit. Shoot. Don't say that," he told Autumn. "That's a bad word. The first one." She giggled as he opened the oven and pulled out a platter of lasagna.

"You made that?" Max asked.

"Nope. Bought it at the store and heated it up." He motioned at the fridge. "There are salads in there, too. Also from the store. Help yourself."

They said little over dinner. Autumn chattered away about school, a classmate's dog, someone who'd spilled a thermos of soup, and Miss Katie's sparkly sweater. Nate lifted a brow at Max, and she smiled in return, but there wasn't much to say. Every minute this

stretched on felt longer than the last. Finally she carried their empty dishes to the sink and ran water over them. Autumn ran into the playroom.

“Let them sit. I won’t throw them away later. I promise.” Nate put a hand on her hip, warm and strong, and she leaned into it without thinking. She didn’t turn around. Instead she kept her gaze on the lake, which had started to freeze around the shoreline. The lawn had turned brown, and every tree that wasn’t an evergreen had lost its leaves. *It’s over. Really over.* The brief, beautiful allure of fall had given way to the dead cold of winter.

“Did you talk to the attorney?”

“Not today.” He turned her around and kept his hands where they were. Only inches separated them. She could lean forward and kiss him. And oh, how she wanted to. But she focused on his eyes instead, those blue pools that lent themselves to drowning. “I wanted to talk to you first.”

“About?” She had a hard time finding words.

“I can petition Penny for custody of Autumn. It would require some paperwork and going to court, but I don’t think it would be too difficult.”

“Do you think that’s the best thing for Autumn?”

He blinked, and the hope in his eyes changed to uncertainty. “I don’t know.” He dropped his hands. “I really don’t, Max. I talked to my sister, I talked to my parents...” He barked out a laugh. “I even made a list of the pros and cons.”

“Did it help?”

“Not really. I realized the person I really should talk to is you.”

Max straightened her shirt. “Why me?”

“My attorney said even though I’m Autumn’s biological father, the odds are against a judge giving me full custody. If Penny fought me,

she could probably prove that she's the better parent figure. Autumn grew up knowing her, she has a stable job—"

"Isn't she a missionary? Who's been traveling the world for the last two years?"

"She works as a pastor. And the trips were through her church, so it wasn't like she was gallivanting around the world getting wasted. Plus she told the social worker she wouldn't be going on any more of them until Autumn was a lot older."

"Still, it's not like you're less stable than she is."

Nate cocked his head. "No? Up until three months ago, I worked as a bartender and jumped in and out of women's beds like I was running the bases."

The image, though true, hurt her. Max pressed her lips together.

"Yes, I'm Autumn's biological father. But her mother didn't even want to find me until she had to. She specifically asked her sister to raise Autumn."

"Lexi didn't know you then."

"When she finally came to Whispering Pines, I was hungover and working at Jimmy's." He held up a palm and glanced over his shoulder to make sure Autumn remained in the other room. "I'm not saying I don't think I have a shot. I'm just saying Penny has a better one. On paper." He cleared his throat.

"You want me to help you? Write a letter of recommendation? Or speak to the judge?" She could vouch for him. She could certainly say he held down a reliable job. He was great with Autumn. And he almost always came home at a decent hour.

"I was hoping you'd marry me."

*"What?"*

"Not for real," he rushed on. "But I was hoping we could tell the judge, the social worker, whoever, that we're planning on getting

married. That way we can tell them Autumn would have two parents. A good stable home environment.”

Emotions welled up and pooled in her eyes. *Do not cry.*

“What’s wrong? Why are you upset?”

He couldn’t have been more blockheaded if he’d tried. She jammed her hands into her pockets and did her best to steady her voice. Leave it to Max to get a fake marriage proposal. She supposed she’d set herself up for this. She’d asked him to be her fake boyfriend. She’d wanted him to help her fool Bethany and the media into thinking they were a happy, devoted couple. Why should it surprise her that now he wanted her to return the favor?

“You know,” she began, “most girls hope for a proposal that includes the words ‘I love you’ or ‘I can’t spend the rest of my life without you.’” *Not to mention a ring.*

He blinked.

“I know you have good intentions here. And it’s not the nuttiest idea in the world. Yes, Autumn would be better off with two parents.” A lump rose into her throat. “But I can’t pretend to be engaged to you, Nate.” She wanted more than that. She wanted more than he could give, and she knew that down deep. He wasn’t ready for marriage and wasn’t sure about anything except a desperate attempt to keep his daughter.

She lifted her chin. Things happened for a reason, and last night’s email had confirmed that for her. “Anyway, I’m going to England for six months.”

Now he was the one to look stunned. “What? Why? What’s in England?”

She’d never told him about the Allbright. She’d forgotten about it, to be honest, and the rare times she did think of it that fall, she’d convinced herself she’d never get it. “The Allbright Scholarship. It’s a

really prestigious award that goes to one librarian each year to study at Oxford. Sienna got one too, for teaching in a private school outside of London. We always wanted to go together. It was what we had planned for, like, years.”

“Wow.” His Adam’s Apple moved up and down. “That’s—that’s really terrific. I didn’t know that was something you wanted.”

“I applied back before Labor Day. I never thought I’d get it.”

“So you’re taking it?”

“I don’t know how I can turn it down. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” God, she’d wanted the Allbright so badly, for so many years. She’d looked up road trips to the North Country and walking guides to homes of authors like Shakespeare and Jane Austen. The Allbright could change her life. It could broaden her horizons. It could also give her distance and perspective and time to think.

He nodded. “That makes sense. I mean, it sounds like it’s important to you.”

“So are you and Autumn. It’s just that the timing...”

“Kind of sucks, to be honest.” He turned away. “I guess that’s it, then. I guess we should tell her.”

She looked at his back, tight and tall, and part of her knew that if he asked her to stay and give up the Allbright, she would. She also knew he’d never ask.

“I’m right behind you,” she said and followed Nate into the playroom.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-THREE**

**M**ax parked in a handicapped spot close to the front door of Luigi's, a posh Italian restaurant just outside Silver Valley. She adjusted the tag on her rearview mirror and hoped no one more handicapped than Bethany would need this spot tonight. Cars filled the parking lot and lined the road, and the dinner event hadn't even started.

"This is great, Ma," she said as she helped her mother from the car. "Look at this turnout."

"It is, isn't it?" Bethany had pulled out all the stops for her last formal appearance on the campaign trail. Tomorrow's pancake breakfast would call for black jeans and a bright blue sweater (she'd already directed Max to lay out her clothes), but tonight was the last chance for formal wear, and she'd opted for a low-cut black dress and diamond jewelry. As a compromise with Max, who didn't want either of them to end up in the Medical Center again, Bethany wore a square, stable, one-inch black heel on her good foot. She'd also wrapped her crutches in black tulle and spent the afternoon getting her hair and nails done.

If she ever looked like a princess, tonight was the night, Max thought as she followed her mother inside. A twinge of sadness hit



her at the memory of Bethany giving Autumn a tiara. Autumn would have loved to see Bethany in all her sparkly glory tonight. She'd have to take some pictures.

"Maxine, stop dragging your feet," Bethany called over her shoulder. "Do you have the flyers?"

Max didn't bother answering. Instead she crossed to the long table set out in the restaurant's foyer and proceeded to cover it with flyers, buttons, and donation envelopes. Bethany made her way inside and was immediately surrounded by couples in suits and expensive gowns.

"She sure knows how to make an entrance," said the man standing at the host stand.

"Yes, she does." Max shoved the empty box under the table and glanced longingly in the direction of the bar.

"Teriyaki chicken stick?" offered a waitress passing through.

"Sure. Thanks." She followed her mother inside and looked for a wall to lean against. Tonight, without a date, Max wouldn't be sitting at the head table. She knocked her head gently against the wall and thought of the first dinner she and Nate had attended, at the Elks Club. Seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Nate isn't coming?" Bethany had asked the other night.

"No." Max shared the details about Autumn and Penny as fast as she could, holding her breath so she didn't cry.

*"Aunt Penny is coming tomorrow to get you," they'd told Autumn, each holding one of her hands.*

*At first the girl's face brightened. Then it wrinkled with confusion. "But what about Daddy? And you?"*

*"We're staying here in Whispering Pines. But you can come and visit us whenever you want, okay?"*

Tears. Vigorous head-shaking. Teddy flung across the room. But finally, exhaustion, acquiescence and bed. Max had left the farmhouse close to midnight.

“I’m sorry,” Bethany said quietly over breakfast the next morning.  
*Me too.*

“It’s nice to see you here, Maxine.” A distinguished-looking man approached her, and the memory shattered. Just as well. She couldn’t bear to dwell on it.

“Mr. Otterbein, hello.” She barely recognized the retired school principal. “How have you been?” She squeezed the hand he offered.

“Oh, I’m all right. Had hip surgery back in the summer, and Andrea had to take care of me for a while, but I’m feeling better now.” He lifted his high-ball glass in Bethany’s direction. “Your mother’s run a good campaign. Given Dom quite a run for his money.”

Something in his voice sounded off. “You think Dom’s going to win?” All the poll numbers had been in Bethany’s favor, this last week. She’d edged ahead of Dom by a point or two, and the undecided voters seemed to be leaning in her direction.

“Oh, well, I’m not sure. It’ll be a close one.” He sipped his drink and surveyed the room. “Bunch of gray hairs here, aren’t we?” He chuckled.

That was it. That was the problem. Max hadn’t realized it at first, but once Drake Otterbein pointed it out, it became clear.

Aside from Max and the waitstaff, no one in the restaurant looked under fifty. Most of the cars in the parking lot were high-end, foreign models. Lots of money here, yes, but not much variety. Bethany had vowed to align herself with the families of the town, but somehow she’d fallen short. They were missing the young vote, the parents of

preschoolers and the newly married, fresh homeowners, people who couldn't afford a dinner like this.

*I told her to let people see her as a regular person.* Max thought again of the women whispering in the library. Dom Lonesca wasn't any younger than Bethany—in fact, he probably had a good five or six years on her—but he knew how to appeal to the masses. In fact, they'd passed him standing in a gas station parking lot on their way here, dressed in jeans and a checkered hunting coat.

Max had figured he was running errands for the night, but now she realized he'd had a group of people surrounding him. Of course. He'd been campaigning for the regular vote. Dom was circling 7-11s while Bethany booked Italian restaurants. Max wondered if they'd made a huge mistake.

The night passed in a blur. She greeted people, shook hands, passed out flyers, and smiled until her cheeks ached. She fetched glasses of water for Bethany and managed not to look at her phone once. She didn't know if she wanted Nate to text her. If he did, she knew it would be to tell her that Penny had arrived in town, they'd packed up Autumn's things, and they'd be leaving for North Carolina in the morning.

By ten o'clock, her feet hurt and her throat was raw from talking. Her hair, twisted into a loose bun, began to fall. Her lip gloss had long since worn off. All she wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep through the next eight weeks. After the holidays, she could pack for England. Once there, she'd lose herself in her studies and the country's history and everything she'd longed to experience for years.

And maybe she'd forget the hole inside her heart.

"I'm exhausted," Bethany said as they stood at the door after ten and bid the guests good night.

“Really? You don’t look it.”

“It’s all in the attitude, Maxine. And the way you present yourself.”

Max nodded and packed up the few remaining promotional items from the table.

“You look very pretty tonight,” her mother added as they walked to the car. “I don’t think I told you that earlier.”

“You didn’t. But thank you.”

Bethany backed into the passenger seat and handed Max her crutches. Max arranged them in the trunk and then started the car.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the Allbright Award?” Bethany asked as they pulled away from the restaurant. “That you’d won it?”

Max gulped. “I don’t know. I didn’t want to tell you until after the election. You have a lot on your mind right now.”

“I had to hear about it tonight from Fred and Lucille.” Bethany clicked her tongue. “That was a little awkward, I don’t mind saying.”

*Please don’t lecture me tonight.* “I’m sorry, Ma. I meant to.”

“I didn’t mean to reprimand you, Maxine. I was just sad that you hadn’t shared it with me. That other people knew before your own mother did.”

Max turned onto the main road. “I’m sorry,” she said again.

“*I’m* sorry,” Bethany said with a sincerity Max rarely heard. “I haven’t been there for you much this fall. I’ve been so caught up in my campaign, I haven’t had time to properly be your mother.”

“Ma, it’s okay. I’m twenty-seven. I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t care how old you are. A girl always needs her mother.”

Max flipped her headlights to high and slowed, scanning the sides of the road for deer. They tended to jump out when you least expected them to.

“Did you tell Nate about the award?” Bethany asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Yes.”

“He didn’t ask you to stay?”

“No.”

Bethany clicked her tongue. “Does he know how you feel?”

“About what?”

“About him. Does he know that you love him?”

Max almost swerved off the road without any help from a crazed deer. “What? Where did that come from?” They crested Sunrise Mountain and began the descent to Whispering Pines. She swung a hard left to avoid passing the road that led to the farmhouse. She couldn’t bear to see a car with North Carolina license plates coming out of it. “I don’t love him.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course you do.”

She let out a long breath. She’d never been able to lie to her mother. Bethany had the uncanny ability to see right through her. “Well, it doesn’t matter if I do or not. Things are different now. Things have changed.”

Bethany blew a raspberry of derision. “Like what? Autumn might be going to live with her aunt? You might be going to England?”

“I *am* going to England, Ma.”

“Fine, fine. But none of that changes love. Life is full of obstacles. It’s full of pain and hard times and loss. Love is the one thing that gets us through all that.”

The road narrowed and the streetlights disappeared. Darkness and stillness cloaked them. “I don’t know if he loves me,” Max said in a small voice.

“Then you need to ask him.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Oh, Maxine.” Bethany patted her leg as they turned onto Merrington Road. Halfway down the block, their familiar white house

waited, with its porch light burning brightly. “You are the bravest, strongest woman I know. Of course you can ask him.”

Max pulled into the driveway and stared at her mother. Brave? Strong?

“I haven’t said that before, and I’m sorry. But you listen to me. I am so proud to be your mother. So proud of what you’ve accomplished. Your job, your education, this award, the way you helped Nate with Autumn...”

Mac sniffled.

“I know I nag at you about, well, certain things. But I don’t ever want you for one second to think your hair or your clothes or whether you have a man really matters to me. I should’ve told you that a long time ago. I’m sorry I didn’t.” She took Max’s hand. “You are the most important person in my life, and you always will be. I want you to be happy. I think Nate makes you happy. I think you should tell him that. But if I’m wrong, then that’s your business. Just know this: I will always, always stand up for you and support your decisions. You are my daughter. *My daughter*. And I love you.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FOUR**

**N**ate pulled Autumn's bedroom door halfway shut. He and Penny stood in the dim hallway and watched her sleep. Her rosy cheeks puffed in and out as soft breaths took her to dreamland. One arm curled around Teddy, as always, and her lips fell open to reveal that tiny gap in her teeth. Like Nate's. So much of her, like Nate.

"You've done a good job taking care of her," Penny said quietly. "Thank you."

"Don't have to thank me. She's my daughter."

Penny nodded. Her hair, a darker blonde than her sister's, lay in a long braid down her back. She had freckles and bleached white eyebrows and resembled Lexi only in the shape of her face and the way she laughed. With her rough hands and gritty voice, she didn't seem much like a church pastor, but then again, Nate had found that sometimes people surprised him.

He sagged against the wall, exhausted. "You want to talk about tomorrow?"

"I think that'd be a good idea."

"I have a bottle of wine somewhere. Or whiskey. Or beer. If you're a drinker."

“Wine sounds good.” Penny turned for the stairs. Nate took one last look at a sleeping, peaceful Autumn and then followed her.



“WELL, THAT’S IT,” Bethany said the following afternoon. She leaned her crutches against the kitchen counter and sank into a chair. “Last meet and greet. Everything now is up to the voters.”

Max put on a pot of tea. “The pancake breakfast went well.” She’d managed to convince Bethany to tone down the makeup and leave off the false eyelashes, and in her jeans and tennis shoes, she’d seemed a little more down-to-earth. The breakfast hadn’t been as well-attended as they’d hoped, though, with more familiar faces than not. Only a handful of families Max knew from the library, and most of the older crowd again, had showed up.

“I hope so.” Bethany loosened her hair from the French twist at the back of her head. “Thank you for all your help, Maxine. Really. You’ve been a Godsend this last week.”

“You’re welcome.” She went through the cabinets looking for sugar, teabags, cups and saucers. Later she’d write one more editorial for the *Post*, to appear ahead of Tuesday’s election. And she’d snagged a thick guidebook to London that she planned to read tonight when she went to bed. Anything to keep her mind off Nate and the fact that by now Autumn was halfway to North Carolina.

Max thought he might have called or texted, but her phone had remained silent the entire day. Ten times she’d picked it up, and ten times she’d put it down. *You could call him. Or text him.* But she wasn’t sure she wanted to see his reply. With Autumn gone, would there be anything left for the two of them? Or had their entire relationship revolved around playing house for a couple of months?



Max blinked back tears as she set the cups in their saucers and waited for the tea to boil.

“You know what, I think I’m going to try that exfoliating mask I picked up at the salon last week,” Bethany said. She hopped toward the bathroom.

“Want your crutches?”

“No, I think I’m good.” With another few awkward hops, she disappeared down the hall and into the first floor bathroom.

The teapot whistled. Max poured the tea, added sugar, and sat down at the kitchen counter. She and Bethany had spent most of the morning and early afternoon at the firehouse, and now shadows crept across the back lawn. The air had smelled like snow all day, and Max guessed they’d have a storm before too long.

*Hope it doesn’t come on Tuesday.* They had enough worries about people getting to the polls. Max already planned to take the day off and drive seniors and the homebound to vote. She still didn’t know how the election would skew. Dom Lonesca had made a rousing show in the last few days, and she knew her mother was worried. The wind picked up, and tree branches bent under its force. One oak standing in the front yard knocked against the living room window, the way it had for years.

*Should get that trimmed,* Max thought absently. She sipped her tea and watched clouds crawl across the sky. The bathroom door opened again, and Bethany hobbled back into the kitchen with her face covered in a white paste.

“Don’t you dare laugh,” she said through tight lips.

“Why would I laugh?”

“It’s supposed to erase lines and take ten years off my face.”

*Or the top layer of skin, anyway.* Max pushed her mother’s tea across the counter. “Here. Enjoy.”

“Is that tree banging against the house again?”

“I think so. I’ll call someone next week to come and trim it.”

“No.” Bethany’s teacup stopped partway to her mouth.

“Why not? Last year’s ice storm almost took it down. I don’t want branches coming through the window.”

“I mean no, that’s not the tree. Someone’s knocking at the front door.”

Max stood and peered outside. “I don’t see anyone. Don’t you have a doorbell?”

“It stopped working last year.”

Max walked down the hall. Now that she got closer to the door, she could see shadows outside. A solicitor? A neighbor? She grabbed an old sweater hanging on a hook and pulled it tight around her. Then she turned the knob.

“Hi, Miss Max!” A flashbulb went off at the same time she heard the words, so all Max saw were pops of white light. She stumbled backwards.

“Maxine, who is it?” Bethany’s crutches tapped down the hallway.

“Autumn?” Max blinked to clear her vision. Why wasn’t Autumn on her way to North Carolina with Penny? “What are you doing here?” Then she saw the sign the little girl held in two mittened hands. Slowly, the rest of the scene came into view. Autumn stood on the stoop with Nate behind her. Gus and Parvati from the *Post* stood off to the right. And at least two neighbors huddled on their porches, watching in curiosity.

Autumn shook her paper sign and held it higher. *Please Marry My Dad*

A lump rose in Max’s throat. Tears filled her eyes. The wind swirled around her, and all she could do was look at those words.

“Miss Max, will you marry Daddy?” Autumn chirped in her little bird voice.

“Oh, honey, I...” Max’s voice died. She wasn’t sure whether her tears came from anger or grief or some other deep-seated emotion. She’d already told Nate she couldn’t do this. She couldn’t lie to that extent, not in a court of law. How dare he use Autumn to manipulate her? Her gaze flicked to Parvati and Gus. And why would he bring along the local news media? “I can’t marry—” She couldn’t say *Daddy*. She’d lose her last little bit of self-control.

“Please? If you marry him, then I can stay here with him. And you can stay too.” Autumn took a step closer.

Behind her, Max heard the rubber squeak of crutch tips on wood as Bethany stopped in the hall. A chirp of surprise broke from her lips, and Max didn’t have to turn around to know that she hadn’t taken off her exfoliating mask. Gus raised his camera and snapped another picture. The chirp turned into a shriek.

Max stepped onto the porch and hugged herself against the wind. Her next words went to Nate. “I can’t.” Her heart broke with every word. “I can’t pretend. And I can’t do this just for a judge, or for the short-term, until you figure out what you want.” It wouldn’t be fair to Autumn, and it sure as hell wouldn’t be fair to Max.

“I’m not asking you to.”

She looked down at the sign, carefully lettered in Autumn’s handwriting. Red words on a white background with red hearts drawn around the edges. Then what exactly was he asking?

“Marry me because I love you. Because I can’t live without you. Neither of us can.” He came closer and put his hands on Autumn’s shoulders, forming a triangle in the wind, he and Max and one little girl.

Max started to shake her head. It was preposterous. They'd known each other, really known each other, only a few months. They'd lived together only a handful of weeks. How could she marry him?

He cupped her cheek with his hand, warm despite the chill in the air. "Nothing was the same after you left. All I did was think about you. And miss you like crazy."

"Me too," Autumn piped up. Her teeth chattered. "I kept asking Daddy when you were coming home."

*Home.*

Max turned and looked behind her. Bethany stood in the open doorway with a stunned expression—or maybe the mask had finally frozen her face completely stiff. *My home is here.* Her childhood home, anyway. But as surely as she stood on this front stoop with her hands in Autumn's and her eyes on Nate, she knew home was with them. Her heart was with them. Wherever that took her.

"I know you're going to England," Nate went on. "I would never ask you to give that up."

The Allbright. She'd completely forgotten. Max's mouth dropped open. Of course she was going to England. In less than eight weeks, as a matter of fact. Parvati inched closer. Gus took another picture. Part of Max thought it ridiculous that this event warranted newspaper coverage, and yet everything in her world seemed to be shifting, so maybe it did deserve a headline.

"So we'll come with you," Nate went on. "If you'll have us." He took her hand and twined his fingers through hers, and everything else went away except his smile and the joy bubbling up inside her. "We're a family, Max. We belong together. And I'd follow you anywhere."

Autumn jumped up and down. Her braids bounced on her shoulders. “Miss Max, please say yes. Pleeeeeaaase?”

“What about Penny?”

“Believe it or not, she helped me plan all this. She took one look at how miserable the two of us were without you and told me she’d do whatever it took for Autumn to stay here.” He lowered his voice. “Plus, to be honest, I think she has another missionary trip she’s itching to go on. India this time.”

At that, Max tugged Nate closer. With Autumn’s wriggly little body pressed between them, she lifted her chin and kissed him. For the first time ever, she was at a loss for words.



“LOOK AT THIS.” Bethany shook the newspaper at Max the next day. They all sat in the living room at the farmhouse, smelling the delicious scent of homemade meatloaf and garlic fries baking in the oven. “I look like a disaster.”

“You look like a human being,” Max said. *For once in your life.*

Gus had caught the moment last night just before Nate and Max kissed. Autumn beamed up at them. Bethany balanced on her crutches in the doorway. The sign *Please Marry My Dad* curled at the edges, caught by the wind.

*A Surprise Proposal*, read the caption, followed by a few light-hearted sentences. Only in a small town newspaper, Max thought, would something like that appear. They must have been hard-pressed for news yesterday.

Bethany jabbed at the picture. “Parvati called me a *grandmother*.”

“She called you a fashionable grandmother who’d be able to give beauty tips to both her daughter and granddaughter,” Max corrected.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“First of all, I’m barely fifty. I’m not even old enough to be a grandmother. Second of all, look at me. Why couldn’t I have stopped to wash my face?”

“You look human, Ma. Like most other women out there who are caught off guard. Besides, if you’d stopped to wash your face, you would have missed the whole thing.”

Bethany moaned and folded the paper. “I can’t look at it anymore.”

“Want to look at this instead?” Max pulled her left hand from where she’d hidden it beneath her leg.

Bethany gasped. “Oh, *Maxine*. Why didn’t you show me before?” She bent over the engagement ring, a gorgeous princess cut set in white gold. One full carat. “It’s beautiful.” She winked at Nate. “You have very good taste. I’m glad someone in this relationship does.”

“Ma!”

“Relax, Maxine, I’m just kidding.”

“Well, thank you,” Nate said with a grin. He’d slipped it on Max’s finger late last night, after they returned to the farmhouse.

*MOONLIGHT FLOODED THE LIVING ROOM, and though Max should’ve been exhausted, exhilaration pulsed through her. The sounds and smells of the house settled around her, familiar and comforting.*

*“Thank you for saying yes,” Nate said as he kissed her neck.*

*“Thank you for asking me.”*

*He moved his hands along her collarbone and nuzzled her ear. “You want to change your mind? I’ll give you one last chance to back out.”*

*Her knees went wobbly, and she sank onto the couch. "Not on your life."*

*"Good." He reached into his pocket. "Then let's make it official." He opened a small black box and dropped to one knee. "Maxine Elizabeth Abbott, will you please, please marry me? For real and forever?"*

*For real and forever.*

*Time stopped, and all Max could feel was the beat of her heart. "Yes. Of course, yes." The diamond caught the moonlight and scattered rainbows around the room. "Nate, it's beautiful." She paused. "But when did you get it?" Just two days earlier, they'd been planning Autumn's departure.*

*He flushed. "The day after you left here for the last time. The day after you told me no."*

*"You thought you'd change my mind?"*

*He slipped the ring onto her finger. "I just hoped I had a chance to change it." He kissed her deeply then, sliding his tongue along hers and reminding her of all the other reasons she'd said yes, the reasons that had nothing to do with falling in love with Autumn or the rhythm of days they'd spent together. These other reasons, just as powerful, began with the way he touched her. The way he held her. The way he needed her. The way they felt together, two heartbeats matched more solidly with every moment that passed...*

*"Do you think I have any chance at all now?" Bethany took another peek at the newspaper.*

*"I think you have a very good chance," Max said. She snuggled up to Nate, and the three of them watched Autumn rearrange her*

stuffed animals for story time. She thought they all had a very good chance indeed.



# EPILOGUE

## CHRISTMAS EVE

“Leave the lights off.”

Nate slipped both arms around Max’s waist and kissed the back of her neck. “It looks perfect,” he murmured into her skin. “We don’t need anything else.”

“Think so?” The colored bulbs on the tree cast a soft, magical light on the walls. They’d just finished setting the angel on top, a fair-haired, chubby-cheeked cherub with an uncanny resemblance to Autumn. Red and green candles sat around the room and sent up wisps of smoke and faint fragrance. Three stockings hung over the dormant fireplace, each embroidered with a single initial: N, M, and A. Their first Christmas together. Max’s heart swelled.

“We better let them in here before they break down the door,” Nate said.

Max laughed and twined her fingers through his. Sometimes she still couldn’t believe all this was hers. She glanced down at the solid silver band on Nate’s left hand, the companion to the thinner band on hers. Her life had been turned upside down in a matter of months, in a single autumn season, and yet she wouldn’t have changed any of it. A wedding, a child, and a trip to England after the New Year.

Only one thing could make it better.

Nate tugged her toward the pocket door between the living room and the kitchen. He slid it open with a grand gesture, and Autumn almost tumbled through from the other side. “Can I open presents, Daddy?” She threw her arms around his legs in what had become her classic greeting.

“You can open one present. From me and Miss Max. Then you have to go to bed so Santa can come.”

“Okay.” She skipped over to the pile of wrapped presents under the tree.

“You spoil her,” Max said.

“I don’t care.”

“Children are supposed to be spoiled at Christmas,” Bethany said. She trotted behind Autumn into the living room wearing a bright red dress and matching suede boots.

“How was the Christmas Eve service?”

“Lovely. You should have come.”

“We had to finish wrapping and decorating, Ma. Besides, you like taking her out.”

Bethany slipped a small box into Autumn’s stocking. “I absolutely do.”

“Was it crowded?”

“Packed. But the Carters saved us seats right up front.”

“I held a candle!” Autumn crowed. She kneeled by the tree with three presents in her lap.

“You did?” Max asked. She stifled a yawn. Long day. Long few days, actually. She couldn’t wait to crawl under the covers with Nate.

“Any word on funding for the new steeple?” It had become one of Bethany’s pet projects after the election.

“Nothing definite. But we’re supposed to hear from the Senator after the first of the year.”

Nate and Max sat in matching chairs on either side of the fireplace, one of their few purchases after the wedding. They hadn't done anything fancy, just a visit to the Justice of the Peace, but Max had promised Bethany they'd have a real wedding next summer. Right now, she didn't want anything more than that. To share Nate Hunter's last name. To live in the farmhouse, wake each morning beside him, and fall more in love with his daughter every day.

She yawned again. "Pick just one to open," she said as Autumn ran her tiny hands over all three presents. "Save the rest for tomorrow."

"This one!" Autumn finally proclaimed as she held up a large box wrapped in silver and red paper.

"Go ahead," Nate said with a chuckle.

She pulled off the ribbons and paper and squealed with delight at the board game inside. "Pink Pony Paradise! Megan and Tilly have this game too but now I have one of my *own*." She hugged the box to her chest. She'd lost a tooth right after her fifth birthday, so now the gap in her front teeth was even bigger.

"Why don't we wait until tomorrow to play it, okay?" Max asked. The game came with about a zillion pieces and a toy pony that had to be assembled.

"Okay."

A noise from the kitchen, followed by a gust of cold air, made them all turn. "Guess who finally made it?" Rachael said through frozen lips. She appeared in the doorway and stomped her feet in furry boots. "Just in time, too. Snow's starting to come down pretty hard out there."

"Miss Rachael?" Autumn scrambled to her feet.

"Hi, honey, how are you?" Rachael tossed off her parka and opened her arms wide.

“Good.” Autumn gave her a hug and then retreated into Nate’s lap.

“Ah, she’s turned into a Daddy’s girl, I see.”

“That she has.” Max couldn’t blame Autumn. He made everyone around him feel safe and cared for. He made people laugh. And she loved him to the moon and back. Max fiddled with her wedding ring. There was just one little thing they still needed to talk about. “I think it’s way past bedtime.”

Nate lifted Autumn over his shoulder. Her legs dangled down farther than they had in the fall, and Max wondered how long he’d be able to do that. “I’ll put her to bed.” He gave Rachael a peck on the cheek. “Glad you made it, sis. There’s eggnog and cookies in the kitchen.”

“Thanks. Is the eggnog spiked?”

“Of course.”

He climbed the stairs, and the three women gathered around the kitchen table. “Congratulations on your election to Town Council, by the way,” Rachael said. “I heard it was a landslide.”

“Not quite.” Bethany beamed. “But it wasn’t close.”

“Good for you.”

Max stretched out her legs and shook her head at Rachael’s offer of eggnog. “It’ll put me to sleep. But thanks.”

“Autumn looks like she’s doing really well,” Rachael said. She helped herself to two gingerbread men. “Glad you moved in here, Max. Glad you made my brother fall in love with you.”

She felt herself blush. “It was mutual. The falling thing, I mean.”

“Good. He could never do better than you. I hope he tells you that five times a day.”

“I do,” came a deep baritone voice from behind them. “Usually it’s more than five, actually. But thanks for doubting me, sis.”

“Never doubted. Just want to make sure this lasts.” Rachael lifted her mug. “The house looks great, by the way. Love the decorations.” She looked at the ropes of evergreen looped along the windows and the poinsettias on the windowsill. “Looks the way it did when we were kids.”

Now, Max thought. Warmth settled over her shoulders, a calm, comforting blanket. *Tell them now.* “I’m glad,” she said. “I wanted it to look like family. It’s a great place to raise kids.” She rested her arms on the table and tilted her head at Nate. Kids. Plural.

He froze.

Yes, she mouthed.

All those mornings she’d spent sipping tea because she couldn’t get anything else down. All those nights she’d gone to bed before nine because she couldn’t keep her eyes open. They meant one thing, confirmed by yesterday’s doctor visit.

“We’re going to have a baby.” The words spilled out, followed close behind by tears. Along with the fatigue and the nausea, she had emotion to spare these days. Rachael shrieked and jumped to her feet. Bethany’s eyes went wide, and she grabbed Max’s hands and squeezed.

Nate took a few halting steps toward her. She got up and met him halfway. One arm went around her waist. The other hand tilted up her chin. “For sure?” he whispered.

“For sure.”

He kissed her then, brushing his lips so softly over hers that her tears dried and the swooping sensations inside her turned to joy. Family. Love. Home. A Christmas with all the people she loved most, and a tiny little creature growing inside her she couldn’t wait to welcome.

It was better than any story Max could ever imagine.



Reader, I'm a sucker for a tough guy who turns into a mush of a dad when a little one enters the picture. I hope you loved this story too. Aren't small towns the best? You never know when and where you're going to find love...kind of like in Book Three of the Whispering Pines series, where a playboy with a past falls for a schoolteacher who's about to leave town in a matter of weeks. In *Spring Secrets*, Sienna and Dash don't have anything in common except a white-hot chemistry...will it be enough?



# SPRING SECRETS

## BOOK THREE

*Tell me your secrets, and I'll tell you mine...*



Schoolteacher Sienna Cruz has always been a good girl. She's a dreamer, a rule-follower, and she's saving herself for marriage. She's also just won a coveted position teaching in a prestigious London school, which means in a few short months she'll be saying goodbye to Whispering Pines forever.

Everything is going according to plan until she meets playboy Dashiell Springer.

Dash has made too many mistakes to count. He dropped out of high school and hitch-hiked his way across the country. He met the wrong woman, ran with the wrong crowd, and ended up with a prison record. After eight years on the West Coast, coming home to open a local gym is his first step toward a fresh start. He has no intention of



revealing his past or starting up a relationship with anyone, let alone a woman like Sienna who's way out of his league.

But the more time they spend together, the more both Sienna and Dash begin to question everything about the rules of dating they've set for themselves. When Dash's past catches up with him, will their relationship be strong enough to withstand the truth?

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

“**N**o peeking!”

Sienna covered her eyes and tried not to laugh. Someone whispered on the other side of the wall. The refrigerator door opened and closed. More whispering, a cabinet door knocking, silverware rattling. A cell phone chirped with a notification. Abruptly, the lights turned off, and then she didn't have to worry about peeking, because she couldn't have seen a thing even with her eyes open. But the whispers continued.

“Almost—”

“Is everyone ready?”

“Hang on, is Jason here?”

A twinge poked between Sienna's shoulder blades. They'd invited Jason? They shouldn't have. She'd broken up with him months ago.

The lights flashed on.

“Surprise!”

“Congratulations!”

“Open your eyes!”

“Get her picture. Frank, are you getting her picture?”

Voices shouted one over the other as Sienna blinked into the sudden brightness of her parents' living room. Balloons and streamers hung from every lamp and piece of furniture. Her father stood in the doorway to the kitchen, holding his cell phone three feet from his face and punching buttons as he tried to record the moment. Her mother beamed over an enormous chocolate cake. Her younger brother lounged on the sofa, looking bored. Nate Hunter and his daughter Autumn stood on the stairs holding a handwritten banner proclaiming *London or Bust!* And Jason Kingsley stood just inside the front door, hands in his pockets, an uncomfortable look on his face.

The whole house vibrated with energy and excitement and the smell of her mother's cooking. It was too warm, as always, with the woodstove in the corner kicking out heat. And it was too small for the crowd of people jammed inside for this belated celebration. Still, for just a moment Sienna felt a pang of longing. How could she leave all this, even for the prestigious Allbright Award? Yes, it was given to only four people each year. Yes, she'd beaten out three thousand other applicants to win the chance to work in another country. But she'd lived in Whispering Pines her entire life. How could she just pick up and move to the other side of the ocean?

"Are you surprised?" her mother asked. "You didn't guess, did you?"

"No," Sienna lied. "I had no idea."

Nate grinned as he handed her an envelope. "From Max. She can't wait until you get there."

"I'm not leaving for another six months." Against all odds, Sienna and her best friend Maxine had both won fellowships to work in London, but while Max had left the week after Christmas to work as

a research librarian, Sienna's teaching position didn't start until July. "Not that I'm counting the days or anything," she added.

"I know. But look inside," Nate said, pointing at the card. "I'm pretty sure it's a list of must-dos before you go."

"Of course it is." No one made more or better lists than Max did. "When do you both leave?"

"Next week!" Autumn said as Nate curled one broad arm around his daughter. "We get to fly on a big plane and everything." Her cheeks shone, and Sienna hoped she'd feel the same enthusiasm when it was her turn to board. She'd never flown anywhere, not even to Florida on spring break.

"Well, I can't wait to hear all about it," Sienna said.

"Here, sit down so you can open your gifts," her mother said. She set the cake on a side table. "Louie, please get the forks and plates from the kitchen. And a knife so I can cut this."

Louie rolled his eyes. At sixteen, everything bored him. "Do I hafta?"

"Yes, you *have to*. Stop asking me that. And stop using slang, like you weren't taught proper English in this house. When your mother asks you to do something, you do it."

Louie shrugged and ambled into the kitchen.

"You know he won't be able to find anything," Sienna said. She waited one, two, three seconds, then pointed at the kitchen.

"Ma!" Louie called. "Where are they?"

Her mother groaned. Everyone else laughed.

LATER, after Louie had begged off to a friend's house and Nate had taken a sleepy Autumn home, Sienna sat on the couch next to Jason. Her parents were doing the dishes, a joint effort that her

father insisted on every night. She could hear her mother singing under her breath in Spanish and her father banging around pots and pans like he still hadn't learned where they went. It was sweet, really, the way they still enjoyed each other's company after all this time. They called each other *sweetheart* and *honey* and kissed like they meant it. Sienna wondered if she'd be lucky enough to find someone like that someday. *In Whispering Pines? Probably not. But maybe in England...*

"You didn't have to come," she said to Jason. "You know what my family's like. They make a big deal about everything."

"You getting the Allbright *is* a big deal." He looked at his lap as he said it, and his ears reddened. He had a rash on one side of his neck from shaving, and his hair needed trimming. He dug one hand into his pocket and pulled out a small, wrinkled envelope. "I got you something."

Sienna flushed. "You shouldn't have."

He shrugged. "I know we aren't together right now." He gave her a hopeful look out of the corner of his eye.

*I don't think we'll be together ever again.* She couldn't say those words out loud. They'd wound him too deeply. But she knew Jason Kingsley wasn't the guy for her. He dreamed of staying in Whispering Pines and raising a family and becoming the minister at the Valley Presbyterian Church, and there was nothing wrong with any of that—except none of it was Sienna's dream.

He handed her the envelope. "I wanted to get you something practical. Something you could use while you're in England."

A credit card? A pass for the Tube? She opened the envelope and pulled out a small slip of paper. **Introduction to Self-Defense. Six Week Course. Springer Fitness.**

"Self-defense?"

“I thought it might be helpful in case...” He reddened even further. “I don’t know, in case...I mean, you’ll be living by yourself. I don’t know how safe it is over there.” He reached over and squeezed her upper arm. “You aren’t exactly made of muscle.”



DASHIELL SPRINGER GRUNTED and shoved up the chest press bar one last time. His arms shook and sweat ran down his face, but he got it all the way up.

“Hell, man, two ninety-five.” Zane Andrews, Dash’s best friend, took the bar and set it on the rack. “Nice job.”

Dash sat up and mopped his face. “Thanks.” He took a long drink of water and draped the towel around his neck.

Zane surveyed the gym, half full at four o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. “It looks good in here. More and more people all the time.”

Dash stood, his legs still wobbly from the squats they’d done earlier. “New Year’s resolutions brought in a bunch of new ones.” He hoped they wouldn’t stop coming by the time February rolled around. “I got some new classes I’m tryin’ out, starting next week. Pilates on Saturday mornings and kickboxing Tuesday and Thursday nights. And that six-week personal training course, heavy on the self-defense depending on who shows up to take it. Figured I’ll give it a go. Couple people bought gift certificates for it over the holidays , so that’s somethin’.”

Only a year into the gym-owning business, he was still trying to see what appealed to the Whispering Pines residents. Small group training, full classes, short-term passes, discounts...he was trying it all. For now he kept the place open seven days a week, with shorter hours on the weekends. He experimented with what he offered, and

slowly, his membership was growing. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't proud of that. He'd come back to Whispering Pines with nothing but twenty bucks in his wallet and a dream of leaving the last six years behind him. Eighteen months after leaving California, he was making a go of it.

Zane wiped his face, finished his water, and headed for the door. "Have a good one, man. See you tomorrow."

"Likewise."

Dash took a quick shower and then walked to the front of the gym, dressed in a clean pair of workout pants and a red-collared shirt with *Springer Fitness* embroidered over the pocket. "How's things?" he asked Hans, the twenty-year-old manning the desk.

"Good. One new full membership, and two women came in for a tour."

Dash flipped through paperwork and glanced outside. Yesterday's snow had stopped, but he could tell by the white streams coming from pedestrians' mouths that the frigid temperatures remained.

"Days like this, don't you miss L.A.?" Hans asked.

"Nah."

"Seriously?" The kid rested his arms on the desk. "I'd be out there in a minute if I could afford it. Sunshine, beaches, women in bikinis." He grinned. "Is it true? Is everything out there silicone and Botox?"

Dash pulled up last month's spreadsheets. "Most of it."

"I don't think I'd care. Fake or real, if I can put my hands on it, it's good enough for me."

"It gets old after a while," Dash said, eyes on his computer screen.

"How long were you out there?"

“Too long. Six years on the West Coast. Three of ’em in L.A..”  
*Worst three years of my life.*

“I’d still like to see it someday.” Hans pulled on his ski jacket and hat. “Guess I’m stuck here for now, though. See you tomorrow morning.”

“Have a good one.”

Dash focused his attention back on the spreadsheets. Outside, daylight waned as the sun set and clouds crawled over the sky. This far north in New York State, winter lasted forever. He didn’t care. He’d still rather be in Whispering Pines, where people had your back, instead of someplace else where they tried to stab you in it.

The door opened with a rush of cold air, and as he looked up his fingers froze on the keyboard. It wasn’t a member. But it wasn’t a stranger, either. He knew the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman who’d just walked in. He knew *of* her, anyway, because she was a local the same as he was, though Sienna Cruz was way out of Dash’s league. She and Max Abbott had both just won some fancy scholarship to study in England. He’d read about it in the papers. He’d heard people talking about it. But he’d sure never seen her in his gym.

Man, she was beautiful. Her hair, shiny and black, fell almost to her waist, and her eyes changed from dark hazel to a lighter shade of brown when they caught the light. She gave him a hesitant smile, and her cheeks turned pink as she approached him.

Dash folded his arms on the desk and told himself to behave. “Welcome to Springer Fitness. How can I help you?”



## CHAPTER TWO

Sienna began to sweat ten minutes into their workout. “I don’t know anything about self-defense,” she said. “My—” *boyfriend bought this for me*, she almost said, then thought about changing it to *ex-boyfriend*, and finally didn’t finish the sentence at all. “And in case it’s not obvious, I can’t tell you the last time I worked out.” She’d jogged two laps around the room, done ten pushups, and was already gasping for air.

They were in a small studio at the back of the gym. When Dash found out she was there for the self-defense course, he’d announced they could start right then. *Not really what I’d planned*, she thought, though she’d brought workout clothes just in case. *Stupid idea*, she chastised herself now.

Dash himself had changed into navy shorts and a black tank top that showed off every muscle in his body. She tried not to stare and failed. They’d gone to school together, but he’d been quite a few years ahead of her. *And never looked that good when he was eighteen*. She would’ve remembered, even as a middle schooler. Now he looked like something from the cover of a magazine, beastly and dangerous and sexy all at the same time. He stood half a foot taller than she, and his face was weathered, as if he’d lived another

life before settling into this one. Girl parts of her that hadn't announced themselves in a very long time now stood up and demanded attention.

*Whatever you do, don't drool. And don't stare at his chest. Or his arms. Or his...* She yanked her gaze away from the waistband of his shorts and cursed Jason for buying her the gift certificate in the first place. Okay, sure, she'd added *take self-defense* to her before-leaving-for-England-to-do list. She might not be as extensive a list-maker as her best friend Max, but she still kept them. And checked them off methodically. And occasionally shared them with Jason, which meant he'd probably bought her this gift as a way of reminding her he still knew her. And hoped they'd get back together.

Thinking of Jason took care of the urges.

"I'm just going to show you some basics," Dash was saying. "You won't need to be in killer shape to use them. It doesn't matter how strong you are. If you know how to manipulate the situation, you can take down an attacker."

She glanced through the windows of the studio. Out in the rest of the gym, people blissfully walked on treadmills or lifted weights or patted themselves with towels. "I think this might be a mistake." She'd never felt so out of her element.

He grinned and rested his enormous hands on his hips. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Ah, sure." She crossed her arms. Maybe that would keep the girl parts at bay, along with their ridiculous chatter about being neglected for so long.

"Was this your idea or someone else's?"

She thought about her to-do list. *Sort of mine. Mostly not.* She probably wouldn't have followed through with taking self-defense if

Jason hadn't actually bought her the gift certificate. "How obvious is the answer?"

He flashed her another grin that turned her knees weak. Tattoos covered his arms, and their intricate designs distracted her. He had ink on both legs too, which made for one heck of a piece of artwork standing across from her. She'd heard the stories about Dash Springer and his reputation with women. Being this close to him, she had no doubt they were true.

She took a step back to put some distance between them. "I'm actually moving to London in July."

"Think I heard about that."

"You did?"

"It was in the paper, right?"

She nodded.

"Are you surprised I read the paper?"

"No." She felt herself redden. "I mean, not many people do, that's all." Of course she was surprised. Men who looked like Dash didn't spend time reading the paper, at least not in her experience. *Not like you have a lot of experience with men like Dash.*

"So what does that have to do with taking self-defense?"

She twisted her fingers together. Dash didn't look like a list-maker. "I have some things I want to do before I go."

*Read Pride and Prejudice again.*

*Get a new laptop.*

*Buy an honest-to-goodness camera and learn how to use it.*

There were other items on the list, but to be honest, she couldn't remember them at the moment. Dash's gaze seemed to be burning them right out of her head.

"Ah," he said, "and one of those things is learning to fight off Jack the Ripper?"

Sienna blinked. “Is he still a thing? I thought he died last century.”

Dash laughed, an amazing sound that filled up the room. His dimples popped and his eyes crinkled at the corners. “I think you’re right. He’s probably long gone. But I’m sure there’s someone over there waiting to kidnap pretty young women.”

*He thinks I’m pretty.*

*Don’t be stupid. He probably says things like that to everyone who walks in here.*

“Sienna?” Dash waved a hand in front of her face. “Sorry. I was kidding. I didn’t mean to scare you. I think London’s as safe as any place these days.”

“Which means, not so much.” She tugged down her tank top and wished she’d brought something baggier than yoga leggings and a thin cotton top. Under his gaze, she felt oddly exposed. Vulnerable.

He took her hands and shook her arms lightly, as if to loosen them. “Then we better get started. If you have a list of things to get through, I mean. I’m sure self-defense training is just one of many.”

Was he teasing her? She couldn’t tell. His mouth seemed perpetually curved into a half-smile.

“Though I can promise you, it might be the most fun of all the things you’ll be checking off that list.”

Oh, he was definitely teasing her. And she was definitely enjoying it.

“We’ll take it one step at a time,” he added, fixing those intense blue eyes on hers. “That’s how you tackle anything, you know. Self-defense, lists, life in general. One step at a time.”



ONE HOUR LATER, flushed with adrenaline and good old-fashioned lust, Dash made two protein smoothies and slid one across the desk to Sienna. “You did good for your first time.”

“Thanks.” She wrapped her lips around the straw and sucked, which did nothing to cool his desire. “But you have a strange definition of good.” She loosened her damp hair from its ponytail and combed it out with her fingers. “I think you mean I didn’t pass out or break a bone.”

“Well, that too. I’ve seen both happen.”

“I’m sure you have.” She looked around the gym. “You’ve probably seen a lot happen inside these walls.”

He’d seen more happen outside them, but he wouldn’t tell her that. “So what are you doing between now and July? Besides checking things off your to-do list?”

She stuck out her tongue, looking so cute he almost couldn’t resist the urge to make a dirty comment. “Very funny. Lists are helpful, you know.”

“Or confining.”

She shrugged. “Not for me. Anyway, I took a leave replacement at Whispering Pines Elementary School. The regular teacher’s going out on maternity leave, and I start tomorrow. I figure it’ll give me some good experience for when I go abroad.”

“Is get experience on your list?”

“I already have some, Mr. Wise Ass. I taught when I was in college. For just a month, okay, but it was something.”

That didn’t surprise him. Teaching seemed like the perfect job for someone like Sienna, someone obviously smart and organized and put together. Someone who’d made all the right choices in and after high school. Someone who wasn’t anything like him.

“You might need some self-defense moves down there,” he joked. “I’ve heard school kids can be tough.”

“Geez, I hope not. Although I guess it would be good practice.” She pulled out her phone. “So should we set up some kind of schedule?”

*Hell, yes.* He wouldn’t mind spending a lot more time training Sienna. “I have most afternoons free, depending on what time you’re done with work.”

“How’s four-thirty?” She tapped something into her phone. It buzzed, and he saw a text message come up on the screen. She swiped it away without answering it. Another message came a moment later. “It’s fine,” she whispered under her breath. “Stop texting me.”

Dash resisted the urge to ask. A moment later, it turned out he didn’t have to.

“It’s my ex,” she said. “He’s the one who bought me the self-defense training. He wants to know how it’s going.”

“Ah.” *So she’s single.*

“He hasn’t really gotten the message that we’re over.” She put her phone down. “Do you know Jason Kingsley?”

Dash thought for a minute. “Don’t think so.”

“He’s a good guy. His father is the minister at our church.”

At that, a cold feeling washed over him. *Our church.* Her casual tone suggested she went on a regular basis. If she had dated the minister’s son, she probably did other church-related things too, like serve coffee and cookies after the service or bring meals to the homebound or pray with the sick. *She’s so far out of your league, it’s not even funny.* “Which church is that?” he asked, more to make conversation than anything else.

“Valley Presbyterian. Right at the bottom of Sunrise Mountain, before you start over to Silver Valley.”

He'd probably passed it a thousand times. He'd sure never slowed or stopped or gone inside, though. “How's Tuesdays and Thursdays at four-thirty?” he asked, to change the subject. He felt suddenly embarrassed, ashamed of his life.

She tapped into her phone. “Sounds good.” She pulled on her hoodie. “I should probably go.”

“Sure thing.” He stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you. We'll get you in shape in no time.”

She took his hand and smiled, and against his better judgment he said, “Let me walk you to your car.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks pinked. “Okay.”

He held up her coat and waited as she slipped first one slender arm and then the other inside. A touch closer and he could wrap her in his arms. *Behave, Dash. She's a good girl. A church girl. She doesn't need to get mixed up with anyone like you.* He pulled on his own coat and followed her to the door. Their breath came in long white streams the moment they stepped outside. They walked around the building to the parking lot behind.

“Miserable weather tonight.” She unlocked her car, shivering.

He glanced up. “But take a look at that view.” Above them, stars studded the early evening sky. In the distance, Sunrise Mountain was a dark, solid shadow, keeping watch over the town.

“It's pretty, I'll give you that.” She blinked and looked upward as well, and her long lashes fell to her cheeks. “Guess I'll see you on Tuesday.”

This was the moment she would turn and say goodbye, duck into her car, and leave him standing in the falling snow. Except she didn't. She stood with her back against the sedan, not moving, her chest

lifting and falling, the breath still streaming from between her cherry lips. It took everything he had not to lean over and kiss her.

*I want you.*

The thought flashed in and out of his head, and suddenly he was twenty-three again, lusting over a woman he'd just met. But that was crazy. He'd just spoken to Sienna for the first time a mere hour ago. "Okay, well, I'll see you later," he said, and waited as she got into the car and flashed him a smile goodbye.

She beeped as she pulled away, and Dash raised one hand and watched her go. What was he thinking, flirting with Sienna, walking her to her car like he was interested in something more? She was a client, obviously smart and well-bred, and he had no intention of turning into a cliché by sleeping with her.

He pulled his coat tighter against the wind and walked back inside. Dash had vowed eighteen months ago to focus on his mom, then his business, then his friends, in that order. Not women. Not relationships. Sienna Cruz was only in town until July, anyway. So she was good looking. And smart. And had a moral compass.

They had absolutely no reason to get involved.



CHAPTER  
**THREE**

Sienna thought about Dashiell Springer the entire way back to her apartment on the opposite end of town. She thought about him as she hiked up three flights of stairs and as she peeled off her clothes and took a long, hot shower. She could still feel his hands touching hers as he positioned her arms. She could still see his gaze in the biting winter air. All muscle. All confidence. She had no intention of getting involved with anyone before leaving for England, but *wow*. A guy like that might almost make her change her mind.

Clad in a robe and fuzzy socks, she poured herself a glass of wine. She'd miss this apartment when she left Whispering Pines. From the wide front window, she could see one full block in each direction. Two floors below her sat Zeb's Diner, a fixture in town for as long as she could remember. Directly across the street were Bernie's Barber Shop, a pet store, a clothing boutique, and a hardware store. A few streetlights twinkled in the dark. A car, then two pickup trucks, then a snowmobile, drove down the street and north toward County Route 78, which eventually led out of town and over the mountain to Silver Valley.

She settled into the recliner and had just picked up the TV remote when her tablet buzzed with an incoming Facetime call. She picked it up, fumbled with the screen, almost dropped it. No one else would be calling her via Facetime except her friend across the ocean.

“Max?”

No answer. She righted the tablet on her lap and checked the volume. “Max?” The screen went fuzzy, then finally settled into clarity. Sienna’s best friend grinned back at her from half a world away.

“Sienna, hi! Can you see me? Hear me?”

“Yes, now I can. What time is it there?”

“I don’t know. Midnight?” Max yawned. “I still haven’t gotten used to the time change.”

“How is it? Amazing? Beautiful?”

“Yes and yes. Also cold and rainy.” Max swung the tablet around to show Sienna a window smeared with rain.

“Where are you?” She could make out a few faces in the background and the sound of music and British accents.

“A local pub. It’s right down the street from my flat.” Max laughed. “*Flat*. Not apartment. Do I sound British yet?”

“Not yet, but you’ll get there.”

“Hey, Nate tells me you’re working out with Dash Springer. *That’s* a little detail you failed to mention.”

Sienna clutched her wine glass a little tighter. “How does Nate know that?”

“Oh, come on. Small town and all.” Max took a long drink from a beer mug. “I guess he ran into Jason downtown.”

Sienna didn’t answer.

“So did you start yet?”

“Actually, yeah. Just today. Just this afternoon.”

“Ooh, how was it?”

“Hard. I thought I might pass out.”

“I’ll bet.” Max bent closer to the screen “What about Dash?”

“What about him? He’s in, like, perfect shape. I don’t even think he was breathing heavy.”

“I’m not talking about that. Dash is gorgeous. Just what you need after Jason. He’s the total *opposite* of Jason, if you know what I mean.”

“Max, I always know what you mean.”

“So?” Max leaned close to the screen.

“He’s a major player with a reputation a mile long.”

“Exactly. Some eye candy to take your mind off your broken heart.” Ever since Max had found her own happy ending with Nate, she’d turned into the expert on all things romantic. “*Enjoy* him, Sienna. That’s all I’m saying. Why not?”

“I’m not going to spend my time at the gym flirting with my personal trainer.” Although she had to admit, the thought had crossed her mind. More than once.

“Why not? Flirting’s harmless.”

But Sienna didn’t think anything was harmless when it came to Dash Springer. She’d seen the look in his eyes in the parking lot. “I’m done talking about this.”

Max laughed. “Fine. But if you decide to give up that vow of celibacy, Dash would be the perfect person to show you the ropes.”

*That vow of celibacy.*

Right. The one she’d taken ages ago, when she and Jason were still serious and he’d told her he’d wanted to marry a virgin.

“Sienna?”

“I think I need to break that vow.” The words came out almost before she realized it.

“Really?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I mean, I have zero experience when it comes to guys. What if I get to England and I meet someone who wants to...I don’t know. What do they say there? Snog?”

Max burst into laughter.

“Is that the wrong word?”

Now Max was holding her stomach. In a minute she’d end up rolling on the floor of the pub.

“Stop laughing. You know what I mean.”

Finally Max took a breath. “Sienna, I can’t tell you what you do. Sex with the right guy is amazing. I can tell you that first-hand. It takes your relationship to a whole new level. But I don’t think you should be looking to jump into the bed of the first guy that comes along just because you want some experience *snogging*.”

But the more Sienna thought about it, the more it made sense. She and Jason were over. She’d stayed chaste for him, not for her. In fact, there were plenty of nights when she’d come close to asking him to change his mind. *Lose my virginity*. She’d add it to her list. Put it on the bottom, just in case she didn’t get to it. She didn’t have to make it a priority. But if the right guy did come along, she wasn’t about to cling to an old vow any longer.

*Maybe the right guy already has. And maybe he owns a gym right downtown.*

Sienna took a long sip of wine and let Max laugh.



LONG AFTER NIGHTFALL, Dash climbed into his pickup truck and headed for home. On impulse, he swung down Red Barn Road, passing a few of the old historic homes on the edge of town. Several

had been redone in the last couple of years by Mac and Damian, and the workmanship was obvious. Just before the road curved up and over the mountain, he stopped.

There it was, a small white church with a simple sign out front: **Valley Presbyterian Church. All Are Welcome Here.** Empty parking lot. A single streetlamp that cast more shadows than light on its grounds. The property was neatly kept, the paint fresh, the pine trees around the church still trimmed with red bows from the holidays. It was probably one of those places that filled to capacity on Christmas Eve, with a choir singing at the top of their lungs and kids in their Sunday best running up and down the aisles.

“If I stepped inside, I’d probably get struck by lightning. Set the whole thing on fire.” Dash did a U-turn in the parking lot. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been to church.

In another five minutes, he was in another world on the south side of Whispering Pines, where one-story homes alternated with rundown trailers and empty lots. The mansions of Red Barn Road could’ve belonged to Rodeo Drive, for as far away as they seemed now. Most of the town lived from paycheck to paycheck, making the bills when they could and scrambling when they couldn’t. On Cornwall Road, he pulled up to the last house on the block, a dingy white ranch with black shutters. He parked in front of the garage and headed up the crumbling brick steps.

One twist of the key, a creaky push of the door, and he was home. Dash tried his best to keep the place clean, but it didn’t seem to matter since he was the only one living there. He grabbed a beer from the fridge and collapsed onto the couch. Eighteen months since he’d come back to Whispering Pines. Thirteen months since his mother had died of a stroke. Those five months before she died had been some of the best of his life, though he hadn’t realized it then.

Now the house echoed with silence. *Probably should put it on the market and use the money to beef up the gym.* But somehow he couldn't bear to sell the only place he'd ever called home.

He finished his beer and walked to the bigger of two bedrooms at the back of the house. The smaller one he hadn't touched, and it remained a sewing room with pencil marks on one wall that measured his height from first to twelfth grade. He'd had to make the marks himself when he outgrew Ma at fourteen. On impulse, he flipped the light switch, illuminating piles of fabric, yarn, rubber bins filled with supplies, and a large crucifix on the wall. Dash stared at it for a long moment. Ma had attended St. Mary's Catholic Church in town, but he'd stopped going with her sometime back in elementary school. For the first time, he wondered how different his life might have been if he hadn't.

He turned off the light and headed into his bedroom. Blue walls, blue curtains, a queen bed left unmade and a closet full of workout clothes. Not much else. He pulled off his shirt and tossed it onto a pile that would eventually get washed.

He wondered what Sienna Cruz would think if she knew he still lived in his childhood home. Of course, lots of people did in Whispering Pines, for various reasons. He hadn't thought twice about moving back in after returning from California. He'd needed a place to stay, his mother had needed a helping hand, and it had worked out well all the way around. In the bathroom, he started a shower and dropped his workout pants and boxers to the floor. One tattoo above his right elbow stood out in stark contrast to the others: no color, no design, just a single date and the words *Never Again* inked above it.

He stared at the letters and the numbers until his eyes watered. The memory of Edie mocked him all these years later. He knew

she'd had a rough history when they first met. He thought that was the reason fate had brought them together, so they could ease each other's hurt and build a life together. He'd realized too late that she was more interested in setting him up and stealing his money so she could build her life with someone else.

Dash tightened his hand into a fist. *You put that tattoo there for a reason. Don't let a woman mess up your head again.* Didn't matter that Sienna was as different from Edie as night from day. Didn't matter that he'd changed, that he wasn't the same punk who'd screwed up out west. He needed to stay single, stay focused, keep his feet on the straight and narrow path. That included not jumping into bed with every woman who walked into his gym. Or even the occasional intelligent, good-looking woman who walked into his gym.

Dash shook his head and stepped under the spray. There, he let the hot water ease the tension from his muscles and drive all thoughts of Sienna Cruz from his mind.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

“Who is that?” A thin boy with brown hair pointed at Sienna, his dark brows drawn together in concern. “Mrs. James, that is not our substitute teacher.” His words, prim and proper, sounded funny coming from the lips of an eight-year-old.

“You’re right, Caleb, this is someone brand new.” Jenny James, the principal of Whispering Pines Elementary School, stood with Sienna in the doorway of Room Eighteen. Jenny dropped her voice and leaned closer. “I didn’t tell the class they might have a new teacher until I was sure you’d take the job. They were with a substitute all last week.”

Sienna looked around the classroom. She’d be teaching preschoolers in London, a good deal younger than any of these students, but this would be good preparation. Two wide-eyed boys sat on the rug while the aide, a matronly woman with a double chin, read them a book. A boy with Down syndrome rocked in a chair near the window. The only girl in the room, her hair pulled into two tight braids, walked a careful circle around the rug. Heel touched toe in careful, mincing steps, and her fingers tapped together in a rhythmic cadence. She kept her eyes on the floor.



“Dawn has OCD, anxiety, and selective mutism,” Jenny said as the girl walked by. “Billy and Bailey are twins and developmentally delayed. Eight years old but at kindergarten levels for reading.” She pointed at the boy standing in the middle of the room. “Caleb is on the autistic spectrum, as far as we can tell. Asperger’s, I suspect, but his parents refuse to have him formally tested.”

Jenny walked to the child in the chair and patted his head. “And Silas is the lover boy of the class.” As if on cue, he jumped from the chair and ran to Sienna. He wrapped his arms around her legs and grinned up at her. Sienna grinned back and tried not to lose her balance.

Jenny clapped her hands together three times. “Room Eighteen, all eyes on me, please. This is Miss Cruz.” Jenny waited until they gathered around her in a haphazard semi-circle. “She’s going to be your teacher for the rest of the year.”

All the boys stared. “She’s pretty,” Silas said.

“Yes, she is,” Jenny answered. “She’s also smart and nice and can’t wait to be your teacher.”

Sienna smiled widely and hoped they couldn’t sense her fear. Accepting this job offer was one thing. Actually teaching for six months would be something else altogether. *I’ve heard school kids can be tough.* Without warning, Dash’s voice came into her head.

Then all of Dash came into her head: muscles and dimples and Max saying *if you decide to give up that vow of celibacy, Dash would be the perfect person to show you the ropes.* The thoughts hovered there, taking up space. What was wrong with her? It was like she’d never crushed on a guy before. Not like she was crushing on him. Of course not. That would be ridiculous. They’d met once. Worked out together once. And they were from completely different worlds.

*Which would make him the perfect person to help you cross that item off your to-do list.* She could snog him and go off to England a changed woman. No strings, no emotional attachments.

Jenny was saying something. “I’m sorry?” Sienna said, embarrassed. “My head’s all over the place this morning.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I know it’s a lot to take in.” Jenny motioned at the teacher’s desk in the corner. “There are lesson plans in the top drawer, and the students’ Individualized Education Plans are all in that file cabinet in the corner.” She produced a ring of keys from her pocket. “The large one is for the classroom, the silver one for the closet in the corner, and the small gold one for the two file cabinets.”

“Thank you.” Sienna palmed them. Yes, she’d taught a special-needs class before. For exactly one month during a college internship. During her interview for this position, it had seemed like a solid qualification, along with her education and the fact she’d grown up in Whispering Pines. The superintendent and principal had obviously agreed. Now she wondered if they’d given her this job because she was the only person who’d applied for it.

“The schedule for the day is posted by the door,” Jenny went on, but before she could continue, Caleb walked over and traced one finger down it.

“Nine o’clock is arrival time,” he began. “At nine-fifteen, you have to call the main office and tell them if anyone is absent. And if we are each having hot or cold lunch today.” He paused. “I am having hot lunch. My mother gave me one dollar and fifty cents for it.”

Jenny leaned close and whispered, “He’ll be your best resource.”

Caleb dragged his finger down the schedule and the explanations went on. “We leave for lunch at eleven-thirty...”

Jenny tiptoed her way around Caleb, mouthing, “*Call me if you need anything.*” The aide stood and followed. Sienna nodded at

them both, and then it was just her alone with the students. And her sudden terror that she was absolutely, positively in over her head.

“At twelve o’clock, we go outside when the weather is nice,” Caleb was explaining, “but not if the temperature is below freezing. That is thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit or zero degrees Celsius.”

“Yes, it is,” she said, but he didn’t slow down or stop to respond.

“And at quarter to three, we have to pick up everything and put it away. We walk out to the buses when the bell rings at three o’clock.” He finished and folded his hands in front of him, like a public debater who’d finished his formal presentation.

“Well, thank you for all of that,” Sienna said. But Caleb looked over her shoulder, avoiding eye contact. She didn’t touch him. Instead, she walked to the bookcase, selected two books, and sank into the chair at the edge of the rug. “How about a story to start the day?”

Billy and Bailey were squirming, but they looked up expectantly, which she took as a positive sign. Silas had returned to the chair under the window and was rocking it furiously. His cheeks had turned bright red, but he waved at her and grinned as if he was having the time of his life, so she left him there.

“It isn’t story time,” Caleb said as he walked across the room, pulled out a chair, and sat at the small table near the teacher’s desk. He folded his hands again, his gaze still focused somewhere over Sienna’s head. Dawn sat beside him. She had wide blue eyes and beautiful blonde hair pulled into neat braids. She wore designer clothes, a long maroon sweater over patterned leggings and cute black shoes with bows on the toes. But her cuticles were chewed to the quick, and as Sienna looked at her, she pulled her knees up to her chin and dropped her gaze to the floor.

Billy and Bailey were slapping each other's knees, so Sienna reached down to put a hand between them and spread her fingers wide on the carpet. "One, two, three, four, five," she said, wiggling each finger in turn. "That's how much space I want here, okay?"

They blinked and frowned, but they stopped slapping each other and moved apart a few inches. One of the twins had a small scar on the bridge of his nose, and his hair was a shade darker brown than his brother's. Okay, so that was how she'd tell them apart. She opened the book and began to read, ignoring the pounding of her heart. Without warning, Dash's words came into her mind. And his smile. And his bright blue eyes. Oh, those eyes.

*"Just take it one step at a time. Self-defense, lists, life in general. That's how you tackle anything..."*

## CHAPTER FIVE

**D**ash stared at the clock on his computer. Some days the time flew. Others, it crawled or went backwards. That Tuesday, he found himself checking it about a hundred times before Sienna arrived for her four-thirty training session. *Stop thinking about her. You're gonna behave, treat her like a client, and that's it.*

But he wasn't sure he knew how to. Flirt with women, kiss them, bed them—he was very good at all of that. In fact, he'd spent most of his adult life perfecting it. Truthfully, he didn't think there was anything wrong with a good time between the sheets, as long as everyone involved knew what to expect the morning after. Pursuing women was almost as natural as breathing to Dash. That meant maintaining his composure around someone like Sienna was going to be a challenge.

At a quarter past four, she walked inside. She wore a red hat pulled over her dark hair, black jeans, and a winter coat zipped up to her chin. Gym bag over her shoulder. Cheeks pink from the cold. Despite all his earlier advice to himself, despite the fact that he couldn't see a thing under her bulky clothes, all Dash could do was stare.

“Hi, there,” she said.

“Hi yourself. So how were your first couple days of teaching?”

She pulled off her hat and unzipped her jacket. “Not awful. I survived.”

“Hope you saved some energy.”

She gave him a nervous look. An adorable look. “What does that mean?”

“Just that I plan on working you.” The words were out before he knew it. *Whoops*. That sentence had about a ton of innuendo inside it. “You know what I mean,” he added. “We have a lot to cover.”

She gave him a funny look as she turned toward the locker room. “Sure. Meet you in the back?”

He nodded rather than risk saying anything else stupid. Thankfully, Mac Herbert and Damian Knight walked into the gym as she left. Dash gave his buddies fist bumps and their usual pre-workout protein drinks. “You guys are early.”

“Crappy weather,” Mac said, jabbing a thumb at the slate-gray sky outside. “Snow’s coming later.”

“We finished the Yang place,” Damian added. “Not starting anything else ‘til next week.”

“Those houses out by you are gettin’ renovated left and right, huh?” Dash couldn’t imagine having the money or the talent to do anything like that. But Mac and Damian had made a regular full-time job of it, thanks to the surging real estate market. All kinds of newcomers were moving into Whispering Pines these days. He glanced at the women’s locker room. And some people, of course, were moving out.

“You two wanna help me with somethin’?”

“Depends.” Mac shrugged off his jacket and downed half his protein drink. “What is it?”

Damian elbowed his friend. “Course we will. Name it.”

“I’m teaching Sienna Cruz some self-defense.”

Mac’s bushy brows flew halfway to the sky. “Seriously? Never thought she’d be the gym type.”

“Me either. I guess some guy bought her the package deal for Christmas.”

“Kingsley,” Damian said. “I heard about that. Summer told me they broke up. For now, anyway. Think he’s probably just trying to be nice and get her back.”

No secrets in a small town, that was for sure. Dash yanked at his collar. “Yeah, well, I’m gonna start her with some basics today. You two wanna play the stranger on the street that grabs her?”

“So you can play the hero that shows her how to kick us in the nuts?”

They all laughed. “Something like that,” Dash said.

“Sure, what the hell?” Mac said. “I’m always up for lending a helping hand.”

TEN MINUTES LATER, the four of them stood in the studio at the back of the gym. Sienna had changed into a t-shirt and leggings, clinging just tightly enough to ruin Dash’s vow to behave. She put her hands on her hips. “So what exactly is happening here?”

He took her wrist in his. Small, slender, but strong under the skin. He tried to ignore the heat it generated. “We’re gonna do some real-life practice. You know Mac and Damian?”

She smiled. “Yes, but you all were a few years ahead of me in school. You guys renovated the Thompson house, right?”

Damian nodded.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah, enough with the polite chatter,” Dash said with a grin. “Okay, we’re gonna pretend you’ve never met Damian, and he comes up and grabs you on the sidewalk in the middle of the night.”

“In Whispering Pines?” Mac said. “Where everyone’s in bed in the middle of the night?”

“Shut up. Yes. Or in London. Or, I don’t know, in a thousand other places where it could happen.” He glanced at Sienna, who looked a little pale with worry. “Sorry. I just mean, it’s better to be able to protect yourself if you’re in a situation like that. With no one else around.”

“Gotcha.”

“Believe it or not, in a lot of cases, you can get away or hurt your attacker even if you’re smaller or weaker than he is.” He dropped Sienna’s wrist and stood with his back to Mac. “Grab my wrist.”

“With pleasure.” Mac reached out a thick hand and was on the ground in less than a second. “What the—” He got to one knee and gave Dash a look of admiration. “That’s a pretty good move.”

Dash hoped Sienna would think so too. “Here,” he said, reaching for her hips and positioning her into place. “Take my wrist.”

“You’re not going to throw me on the ground, are you?”

Oh, he’d like to. And then he’d like to do a few things with her while she was down there. He swallowed. “Nope. I’m gonna show you how to do it to me.”

He was never going to make it through this hour. Never. Every single word out of his mouth sounded like it belonged in a porn film. Or maybe he was just being paranoid. He slid a glance at Sienna. Sure, that was it. Paranoid.

“Watch. You just grabbed me. Now I put my hand on your wrist and turn like this. Then apply pressure. Doesn’t have to be a lot.” He



gave her the slightest push, not wanting to hurt or startle her. “See?”

Understanding lit her features. “I think so.” She inched closer and held out one arm. “Try it on me.”

He cleared his throat, stepped behind her, and grabbed. Not hard, but she was a fast learner. She turned, pressed, and shoved him to the ground.

Mac and Damian broke out in laughter and applause. “Hey, that’s what I like to see! A woman who can bring Dashiell Springer to his knees.”

He popped back up. “Not bad.”

“Thanks.” Her face was pink. “That was kind of fun.”

“Yeah?” He motioned to Damian. “Give it a try with him.”

“Don’t tell Summer I was grabbing another woman,” Damian said with a laugh.

“Is she the jealous type?” Dash had only met Damian’s girlfriend a few times, but he knew Summer Thompson had grown up in Whispering Pines. And that she’d lost her kid brother in a car wreck years ago.

“Nope. She’s the cool, down-to-earth, gorgeous type.” Damian took Sienna’s arm, and she turned him around and put him on the ground. “Nice,” he said from his knees. “You aren’t a half-bad teacher, Springer.” He hopped up and grabbed his water bottle. “Ready to hit the weights?” he asked Mac.

“Yep. Sorry, Sienna,” Mac said as they headed for the door. “We’re leaving you alone with the devil.”

Dash flipped them the bird. “He’s kidding.”

“I know.” She wiped her face with a towel. “But Damian’s right. You are a good teacher. I mean, if I could pick up that move in just a few minutes.”

He flushed. “It’s a pretty basic one.”

“But a good one. I hate to think I might actually have to use it someday, but I guess that’s the world we live in now. Felons around every corner, huh?”

He didn’t say anything to that.

“So what’s next? Should we practice some more, or…”

“Want to try something else?” He didn’t usually suggest this right away, but Sienna seemed different. She might actually appreciate it.

“Sure.”

“Focus is important in self-defense. Awareness of your surroundings is key. Meditation can help with that.”

“Seriously?”

“You might be surprised. It’s something I picked up when I was living in California. Helps clear the mind.”

She gave him a sideways glance. “I didn’t know you’d ever left New York.”

“For a few years, yeah.” He shrugged. “Don’t talk much about it.”

“Any reason?”

*Because I made some shitty mistakes and don’t want everyone in town knowing about them.* “It’s in the past.”

“I get that,” she said, and those delicious lips curved upward. “Okay, coach. Show me what to do.” She stretched, raising her arms above her head and revealing an inch of smooth, caramel-colored belly skin.

Dash blew out a long breath. *Think about baseball. The Yankees. Pitch counts. Cold showers. Anything.* He picked up two yoga mats from the stack in the corner and unrolled them. Then he turned off all the lights but one and sank to the floor.

“Ever done this before?”

“No. I’ve read a little about it, though.” She sat beside him, legs crossed.

Of course she had. She'd probably read a little about every subject under the sun. Again that feeling of insecurity washed over him. Sienna Cruz wasn't meant for a place like Whispering Pines. She was meant for London, for Paris, for traveling the world and leaving her mark every place she went.

He inhaled and exhaled slowly. "This is a good way to wrap up a workout. Or a rough day."

"Do I have to chant or say *om* or something?"

"Not unless you want to. Just close your eyes."

She lifted one brow.

He raised his palms in innocent supplication. "I promise I won't try any funny business."

For just a second, her expression changed, and he thought she might say something flirtatious in response. But then she dropped her gaze and the moment was gone. Dash cleared his throat and stretched both arms overhead. *The Yankees. The Rangers. The Giants.* Any sports team would do.

"Okay, the goal is to breathe in for a count of four, then out for four. Then breathe in for five, and out for five. Go up to eight if you can, or if you can't, stay wherever feels comfortable. Stay at the top number four times, then work your way back down to four breaths in and out."

"And that's it?"

"That's it. Well, try not to think about anything except your breath."

She opened one hazel eye. "That might be harder said than done."

"I know," he admitted. "But give it a try."

For the next few minutes, the only sound in the room was the soft swish of inhalations and exhalations. He fought the urge to cheat

and watch Sienna's chest rise and fall. Instead, he did his best to satisfy himself with the thought of her beside him. After he'd finished, he opened his eyes, letting them adjust to the dim light. He sat there a few minutes longer, letting her breathe.

"Time's up," he finally said softly.

Sienna opened her eyes and brushed a few stray hairs from her forehead. The serious frown between her brows had disappeared. "You were right. That was pretty relaxing."

He reached down to give her a hand up. For just a second, a current passed between them. Her eyes darkened. Her chest lifted, and he wondered what she was thinking. What she was wanting. *I could kiss her right now.* Hell, every single atom of his body wanted to kiss her right now.

Then, to his utter surprise, *she* leaned over and kissed *him*.

She tasted like lemons and the tang of salty sweat, and desire rushed over him. All his earlier vows fled as his tongue slipped over hers. She leaned into him, and he could feel the catch in her breath as the kiss deepened. He took her shoulders in his hands, bracing himself so he didn't fall over on top of her. *Not like that would be a bad thing.* She ran one hand down his arm, light fingers, the touch fire. He dropped his arm and wrapped it around her waist, pulling her close, breathing her in.

Then he broke away. What was he doing? Windows lined the studio, which meant anyone could look in and see them. People would talk. Stories would hit the rumor mill. But that wasn't what bothered him most. He absolutely, positively could not let this happen again. Not with Sienna. Not with anyone.

"Sorry." He grunted as he stood. "It's just..." He didn't know how to finish.

“No, *I’m* sorry. I thought...I read things the wrong way, I guess.” An injured expression crossed her face. Her hair dropped into her eyes, but he could still see the confusion and hurt inside them. She gave a short nod, stood, and rolled up her mat. “Thanks for the workout. I’ll see you next time.”

“Wait. I...” He stopped, unsure what to say. She hesitated, but he couldn’t put a sentence together, and after a minute she pushed open the door and left. *Idiot*. Dash cursed himself as he watched Sienna go. *But seriously, where did that kiss come from?* He’d been caught completely off guard. Hadn’t imagined in a million years that Sienna Cruz, of all people, would kiss him out of the blue.

He chewed his bottom lip as he headed for the locker room. Damian had said she’d just broken up with her boyfriend. It was probably a rebound thing. He’d been around women enough to know how that worked. And as much as he’d like to spend more time kissing her—hell, doing a lot more than kissing her—that wasn’t a road either of them needed to go down. She didn’t need to get involved with someone with a past like Dash’s. And he didn’t need to get involved with someone who was leaving town in a matter of months. Pretty women had always been his downfall. If he wanted this place to succeed, he couldn’t follow the urges of anything but his brain. *Been there, done that*, he thought as he ran a hot shower.

Dash soaped up, the pattern of his tattoos turning a rainbow of colors under the water. Every one, a memory. Every one, a reminder. *It’s better for both of us*. He’d train her, they could be friendly, but that would be the end of it. Tomorrow he’d explain that to her, just to make sure things were square and she wasn’t expecting anything more than self-defense training.

He just wished Sienna Cruz looked a lot more like Godzilla and a lot less like a Sports Illustrated model. Beasts, he could slay.

Beauties, he didn't stand a chance against.

## CHAPTER

# SIX

Sienna sat in her car and turned the heat to high. Had she misread the situation? Obviously she had. She'd thought maybe Dash was interested in her, attracted to her, the way he kept stealing glances and smiling at the smallest thing she said. *I thought we were getting along. Thought we had some chemistry.* Her face burned with embarrassment. She'd made a total fool of herself, kissing him that way.

"You were wrong, Max," she said aloud. Dash Springer obviously wasn't interested in casual hookups. She might as well shelve that plan right now.

Thankfully, her phone buzzed with a text from her mother. **Dinner in 10 minutes. Want to join us?**

**Sure.** Friday night dinners were a staple at her parents' house, but sometimes she ate there during the week too. Sienna's cooking couldn't beat her mom's. And it was better than sitting in her apartment overanalyzing a kiss that never should've happened.

**Your brother won't be here, Ma added, so there's more for us.**

That didn't surprise her. Since turning sixteen, Louie had turned mopey and distant, spending more time at his friends' houses than his own. Sienna knew it bothered her parents, but teenage boys

were a breed all their own. He'd come back around when he grew into his hormones.

**Need anything?** she texted before pulling out of the lot.

**Just you.**

**Be there in 5.** The nice thing about Whispering Pines, Sienna thought as she headed down Main Street, was that it took ten minutes to get anywhere. More than that, and you were lost or on your way over the mountain to Silver Valley. She headed down Main Street on her way to Galley Circle, one of a handful of cul-de-sacs that ringed the town. There's only a half-mile around, and she knew every single one of her neighbors. Eight homes, all the same style, either white or beige or blue, all with black shutters. They'd gone up in the late 1980s, and some still had pastel tiled floors inside and the attached redwood decks that had been so popular back then.

Sienna parked in the driveway and hurried inside. Snow spit from the sky, angry and ominous, and she wondered how much would stick before morning. A gust of wind took her breath away, and she yanked her hood over her still-sweaty hair. *If I catch a cold because of that stupid workout...*

She couldn't keep thinking about the workout, though, because that meant thinking about Dash. And the kiss. And what had happened after the kiss. *Am I the first and only person he's turned down?* Because honestly, she'd heard all the stories about him. She'd thought if anyone was a sure thing when it came to helping her learn a few things in the bedroom, it would be Dash Springer

"Sienna!"

The minute she stepped inside, the warmth of the woodstove embraced her. *Thank goodness.* The sting of rejection faded a little. The whole house smelled like empanadas and *arroz con pollo*, and



her stomach growled. *I will never get tired of walking in that front door. Never.* She wondered if any place in London served rice and beans the way her mother made it.

Ma kissed her on both cheeks. "You look tired," she proclaimed.

"Of course she's tired," her father said from the kitchen doorway. He had a towel over his shoulder and one hand on his lower back. "She just started a new job." He winced.

"Your back still bothering you?" Her father had disk problems from years of working as a contractor. He'd spent the last two years going to doctors in and around the valley, with little relief.

"Sometimes."

"Did you take a pain pill?" Ma asked him. "He got a new prescription," she told Sienna. "He just refuses to take it."

"Don't want to get addicted to 'em."

Ma rolled her eyes and threw up her hands. "See? This is my struggle, every day. If it isn't your brother giving me angst, it's your father." She squinted at Sienna. "Why do you look sweaty?"

"I was working out after school."

Her parents stared at her like she'd grown an extra head.

"Working out how?" her mother demanded. "Where?"

"I didn't tell you?" She peeled off her jacket and gloves. "Jason bought me a gift certificate to Springer Fitness downtown. For some self-defense classes before I go to England."

"He's a good man," her father said gruffly, ignoring the whole part about Springer Fitness and self-defense.

"We always liked him," her mother added.

"I liked him too. I still do. I just don't want to marry him." She braced for the inevitable argument, that good guys were hard to come by and she shouldn't wait for a knight in shining armor, but to

her surprise, her mother just handed her a glass of wine and ushered her into the dining room.

“Come in here and sit down. If you’re working out, then you need extra calories.” She pinched Sienna’s waist. “You’re too thin.”

“Really, I’m not.” *And I sure won’t be if I eat dinner here every night.* “Ma! How many people are coming over?” The entire table was covered with food, heaping dishes of entrees, green beans, baskets of rolls and two pies at the far end. “It’s a Tuesday night.”

“Oh, hush. Your brother will be home at some point, and he eats like a horse, so I planned for leftovers. And Marge and Mickey might come over later for cards.” Ma pulled out Sienna’s chair. “Now sit and tell me about your day. Start with *after* school,” she added. “I want to hear more about Dash Springer and his gym. You know, I’ve been meaning to stop down there ever since his mother died. Such a shame, he’d barely moved back home and then she just...”



DASH TRUDGED up the front steps and into a cold, dark house. He’d forgotten to call for an oil delivery, and now the boiler had gone out. *Hope the pipes didn’t freeze.* Shivering, he flipped on the lights and set to work building a fire. He didn’t use the living room fireplace much, though he probably should since wood was cheaper than oil. He found a few logs in the basement, set them in the fireplace, and crumpled newspaper on top. The air was so cold he could see his breath. It took him three tries to strike a match and light the paper.

“C’mon...” He blew onto the spark, willing it to catch. “This is not what I need right now.” If he wasn’t afraid the pipes would burst, he’d just go back and sleep at the gym. He dropped into a chair and watched the small, weak flame grow bigger. He fed it some more

paper, then a few pieces of kindling. Finally it took, and he bent over it, rubbing his hands to warm them and trying not to think of the pathetic figure he made.

Alone.

On parole.

In a freezing house.

*Felons around every corner, huh?*

He tried to pretend Sienna's offhand comment hadn't gotten to him. She didn't know his history. Hell, he didn't want her to. And most nights he wasn't lonely. Most nights he was so tired from work that he dropped into bed within a few minutes of eating and showering. But tonight was different. He felt restless, on edge, more awake than ever. When he was sure the fire had taken, he went to the kitchen to rummage around in the cupboards. He avoided grocery shopping as much as he could. No reason to stock up when he lived alone; he usually just got takeout from someplace downtown. But that meant on nights like this one, all he had on hand was a can of tomato soup and some crackers.

He opened a beer—always plenty of that in the fridge—and dumped the soup into a saucepan. He flipped on the television, more to fill the quiet than because he wanted to watch anything. He channel surfed until he found a basketball game and left it there.

While he was waiting for the soup to warm, he walked to his bedroom, peeled off his shirt and workout pants, and tossed them in the general direction of the laundry pile. He grabbed a clean T-shirt and sweats and was about to pull them on when he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Serious expression. A few gray hairs at his temples. Tiny lines at the edges of his eyes that stood out in the dim light. He took a couple steps closer.

“I’m gettin’ old.” And he didn’t turn thirty until next year. Well, that was what a decade of hard partying and eight months in jail did to you.

*I should be one of those guest speakers at a school.* He could tell teens what choices not to make and how to find friends who wouldn’t betray them. Then he reconsidered. “Imagine me in a school.” He’d barely done enough to get by before dropping out after the eleventh grade. School was the last place he would ever spend time as an adult, no matter how much life advice he had to give.

He glanced outside. Stars covered the night sky, with snowflakes coming down every so often. Something inside him twinged, a longing for something he wasn’t sure he’d ever have. *Be nice to have someone to look at the sky with.* The thought, silly and dramatic, surprised him. He’d been screwed but good by his ex out in Los Angeles. He hadn’t dated anyone seriously since returning to Whispering Pines. You trusted someone, and eventually they let you down. That was the story of life. He’d seen it happen to more good guys than he could count. As much as he liked Sienna, as much as he enjoyed talking to her and training her and thinking about her when she wasn’t around, getting involved would only lead to heartbreak.

He knew that better than anyone.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

**T**he next day, World War Three broke out in Room Eighteen. “I wanted peanut butter!” Billy shrieked at the top of his lungs. He threw himself onto the rug and began to beat his hands and feet against the floor.

Sienna took a deep breath. They’d been reading the monthly lunch menu for practice sounding out words. Today’s cold lunch was ham and cheese on wheat bread. No peanut butter in sight. Thus the tantrum.

Silas climbed into his chair and rocked so hard the books on the shelf nearby vibrated. Caleb sat at the table, head bent over his math sheets. Bailey watched his brother, wide-eyed, probably about to join in the shrieking. Sienna glanced at Dawn, who was chewing at her cuticles and making them bleed.

“Silas, honey, let’s take it down a notch.” She handed him a wooden Jacob’s Ladder toy. He clutched it in both hands and looked at her for a moment, confused. Then the rocking slowed as he began to flip the pieces of the toy over and back.

Billy’s cries grew weaker, and she decided to risk letting him wear himself out. She patted Bailey on the back and handed him the alphabet coloring sheets he’d been working on earlier. “Bailey,

please sit down,” she said as she pulled out a chair across from Caleb.

As Bailey climbed into the chair and took a red crayon in one fist, his brother looked up, still prone in the middle of the room. “I wanted peanut butter,” he said in a mournful voice.

“I know, honey,” Sienna said, “but we don’t always get what we want.” Boy, she knew that better than anyone. On impulse, she walked over and pulled him onto her lap, cradling him in a hug before smoothing his hair and handing him a tissue. He left tear streaks and a black handprint on her shirt, but she didn’t care. Touch and contact could make such a difference in times like these.

Touch and contact.

Like the way Dash had touched her.

*Okay, I need to stop thinking about him right now.* But that was easier said than done.

Dawn began to pace in a circle around the room, following the pattern of the rug and then the tiles of the floor when the rug ended. She didn’t speak. She didn’t look at anyone else. She pinched her fingers together in a rhythm that matched her footsteps. She’d been better the last few days, but obviously Billy’s tantrum had set her off. Anything out of the ordinary seemed to. Sienna looked at her watch. Thirty more minutes before Caleb would inform her they had to go to lunch.

She couldn’t wait that long.

*We’ll go outside. Get some fresh air.* She could certainly use some, to cool off the memories of Dash’s mouth on hers. She pressed the backs of both hands to her cheeks. “Who wants to go outside?”

“Me!”

“Me too!”

They tumbled over each other in their excitement, even Caleb, who fretted for less than a minute that it wasn't recess time. So she helped them into their coats and marched them out to the playground. In minutes, their tension and frustration eased. Sienna folded her arms against the cold as the twins chased each other around the swings. Caleb crouched next to the snow gauge, walking back to her every so often to report his measurements. Silas was content to stand near the bottom of the slide and clap as the other children came down.

The only student she couldn't keep track of was Dawn. She scanned the playground every few minutes, but three times out of four, Dawn's blonde braids would be gone, and Sienna had to ask one of the playground monitors. "Have you seen her? Red plaid coat, blonde hair?"

The first time, Sienna found her standing behind a tree, pressing her fingers against the bark and counting the marks it made on her skin. The second time, she wandered over to the older kids' side of the playground to watch a snowball fight. Just before they came back inside, she walked around the corner of the school, where Sienna found her staring up at the fringe of icicles hanging from the roof.

"Honey, you can't just walk away like that," she said for the third time. "It's not safe. I need to know where you are." Honestly, she'd prefer if Dawn just walked in circles around the playground. At least Sienna wouldn't lose her. She took Dawn's mittened hand, but the girl pulled away and ran ahead of her into the building.

Finally lunchtime arrived, and Sienna walked them down to the cafeteria and then found her way to the faculty room. In her former school, the teacher faculty room had always featured some kind of food, either pastries dropped off by appreciative parents or leftover

snacks from a fundraiser. She hoped the same held true for Whispering Pines Elementary. All she'd had for breakfast was a granola bar and a large cup of coffee from Zeb's.

"I'm thinking about trying one of those dating sites," Sienna heard as she walked inside.

"Really? I don't know if—"

As soon as they saw Sienna, the women stopped talking. One brunette, the other blonde, same shaggy bob hairstyle, same smoky makeup. A little older than Sienna, if she guessed right. They sat next to each other on a sagging plaid couch, left leg crossed over the right, and looked like the Bobbsey Twins on Botox.

"Hi," Sienna said, more to fill the awkward silence than because the women looked interested in talking to her. "I'm Sienna Cruz. I'm filling in for Lucy Foster while she's out on maternity leave."

The brunette gave a wide smile. "Oh, right! Hi! I'm Polly. This is Harmony. Second grade—" she pointed to herself— "and third grade. Welcome. Are you settling in okay? Finding everything?"

"I think so." Thankfully, some bagels and cream cheese sat on a table next to a full coffee pot. "Little bit of a rough morning, but I think we're under control now."

"I think the weather's getting to everyone," Polly said. She nibbled at a croissant. "My kids were off the wall this morning too."

Harmony recrossed her legs. "I think I've seen you around. Outside of school, I mean. Are you from the town?"

"I grew up here," Sienna said as she poured a tall cup of coffee. "Did we maybe go to school together?"

"No, I'm from Silver Valley. And Polly's from Pennsylvania. So that's not it." Harmony snapped her fingers. "Wait a minute! You're the one that got that award, right? To go to England or something? I saw it in the paper."



Sienna nodded.

“That’s pretty amazing. Congrats.” She continued to study Sienna. “But that’s not it. Hey...have I seen you at Springer Fitness? Just recently?”

A lump of bagel lodged itself in Sienna’s throat. “Ah, yes. A couple of times. Not on a regular basis or anything. I’m just taking some self-defense classes.”

Harmony ran her fingers through her hair. “Is *Dash* the one training you? I’m trying to decide if it’s worth it to sign up for a regular membership down there. If *he* comes with the monthly fee, then I’m all in.” She winked and reapplied bright pink lipstick.

“Ah, yes.” Sienna’s traitorous heart thumped as she swallowed away her jealousy. How many other women in town thought the same about him? Signed up for gym memberships just to be near him?

*All of them. Get in line.*

“Ooh, then I’m in.” Harmony checked her phone. “I’m not meeting my future husband here at work, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Are you trying to?”

Polly laughed. “Of course she is. Harmony’s always on the hunt.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s not like I want to spend my whole life working.” Harmony shrugged. “Call me old-fashioned, but I want a husband and kids. Preferably before I turn thirty.”

Sienna refrained from asking how much time that gave her. She would’ve guessed Harmony had already passed that milestone. Her cell phone buzzed, and she glanced down to see **Springer Fitness** on the screen. Her cheeks went hot. *He’s texting me? How does he have my number?*

Then she realized she’d written it down in at least two different places on the forms she’d filled out at the gym. *It’s nothing. Probably*

*just confirming tomorrow's training session.* He'd made it pretty clear yesterday that he wasn't interested in anything more. Maybe it wasn't Dash at all. Maybe it was an automated text message thanking her for joining. She tore her eyes away from her phone.

"Bye," Polly said as they got up to leave. "Hope your afternoon goes better than your morning did."

"Me too," Sienna answered, but they were already gone. She pulled out her phone and read the text message.

**I know we aren't scheduled until tomorrow. But could u stop by 2day?**

It was from Dash. She bit her lip and read the message three more times, trying to decipher the message behind the words. Was this strictly a business text? Or a personal one? Had he changed his mind about the kiss? Did he want to see her? Or was he cutting off their training sessions and only figured he should tell her in person?

Finally she typed **Sure, see you around 4** and put the phone in her pocket. And told herself not to count the hours until she saw him again.

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

Dash ordered supplies, interviewed two potential trainers, taught a kickboxing class, and then spent two hours answering emails, all in an effort to try and keep his mind off Sienna. None of it worked. When she finally walked into the gym a little after four, he'd gone over the conversation so many times in his head, he wasn't sure which version might come out.

"Hi, there," she said.

Did she ever not look gorgeous? She wore a simple ponytail, minimal makeup and a plain turtleneck sweater and jeans, but her hazel eyes sparkled, and her smile made him want to abandon all reason and take her right there on the counter.

*Count to ten.*

*Get a hold of yourself.*

*She deserves better than you.*

Slowly, by degrees, he got his head back where it belonged. "Hi yourself."

"How's business?" She looked around.

"It's okay. Always slow in the afternoons. It picks up at night after most people are off work."

She nodded. "So...about yesterday. Is that why you texted?"

“I’m sorry,” he said in a rush. It always seemed best to apologize to women straight off. He cracked his knuckles. Bad nervous habit he’d picked up ages ago, but he couldn’t help it. “I’m just thinking it’s better if we don’t go down that road.”

“Which road is that, exactly?”

“I try not to get involved with my clients. It makes things...”  
*Complicated. Messy.* He wasn’t sure which word to use.

“You want to keep things professional,” she finished for him.

“Well, yeah. You’re going to England in a few months.” He spread his hands wide. “And I’ve got a lot on my plate with this place. It’s still pretty new, and it keeps me up nights. I like you, maybe that’s obvious, but I think it would be kind of a disaster if we got involved.”  
*Plus if you really knew my history, you wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me.*

Her face went red. “A disaster? Okay. I get it.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. If things were different—”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to explain. We’ll just be friends.”

“Friends?”

“You know, people who see each other once in a while. Hang out. Grab a drink, or coffee, or whatever.” She flipped her phone between her fingers. “I have your number now. So I could randomly text and ask how your day was.” She leaned in close. “And you could answer. The way friends do.”

“Gotta be honest, I’m not sure how good I’ll be at any of that.” He hung out and got drinks with Zane or Mac or Damian, sure, but not with women. Wasn’t there a line from some movie about how men and women could never be friends?

“Well, you still owe me six more training sessions, so I’ll be around at least that long,” Sienna said. “And last time I checked, my

next one was tomorrow at four-thirty, so I'll see you then." She slid off the stool. "*Friend.*"



"FRIENDS?" Max squinted at Sienna from the iPad screen. "That doesn't sound like very much fun."

"But it makes sense." Sienna stretched out on her sofa and tried not to think about her keen disappointment. *Turned down by Dash Springer.* Who, by all reports, slept with pretty much any woman who showed the least bit of interest and had a pulse. Even that woman she'd met at school today, Harmony, had alluded to the fact. Sienna had tried to play it cool today at the gym, but really? She'd thought Dash would have jumped at the chance to have a little casual fun with someone who'd be gone by summertime.

*Not that I'm really the have-a-little-casual-fun kind of someone.*

But she could be. She could *try* to be, anyway. That was the whole point of adding it to her list.

"I mean, I'm leaving in six months," she added, faking the explanation for her best friend. "So it would be silly to get involved with him."

"Do you *want* to get involved with him?"

Sienna didn't answer. She couldn't stop thinking about Dash's hands touching her hips, her wrist, the small of her back as he kissed her. And she couldn't stop counting the hours until tomorrow's training session. Saying they could be friends had sounded okay in the moment, but when she thought about it now, it seemed like a copout. A major disappointment.

"Did you know he lived in California for a while?"

Max took a long drink of her beer. “He dropped out of high school, I heard that much, and hitched his way out of town. I didn’t know he ended up on the west coast, though.”

“That’s rather...”

“Ballsy? Stupid?”

“I was thinking brave.” At that age, what had Sienna done besides go to class and do her homework and follow all the rules her parents set for her?

*Well, you started dating Jason Kingsley.*

Oh. Right. She and Jason had met at Youth Fellowship Group the summer after junior year and fallen into an easy relationship spanning nearly a decade. He was the first guy she’d kissed, the first guy she’d traveled with, the first guy she’d brought home to her parents, the first guy she’d made a promise to.

“Sienna? You still there?”

“I’m here.” For a long time, she’d been completely content with that life, living in Whispering Pines and dating a guy who wanted nothing more than to raise a nice family who never ventured outside the town limits. Jason had waited for her all through college, even though they’d gone to different schools hundreds of miles apart. He’d held her hand at her grandfather’s funeral and tutored her brother when he was failing sixth grade math. Jason was kind and reliable and predictable. Good and gracious to a fault.

She just wasn’t sure he was the guy for her.

“I’m really glad you convinced me to apply for the fellowship,” she said. Everything in her life had changed the day she’d gotten the email from the Allbright Foundation. She’d felt her horizons cracking open, her whole future stretching out ahead of her. Once she got to London, everything in her life would change.

Except it was funny, but a lot had already changed in her life in just a few short days.

Because of one person.

One person who was most certainly not reliable or predictable. Probably not good or gracious either. But oh, how she couldn't stop thinking about him.

"Max? I know it's late there. And I've got to go and get some dinner." If she sat here any longer, she'd spiral down into self-pity, thinking and re-thinking about the afternoon's conversation. Dissecting every word. Analyzing every expression. Max was right. Being friends with Dash Springer didn't sound like very much fun at all.

CHAPTER  
NINE

“Are we doing the wrist grab thing again?” Sienna asked the following afternoon. “I practiced on a couple friends at work.” She held up an arm and made a muscle, hoping it was impressive and knowing it probably wasn’t.

“Good for you. But no.” Today Dash wore a black tank top and black and gold workout pants. He looked like some kind of Greek god, and it took all her effort to keep a few safe feet between them. “We’re movin’ on to something else.”

“Are Mac and Damian helping out?”

“Nah, they’re working late today. Mac texted me.” He grinned. “So it’s just you and me.”

“Perfect.” She raised her chin and narrowed her eyes. *Friends. We’re just friends.* That’s what he wanted, so that’s what she’d give him. “This is my game face. What do you think?”

He framed the air around it with his hands. “I think you need to work on it.”

“I don’t look tough?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re the opposite of tough.” She dropped her chin. “Really?”



“In a good way. You’re nice and soft and pretty and...” He trailed off as his cheeks turned red. “An’ now I’m done talking.” He struck a wide-legged stance. “Now watch. This is what you do if someone comes up from behind and puts an arm around your neck...”

“TRY IT AGAIN,” he said a half-hour later. But Sienna struggled to get a grip on his arms, not just because they were twice as big around as her hands, but because he weighed about eighty pounds more than she did. He was right. She wasn’t tough or anything close to it.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. It doesn’t matter how big or strong your attacker is.”

“You keep saying that. But obviously it does!” She wiped her face and threw down the towel. “I can’t get a grip. I can’t do anything you showed me.”

“It’s the first day you’ve tried this. It’s harder than the wrist grab.” He paused. “Why does it bother you so much that you can’t get it right away?”

“Because I should be able to figure it out. It’s just physics. And you’ve shown me a dozen times.”

His expression changed. “Ah. That’s your problem. You’re trying to be academic about it.”

“Well, yeah.” That’s what she was, what she had been her entire life. An academic. No wonder he looked at her like she was crazy. And no wonder he’d put on the brakes. She was a prude, plain and simple. She over-thought every situation. She didn’t react or jump into the moment. She never had. It was ridiculous to think that she could sweep Dash Springer off his feet and into her bed and not

spend the next week analyzing every last minute of it. He probably knew that, too.

“Just do it,” he said. “Don’t think about it.”

“I’m *trying*.”

“No, you’re not.” He took a few steps away. “Tell you what. Let’s take a five-minute break and then try it again.” He pulled out his phone and began typing.

“Fine.” She scrubbed the sides of her hair back into her ponytail. Put her hands on her hips. Closed her eyes and visualized the move again, securing his arm, ducking beneath his shoulder, dropping to—

Out of nowhere, he grabbed her from behind.

*Hey, that wasn’t five minutes*, she almost said, but then something happened. A ball of heat solidified in the middle of her chest, and she ducked under his arm and kned him in the back of one leg before she realized what she’d done.

He looked up at her from the ground. “Now *that* is how you do it. I knew you could.” He jumped up and gave her a fist bump. “Nice job.”

“Thanks.” *I did it. I did it without thinking about it.*

“Want to try again?”

“Can I bask in the glory of doing it right and maybe try again next week?”

He chuckled. “Sure. You should practice if you can, though, between now and then. Get some muscle memory, so you do it without thinking too much. So it’s just an instinctive reaction.”

“It might be tough finding someone to practice with. I’d probably break one of my parents or my friends. Maybe my kid brother.”

“There you go.” Dash picked up their damp towels and held open the door. “How old is he?”

“Sixteen going on thirty, with the mood to match.”

“I remember those days.”

She almost asked him right then. *Why did you drop out of high school and leave Whispering Pines? Did you really hitchhike across the whole United States? What made you go to California? What made you come back?*

But she didn't. Their mood was light and celebratory, a fragile bubble that hovered in the air between them, and she didn't feel like bursting it. "See ya next time, Dash."

"See ya."



"HEY, boss, there's a bunch of kids hanging out in the parking lot," Hans said when he came in from throwing out the garbage.

"That's not really a crime, last time I checked."

"Except Martha McGee complained that they scratched her Mustang."

Dash sighed. "Didn't she complain about something like that last month?"

"And the month before."

"She's the only person I know who drives a Mustang in the middle of a New York winter."

Hans chuckled. "I know. But she's got a ton of money, and she spends a lot of it here."

Dash pulled on his jacket. "Okay, show me these kids who are terrorizing the neighborhood." He followed Hans out the back door, which opened onto a large public parking lot that ran half the length of Main Street. At six o'clock it was still pretty full, a combination of late-night workers and his own gym clients. He'd paid to have security cameras put in last year, along with better, brighter lights. He saw at once the group Hans was talking about.

Five teenagers, four guys and a girl, all wearing thick winter coats with hoods pulled up over their faces. They stood in a dim corner of the lot, and it wasn't hard to tell what they were up to. Or maybe, Dash thought, that was just because he'd seen the same shit a dozen times a month living out west. Three were smoking a blunt. Another held a bottle in one hand. They talked in hushed tones, and as he watched, two of them exchanged something that looked like a wad of cash.

"Hey, there," he said as he walked over. They were jumpy and twitchy, and they turned and scattered as soon as he got near. The girl had a duffle bag over one shoulder, and she grabbed a pill bottle from one of the guys and stuffed it into the bag before taking off on a jog across the street.

"Not the place," Dash called as they disappeared. Hell, he wasn't naive enough to think drug deals didn't happen in Whispering Pines, but he hated to see them right behind his place of business. If his parole officer got wind of anything like this, he'd be a dead man.

"What are they, fourteen?" Hans said as Dash returned to the back door. He stood shivering in the cold.

"Somethin' like that." Dash shook his head. He'd gone down that road, made those same mistakes, almost a decade ago. At sixteen he'd thought he ruled the world. He'd left Whispering Pines with grand plans, good looks, and a sweet-talking tongue. And it had been golden for a while, until everything crumbled around him. Man, he hated to see other dumb kids making those same mistakes and assumptions.

"Call the cops," he said as they walked back inside. "Let 'em know." At the very least, he could get on record that he'd seen it, reported it, and stayed far away from it all.

CHAPTER  
TEN

Friday morning, Sienna overslept. When she finally opened her eyes, the time on her phone read a quarter to eight. She'd slept right through her six-thirty alarm.

"No!" She leaped out of bed and pulled on the first thing she saw, an old sweater with fraying sleeves and the same pair of jeans she'd worn the day before. She splashed water on her face, tied her hair into a ponytail, and grabbed her makeup bag on the way out the door. Outside, two inches of newly fallen snow covered her car. *Of course*. She opened the trunk and realized she had no idea where she'd left her snow brush. At her parents' house? At the gym?

"Hey, Sienna."

She looked over her shoulder to see Ella Ericksen coming down the stairs behind her. Ella and her sister Becca lived upstairs from Sienna, though they rarely crossed paths. Ella had a designer bag slung over one shoulder and a lumpy paper bag in the crook of the other arm. Despite the early hour, she looked impeccable and fully awake, hair in golden curls falling down her back and makeup expertly done. Even back in high school, Ella would bounce into class with limitless energy and smiles for all the guys surrounding

her. Now she worked at a salon in town with an appointment waiting list two months long.

“Hey.” Sienna stared mournfully at her car and began wiping the windshield with one mittened hand.

“Don’t you have a snow brush?” Ella opened the back of her sturdy-looking SUV, parked as usual behind Sienna’s car.

“Ah, no. I mean, I did. I’m not sure where I left it.”

“Here.” With two quick sweeps of a long brush, Ella had cleared Sienna’s windshield. She walked around the car, clearing the rest of it without getting any snow on her long red jacket or in her perfectly coiffed hair. Then she handed the brush to Sienna. “Take it. I have another one upstairs.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course.” Ella tossed her hair and beamed. “That’s what neighbors are for.”

Sienna stood there as the beauty queen climbed into her SUV, beeped the horn twice, and drove away. Sometimes people did surprise her.

SIENNA DASHED into the elementary school twenty minutes later. She’d called the office, but by the time she reached her classroom, sweat drenched her back. *Please let everything be calm and peaceful.* Surely the twins wouldn’t be awake enough to have started their tantrums. Maybe Caleb would be bent over his work, and Silas would be rocking happily in his chair.

Or not.

“Glad you finally made it,” the substitute teacher said stiffly.

“I’m so, so sorry.” Billy and Bailey sat red-faced in the corner. Silas was rocking, but in a manner so jerky and agitated she was

afraid he'd pitch forward out of the chair and knock himself out. Caleb wasn't sitting in his usual chair, but instead stood in the corner under the window, blinking too fast.

"Where's Dawn?"

"In the closet, last time I saw her." The sub pointed to the corner as she walked out. "Good luck."

Sienna sank to the ground. Her legs gave out, and she simply folded into a pretzel on the rug. How did people do this year after year? She pressed her fingertips to her temples. *This is only temporary. Your job in London won't be anything like this.* There, she'd be teaching four-year olds with no learning difficulties who came from rich families. That's what the Allbright Foundation had promised, anyway. And that would be a walk in the park compared to this.

She took another few breaths, then stood and walked over to Caleb. She didn't touch him. She didn't try to look at him. Instead, she pointed at the bookshelf and spoke over his left shoulder.

"Caleb, please pick out two books. Then you can sit at the table and read them to yourself, and we'll talk about them in thirty minutes."

His gaze shifted, and for a second—maybe a half second—his eyes met hers. Then he nodded and walked to the bookshelf.

Silas stopped rocking. He looked at her with tears in his eyes, and suddenly she realized the magnitude of her lateness. *They thought I wasn't coming back.* Their regular teacher had already left them. They'd probably assumed Sienna was doing the same.

"I'm sorry, buddy. I'm sorry I was late. But I'm here now." She sat in the rocking chair and snuggled Silas to her chest. His body tensed, and she waited for him to leap up and run across the room.

But he didn't. After a breath or two, he relaxed into her, and together they rocked in silence.

Sienna kept one eye on the twins and the other on the ajar closet door. She continued to rock. Caleb sat at the table and dragged his finger down the first page of his book. After a few minutes, Billy walked over to her, sniffing.

"Miss Cruz, are we gonna do math this morning?"

"Would you like to?"

He gave her a long, soulful look and nodded.

"Yes," Bailey said from the other side of the room. "I want to do math."

Well, that was a first. Sienna put Silas on the floor. She sat the twins at the table with worksheets and freshly sharpened pencils and walked over to the closet.

"Dawn?"

Nothing. She pushed the door open a few more inches. "Sweetheart, I know you want to stay in here." She had a sudden memory of herself as a child, turning out all the lights and curling into a ball on her bed if the world got too scary. This wasn't much different. As her eyes adjusted, she made out the girl's tiny frame in the far corner. Sienna held out one hand. "I need you to come out now." *Please*. "I promise you I will be here for you. I will not leave you, and I will make things as safe as I can for you."

A figure moved in the shadows, and a moment later, Dawn reached out one sticky hand and placed it in Sienna's. The girl didn't speak. But she squeezed Sienna's fingers slightly, as if to say, "*Okay, I'm here. But remember. You promised.*"





LATER THAT NIGHT, Dash unlocked his apartment with a yawn. He debated watching the Knicks-Lakers game, but he'd already missed the first half. Instead, he tuned his iPod to a rap station and spooned vanilla ice cream into a bowl. It wasn't health food, but he spent enough time working out that he figured he could cheat every so often.

His phone buzzed on the kitchen table after a few minutes. **Going to the Watering Hole later**, Zane texted.

Dash rubbed his eyes and yawned again. **Long day. Gonna skip it.** The bar scene had lost its appeal long ago, and even though he sometimes went on an occasional Friday or Saturday night, he was usually content to sit at home. His phone buzzed again, and he was about to send Zane a bunch of X-rated emojis when he checked the name on the screen.

**Hey, friend**, Sienna had written. **You still up?**

He licked the last of the ice cream from his spoon and set it in the empty bowl. **Hey there. How's things?**

**Long day.**

**Bad or good?**

**Little of both. I overslept & was late. The kids flipped out.**

Dash kicked off his shoes and carried his phone into the bedroom, where he stretched out on his bed. **I'm sure they'll be OK.**

**I'm sure they will too. Just started the day off wrong.**

Dash rested his head on one arm. Was this what friends did? Texted about their day? He'd rather talk to her in person. Of course, if she was actually here in person, he didn't think they'd talk for very long. He'd be too busy trying to figure out how to get her clothes off, despite what he'd told her about not getting involved.

He wriggled out of his workout pants and pulled his shirt over his head. **You'll never guess what happened at the gym.**

**What???** This time she sent a smiley face along with the words.

**2 clients found out they R sleeping w/ the same guy. Shoulda seen the looks on their faces when they found out.** It took him almost a minute to type the message.

She sent back a bunch of exclamation points. **No way! Small town life LOL.**

**People cheat in big cities too.** A lump rose into his throat as he typed. Boy, did they ever.

**True. But they're not coming into the same place at the same time, right? That could happen 10 times a day here.**

He didn't answer. Didn't matter. Didn't affect him. He stared at the bubbles on the phone, waiting for her next message to come. But they went away after a minute. Had he offended her? Hell. He knew he couldn't do this right. On impulse, he sent a quick final question.

**Got any dinner plans tomorrow?** He wasn't sure he should ask. Maybe she'd get the wrong idea. Hell, maybe he had the wrong idea in asking. But he liked Sienna. And he wanted to see her outside of the gym. So sue him. Friends had dinner together, didn't they?

Her response took almost a minute to come, but it was worth it when it did. **Nope. Meet u at the diner at 8?**

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

Sienna walked into Zeb's at five past eight the following evening. Outside on the sidewalk, a stray cat had slinked across her path, yellow and white with a tail bent in the middle like it was broken. *Poor thing.* She'd seen a few of them here and there on this end of town. *Must be tough scrapping out a life when no one wants you.*

She spied Dash sitting at the counter, but as she walked over, he climbed off his stool and met her halfway. Josie grabbed two menus and led them to a table in the back corner of the restaurant.

"Hey, y'all," she said, and to her credit, she didn't blink an eye when she saw them together. "Drinks?"

"Just water," Sienna said. "I'm not much of a drinker."

"I'll have a light beer, Josie," Dash said. "Thanks."

"Sure thing."

Sienna scanned the specials and decided on the pot roast with stuffing and asparagus. She needed something hearty on a winter night like this. She set her menu aside and surveyed the other tables. Mostly couples, a few businessmen eating together, and one family of six. A cute toddler sat in a high chair and waved her fist as

her parents and grandparents oohed and aahed. An older brother, maybe six or seven, looked bored and played with his silverware.

Josie dropped off their drinks and a small plastic basket with slices of bread inside. Dash leaned over and touched his beer to Sienna's glass of water. "Cheers."

"What are we toasting?"

"How about making it to the weekend?"

"Cheers to that, then."

He took a long pull on his beer. "How was your first week of work?"

She blew out a breath. "It's been challenging, that's for sure. I only have five kids, but it's still a lot to wrap my head around. They're all at different levels, and they all have different needs." She took a sip of water. "I don't know how Lucy did it with just a chalkboard and one computer. We have a table that's falling down and chairs that look like they're left over from the seventies. The books, too. Well, they might be from the late nineties, but still. I ordered some new ones, and a bookshelf to put them on, but they won't get here for at least three weeks." She stopped. "Sorry. I'm rattling on."

But he just smiled. Josie came and took their orders, and when she was gone, he waved his beer bottle. "Go on. There's more. I can tell."

"Not much. You know what I'd really love?"

"What?"

"Bean bag chairs." She laughed. "That sounds silly, right? But I had a teacher, I think it was in fourth grade, who had them all around the room. Whenever we finished our work early, or got a good grade on a test, we could sit in one and read."

"Let me guess. You spent a lot of time in those bean bag chairs, Miss Smarty-Pants."

She stuck out her tongue. “Why, yes, I did.” *See, we can be friends. We can joke around and not have it mean anything.* She just had to focus on something other than Dash’s searing blue eyes, or strong arms and hands, or low chuckle that made her belly tighten in wonderful, not-so-friendly ways.

“You have Silas Turner in your class, don’t you?” he asked as their salads arrived.

“How did you know?”

“His father works out at the gym. He mentioned it.”

“Hope he had good things to say.”

Dash grinned. “They weren’t all bad.”

“Meaning some of them were?”

“No. I’m kidding. He thinks you’re great.”

Sienna stabbed some lettuce and a cucumber. “I have a student who doesn’t speak.”

“At all?”

“Not at school. It’s not a medical or physical thing, either. She has selective mutism. I’ve read through her file, and there’s some history there...” She trailed off. She wasn’t supposed to break confidence about things like possible past abuse or families’ criminal records. “Anyway, it breaks my heart.”

“Does she talk at home?”

“I don’t know. I’ve called her foster parents twice, but they haven’t gotten back to me.”

“That’s awful.” Dash finished his own salad and pushed the plate aside. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Beneath one sleeve she could see the tail end of a red and blue swirl.

“You have a lot of ink.”

He flexed his hands. "Yeah, guess so. It becomes addictive. One turns into two and the next thing you know, you're on your tenth."

"Do they all mean something? Or were they just..." She trailed off.

"Drunken whims?" He grinned. "I have a couple of those from when I was younger. Probably oughta get 'em covered up or changed someday."

She cocked her head. "What's your favorite one?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. His dark blond hair caught the light, and a jolt of desire hit Sienna yet again. With effort, she tamped it down. *He wants to be just friends. You can't look at him that way.*

"I'd say I haven't gotten it yet," Dash said, and it took a minute for Sienna to realize they were still talking about tattoos. He turned his arms back and forth. "Haven't gotten a new one in a while, though."

"Any names?" she said lightly. "I always think of that Norman Rockwell painting with the sailor who has about eight or ten girls' names tattooed on his arm, and each one's crossed out except for the newest one."

He shook his head. "Just one name. My mom's." He touched his chest above his heart. "Right here. It's bad luck to put anyone's name on your skin except your mother or your child." He paused. "Can't trust that other people are going to stick around."

She took a deep breath and decided to ask. "How did you end up going out west?"

Their entrees arrived, saving him from answering, Sienna thought, but she didn't push it. They ate in silence for a few minutes. The pot roast melted in her mouth, and she closed her eyes to savor it.

"I needed a change," he finally said. "I dropped out of high school." His cheeks colored, and he didn't look at her as he spoke.

“You probably heard that. I wasn’t good at school, and I pretty much hated being there. My mom tried to fight me on it, but I was done after junior year.”

*School isn’t for everyone*, she wanted to say, but the words sounded small and cliched. She let him continue.

“A buddy of mine needed help doing construction work, so I hitched my way out and lived in San Diego for a few years. Then I moved to Los Angeles. For a woman.” A bitter laugh left his lips. “Stupidest decision I could have made.”

Well, that explained a few things. Sienna kept her eyes on her pot roast. “I’m sorry. Relationships can be damaging, especially when they don’t work out.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“But the gym seems like it’s doing well.”

He finished his dinner, set his fork and knife on his plate and pushed it back. “It is. I’m so thankful for that, I can’t even tell you. Took a big risk with it.”

“It’s great. Seriously, it’s a really nice place. So much better than the Y in Silver Valley.”

“Ah, now you’re just trying to butter me up.” He sipped his beer. “I’m sorry. I’ve got a lot of shit in my past, that’s all. Made some stupid decisions and I’m trying not to repeat them.”

She finished her meal. “I think that comes with being human.”

“Is there anyone you don’t like? Anyone you’re not incredibly nice to?”

She blinked. “Meaning what?”

“You’re nice to *everyone*. At least from what I can see. You never look mad, or upset, or tired, or...anything. And you always find something kind to say. Even to an obvious screw-up like me.”

“Well, first of all, I don’t see you as a screw-up.” She shrugged. “There are people I don’t like, sure. But I guess I haven’t really been hurt by anyone yet. Not in that awful, down-deep, never-going-to-trust someone again way.”

“You’re lucky. I hope you never are.”

Josie swung by and cleared their table. “Dessert? Coffee?”

“I’d love some coffee,” Dash said. “Regular.”

“Decaf for me.”

“You got it.”

“So tell me about this London gig,” Dash said after Josie brought their coffee. “When, where, how, all that good stuff.”

She wrapped her hands around her mug and realized she had no idea how many other people sat around them now, or who had come and gone since they’d arrived. Usually she loved people-watching. Tonight it didn’t matter who else sat around them. *He’s good company.* “Max convinced me to apply.”

“Maxine? The one who lives with Nate Hunter?”

She nodded. “We’ve been best friends forever. She got the award too, but she’s already over there.”

“Will you live with her?”

“No, but that’s because Nate and his daughter will be there. They’re leaving in a few days.”

Dash’s eyes widened. “That’s a big deal. Pulling up a lot of stakes.”

“You pulled up stakes when you moved west.”

“True.”

“Anyway, I’ll have a job teaching at a private preschool outside of London.”

“For how long?”



Was he simply curious, or would he miss her when she left? “One year.”

“Wow. Sounds like a great opportunity.”

“It is.” She picked at a cuticle. “Can I tell you something, though?”

“Sure.”

“I’m kind of a little scared.”

He leaned back in his chair and put one hand on his heart. “The magnificent Sienna Cruz, slayer of self-defense courses, teacher of the mute, smarter than anyone else I know, is scared?”

“Shut up.” But she smiled at his reaction. “I’ve never been on a plane.”

He dismissed her confession with a wave. “Ah, it’s nothing.”

“You have been?”

“Once. When I came back here.” His smile dimmed. “Anyway, there’s nothing to be scared of. They say flying is the safest form of travel.”

“I always wonder, who’s that mysterious *they* people quote when they say things like that?”

He chuckled. “I have no idea. People with experience, I hope.”

“I hope so too.”

Josie came by and dropped off the check. Dash reached for it.

“Let’s split it,” Sienna said and opened her purse.

“I’ve got it. You can leave the tip, how’s that?”

“Okay. But friends are supposed to pay their fair half.” She did the math inside her head and tucked some bills under her mug.

“I told you, I’m still learning the ropes on this friends thing. When I go to dinner with a woman, I’m used to paying.” He folded two twenties on the table. “So humor me.”

“I live right upstairs,” she said as they walked into a frigid night. “Third floor.” She took his arm as her boots slipped on the snow-

covered sidewalk, and he squeezed his elbow to keep her hand secure. “And there isn’t an elevator in the building, so I do get my cardio a couple times a day.”

Their breath puffed out of their mouths as they walked. Light snow fell from a mottled blue-black sky.

“Look at all these places,” he said, pointing at the office buildings and boutiques down Park Place Run. Clothing shops. Gift shops. A pet-grooming service. The street ran perpendicular to Main Street, only a few yards from the door to Sienna’s stairs. “All this was added while I was gone. I came back, and bam! There was a whole la-de-da block here instead of farmers’ fields.”

A pair of yellow eyes twinkled in the dark, and a moment later, a cat dashed across the sidewalk and almost tripped Sienna.

“Whoa.” Dash tightened his elbow around her hand, and heat zoomed straight into Sienna’s core. This friends-only dinner hadn’t done anything to cool the chemistry between them. If anything, it had fueled it.

“I never knew there were so many strays around here.” She stopped outside the door that led upstairs. “I feel bad for them. They’re way too skinny and matted to be anyone’s pets.”

He nodded. “Pretty cold this time of year. Tough to survive.”

“Ella’s sister Becca works at the animal shelter, I think. I should tell her about them.” Although if Becca lived right upstairs, she probably already knew.

Sienna stared into the silent night. Evergreens took over where the sidewalk ended, and a ribbon of river ran along Whispering Pines all the way to the mountains outside of town. It never quite froze in winter. It ran deep enough that a current always slid along beneath the frosty surface, moving even in the dead of January.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said. “It was nice to have a conversation with someone outside of school.”

He inclined his head. “You’re very welcome.”

“I think we can do this,” she added. “This just being friends thing.”

“Yeah?” His gaze bore into hers, strong and steady.

“Yeah.” *No. No way. Not if you keep looking at me like that. And I keep wanting you the way I do.*

“I’m willing to give it a try if you are,” he said, and slipped his arm from hers. “Good night, friend.”

She leaned against the door as he backed away. “Good night.”

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

The following Monday, Dash pulled on his coat after lunch. “I’ll be back in an hour,” he told Hans. “Text me if you need anything.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

A respite from snow had left Whispering Pines cold and gray, with snow banks rising almost as tall as Dash’s waist. He climbed into his pickup and glanced at the load in the truck bed, covering tightly with a tarp. *It’s the kind of thing friends do for each other*, he told himself as he drove to the elementary school. He wasn’t sure if friends thought about each other as much as he’d thought about Sienna in the last forty-eight hours, though. A half-dozen times on Sunday, he’d almost texted her. *How’s your day going? Dinner last night was nice. Same time next week?* But like a teenager, he lost his nerve and erased the words.

At the school, he sat in his truck and stared at the front door. He hadn’t minded this place as a kid. The bad stuff hadn’t started until high school, when words swam on the pages and dates and places got all messed up inside his head. Eventually he decided skipping class was easier than going to it and failing. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and glanced absently at the flag. On sunny

days in the spring, the whole school used to go outside and say the Pledge of Allegiance before the day began. He wondered if they still did.

*You never think when you're that age anything bad will happen,* he thought as he watched the stars and stripes ripple in the wind. *The hardest decision is where to sit at lunch or who to play ball with at recess.* He killed the engine and got out of the truck.

Eva Hadley greeted him at the desk inside. The oldest of the four blonde, beautiful Hadley women, she'd stuck around town like her sisters. "Well, be still my heart. Dash Springer?" She folded her fingers under her chin and flashed him a toothpaste smile. "*This* is a surprise."

"Hey, Eva." Dash scribbled his name on the visitors' log and kept his eyes averted. They'd slept together once a long time ago, before he left town. He rarely saw her these days.

"What brings you here?"

"Just dropping off some things for Sienna Cruz's class."

Eva's carefully plucked brows lifted. "Really? I didn't know...she didn't mention anything to me. Usually visitors have to be announced ahead of time."

He wondered how true that was, or if Eva was just making up some random rule. "She doesn't know I'm coming." He stopped. That sounded idiotic. "I mean, she doesn't know I'd be here today."

Eva winked. "Guess I don't have to ask you for ID."

"Hope not." There had to be some advantage to living in a small town.

"She's in Room Eighteen. Down the center hall, all the way to the end on the right."

"Thanks. I'll drive around." He headed back outside, trotted to his truck and pulled around to the school's back entrance. He positioned

the truck as close to the building as he could get it and then knocked on the small door marked *Custodial*.

A moment later, Darryl Cobalt's wrinkled face peered out. Darryl lived down the road from Dash and had worked at the school as long as Dash could remember. The old man beamed and pushed open the door. "Dashie!! What on earth are you doing sneaking around the back of my school?"

"Special delivery for a friend." He gestured at his truck. "Do you think you could help me? It's for Sienna Cruz's class."

Darryl's smile widened. "Of course. She'll be thrilled." The custodian produced a master key and unlocked the double doors that faced the playground while Dash hauled a brand new table from the back of his truck. Only three feet off the ground and painted with cartoon figures, it looked like something that might work for a class of eight-year-olds. He'd found it at a discount furniture shop yesterday, nearly an hour away.

Did all elementary schools smell the same? Like paint and pizza and faint antiseptic? A cool sweat settled on his skin as he walked inside, and it took a few moments before he could make out the numbers on the doors. Room Eighteen. There. He peeked through the window. Sienna sat in a rocking chair with one boy on her lap and three others sitting in front of her. She wore her hair down over a navy sweater and jeans. Silver hoops in her ears matched a long silver necklace that hung almost to her lap. The boys stared at her, rapt, as she turned the pages of a brightly illustrated book.

He knocked. One boy jumped up, looked through the window at Dash, and began talking rapid fire to Sienna. She frowned, then followed his gaze to the door. When she saw Dash standing in the hall, her mouth fell open.

"Surprise," he said when she opened the door.

“Wow. Hello. I’d say it is.” Her cheeks turned pink.

“I brought you a couple things. After the other night, when you said you didn’t have much, I thought...”

Her gaze lit on the table. “Oh, Dash. You really, really shouldn’t have.”

“Wasn’t any big deal.”

One of the boys cautiously approached, one hand on Sienna’s leg as if for reassurance. “You’re Mr. Springer. I met you once when my daddy took me to your gym.”

Dash yanked at his collar. The kid didn’t look familiar, but that didn’t mean much. “Ah, yes, I am. Hi there.”

Four pairs of curious eyes settled on him. The boy who’d first pointed out Dash stepped forward and stuck out his right hand. “My name is Caleb Arthur Williams. It’s very nice to meet you.” He spoke in clipped tones and looked at Dash’s belt.

Dash took his hand and shook it. “It’s very nice to meet you too, Caleb.”

Sienna was still looking at the table. “This is amazing. So cute.” She traced the cartoon figures. “I can’t believe you got this for us.”

Her pleasure struck a nerve deep inside him. “That’s what friends are for, right?” Without waiting for her response, he returned to his truck. The next gift took him two trips. When he was done, five brightly colored bean bag chairs sat on the floor of the classroom. Within minutes, the twins had plopped themselves down on two of them.

Sienna kept staring from him to the kids to the gifts and back again. She hadn’t stopped smiling. “And bean bag chairs? I don’t even know what to say.”

She didn’t have to say anything at all. The light in her eyes warmed Dash from head to toe. He couldn’t remember the last time

a woman had looked at him like that outside of a bedroom.

“Thank you,” she said, and pressed his arm. “It’s beyond kind.”

“You’re welcome.” He wanted to say more but couldn’t find the words.

“Would you like to stay?” she asked. “We’re just doing our afternoon read-along.”

Caleb looked over in alarm. “Miss Cruz,” he said, “we don’t do read-along with anyone else. No strangers.”

“You just met Mr. Springer,” Sienna said. Her gaze never left Dash’s face. “He isn’t a stranger.”

“I can’t,” Dash said. Read out loud? Even with a bunch of little kids, the idea terrified him. He didn’t know if she meant Dash would have to read or just listen, but either way he wasn’t sure he could handle the pressure of all those eyes looking at him. “I have to get back to the gym. But thanks.”

“Oh, okay.” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. His traitorous mind took full notice of the way they hugged her hips.

“Maybe another time,” he added. *Or never.* He wasn’t good with words. He mixed them up and reversed letters. Had a hard time sounding things out. He could do anything with his hands or hold a conversation with just about anyone. But read books? That was better left for someone else.

“We have Friday afternoons free,” she said. “Drop in any time after two. Honestly, it would be good for the kids to interact with someone besides me.”

He nodded noncommittally. He couldn’t picture himself in a school on a regular basis. Then again, if he were visiting Sienna, maybe he could. Maybe he could tell her about his reservations, and she wouldn’t make him read. “Nice seeing you,” he said, and pushed



open the door. “And nice meeting your kids. I hope everything comes in handy.”

“It will. Thank you again. Really. It’s more than you should have done.”

“Dash *Springer*?”

He turned at the unfamiliar voice in the hall and then wished he hadn’t. Harmony Donaldson, caked in a pound of makeup and grinning like a Cheshire Cat, stood with a gaggle of kids stretched out behind her. “What on earth are you doing here?” Her gaze moved from Dash to Sienna and back again.

“Just stopped in to say hello.”

“Well, hello.” The tips of Harmony’s ears turned pink, and she motioned to one of her students. “Brandon, you know where to go. Straight up the stairs and wait for me at the top.” The boy nodded and skipped down the hall with the other students following.

Surely Harmony couldn’t think he was here to see her. Yet the way she focused her gaze on his mouth, then his chest, and then his groin, he wasn’t sure. She’d stopped into the gym a half-dozen times when he first opened, always hanging around the juice bar and inviting him out for drinks. He never said yes. He thought she’d given up. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“You know, the offer still stands,” she said in a low voice. She took one step closer and gave him a look he couldn’t mistake. “No strings attached.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, well, okay,” he stammered.

She reached out and brushed his arm. Then she turned and followed her students, but not without one last wink in his direction.

Dash’s stomach turned. Harmony Donaldson was someone to watch out for. Word around town was that she’d faked a pregnancy

last year with a lawyer over in Silver Valley. The guy had almost popped the question before a phone call from the doctor's office set everyone straight.

He turned back to Room Eighteen, but Sienna had disappeared inside. He hoped she hadn't seen or heard the exchange, but she probably had. He looked through the window. She had rejoined her students on the rug, but she glanced up with a smile as he rapped on the glass and waved goodbye.

*"Thank you again,"* she mouthed over the twins' heads.

He gave her a thumbs-up, like a stupid kid, and then wished he could've thought of something clever to mouth through the glass in return.

*Friends. We're just friends.* Dash repeated the words all the way back to the gym, wishing for just an instant he hadn't screwed up his life so royally in the past that he could enjoy someone like Sienna in his life without knowing how it would all end.

CHAPTER  
THIRTEEN

**H**e brought me a table. And beanbag chairs.

Sienna couldn't stop staring at the furniture. "He's such a nice guy," she said aloud as she propped open the door in preparation for dismissal.

"Yes, he is," the custodian said as he wheeled a mop bucket past her in the opposite direction. "Course, I don't see Dashiell Springer dropping off a special delivery to anyone else at this school."

Before Sienna could answer, the old man turned the corner. *We're just friends.* If she said the reminder enough times, maybe she'd believe it. Still, it took a pretty solid friend to buy things out of his own pocket and deliver them here himself. The table and chairs might not have cost a lot, but the gesture itself? Priceless. She'd have to find a way to thank him. She kept one eye on the classroom and one on the hallway as her students packed for dismissal. In a few minutes, when the bell rang, the hall would fill with small bodies. Right now it echoed with silence. She took a deep breath and savored it.

"Miss Cruz, what is *that*?" Caleb joined her and pointed to something on the ground a few feet away.

“I’m not sure.” She bent over and realized it was a cell phone. An expensive one, the latest model, with a slick black case. When she pressed the home button at the bottom, a familiar background blinked up at her.

Springer Fitness, to be exact.

*Dash must have dropped it.* Her fingers closed around the phone, and her whole hand started tingling. This was ridiculous. She felt like a teenager with a crush on the most popular boy at school.

“Is it a cell phone?” Caleb asked.

“It is, yes.”

“Is it Mr. Springer’s cell phone?”

Man, that kid didn’t miss a thing.

“I think so.” She tucked it into her back pocket. “I’ll make sure to return it to him, okay?”

Caleb nodded and trotted back into the classroom. A moment later, the bell rang, and ten minutes after that, the students were gone for the day. Back in her classroom, she straightened up a few things before sinking into a chair and pulling out the phone again. *I shouldn’t.* But curiosity was too strong. He’d gotten two text messages since leaving it behind.

**U got an ad rep here tryin to catch u**

**Hey man been a while what’s goin on????**

She didn’t recognize either name, though she guessed the first, Hans, was probably the young guy who worked at the gym’s front desk.

There was also a calendar notification that read simply **Meeting w/ P.O. 5:30 pm**

Post office? Probably. Running a gym meant tons of correspondence. She couldn’t imagine the paperwork Dash had.

*I shouldn't be looking at this.* She tucked the phone into her purse. But of course, she couldn't call or text Dash and tell him she had it. She supposed she could call the gym, but it would be easier to just stop by and drop it off. *Sure. Or maybe you want to see him in person again.*

Two familiar voices floated through the air as Sienna packed up her things and closed the door behind her.

"We could go to Jimmy's tonight," the first voice said.

"Yeah, maybe."

"I bet Dash'll be there. He and Zane used to go every Friday night."

Sienna felt her face go fire-engine red. She whirled and tried to disappear inside her classroom, but the door had locked automatically, and she had no time to find her keys. Polly and Harmony turned the corner as she yanked on the knob in vain.

"Oh," Harmony said when she saw Sienna. The word was cool, her face even cooler. "Hello."

Polly didn't even look up, bent over her phone with her petite features drawn into a frown.

"Hi!" Sienna shuffled her feet. Would it be rude to run ahead of them down the hall? *Probably.* In a minute Harmony would say something about Dash's visit, and Sienna wasn't sure she should tell the truth or plead the fifth. She'd seen the way Harmony batted her false lashes at him. *I bet he wouldn't just be friends with her.*

But Harmony turned to her friend without another word to Sienna. "Pol, you're not even listening to me."

"Yes, I am." Polly typed something, bit her lip, typed again. The ding of a return message turned her cheeks red.

"Don't say that," Harmony said, reading over Polly's shoulder. "He'll get the wrong idea."

*He who?* Sienna was dying to ask.

“No, he won’t. And how do you know, anyway?” Polly finger-combed her hair from her face and typed something else.

“Everything okay?” Sienna asked, though clearly it wasn’t.

“It’s fine.” Harmony reached out and snatched Polly’s phone away. “Stop texting him,” she said in a low voice.

“Guy troubles?” Sienna asked, more to make conversation than anything else. Dash’s phone was burning a hole in her pocket. *If Harmony knew I had it, she’d probably wrestle me to the ground for it.*

“I’m trying to convince Polly to spend her time with a guy who makes a decent salary,” Harmony said. “Not someone who’s barely making ends meet.”

Polly flushed.

“A decent salary is nice,” Sienna agreed, “but it’s not everything. Besides, wouldn’t you want to make your own money? So you don’t have to rely on a guy to take care of you?”

They both looked at her with surprise. “I *want* a guy to take care of me,” Polly said. “I don’t want to have to worry about paying bills for the rest of my life. I want to have kids and take care of them.”

“Oh.” Sienna didn’t know what to say after that.

Thankfully, the principal rounded the corner at that moment. “Sienna? I’m glad I caught you. Do you have a minute?” The other two women scattered.

“Of course. What’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things...”

IT WAS ALMOST five o’clock when Sienna finally walked into the gym. She looked around for Dash, but the place was eerily quiet.

Two women walked on treadmills and a single guy lifted weights in the corner. Other than that, the place was deserted.

“Welcome to Springer Fitness.” A new, young employee greeted Sienna at the front desk. The girl looked all of sixteen with a figure that rivaled that of a lingerie model’s.

“Ah, hi.”

“Can I help you with something?” The girl studied her, as if guessing Sienna wasn’t a regular. She wore a tiny diamond stud in her nose and bright pink lipstick.

“Is Dash here?”

The girl tossed her ponytail and popped a piece of gum into her mouth. “Actually, he just left.”

“Oh.” Sienna fumbled with her purse. Somehow she didn’t feel like leaving Dash’s phone with a neophyte who looked like she’d jump into his bed at the snap of his fingers.

“Did you, like, want to leave a message or something?” The girl blew out a large pink bubble.

“No, I don’t think—”

“Hey, Sienna.” Hans came up behind her. “If you’re looking for Dash, he left early today.”

“Oh. Okay. I have his phone.”

The girl gave her a funny look.

“Oh, man,” Hans said. “That’s why he didn’t answer my messages. Just came in, worked out, and left like his house was on fire.”

“Should I leave it with you?”

Hans stuck his hands in his pockets. “You could, except then he won’t get it ‘til tomorrow.”

“Is he home? I could drop it off.” Was that a stupid suggestion? Would Dash think she was stalking him?

But Hans didn't seem to think so. "Maybe that'd be best. I'm here until closing. And that's not for a few more hours."

A funny feeling slipped through Sienna, as if she might be crossing an invisible line. So far they'd only spoken at the gym, the school, and the diner. Public places. Safe places. Knocking on Dash's front door felt like an invasion of privacy. But what were her options? Leave it here with blondie big-boobs?

"Okay, I'll do that," she decided. "Can you give me his address?"



CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

Dash spent a long time under the hot spray of the shower, savoring the warmth and replaying Sienna's smile. *She liked it. And she was surprised.* Her happiness had made Sunday's long drive over the mountain well worth it. He lathered up, taking his time, stretching his arms and knowing his triceps would be killing him tomorrow. He'd pushed himself during the afternoon's workout, which always felt good, but he'd pay for it later. He turned off the water in time to hear the pipes knocking.

*Damn.* Winter in Whispering Pines did nothing for old homes like this one. He toweled off, left his hair wet, and wrapped the towel around his waist as he hurried to the basement. *Can't let the pipes freeze.* He'd gotten oil, so they shouldn't be making noise, but his mom had let the place go in the last few years. Every time he turned around, something else needed fixing.

"Hello?"

Dash froze at the top of the basement stairs.

The knocking had stopped, but now he swore he could hear a voice calling his name. *I'm going crazy.* He retraced his steps through the living room. The sound came again, but not from the basement. This time it came from the front door.

“Dash?”

He almost jumped out of his skin when he saw her face at the living room window. *Sienna?* And here he stood half-naked. He couldn't decide whether to put on clothes or let her in.

“Hi!” She waved when she saw him, as if oblivious to the fact he was wearing nothing but a towel.

Well, he couldn't leave her standing out there in the freezing temperatures. Dash opened the door. Cold air rushed in, along with a blanket of snow. “Hey, Sienna. What are you doing here?” He gripped the towel and held it firmly in place. With his luck, it would hit the ground while she was standing six inches away from him.

She stepped inside and rubbed her arms. And then she did realize how she'd caught him. Her gaze slid down his torso and back up, and her cheeks turned bright pink. “Oh. I didn't—I am so, so sorry.”

“Hang on.” He hurried to his bedroom and dressed in under two minutes. Shorts, t-shirt, nothing else. He ran his palms over his wet hair. “Sorry,” he said when he returned to the living room. “You caught me right out of the shower.” As if she hadn't figured that out. He cracked his knuckles. “Ah, what can I do for you?”

She opened her purse. “I think this is yours.”

Hell, his phone? Where had he left it? No wonder he hadn't been bombarded with calls and texts the way he usually was. “Thanks. But where—”

“I think you dropped it in the hallway at school.”

He felt like a complete idiot. “And you brought it over? You didn't have to.”

She glanced around, and he saw the room, the whole house, through her eyes. Dark. Dingy. Threadbare. Without personality.

“Hans gave me your address. Hope that’s okay. I know what it’s like when I lose mine.”

“Somehow I find it hard to believe you ever lose anything.” Sienna Cruz was so put together, he felt like an oaf around her most of the time. “Well, thanks.” He took the phone and rocked back on his heels. An awkward silence filled the room.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said.

“Want a beer?” He crooked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen. “I don’t keep a whole lot of things stocked, but I can offer you that.”

“I’d love one.” She slipped off her coat and let it drape over the couch. “I’m sorry about your mom,” she said as he got two beers from the fridge and popped the tops. “I didn’t know she passed.”

He took a long pull and sat on the edge of the recliner. “Thanks. It was a tough few months.”

“I’ll bet. I can’t imagine what I’d do if I lost my mom. Or my dad.”

He let the bottle dangle one from one hand and wondered if he should start a fire, bring some kind of life and warmth to the room. He didn’t have anything else to offer her, no food, no wine, nothing classy at all.

“This is a nice place,” she said after a few minutes of silence.

He laughed. “Liar.”

“I’m serious. I love these mid-century homes. They’re all over Whispering Pines.” She took a few sips of her beer and stood up again. “I mean, obviously it’s a bachelor pad now.” She gave him a look over her shoulder as she peeked into the kitchen and down the hall. “But it has potential.”

“If you say so. It’s just a place for me to crash most nights.” He joined her at the end of the hallway and flipped on the light. “That was my mom’s sewing room,” he said as he pointed at the first room

on the left. "The other room's my bedroom, then the bathroom, and that's about it back here. I'm thinking about selling it," he added, and realized only at that moment that he actually was. "I can get an apartment closer to the gym. Cut down my commute time."

"Because it's so long now," she quipped. "What does it take you, a whole ten minutes to get to work?"

He chuckled. "Something like that. But you know what I mean." This place was too big, too lonely, too filled with memories.

"I get it." She touched the neck of her bottle to his. "Well, if you want some help sprucing it up before you put it on the market, let me know."

"Really?" He followed her back to the living room. "You'd do that?"

"Sure. I owe you after today's delivery." She took another sip of beer and then set down her bottle on a scarred end table.

"You don't owe me anything. I wanted to do it."

"I know." She pulled on her coat. "And I want to do this." She winked. "So let me."

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

It snowed for three straight days.

The storm came in from Canada, fierce and unforgiving, and blanketed Whispering Pines. Streets closed down. The schools closed down. Abandoned cars lined the sides of the road, all the way over Sunrise Mountain into Silver Valley. The Whispering Pines Motel put out a No Vacancy sign for the first time in its history as travelers from three surrounding states found themselves stranded. Finally the governor declared a state of emergency.

*No Unnecessary Travel*, read the bright orange banner across every local television station and social media site. *Emergency Vehicles Only*.

Not everyone listened, Sienna noticed. Plenty of locals still drove their snowmobiles and four wheelers up and down Main Street. She saw quite a few pickup trucks, too. Born and raised this far north, most of those who lived in Whispering Pines saw the storm as an inconvenience more than a reason to stay cooped up inside.

"We haven't had snow like this in years," Sienna told Max Wednesday night. She swung the iPad to face outside. "Look."

"I can't see anything."

“That’s my point. There has to be four feet of snow out there. And it’s still coming down.” She took a sip of wine. She hadn’t gotten out of her pajamas in two days, and while she’d enjoyed the unexpected vacation, she was beginning to feel a little claustrophobic. “Weather report says it’s supposed to stop tonight.”

“That’s good. How’s work?”

“I haven’t been there in two days, but otherwise it’s pretty good. I’m still getting used to everything. By the time I do, it’ll be June, but it’s still good experience.” She paused. “Did I tell you Dash Springer bought me some bean bag chairs and a table for the classroom?”

Max’s mouth fell open. “Um, no, you most certainly did not. When did *that* happen?”

“Just the other day.”

“So does that mean you’re sleeping with him?”

Sienna spilled her wine. “What? No. Of course not. Why would you ask me that?” She grabbed some tissues and mopped the floor. Her glass rolled around and disappeared under her chair.

“I don’t know. Because he’s gorgeous and obviously likes you.”

“We’re friends.”

“Sure you are. Friends don’t buy each other expensive furniture, Sienna.”

“I don’t think it was that expensive.”

“You know what I mean. It’s not like he bought you a cup of coffee.”

Sienna decided not to tell Max that he’d bought her a whole dinner the other night at Zeb’s. That would probably mean a whole lot more than coffee.

“Do you like him?”

“Of course.” *As a friend*, she meant to add, but heat spread across her cheeks.

“Oh, my God. You’re *blushing*.”

“No, I’m not. Or if I am, it’s only because I saw him half-naked.”

“*What?*”

“It’s not what you think. He left his phone at school. So I stopped by his house to drop it off. He’d just gotten out of the shower.” The memory flashed into her mind. Flat planes of muscle everywhere she could see. Damp skin. Intricate tattoos. A thin line of dark blond hair that trailed from his chest down to his—

“Oh, Sienna. And you didn’t jump him?”

“Max! What do you think? I’m not about to jump anyone.”

“I think the promise you made to Jason Kingsley happened a long time ago and shouldn’t be held against you since you’re not even dating him anymore.”

Sienna didn’t answer. Max was the only one she’d ever told about that night.

*Promise me we’ll wait*, Jason had said to her when she turned twenty-one. He’d given her a ruby ring and asked her to think about marrying him when they both finished college. *I want it to be special*.

So she had. It made sense, anyway. She’d seen too many of her friends get mistreated, hurt, dumped by guys right after they slept with them. Sienna had held her college roommate Misty’s hand the night Misty found out she was pregnant. She’d heard rumors of a woman at church who got herpes after her fiance cheated on her. Casual sex just seemed messy and risky and not anything Sienna wanted to get involved with.

But she had to admit, if she could try it without risk or consequence, Dash Springer would be the perfect guy.

“Sienna? You still there?” Max was tapping the screen. “Sometimes this thing freezes, and I swear—”

“I’m here.” She walked into the kitchen and started opening cupboards. “I just realized I’m down to bare bones. May have to go to the diner tonight.” Thankfully, Zeb’s was one of a handful of places that had stayed open throughout the storm. She’d seen plow trucks parked outside all at hours of the day and night, the drivers hurrying inside and emerging a few minutes later with giant cups of coffee and to-go containers.

“Be safe,” Max said. “Five months and counting! Can’t wait to see you!”

“I will. See you soon.” Sienna checked every cupboard and her fridge and came up with a can of tomato soup, some yogurt, and two apples. Definitely not enough to make any kind of nourishing dinner.

**How are you guys over there?** she texted her mother. **Snowed in?**

**Not too bad. Dash Springer has been by twice.**

Sienna almost dropped her phone. What did that mean? Before she could ask, another message flicked onto the screen.

**He’s been plowing out everyone over here. The Masons have used him for years. Your father’s back is still bad so I told him he COULD NOT SHOVEL!!**

*Huh. That’s good,* Sienna answered almost without thinking. She had no idea Dash did snow removal on the side. Then again, what *did* she know about him? Here she’d been treating the storm like a holiday, sleeping in and watching reality TV, drinking wine and talking to Max, while he’d been driving around town clearing snow.

He had to be exhausted. Probably starving, too. She’d gotten a peek inside his refrigerator the other night, and it held even less than hers did. Sudden inspiration struck her. It might not cost her as much as a load of furniture, but she bet she could drop off a home cooked meal.



She looked outside. The snow had died down, the howling wind had quieted, and she could almost see the other side of the street. Now would be as good a time as any to brave the elements. The grocery store most people used was over in Silver Valley, but the local Grab 'n Go was less than a half-mile away. She picked up her phone again.

**Does Dad have chains on the pickup?**

**Of course,** her mother answered. **Why?**



IT WAS after nine when Dash finally finished clearing the last driveways on Sycamore Lane. He hadn't seen a storm like this one since coming back from California, and truth be told, it almost made him miss the sunshine and palm trees.

Almost.

He yawned as he pulled down his road. Seventeen driveways plowed in the last forty-eight hours, most of them twice. Over a grand in his glove box, too. Not too shabby for a couple days' worth of work. He parked and rolled his neck from side to side. The snow had pretty much stopped by now, and he'd be back to his regular schedule at the gym tomorrow. Right now all he wanted was a hot shower and about ten hours of shut-eye.

He almost tripped over the brown paper bag on his steps. "What the—" He looked around, but every house on the block was closed up tight. He'd forgotten to leave his own front light on, but he could see the faint outline of footsteps that had been there before him. Pranksters? A mail order dropped off at the wrong address? Could be anything inside the bag. He reached down and peered inside.

Food. Four or five containers, from the looks of it. As if on command, his stomach growled. He'd survived on coffee and cold sandwiches most of yesterday and today, but whatever was inside the bag smelled a hell of a lot better than that. He grabbed it and carried it inside, where he flipped on the kitchen light and set the bag on the counter.

*Thought you might be hungry,* read the handwritten note on top.  
—*Sienna*

“Well, I’ll be damned.” He shrugged off his heavy coat and let it fall to the floor, where it dribbled half-melted snow and ice across the linoleum. He’d tracked in mud and snow on his boots too, but he didn’t care. The scent of home-cooked food hadn’t filled this kitchen in ages. He opened the lid of the first container and found some kind of rice that smelled like heaven on earth. Still warm, too. He yanked open a drawer, grabbed a fork and swallowed three mouthfuls almost without chewing. His eyes closed in bliss. *I could die right now and be completely happy.* He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten anything so good. With great effort, he set the rice aside and looked through the other containers. Chicken cutlets, beef with vegetables, garlic bread dripping with butter, and two enormous brownies wrapped tightly in plastic wrap.

Dash sat down at the kitchen table and stared. No one had ever done anything like this for him. Well, his mother, of course, but she hadn’t had the strength or the appetite to cook at the end. And she’d never brought him food at work, neatly packaged with a note on top. Tears welled in his eyes, and he rubbed his face to keep them from falling. His heart felt over-full.

With fingers still stiff from the cold, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

**Thanks for the food. U shouldn't have.**

Sienna's response came less than a minute later. **It's the least I could do.**

**It's amazing.**

**Did u eat it all already?**

He grinned and took the lid off the beef and vegetables. **Not yet.**

**Good. Enjoy.**

He popped the top off a beer and settled himself at the table. He waited to see if she'd text again. The bubbles on his screen popped up and then disappeared, popped up and disappeared. He finished the beef and vegetables and reached for a piece of chicken.

**You survive the storm?** he finally texted.

She sent a thumbs-up in return. **My mom helped with the food,** she added. **Thanks for taking care of them.**

Her parents had paid him more than he'd asked and tipped him on top of that, so Dash figured he should be the one saying thank you. He sent his own thumbs-up in response, followed by a line of snowflakes and a shovel.

**Don't think I'll be in tomorrow for my 4:30 session.**

He stopped eating. **We'll be open.**

**Yeah but I missed 2 days of school. I'll have a ton of work to make up.**

He tried not to care. He'd have more than enough work of his own to do, bills and cleaning and clients who hadn't made it in at all this week. But disappointment surged through him all the same. **Sure, OK.**

**But u should stop by Fri afternoon & say hi. We'd love to see u.**

Dash took a huge bite of brownie. For read-along time? Everything inside him wanted to say no. Then he looked at the food.

Looked at Sienna's note. Thought about her standing in his hallway, smiling at him over a beer and filling the house with more light and life than it had seen in months.

**Wouldn't miss it,** he finally typed. It wasn't a lie. He'd be counting the hours.

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

Sienna looked at the clock a half-dozen times on Friday afternoon. She'd wanted to surprise Dash at the gym yesterday, but then the principal called an emergency staff meeting, and she'd been stuck at work until almost five. Now she wondered if he'd take her up on her offer to visit. Maybe he'd forgotten. Or maybe he had no interest. He'd seemed pleased enough when he texted her Wednesday night, though. She chewed at a fingernail and tried to put him from her mind. He probably had a thousand things to do. She could only imagine the hit a small business owner took when a storm shut down the entire town.

"Miss Cruz?" Caleb broke into her thoughts. "It's two minutes past read-along time."

"Ah, yes, it is," she said with yet another glance at the clock. "Thank you, Caleb." She looked around the room. If Dash was coming, he'd have to join them mid-story. "Dawn, would you like to choose today's book?"

Dawn stared at her from a bean bag chair that she'd pulled into the far corner of the room. She blinked a few times, then stood and walked to the bookcase. Her clothes, beautiful and impeccable as always, belied the terrified child trapped inside the body.

*Just talk to me*, Sienna wanted to say. *I can't read your mind*. But the girl remained silent no matter what strategies Sienna tried.

Dawn stood for a long minute in front of the bookcase and then chose *Where Are My Shoes?* and *Bears in Winter*. She turned and held them out.

"Those are perfect," Sienna said. She settled herself in the rocker with Silas on her lap and began to read. Each time someone passed her door, she looked up. It was only when they'd finished both books and Caleb announced they had ten minutes to pack up and walk to the buses that she realized Dash wasn't coming. Well, what did she expect? Dropping off classroom supplies was one thing. Spending time with her and her students was something else altogether.

He clearly had things to take care of. So did she. In fact, tonight would be the perfect night to start sorting through her things and deciding what to put in storage when she went abroad. July would be here before she knew it. Then her phone rang, and Sienna forgot about everything except her mother's panicked voice on the other end of the line.

"Ma? What's wrong?"

"Your brother's just been suspended for fighting."



AT ONE THIRTY, Dash started looking at the clock. *I could stop in for the last hour of school. Sienna invited me. Said it would be good for the kids*. He wasn't thrilled about having to read, if she asked him to. But part of him wanted to see if the kids liked the bean bag chairs. He also had to return her plastic food containers, long since emptied out and scrubbed clean. "I'm going out around two," he told Hans.

"Okay." The kid texted with a mad blur of his thumbs.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Liesel. Met her last month.” Hans grinned and finally put his phone down. “She’s amazing, man. So hot. So funny.”

That could be a good combination, but Dash could’ve told Hans that women always seemed hot and funny when you first met them. Let them into your life, add them to your bank account, share some of your deepest fears, and see what happened then.

“Get everything done here, and then you can text.” Dash pointed to the trash that needed to go out, sitting next to a shovel. “Clean up the back steps when you go out, would you?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

“You see those kids out back again, let me know,” Dash added.

Hans nodded and tossed the trash bags over his shoulder. “You got a visitor,” he said as he left.

Dash turned in time to see Ella Ericksen strut inside. Everyone in town knew her. Half the town had slept with her. She probably could’ve been a model if she’d ever left Whispering Pines, but to Dash’s knowledge she hadn’t. Today, despite the slick sidewalks and the mud and slush everywhere in town, she wore stiletto heels and a long white coat. “Hey, handsome.”

“Hey, yourself. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” Last time he’d checked, Ella worked long hours at the upscale hair salon on Park Place Run.

She laughed and tossed her hair. “Who are you, my father?” She peeled off her red leather gloves, finger by finger. “I’m on lunch break.”

“Oh.” He looked over his shoulder, willing Hans to return.

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to seduce you.” Ella narrowed her gaze. “Unless you want me to.”

“I’m sure there are more worthy guys.” Dash checked the time. One forty-five.

She sighed and tossed her hair again. “I just wanted to see if I could leave these here.” She handed him a handful of red and white flyers with the words *Pet Me! Love Me! Take Me Home!* at the top. For a minute he thought they were advertising some kind of sex show or porn shop. *Really, Ella? The gym is PG-rated.* Then he saw the red hearts on both sides of the paper and photos of dogs and cats with pleading eyes along the bottom.

“What is this?”

“You know my sister works at Whispering Pines Paws, right?”

Dash wasn’t even sure what that was, but it didn’t sound like a sex show or a porn shop. He nodded and played along. “Sure.”

“They’re having a fundraiser next weekend. Raising money for a new kennel or something.”

*Ah. The animal shelter.* Now the reference to petting made more sense.

Ella wrinkled her nose. “It’s dinner and dancing and a silent auction over at Villa Amore in Silver Valley.”

“That’s a fancy place.”

“No kidding. Anyway, they’re a little low on donations this year, so I’m making the rounds to ask local places if they want to give something for the auction. Maybe a gift certificate or a gym membership?”

“Oh. Sure.” That was a no-brainer—a tax write-off plus free advertising. “Do I have to come to the dinner?”

“Well, you’re invited, obviously.” She cocked her head. “I’m sure I could find you a date if you wanted to go.”

“Not sure I can make it,” he said without looking at the date on the flyer. Dash Springer didn’t do glam events, even for a good



cause. He pulled out a gift certificate and scribbled a dollar amount on it. "But here you go. And I'll leave the flyers on the desk."

"Thanks. I know Becca will appreciate it. If you change your mind about going, just let her know." She gave him a long look. "It might be good for business to make an appearance. Just saying."

"Yeah, okay." She was probably right, but the thought of wearing a tie and making small talk with people he barely knew was hardly Dash's idea of a good time.

"Thanks again, handsome." She turned to go and almost collided with a broad-shouldered guy who came barreling through the front door. "Oh, sorry," she said, but the guy didn't even slow down.

Dash almost didn't recognize him in the bulky winter coat and red watch cap. He wished a second later he hadn't, or that he'd left for the elementary school ten minutes earlier. Because the last person in the world he wanted to run into, the last person he thought would ever return to Whispering Pines, stood on the other side of the desk with a crooked grin.

"Hey, Dash. Long time no see."

Bile rose in the back of Dash's throat, and he had to fight to keep his hands at his sides. *Not long enough.* The last time he'd looked Al Halloran in the eye, the two of them had been on their way to serving time in the Los Angeles county jail.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

“**W**hat the hell are you doing here?”

Al didn't answer. Instead he unzipped his coat like he was planning to stay.

Dash tried again. “When did you get back?”

“Last night.” Al pulled off his watch cap. Gray peppered his dark, close-cut hair. He'd served fifteen months to Dash's eight, and the time had definitely worn him down. Wrinkles cut into the corners beside his eyes, and he needed a shave. Stubble covered his chin and throat.

Dash glanced over his shoulder. Most people in town probably remembered Al. His younger brother had moved away years ago, but his dad, Doc Halloran, had worked as Whispering Pines's family doctor for decades. Mrs. Halloran had split when the boys were still in grade school.

“What do you want?”

Al grinned, and Dash could see a missing eye tooth. Prison fight? Probably. “Looking for a job. Thought maybe you could help me out.”

*Over my dead body.* “Why don't you ask your father?”

“He disowned me years ago.”

“Can you blame him? Stealing prescriptions wasn’t exactly the way to get on his good side.”

Al’s breath hitched, and for a minute Dash thought he might throw a punch. Then he laughed. “Hell, guess you’re right.” He looked over Dash’s shoulder. “I heard you opened a gym. Had no idea it was this fancy.”

“It’s not.”

“Fancier than what I got going on.”

“Getting off the drugs would help.”

The front door opened, and two middle-aged moms walked inside. “Hi, Dash.”

“Hi, Beth, Sherry. Have a good workout.”

“We will.”

Al waited until they’d checked in at the desk and walked toward the locker room before speaking again. “You can get yourself some tail here anytime you want, huh? Good plan.”

Dash cracked his knuckles and didn’t bother with a response. “I gotta get back to work. If there’s nothing else—” The clock on the wall read a quarter past two. So much for visiting Sienna’s class.

“Do people here know?” Al asked.

“About L.A.?” Dash shook his head. “I don’t think so. Like to keep it that way.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice, “I don’t need you running your mouth. Telling people isn’t gonna get you a job, either.” His arms tightened. He had twenty pounds of muscle and three inches on Al. If the guy knew what was good for him, he’d turn around and leave. Leave Springer Fitness, leave Whispering Pines, leave the whole damn country.

Except felons couldn’t cross international boundaries.

Al twisted his hat in his hands. “Don’t worry. I won’t blow your secret. You think I want people here knowing what we did?”

Dash's jaw clenched. *Don't use the word we. The only thing I did was try to get back what was mine.*

"Hey, I just stopped in to say hello," Al said, "and ask if you knew of anyone hiring."

"I'm sure you can find a construction job when the weather warms up."

"Yeah, maybe." Al's gaze moved past Dash again, taking in the gym full of equipment, the locker rooms, the sleek wooden desk, and the smoothie bar behind it. "Keep me in mind."

Dash had no intention of doing anything of the kind. "Sure." He picked up a pen and motioned at the door. "See you around."



SIENNA COULD CUT the tension with a knife the minute she stepped inside her parents' house. "Ma? Dad?"

There was a long pause. Then her mother emerged from the dining room. "We're in here. Talking to your brother. Trying to get some answers." She spoke in short, clipped sentences and looked as though she'd been crying.

Sienna kicked off her boots and hung up her coat. She followed her mother into the dining room. As usual, the table was piled high with food. Her father sat at one end of the table. Her brother sat in the middle. Both stared at their plates. No one said a word.

"What's going on?" She took her customary seat across from her brother. He sported a black eye, a serious glower and three days' worth of beard growth. "What happened at school?"

"Why don't you ask your brother?" her father said. He dug into the bowl of potatoes with such vengeance, Sienna was afraid he might shatter the bottom of it.

She tried to catch Louie's eye, but he stared stubbornly at his fork and knife. "Okay, I give up." She helped herself to a slice of roast beef and a spoonful of green beans. "Why were you fighting? *Who* were you fighting?"

"Jack and Carlos," Ma said, her voice trembling with anger.

"His best friends?"

"I have no idea why or what happened. He won't say a thing. I've asked and asked. All I know is that I got a call in the middle of the afternoon saying the three of them were fighting in the bathroom." Ma threw up both hands. A fork went flying. "I can't get an answer beyond that. Five days' automatic suspension for all of them. *Five days.*"

"Lou?"

"Leave it alone," he muttered. "It's not a big deal." He looked up, his cheeks bright red. "Kids get suspended all the time. It's just stupid school policy. We weren't even fighting. We were just horsing around."

Her father slammed down his fork. "People in *this* house do *not* get suspended all the time. Or horse around to the extent that I get a phone call about it."

"Oh, I forgot. Right. It's just me, then. Miss Goody-Goody never did one single thing wrong in her whole life."

"Louie!" Ma gasped. "Don't talk about your sister that way."

"It's fine, Ma." Sienna tried to read her brother's face but couldn't. He wasn't a bad kid. And he was right—the school's no-tolerance policy meant sometimes kids did get detention or suspension for little things. Not like fighting was a little thing. But still. Something must have set him off today.

"It isn't fine. Apologize right now."

"Ma—" Sienna began, but her mother was on the warpath.

“Whatever,” Louie muttered.

“Whatever. Is. Not. An. Apology.” Ma drew herself up to her full five feet of height. “No cell phone, no computer, and no leaving the house for the next five days. Consider yourself under house arrest, mister. And when the suspension is over, I’m driving you to school every day. There *and* back.”

At that, Louie shoved back his chair and marched from the room. A moment later, his bedroom door slammed so hard, it rang through the house.

“I don’t know what’s happened to him the last few months.” Ma pushed away her plate.

“He turned sixteen,” Sienna said. She remembered being that age. Restless in her own skin, edgy, wanting to stay a kid, wanting to grow up, feeling like she had to act a certain way as adulthood approached. “I kind of believe him when he said he was horsing around. I mean, this is Jack and Carlos we’re talking about. They’ve been best friends since preschool. Maybe it was something small that got blown out of proportion.”

Her father didn’t say anything, just shook his head. She hated the pain on his face, the look of disappointment, as if he’d personally let down the high school principal. A moment later he got up and walked out. Sienna tried to eat, but she’d lost her appetite. Even her mother’s roast beef and mashed potatoes tasted like sawdust in her mouth.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out and set it on the table. Normally her mother didn’t allow phones during dinner, but this didn’t feel like a normal Friday night dinner.

**Sorry I missed seeing u today.**

Her cheeks warmed at Dash’s text message. **It’s OK.**

**Something came up.**

**No worries.**

“Is that Dash?” Ma asked.

Sienna looked up to see her mother peering curiously at the phone. She slid it off the table and back into her pocket. “Yeah. He was gonna stop by and see the kids this afternoon.”

“That’s nice.” Her mother took one look at the table and jumped to her feet. “I’m going to pack some of this up. There’s too much here, and none of us have much of an appetite tonight. Take it over to him, would you?”

“To Dash? I don’t think—”

“Sienna. That poor man lives alone. You said yourself he doesn’t have much of anything there. The least we can do is share some home-cooked food with him.” She looked around and tapped one finger to her chin. “You know what, I have that extra set of blankets and towels I’ve been meaning to wrap as a gift. Take those too.”

“I don’t think he really needs—” Sienna stopped. Actually, she had no idea what Dash needed. That little house on the opposite side of town was bleak at best. A domestic touch might help, whether he stayed there or decided to sell it. She *had* promised to help him spruce it up. “Okay. I will.” One thing she’d learned long ago, there was no sense in arguing with her mother. “Let me help you pack everything up.”

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

**D**ash dropped onto the couch, a beer dangling from one hand. He still couldn't believe Al Halloran had showed up. Out of prison. Here in Whispering Pines. His mouth held a bitter aftertaste, a mix of remorse and regret and downright anger, too. He'd come home to escape his life out west and every reminder of it. California was three thousand miles away. He kept in touch with no one out there. He hadn't thought his past would catch up with him, but then again, why would he blame Al for coming home and thinking the same?

He closed his eyes and let his head rest on the back of the couch. He'd brought home food from the diner, but it was probably cold by now, and he didn't feel like heating it up. Didn't feel like doing anything except getting rip-roaring drunk. He tipped the bottle and emptied the rest of the beer down his throat. He had four left in the fridge, which would probably be just enough to carry him into dreamland. He'd deal with Al tomorrow. Or the next day. Or never.

Headlights swept across the front window and stopped. He sat up. Here at the end of the road, anyone who pulled up to his house was either lost or turning around. He waited for the lights to swing



toward town, but inside they turned off. A moment later, someone knocked at his front door.

Dash wiped his mouth and set the empty bottle on the floor. He waited, just in case it was a mistake, but the knock came again. Then a familiar voice. “Dash?”

Just like that, his bad mood vanished. He jumped up and smoothed two hands down his wrinkled t-shirt. He’d sent that text as an apology; he’d never expected Sienna to actually come over. Yet here she stood on his doorstep, loaded down with two giant shopping bags.

“Hope this isn’t a bad time.”

He stared, trying to make sense of her and the bags. “Not at all. Come on in.” He took one bag from her. “Can I ask...”

“Long story.” She walked into the kitchen and set the other bag on the table. “Well, actually it’s not. My brother got into trouble at school, no one felt like eating tonight, so my mom packed this all up and said I should bring it over.” She started unloading the bag, and just like the other night, delicious aromas hit him fast and hard. Garlic. Tomato. Butter and spices.

Dash’s mouth started watering. “You’re kidding. You shouldn’t have. *She* shouldn’t have.”

Sienna lifted out the last container and set it on the table. “You don’t understand. My mom cooks. That’s what she loves to do. Food going to waste is worse than death in her mind.” She looked at the bag he still held. “And that’s just some extra blankets and towels she had lying around.” Her cheeks flashed red. “I hope you’re not offended. I mean, I know you have blankets and towels. She just always has extras that she saves for gifts. And she was in a *mood* tonight, so she was going through the house like a whirling dervish.”

“What happened with your brother?”

Sienna shrugged. "He wouldn't say. Got suspended for fighting, that's all we know." She stopped moving long enough to lean against the counter. "Kids fight, right?"

"Sure." Especially kids in small towns. He thought briefly of himself at that age, and of the knot of teens hanging out in his back parking lot. There wasn't a whole lot to do in Whispering Pines. Hormones and emotions ran high sometimes.

"My parents are so upset, though. They're treating it like a personal insult."

"That's what parents do. Right? They think we're extensions of them." He opened the fridge and grabbed two beers. Popped the tops and handed her one. His mom had acted the same way when he told her what he'd done in California.

*Dashiell Springer. After everything I taught you, this is where you end up?*

He could still hear her disappointment across the phone line. He drank long and hard, a few generous swallows until he couldn't hear it anymore.

"Anyway, here's to the weekend." Sienna touched the neck of her bottle to his. "Hope you don't mind some company."

"Naw. It's a nice surprise." He dug out some plates and silverware and scraped back a chair for her to sit on.

For a few minutes they didn't say anything, just ate in silence. The tension of the day eased from his neck and shoulders, and when the dishes were bare, he pushed back his plate and sighed. "Your mom sure knows how to cook."

Sienna smiled. "Yeah, she does." She finished her beer.

"Want another?"

"Sure."

They were the last two he had, but he didn't mind sharing. The thought of drinking himself into oblivion had lost its appeal. "Let me make a fire. Cheers the place up."

"Okay. I'll wash the dishes." She collected the empty ones and piled them in the sink. "Do you have...um..."

"Detergent? Maybe. Try under the sink?" He couldn't remember the last time he'd washed a dish. Takeout containers and paper plates were the norm and went into the trash. "I think there might be a pack of sponges down there too." He walked into the living room, embarrassed again about the place he called home.

He got to work setting up kindling and lighting old newspapers. At least he could do this. The fire caught, grew, and threw shadows on the walls. He gathered some dirty clothes that lay on the couch and carried them into his bedroom. From the kitchen came the sound of running water and clanking dishes, and for just a moment, memory swept over him. Once, a long time ago, those same sounds had filled the house. He'd been a kid. And he'd been happy.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there in the dark.

"Dash?"

He jumped.

"Sorry. I was just looking for the bathroom." He pointed across the hall. "Excuse the mess."

She flipped on the light. "Please. I lived in a coed dorm at college. You haven't seen a mess until you're sharing a bathroom with a bunch of drunk frat brothers at three a.m."

Dash tried to imagine that but couldn't. Sienna Cruz dodging vomit and horny grabs from nineteen year-olds? No way. It was easier to picture her sitting next to Jason Kingsley in the front pew at church.

The fire had taken hold and transformed the living room into something almost cozy and habitable. He pulled up a chair, belly full, mind quiet. He sipped at his beer with no real rush to finish it. Even knowing that Al Halloran was back in town couldn't dim his mood anymore. He thought again about Sienna sharing a dorm and bathroom with a bunch of teenage guys. Talk about hormones and emotion. He'd heard about college, the way everyone swapped partners and binge drank but still dragged themselves to class so they could graduate with honors that took them to places like Paris and London.

He and Sienna couldn't have come from more different worlds if they'd tried.

"Hey, there." She joined him in the living room and sat on the couch, kicked off her shoes and curled her feet beneath her. "This is nice." She looked at the fieldstone fireplace. "That's beautiful. Looks handmade."

"Probably is." He didn't know. The house had been built long before him.

"How's the gym? You get caught up after being closed for two days?"

"Pretty much." He stretched and stuck one arm behind his head. Shadows played on the ceiling, illuminating the red and black dragon tattoo that began on his shoulder and twisted down to his elbow.

"Tell me about that one," she said, pointing to it.

He took another long swallow and thought back. *Almost twelve years now.* "I was eighteen. First one I got when I made it to California. Hurt like hell." "Does it mean something special?"

"Nah. I just liked the design." He turned his arm in the moonlight, and the body of the dragon seemed to grow on his biceps.

“What about that one?” She pointed to his other arm. A sunburst covered his shoulder and most of his biceps. Small black footsteps walked away from it, down to his wrist.

“I was twenty-three.” He tried to ignore the memory of Edie picking it out, just a week or two after they’d met. “It’s a reminder to keep the sun at my back. Keep looking ahead.”

Sienna nodded. He could feel her wanting to ask about the others. “No tattoos for you?” he said before she could.

She hesitated. “They’re so permanent. I think I’d choose the wrong one, and five or ten years later, I wouldn’t like it anymore.”

“There’s always that possibility.”

She took a sip of her beer and stared into the fire. “What happened out in California? If you don’t mind my asking.”

He minded. He minded so much it hurt, because if he told her the truth, she’d look at him differently. Once people knew you had a record, they always did. He rubbed his nose and watched the pattern of the light on the ceiling. “I made some bad decisions,” he finally said.

“How long were you there?”

“Eleven years. Give or take.”

“Did you like it?”

“Sometimes.”

“I bet your mom was glad when you came back.”

“She was.” *Wish I’d done it a lot sooner.* He wished a lot of things.

“She ever go out and visit you?”

Once, the month after he went to prison. He did his best not to think about her drawn, white face looking at him under the supervision of an armed guard. “Nope. She’s not really a traveler.” He finished his beer and set the bottle on the floor. “Tell me about

you,” he said. “I mean, I know you were, what? Three years behind me in school?”

“Four. And I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t have known I existed even if we were closer.”

“Why’s that?”

“Aw, come on. You and I ran in different crowds back then.”

She had a point there. “Can’t say I spent a lot of time in school, to be honest.” And here he was sitting next to a schoolteacher. The irony wasn’t lost on him.

“See? And I loved school.” She made a face. “Well, the classes and my teachers, anyway. The other kids, not so much.”

“Why not?”

“I was a nerd.” She shrugged and lifted both palms. “*Am* a nerd.”

“No, you aren’t.”

A funny look passed over her face, quick as lightning. He tried to read it but failed. “Let me guess,” she said. “You had tons of friends and a different girlfriend every other week.”

“Not tons. And not every other week.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“You used to eat in the library,” he said suddenly. “I do remember that. My buddies and I sat on the wall outside that big picture window.” *When we were cutting class*, he almost added. And smoking weed. And telling lies about which cheerleaders they’d slept with over the weekend. A couple times he’d looked inside to see a dark-eyed, dark-haired girl sitting at a table full of books, eating a sandwich and tracing the words on the page. *Huh*. Funny to think that now, that girl was sitting in his living room, tracing the pattern of the cushions on his couch.

“You knew where the library was?” she said in a teasing voice.

“Sure. Someone told me.”

They both laughed. Yeah, he'd had a good time in high school, at least until he dropped out. Nothing had mattered too much, and no one ever had stabbed him in the back.

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out to see an unfamiliar number. "Sorry, Let me get this." He put it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hey there, handsome," a female voice purred into the line.

"Ah, hello?"

The voice gave a little huff of exasperation. "Dash, it's Ella. Ericksen."

He pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it. How had she gotten his number? "Hey."

"Found a date for you."

He glanced at Sienna and lowered his voice. "What are you talking about?"

"For the fundraiser at Villa Amore."

"I didn't say I was—"

"You know Clarice Pontice?"

He searched his memory. "Nope." "She's on the board of directors of the Silver Valley Medical Center. And the library. And she owns half the rental properties in town." Ella clicked her tongue. "C'mon, Dash. You've heard of the Pontices of Silver Valley."

"Oh. Sure." The old-money family had settled half of Silver Valley, the next town over. He'd never met any of them, though. Wouldn't know what to say if he did.

"She was in the salon this afternoon. She's single. And *very* interested in getting to know you better. She's the biggest donor of the event." There was no mistaking the syrupy suggestion in Ella's voice. *Take a millionaire to the dance and you might get something out of it.*

“Thanks, but I already have someone in mind,” he said without thinking.

“Oh. Really? Well, your loss, then,” Ella said brightly, and hung up before he could say goodbye.

“Dare I ask what that was all about?” Sienna said as she finished her beer.

Dash grunted and ran one hand over his hair. “I made a donation to a fundraiser over in Silver Valley next weekend. There’s a dinner and a dance. And donors are kind of expected to show up.”

“I’m guessing that’s not really your thing?”

“Not in the least.” He paused for a second and hoped she wouldn’t laugh at him for asking. “You want to go and keep me company?”

She didn’t answer at first, and he wondered if he’d crossed a line. She fussed with a loose thread in her jeans and tucked her hair behind one ear. Finally she looked at him and smiled, and everything else in his world went away. “I’d love to.”



CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

Though she thought about it all weekend, Sienna tried not to read too much into Dash's invitation. Obviously he didn't want to go to the fundraiser. They'd probably stay a couple hours at most, clutching watered-down drinks and making small talk with people neither of them knew well. Still, the last time she'd dressed up was for her senior formal in college. She couldn't wait to put up her hair and do something more with her makeup than mascara and lip gloss on her way out the door.

Maybe she could also make a little progress in crossing off one particular item on her to-do list. Going to a dinner and a dance together might turn into something more, right? Something in the bedroom. The thought sent her nerves into overdrive.

"New technique today," he told her Tuesday afternoon. They hadn't trained in over a week, and she felt rusty and slow on her feet. They practiced the moves she already knew, but she kept stumbling and making careless mistakes, until finally he stopped her.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know." She looked at her hands. "I think I'm a little preoccupied. It's been a while since anyone's asked me on a date."

“A date?” His brows lifted. “Oh. Is this about the fundraiser?” His voice went gruff. “Didn’t mean to put you on the spot. We can cancel if you want.”

*That’s the last thing I want.* She wiped her hands on her shorts and took a long drink of water. “No, I want to go.”

“Ella dropped off the tickets this morning,” he said. “Do you want yours?”

“Does that mean I’m meeting you there?” Her hopes dropped. Maybe he really did see her as a friend and nothing more. Usually people drove to these things together, didn’t they?

“No, I didn’t mean...that would be...I’ll drive you.” He turned red. “Take you there. Pick you up. Whatever.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I sound like an idiot, don’t I?”

*You sound like I feel,* she thought. *Like we’re negotiating this just-be-friends thing without a clue of what we’re doing.* “What time does it start?”

“It’s Saturday at...eight? I think?”

“Then you can pick me up at seven-thirty.”

“YOU’RE GOING to a *fundraiser* with him?” Max asked later that evening. This time she wasn’t in her favorite British pub, Sienna noted, but her apartment. Sienna could see Nate and Autumn in the background, putting together a puzzle at the kitchen table. At the question, Nate looked over and gave a thumbs-up.

“Just as friends. He needed a date and I was sitting there, so he asked me.”

“You were sitting where? At the gym?”

Sienna flushed and realized her mistake. “Ah, no. I took some food over to his place last Friday.”

“Seriously? Like a date?”

Autumn looked over. “What’s a date?” she asked in her cute little-girl voice.

“Could we possibly have this conversation somewhere else?” Sienna asked.

Max chuckled but carried the iPad outside and sat on the front steps. Behind her, Sienna could see a street filled with light. A few people walked by. A dog, a jogger, a cyclist. She swore she saw cobblestones. “That’s your block?” It looked like something out of a Dickens novel.

“Yes. I *love* it. Everything about it.”

Sienna wondered if she’d fall in love with London the way Max had—so quickly and completely. Sitting here on Main Street in Whispering Pines, with the snow falling outside, it seemed hard to imagine.

“So what are you wearing?” Max asked. “To the dance, I mean. Not right now. That would be weird.”

Sienna laughed. “I’m not sure. I’ve got to go shopping sometime between now and Saturday.”

“Find a killer dress. Tight and black.”

“You don’t think that’s too much? It’s a fundraiser for an animal shelter, not the Academy Awards.”

“But it’s at the Villa Amore, right? That place is fancy, Sienna. Plus don’t you want to do some snogging at the end of the night? A tight black dress should put you in prime snogging position.”

“Max!”

“You’re the one that brought it up. You can keep telling me you and Dash are just friends all you want. I’ve known you since third grade. I know what you’re really thinking.”

Sienna curled her fingers into the soft fabric of her robe. *I'm thinking I don't have a clue.* "Is it the stupidest thing in the world?"

"To want to sleep with Dash Springer? Of course not."

"I mean to want him to be my first. Maybe he'll be disappointed."

"I doubt that." Max brought her face close to the screen. "But honestly, you should tell him."

"That I'm still a virgin? No way."

"If you guys are really friends, he'd want to know. Give him a little credit. He's not seventeen. If he knows it's your first time, he'll want to make sure it's good."

"Or he'll want to run away."

Max laughed. "I've never known a guy to run away from sex. Just tell him, Sienna."

But she couldn't. It was too embarrassing. She'd just wait and see how the night unfolded.

"Hey, send me a picture when you find a dress," Max said. She glanced up, and Sienna could hear Autumn's voice calling out something. "I've gotta go. But have fun! Tell me everything!"

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

**A**t two o'clock on Friday, Dash scrawled his name in the visitors' log at Whispering Pines Elementary School. He hadn't seen Al Halloran all week, which made it an extra good five days. Maybe Al had heeded Dash's advice to lay low and get out of town. Maybe Doc Halloran had told his son the same thing. Whatever had kept him from crossing Dash's path, Dash was grateful.

"Back again?" Eva Hadley asked.

"Yup." He'd missed visiting Sienna's class last week. No reason to miss it again. Besides, he'd just found out the fundraiser started at six o'clock rather than eight, and while he could've texted her that, he wanted to see her in person. If it was read-along time, then he'd just deal with it. He was a grown man, after all.

He walked down the hall and knocked on her door. She was standing in the middle of the room with the kids circled around her, and he hoped he wasn't interrupting something. But she looked over and smiled, then tapped one of the boys on the shoulder and motioned him toward the door.

"Hi, Mr. Springer. It's nice to see you again."

“Hello, Caleb.” He shook the boy’s hand. “It’s nice to see you, too. How’re you doing today?”

“I’m fine.” Caleb pointed at the rug and the rocking chair. “We’re having read-along time.”

Dash followed him inside. Before he knew what was happening, another of the boys tugged his pant leg. “Hello. I’m Billy. That’s my twin brother, Bailey. I’m older by six minutes.”

Dash crouched down so he was eye level with them. “Really? I don’t have any brothers or sisters, so that makes you pretty lucky.”

“I have a younger sister,” Caleb said. “Her name is Dinah and she’s in Miss Preston’s class.”

“All right, you chatterboxes,” Sienna said. “It’s time for read-along.” She wore her dark hair down and loose, with a pink sweater and black jeans hugging her curves. Silver earrings dangled from her ears. Dash wondered what she’d wear to the fundraiser. He’d gotten his only suit dry cleaned after confirming with Ella that he didn’t need to rent a tux. But he didn’t know the first thing about women’s attire, or whether Sienna would know what kind of dress was formal enough. She probably would. She was smart about things like that.

“This is a surprise,” she said. “A nice one.”

Billy tugged at Dash’s hand. “Come over and sit with us.”

Dash hung up his jacket and joined them on the rug. *Oh, boy.* He hadn’t sat cross-legged in a long time. He hoped he’d be able to get up later. He glanced at the mute girl, who sat in one of the bean bag chairs across the room. She stared at him. He smiled, and she ducked her chin. Sienna began to read about a raccoon family that lived in the forest.

“One day, Mother Raccoon came home to find that Rocky had disappeared.” Sienna raised her eyebrows and made a big O with her mouth. “What do you think happened to him?”

One of the twins shot up his hand.

“Yes, Billy?”

“I think Rocky went to play with his friends even though his mother told him not to.”

Sienna turned the page but kept the illustration hidden. “Should we find out?”

They all nodded, and she revealed the picture. “You were right, Billy. Rocky went off to play with his friends without asking permission.” She swept the room with a serious gaze. “Should you ever go off to play without asking permission from an adult? Do you think that’s a smart thing to do?”

“No,” they crowed in unison. Dash looked again at the girl. She hadn’t spoken a word, but she looked rapt at the storytelling. This time when their eyes met, she didn’t look away.

Sienna finished the last page and closed the book. “I think we have time for one more today,” she said. “Who wants to choose?”

“Mr. Springer should,” Caleb said. “And he should read the story to us.”

Dash froze.

“Yes, yes,” the other boys agreed.

Sienna pointed at the bookcase. “It’s all yours.”

“Thought I’d just drop by and watch,” he mumbled as he got up. That extra set of squats and lunges was killing him right about now.

“Nope, we like to put visitors right to work,” she said.

He ran his finger along the spines of the books. Many were so worn he could barely read the titles. Finally he came to one he recognized, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*. “My mom used to read me this one all the time.” He wondered where his own dog-eared copy had ended up.

Sienna stood and patted the rocker. “It’s all yours.”

He arched a brow. “Gee, thanks.”

“My pleasure.” Laughter touched her light brown eyes, and an unfamiliar feeling turned over inside Dash’s chest. Not pure desire, but something else, something deeper.

He sat, opened the book, and read the opening lines. His voice sounded rough to his own ears. When had he read a kid’s book aloud? Never. Not even as a kid. His mom had always done the reading at bedtime. He glanced at his audience, who waited expectantly. Caleb folded his hands under his chin like he was listening to the president of the United States. *If these kids really knew my past...*

Blood crawled up Dash’s cheeks, and his tongue felt thick inside his mouth. *C’mon, Springer, get it together.* He glued his eyes to the pages and kept them there. The words weren’t tough. The story was a good one. The minutes seemed interminably long, but somehow he reached the end of the book. His back and hands were damp with sweat.

“Thank you!” Sienna led the class in applause. “That was wonderful, wasn’t it?” She looked at the clock. “I’m not sure we have any more—” She stopped. Dash followed her gaze to the back of the room.

The girl had gotten out of her bean bag chair and walked to the bookcase. She scanned the books and then pulled one off the bottom shelf. Carrying it in both hands like it was a serving platter, she walked over to Dash and held it out. He didn’t speak. Neither did she. *Am I supposed to read this?* He wasn’t sure what she wanted. But she was studying him with blue eyes so serious he didn’t dare say no.

“Ah, thank you,” he said as he took the book. She scuttled back to her corner.



“I can’t believe it,” Sienna said a few minutes later when he’d finished reading. Thankfully the book had been short, mostly pictures, and Dash made it through with ease. Now the room was filled with the chatter of voices and the sound of backpacks being zipped up to take home. “Dawn’s never done that. And I mean *never*. She barely interacts with me most days. I’ve never seen her come up to a stranger.”

A strange, simple pleasure filled him. “I’m glad.” He caught her gaze and held it, and something passed between them, a current he didn’t want to break.

“Miss Cruz! It’s time for us to walk out to the buses.”

“Ah, yes, Caleb, thank you.” She lowered her voice. “Can you wait around a few minutes? Or do you have to get back to work?”

“I can wait around.” He stuffed his hands inside his pockets and tried to play it cool as she shuffled the students out the door. But as soon as she was gone, he collapsed back in the rocker. *Teaching sure is tough*. Who was he kidding? Reading aloud was tough. Give him the front desk of the gym or a set of weights and he’d be happy all day long.

Sienna returned a few minutes later, cheeks pink and hair tousled from the winter wind.

“Still cold out there?”

She laughed. “Isn’t it always?”

He stood. “I should go. I mean, since read-along time is officially over.”

“You did a good job.”

“I thought I was going to pass out,” he confessed. “I don’t think I’ve ever read a book out loud in my life. I’m not exactly the intellectual type.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You keep saying things like that, like hating school and making bad decisions and not being a reader and such. But you know what I see?”

His tongue worked itself into the corner of his mouth. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what she saw. Something that would never measure up, he knew that much.

“I see a guy who cares about other people. Who works harder than anyone else I know.” She laid one hand on his arm, just below the footsteps walking into the sun. “You’re a good guy, Dash Springer, no matter how much you try to keep up that tough-guy exterior.”



#### *HE CAME TO READ-ALONG.*

Every time Sienna thought she had Dash Springer pegged, he surprised her. She’d loved watching him with the kids, loved the way his brow furrowed as he read the stories to them. She finished her lesson plans, watered the plants on the window sill, and hummed. Last night she’d found the perfect dress for the fundraiser. Not quite black and tight the way Max had recommended, but she still couldn’t wait to see the look on his face when he saw it.

She closed the classroom door and walked through the quiet halls. Everyone split on Fridays as soon as the buses left. Even the lobby was empty when she got there, except for Eva Hadley at the visitors’ desk. “Have a good weekend, Eva.”

“You too.” She gave Sienna a curious look. “So, you and Dash?”

“Me and Dash what?”

“You’re...” Eva flipped her manicured fingers in the air. “You’re, like, together now?”

“Not together. We’re just friends. He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he is.” She paused. “Too bad he was married before.”

Sienna blinked. “Really?” *He never mentioned that.* Maybe they weren’t really friends. Maybe they were more like acquaintances. Or training partners.

“You didn’t know?” Eva made a tsking sound. “I always try to keep my distance from divorced guys. You never know what went wrong the first time around.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE

Sienna pinned her hair into a twist. She tilted her chin, turned to the side, checked the mirror, and took it down again. Too formal. She'd asked around, and this fundraiser was fancy but not black-tie. She pulled out the twist and started again. *All down? Partly up?* Finally she pinned up two small sections at each side of her face and decided to curl the rest.

*Of course, I didn't plug in my curling iron, so...*

She jabbed the plug into the wall and took a long sip of the pre-party wine she'd poured herself. She wasn't driving, she reasoned, and even though this wasn't a date, it sure looked a lot like one from the outside. She needed a little something to calm her nerves. At ten minutes to six, she was still in her underwear when her phone buzzed with a text.

**I'm outside. I know I'm early.**

Sienna fumbled with her phone and dropped it on the floor, where it slid under the vanity. *Damn.* She bent, kicked it by accident, and it disappeared entirely. It buzzed again, somewhere in the dark. She dropped to her hands and knees and felt around the floor. This was getting ridiculous.

**Not ready yet,** she answered when she finally retrieved it.

**No prob. I'll go fill up the truck with gas. Back in 10.**

Sienna set her phone aside and got to work curling her hair. She wasn't sure ten minutes would be enough, but she'd do her best. Smokey eye makeup, check. Hair done, check. Perfume sprayed in a few key locations, check. Nine minutes later, she pulled on her winter coat and locked her door behind her. The dress she'd splurged on, ankle-length and black velvet, was shot through with green along the arms and waist. It fit her curves perfectly, even though it didn't show a ton of skin. She added a silver chain and matching earrings that dangled to her shoulders. High-heeled black boots and a winter-white scarf and gloves completed the outfit. She'd never been to an animal shelter fundraiser, but she hoped she wouldn't look entirely out of place.

The look in Dash's eyes when he jumped out of his truck to help her into the passenger side told her she'd chosen right. "Hi," he said. "You look great."

"Thanks. So do you." He wore a long leather jacket and what looked like a suit and tie underneath. Dark blue, which matched his eyes.

*I wonder if his ex-wife picked that out for him.*

She told herself to stop thinking such things, but she couldn't help it; she hadn't stopped since Eva Hadley's revelation yesterday. *Married? Seriously?* She knew it was Dash's personal business. Yet they'd shared not one but two dinners. She'd had fireside drinks with him in his living room. She supposed a previous marriage was a little much to explain to someone he'd just met a few weeks earlier. But still.

"One step up from gym attire, huh?" he asked as he climbed inside.

She smiled. "I'd say two or three steps up."

Silence filled the truck as he drove down Main Street and headed over Sunrise Mountain. Snow crunched under the tires, and the skeletal branches of the trees that gave Whispering Pines its name surrounded them on all sides. They crested the mountain and began the long descent into Silver Valley. In the distance, Sienna could see the glimmer of lights, a pale blanket spread over the dark land.

“You’re quiet tonight,” he said. “Everything okay?”

She looked straight ahead and wondered if she should ask. Would she cross a line if she did? “I didn’t know you’d been married.”

From the corner of her eye, she could see his hands tighten on the steering wheel. “Who told you?”

“Eva Hadley.”

He nodded slowly. The truck skidded on a slick patch of snow, and for a moment neither of them spoke. Then Dash corrected, and they straightened out again.

A marriage. A whole life out in California. Tattoos that sketched the history of that life across his skin. Sitting next to Dash, Sienna felt like a naive little girl who hadn’t done much of anything. She’d never left town. She’d never broken the law or gotten in trouble at school. Her brother called her Miss Goody Goody, and maybe that name fit her.

What on earth was she doing here with someone so completely different?

“It was one of the biggest mistakes of my life,” Dash said as they descended the mountain. “I was young and stupid and thought I knew everything.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Her name was Edie. Al Halloran introduced us.” He paused. “Here’s from around here, and we hooked up after I’d been living out there a few years. You know him?”

“Doc Halloran’s son? I think so.”

“He had a big group of friends out in L.A.—if you can call ’em friends. He knew a lot of people, put it that way. I went to a party, Edie showed up with some friends and that was it.”

“What was she like?” Sienna had a hard time picturing Dash as the marrying type. He seemed so determined to play it cool, to play the field. Someone pretty special must have knocked his socks off.

“Long blonde hair. Good body. Like everyone else living in L.A.” They came to a stoplight with a long line of traffic. “But we had some decent conversations at the beginning. She wasn’t from around there either. She grew up in the Midwest and was trying to make it as an actress.” He glanced at Sienna. “And yes, most of the women out there are. But she was different from the rest. And I was twenty-three. Young and stupid, like I said.

“We started hanging out, and one thing led to another. I was lonely, the lease was up on her apartment, so we drove to Vegas one weekend and got hitched.” He rolled his neck from side to side.

“How long were you with her?” It sounded like a whirlwind affair, here and gone before Dash knew what hit him. Exactly the opposite of the single, long-term affair she’d had with Jason Kingsley, which followed all the right rules and a proper timeline and involved half-hearted kisses and promises. Something tingled at the base of her spine. She didn’t think anything with Dash would be half-hearted.

“We dated for about a year. We were married for three.”

Sienna blinked. Longer than she’d imagined. *He must have loved her.* She wondered what it felt like to be loved by someone like Dash, wild and unpredictable, with lean muscle and teasing dimples and blue eyes that looked right into your soul.

“I found out she was cheating on me with an old boyfriend. Maybe she was cheating the whole time, I don’t know and don’t want

to know.” He waved one hand as if to dismiss Edie’s infidelity, their marriage, the whole conversation.

“Ouch.” *Which of your tattoos marks that moment?* She’d studied them over the last few weeks, the ones she could see, anyway. They weren’t random, despite what he’d said about the dragon. He had a whole history on his skin, there for the reading if she only took her time.

“The cheating would’ve been bad enough,” he added, “but she cleaned out my bank account and took my Mustang. First car I ever bought with my own money, and she took the title and screwed me.”

“Oh, Dash. I’m so sorry.”

“Live and learn.” His voice sounded casual, but his hands tightened on the wheel again. “I put her name on everything when we got married, so I couldn’t do much legally.” He started to say something else but stopped. “Last I heard, she’d gotten hooked on heroin, so it’s just as well things didn’t work out. People make bad choices, me included.” His gaze flicked to Sienna. “Honestly, I don’t talk about my marriage because I’m embarrassed by it. It’s better left in the past.”

She reached across the seat and touched his leg. “I understand. And I’m really sorry that happened to you.”

He pulled around the circular drive of the grand, three-story Villa Amore. The reception hall was the *it* place to hold any kind of event. Every window and doorway blazed with light. “And I’m really sorry you had to find out from Eva Hadley.”

“Don’t be. Everyone knows she’s the town gossip. I’m surprised she didn’t tell me weeks ago.”

Dash eased to a stop by the entrance. “What do you say we forget about everything else except having a good time tonight?”

“I say that sounds perfect.”



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-TWO

Dash hadn't meant to tell Sienna so much about Edie, but once he started, the words came out like rain from a thundercloud. He wondered now if that changed how she saw him. Divorced before the age of thirty. A failed marriage behind him. Sienna didn't seem like the type who failed at much. But maybe it didn't matter. She'd be gone by the time summer rolled around.

The thought put a tight spot in the pit of his stomach that surprised him.

"It's beautiful," Sienna said as they walked inside. She looked around the ballroom. Long tables lined the walls and auction prizes covered them, fancy wrapped baskets and over-sized gift certificates mounted in frames. *Pet Me! Love Me! Take Me Home!* appeared everywhere Dash looked. The tightness in his stomach moved lower. *Maybe they should choose a motto with less sexual innuendo next year.*

An older man in a tuxedo emerged from the crowd, and Dash's stomach turned over. *Doc Halloran.* Before he could turn or run or pretend he hadn't seen Doc, the old man offered a hand. "Dashiell Springer, my man. How're ya doin'?"

“Ah...” He knew Doc hadn’t had any contact with Al in over a decade. He knew the man probably felt the same way about his son as Dash did. But still, seeing the same Halloran eyes and the same lazy grin made his gut twist. “Hello.” He made himself shake Doc’s hand. “It’s been a while.”

“Sure has. Got a fitness question, if ya have a minute.” Doc tipped his head at Sienna. “Miss, can I steal him away?”

“Of course.” Sienna’s gaze moved from Dash to Doc, and he knew what she was thinking. Didn’t take a rocket scientist to read the tension between them. She reached out and squeezed Dash’s arm as if in reassurance. “I see a couple people I know from school. Let me go say hello.”

They moved to the side of the ballroom, and Dash’s chest went tight. He’d never seen Doc step foot inside Springer Fitness. The sixty-year-old walked five miles a day and did pushups and crunches on his front porch in all kinds of weather. As a practicing physician for over thirty years, he probably didn’t have a fitness question at all. Dash braced himself.

“I’m sure you’ve seen my son back in town.”

Dash cracked his knuckles. “He stopped by the gym.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to look Doc in the eye. Wasn’t the old man’s fault that Al had ruined Dash’s life.

“He’s not here on my asking,” Doc said. “Just wanted you to know that. He called me up, said he wanted to make amends. I told ‘im until I saw proof he was clean, I wasn’t interested in anything he had to say. Actually, doesn’t matter if he is. I’d prefer it if he found somewhere else to live altogether.” The man talked in controlled tones, but the blood that rose into his cheeks belied his composure.

Dash started to answer, but Doc went on before he could.

“Now, I don’t know all the details about what happened with the two of you out in California, and I’m not sure I want to. But I see what you’ve done here with that gym, and I know you’re a good man with a good head on his shoulders. Just want you to know that.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I haven’t heard from him in a few days. If you do see him around, I’d appreciate a heads-up. I told him he wasn’t welcome, but if he’s desperate for a place to sleep or something to eat, he might end up staying.”

“Will do.” Dash cracked his knuckles again.

Doc clapped him on the back. “Hang in there, my man. You did your time. Everything else is water under the bridge. Enjoy your pretty date tonight.” He winked and walked away.

*She isn’t really my date*, Dash started to say, but Doc was gone before he could. Sienna returned to his side, chattering about the homemade desserts she’d spied in the back, but he couldn’t concentrate. All he could think of was Al Halloran. Neither his father nor Dash had seen Al around town, and he hoped that was a good sign. *He better be gone. For good.*

He stuck his hands into his pockets. The place did look great, decked out from floor to ceiling, but he wasn’t used to finery like this. His feet seemed too big, his tie too tight, his tongue too thick to make conversation. He recognized a few faces in the crowd, but not many. “Want a drink?” he finally asked Sienna.

“Sure. White wine would be perfect.”

He nodded and watched her walk along the tables of prizes. She took her time, touching a few and smiling as she read the names of the donors. He wondered what she thought of it all. With the upscale decor, open bar, and band warming up in the corner, it was fancy by Whispering Pines standards, but he didn’t know what kind of life she was used to. She lived in a regular house on a regular street in town,

sure, but the way she carried herself, she looked like someone who could easily get used to the best. Educated. Intelligent. Classier than most women he knew. Maybe she'd been to a dozen events here at the Villa Amore.

Dash turned to the bar and ordered a glass of wine and a beer.

"Well, look who the cat dragged in and cleaned up." From nowhere, Zane appeared at his elbow.

"Hey, man. Didn't know you were gonna be here."

"I'm working an angle," Zane said, with a nod over his shoulder toward a group of single women.

"Which angle is that?"

Zane just shrugged and laughed. "You brought Sienna, huh? Thought you were trying the just-friends thing with her."

Dash gave him a lopsided grin. "We are just friends." *We talk*, he wanted to add. *She brings me food when she knows I don't have a thing in the house. I read books to her students and she asks me about California and for the first time I don't feel completely terrible talking about my past.* If that was what friends did, maybe he could do it with Sienna after all.

"You're crazy," Zane said. "She's hot. And single. And smart. Although I can see there why you might think she's outta your league. Bein' friends is the probably the only shot you've got."

Dash glanced around and then flipped him a quick bird.

Zane laughed. "Seriously, as long as you both know you're not heading down the aisle, what's the harm in having a little fun?"

Dash bet there could be a whole lot of harm. In fact, he was about to list the ways he could mess up a perfectly good friendship when Ella Ericksen walked over. She slipped her arm through Zane's and gave Dash a curious look. "So Sienna Cruz is your date? Wouldn't have pegged you for dating a church girl."

“It’s not like that,” he said, but he wasn’t sure if he meant the *dating* or the *church girl* part. “We’re friends,” he said. “We have a good time together.”

Ella rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“See ya.” Dash took the drinks, tipped the bartender, and joined Sienna at a table across the room. She offered him some appetizers from a plate in front of her. “They’ve done a great job here. The shelter should make a lot of money tonight.”

“Hope so.”

The band started playing a rock tune, and she jumped up. “Want to dance?”

“Ah, no. Sorry. I’m not the dancing type.”

“Seriously? You asked me to an event that involved dancing. You have to give me one, at least.”

“You dance. I’ll watch.”

She tugged at his shirt sleeve. “No fair. Come on.”

He grumbled but followed her to the dance floor. “I look like an idiot when I try this.”

She began to move, her arms and hips finding the beat as he stood there like a stone. “Then you haven’t had the right partner.”

*Isn’t that the truth.* Hard, angry memories of Edie rushed in like waves. They’d never danced together. Drank, smoked weed, gone skinny dipping, stolen from a 7-Eleven, gotten married on a whim, yes. But they’d never done this. Maybe if they had, things would have ended up differently. *Or maybe I never would’ve ended up with her at all.* Man, what a sweet thought that was. Erasing the past and all the mistakes that went with it. Dash banished the thoughts and focused on Sienna, who worked her way closer until he could smell her perfume.

Before he knew it, his feet began to move. His hips followed, not with any great style, but at least he wasn't standing like a statue in the middle of the dance floor. Enough people had joined them by now, and the lights had dimmed, so he hoped no one could see him.

"Ah, you do have a move or two," she said. She danced up to him and then away, spinning with ease, mixing silly moves with semi-sexy ones until he finally laughed and let himself go. She took his hand and spun under his arm, gripped his fingers, came in close, then moved away again. He smiled, and laughed, and finally he stopped worrying about people watching him. Instead he just watched Sienna.

The song came to an end and another one came on. A slow one. A love song from the 80s. Dash froze. But Sienna didn't even blink. She stepped into the circle of his arms and placed her own around his neck. Casually. With a good few inches between them. Still, his whole body responded as if he'd been lit on fire. *Don't let her feel that.* He tilted his groin away from her. *We're friends. Just friends.*

But then she stepped closer. "This is nice," she said against his cheek, and he was a goner, a dead goner, and he didn't even care. He hadn't touched a woman, held a woman close like this, in over a year. The sensations swept over him, pleasure and desire mixed with a faint dread that getting involved would be a bad idea.

*She isn't Edie, he argued with himself. She's not even close.*

*Maybe she's not interested in you that way.*

*She wouldn't have come here tonight if she didn't like you.*

*But she's leaving this summer. And she's way out of your league.*

*True. All of that, true. But you want her.*

The voices warred inside his head, neither one winning, until the song finally ended and she stepped out of his arms. He tried to study

her face, to see if she'd been as unsettled by their closeness as he had, but she looked as calm as ever. Unruffled. Just...happy.

"While you're helping yourself to the buffet," a woman said from the podium at the front of the ballroom, "I want to thank all the sponsors tonight, as well as let you know..."

Dash didn't hear her. He didn't hear anything except his heart pounding as they filled their plates and joined Zane and his friends at a table near the back. Good thing the dancing part of the night was over. Introductions went around, and he busied himself with finishing the chicken marsala and roasted potatoes. Beside him, Sienna fell into conversation with a man in a top hat, and every once in a while Dash heard phrases like *systemic bias* and *necessary regulations* and *mandatory state testing*. He had no idea what they were discussing, but he bet she could talk to the Devil in the middle of a snowstorm.

Dinner plates were cleared away, and she excused herself for the ladies' room. After she'd left, Zane leaned in. "I heard Al's back in town."

Dash's good mood vanished. "Yeah."

"He staying?"

"Not if I can help it."

"He was in longer than you, right?"

Besides Dash's mom, only Zane knew the whole truth about what had happened in L.A. "He had weed on him when the cops pulled us over. Got an extra seven months." Wasn't long enough, not by a long shot, but at least it had bought Dash some time back in Whispering Pines to get his own life on track. "I'm hoping he'll realize there's nothing for him here and take off again."

Zane considered that for a moment. "You ever hear from your ex?"

Bile rose in Dash's throat. "Nope. Hope I never do."

"She never got charged with anything?"

"Nope. She was just smart enough to not get caught. Or maybe lucky enough." He shoved back his chair, done with talking about the past. "I gotta get some air."

"Hurry back," Zane said with a grin. "The auction's about to start."

But Dash wasn't interested in who might be buying or selling tonight. He'd put in his time and made his appearance. He had no interest in staying any longer. He hoped Sienna would understand. He walked to the lobby and found her coming out of the ladies' room. "Hey, you want to get out of here?"

She gave him a funny look. "Okay. If you want to. You need to say goodbye to anyone?"

"Already did."

They collected their coats and stepped under the canopied entrance. Outside snow fell, silhouetted by the lights. The temperature had dropped, and the sidewalk squeaked under their feet. To his surprise, Sienna tucked her hand into his elbow as they waited for the valet. She pressed against him, probably for warmth, Dash figured, but the reason didn't matter. Ten seconds with her skin against his, and all his desire from the dance floor returned. She hadn't said a word, hadn't asked why they were leaving. He thought she could probably guess from the look on his face, but she hadn't questioned it, which made him like her even more.

"I'm sorry," he said as they headed back over the mountain. "Events like that just aren't my scene."

"They aren't really mine, either."

"Really? You seemed totally comfortable."

She waved a hand in dismissal. "It's just talking to people."

But he wasn't so good at that.



“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah.” But the night had worn him down, talking about Edie and thinking about Al and holding Sienna on the dance floor while his head spun in ten different directions. He wasn’t used to being tied up in knots like that. He was used to the simple life he’d built over the last eighteen months: open the gym, work out, do the books, go to bed, get up, do it all again. He liked routine. More than that, he appreciated it. People who got inside his head, even for good reasons, complicated things. He wanted to tell Sienna all that in a way that made sense, but the words were hard to find. By the time he’d worked out some kind of explanation, they were back on Main Street in front of her apartment.

“I had fun tonight. I haven’t danced in forever. Thanks for asking me.” She hesitated, one hand on the door. Her eyes played over his face, and for a long, heated moment, he thought about kissing her. Sliding across the seat and pressing his chest to hers. Taking her face in his hands. Tasting the lips he’d been watching all night. Breathing in her words, leaving her without them, telling her without speaking how she made him feel.

Instead he curled his fingers into his palms and watched her go. “You’re welcome,” he said, but only the falling snow heard him.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE

**N**othing happened, Sienna texted Max after she got upstairs. She undressed, took off her makeup and pulled the pins from her hair. She didn't know what she'd expected, but she'd thought at least Dash might have kissed her good night.

**Really?????** Max wrote back.

"Really," Sienna said aloud. She turned her phone to silent and set it aside. She couldn't blame him for wanting to leave. It hadn't been his scene at all; she'd gathered as much the moment they walked into the ballroom. And his conversation with Doc Halloran had obviously triggered some bad memories.

*But that dance...*

He'd felt it, hadn't he? There'd been some kind of chemistry, something more than simple body heat radiating between them. She'd watched the look in his eyes change from discomfort to pleasure. She'd felt the palm of his hand resting against the small of her back, pressing her close when he didn't have to.

*We aren't just friends.* But she wasn't sure how to get over the bridge from friends to something more. She yawned and turned off

the light just as her phone lit up with a new message. She picked it up and squinted in the dark.

**Thanx for going tonite,** Dash wrote. **Sorry it ended early. I'll make it up to u.**

Her heart sang all the way to dreamland.



“SHOW ME,” Dash said when they met in the training studio on Tuesday afternoon.

“Show you what?” For a crazy minute, Sienna thought he was asking her to flash him. *Maybe this is how we cross that bridge...* Her imagination took a wicked turn.

“What you’ve learned,” he said, and her thoughts straightened out again. “What you’ll do if someone comes up from behind and grabs you. We’ve had eight training sessions. I’d like to think I’ve taught you something useful. So, show me your moves.”

“Oh. Okay.” She flipped through all the self-defense tactics he’d shown her over the last few weeks. “Which one?”

“All of them.” He grinned. “Let’s consider this a review for your final exam.”

“What? No one told me there’d be an exam.”

He winked. “Ah, come on. You’re a good student. The best, from what I’ve heard. You should like exams.” His tone was playful, his mood upbeat.

“I do always ace my finals,” she said with a grin. “So if there’s going to be one, I guess I better start studying...”



THAT FRIDAY AFTERNOON, he went to the school again.

"It's Mr. Springer!" Caleb announced when he knocked on the classroom door.

"I didn't know you'd be stopping by," Sienna said. She got a cute look on her face Dash was starting to recognize, a smile and a blush that he loved.

"Thought I'd surprise you."

The smile widened. The blush deepened. He was about to say something else when one of the twins tugged on his pants leg. "Will you read to us?"

Dash swallowed. "Ah..."

"Please?"

"Like I can resist," he said in a low voice to Sienna, and she smiled.

"It's hard, isn't it?"

*You have no idea.*

Dash made his way to the rocker, and the boy dropped a stack of books into his lap. "Here. We picked these out."

"Three?"

"They're short," Sienna said. "If that helps." She sank into the chair at her desk and propped her chin on one hand.

Not short enough, he wanted to answer. A sweat broke out across his forehead. *They're just kids*, he reminded himself. *They won't know if you screw up or skip a page*. But he still wanted to do it right. And Sienna was watching. He opened the cover of the first book.

"Sally Goes to the Store," he began. Well, as long as Sally wasn't shopping for avocados or paprikash, he could make it through this one. He took his time, trying to make sure he held the book so the kids could see the pictures. About halfway through the story, Sally

tried to sneak a carton of ice cream into her mother's shopping cart. The boys burst out laughing. Dash looked up, surprised.

"Look what she's doing!" crowed one of the twins. He kicked his feet and laughed. His brother joined in. Silas clapped and laughed louder than both of them. Even Caleb smiled. Only Dawn remained silent in her beanbag on the other side of the room.

The tension in his neck released, and Dash finished the story. The kids clapped, and before he knew it, one of the twins was leaning on his leg and pushing another book into his hands. "Read this one next."

"Billy, please be polite." Sienna said from her desk. "I don't think Mr. Springer wants you sitting on his lap."

"It's okay." Sometime in the last twenty minutes, his anxiety had dissolved. "So this one next, buddy?"

The boy nodded.

Before Dash had realized it, he'd finished all three books, and almost forty minutes had passed. Sienna stood. "Let's give Mr. Springer a big round of applause for reading to us today."

They smacked their hands together, and Silas whooped as he jumped up and down with glee.

"My gosh, that's more of a reception than I usually get," Sienna said.

Dash stood in the middle of the room, unsure of what to do or say. He'd never gotten a reception like that in his life. Amazing that a group of eight-year-olds could make him feel better about himself than most people he'd known as an adult.

"You're good with them," she said as the warning bell sounded for dismissal.

"I like them." Silas trotted over with papers falling out of his backpack, and Dash straightened them and zipped up the pack

before helping Silas slip the straps over his shoulders. "I didn't think I would," he added.

"Really? What's not to like about a bunch of eight-year-olds?"

"It's not them. It's school. I was never much good at it."

"You keep saying that. But you're good now."

"Reading picture books to kids? I hope I am."

The bell rang, and the kids straggled into line. "Can you wait?" Sienna asked as they tugged her toward the hallway. "Or do you have to leave right away?"

"I can wait." Friday afternoons were notoriously slow at the gym. Hell, even if they weren't, he'd prefer spending time here. *You're getting too close to her*, came a warning voice in his head, but for the first time since meeting Sienna, he ignored it.

Ten minutes passed before she returned. "Sorry. Dawn's bus was late. She had a bit of a meltdown. A silent one, but you'd be amazed how kids can communicate without saying a word."

"She still doesn't talk?"

"No. And I can't figure out why. It's a psychological thing, for sure, not a physical one. It's a defense mechanism, I guess."

"Well, the world can be a scary place." Dash leaned in the doorway and looked down at her.

"For little girls, yes. For guys like you? I doubt it."

"I've been scared before. Once. Maybe twice."

"Oh, yeah? Of what?"

*Getting hurt*, he almost said. Of course, physical pain was easy to get over. Emotional pain? Betrayal, heartache, regret? Those scars seemed to last a lifetime. He screwed up his courage and met her gaze straight on. Didn't look away.

"I have something for you," he said. "Meant to give it to you the other night."

She frowned. "What's that?"

He hesitated only a moment. Then he slipped his arm around her waist, pulled her close, and kissed her like they were the only two people left in the world.



*THIS.*

The word whirled through her brain, the only one she could hold onto.

*This is what I've waited for. What I was missing for so long.*

Dash took her mouth with authority, strong and sure, easing her lips open and letting his tongue explore hers. A breath caught in her throat, and he smiled against her lips. One arm remained around her waist. The other hand came up to her jaw, holding her mouth to his. His fingers, rough and calloused, stroked the skin of her neck, and she went a little dizzy.

*This.*

He never stopped kissing her. He knew exactly how to tease her, how to make her lean in, how to take his time until she was hungry for more. His hand began a lazy trail down her side, tickling her ribs and the edge of her breast before moving on. A restlessness kicked up inside her, and she wanted to taste every inch of him, wanted to know how he'd touch her if they weren't standing inside her classroom.

At that, Sienna did stop. *We're in my classroom.* She put one hand to her swollen mouth and looked at Dash like she'd never seen him before.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. She didn't trust her voice.

“Not here, huh?” he added, reading her thoughts. “Sorry. You’re awfully hard to resist.”

She wanted to hear that.

It terrified her, hearing that.

*You should tell him*, Max echoed inside her head.

But how could she? How could she tell him she’d never done anything like this before, never wanted anyone like this before, without screwing things up or scaring him off?

He brushed his thumb along her cheek and lower lip. “I don’t want to be just friends. I know you’re leaving. I know we’re about as different as day and night. I still want more.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah?” His eyes lit with hope.

“Yeah. I just...” *I need to tell you something*. But before she could get up the courage, he went on.

“Listen, I have a crazy week ahead. Continuing ed classes, certifications I gotta update for the gym, but after that I’d love to take you out again. Or maybe have you come over for dinner again.” He left the rest of the words unsaid, but she could read them on his face. *And maybe do something more after dinner, too*.

Oh, she was in so much trouble.



CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FOUR**

Sienna didn't tell Max. She didn't tell anyone. She wanted to keep it as a secret, at least for a few days. The town of Whispering Pines buzzed and talked about everything and everyone. She had no desire to be the center of its grapevine. So she savored the memory of Dash's kiss and replayed every word, every touch, as she lay in bed at night too giddy to sleep.

The weekend dragged. The following week was worse. Dash was busy enough that he cancelled her two training sessions, and she would've been disappointed except he sent her silly text messages from the continuing education classes he was taking over in Silver Valley.

**4 hrs??? Feels like it's been 45 & its only Monday.**

**Best dancing dog video ever. Ck it out**

**Is it Friday yet??**

She kept them all, reading and rereading them and imagining the first thing she'd say when she saw him again.

*Missed you.*

*Is that dinner invitation still on?*

*Want to skip dinner and go straight to dessert?*

“Control yourself, Sienna,” she told herself more than once, but then she wondered why she needed to. She’d carefully controlled every action, every decision, she’d made for as long as she could remember. Why not let down her hair? This was the perfect time. And Dash was the near-perfect guy.



MID-MARCH SURPRISED everyone with near-record temperatures. Dash checked the weather report three times before leaving the gym on Friday, and when it still predicted a high of sixty-five with zero precipitation, he grabbed two gloves and baseballs.

“Thought we might do a little preseason training,” he said when he walked into Sienna’s classroom. He held up the gloves. She gave him a quizzical look, but Silas almost fell out of the rocking chair in excitement. He ran to Dash and took one of the gloves, stroking the soft leather and laying it next to his cheek.

“Mr. Dash, we always do read-alongs on Fridays at two o’clock,” Caleb said with a worried expression. He turned to Sienna. “Miss Cruz, we always—”

“I know,” she said. She put one hand on his shoulder and steered him to a seat at the table. “But since the weather’s so nice today, how about we read two books instead of three? Then if there’s time, we’ll go outside and play catch.” She gave Dash a wide smile and mouthed *Hi there* in the cutest way possible.

He couldn’t wait to get her alone again.

Caleb eyed Sienna with doubt, but he didn’t say anything else. After Dash had finished *Where the Wild Things Are* and *I’m Going to the World Series!*, he picked up a glove again. “So how much do you guys know about baseball?”

“The Yankees!” shouted Billy.

“Well, that’s one team,” he agreed with a laugh. “Any others?”

“There are two leagues and three divisions in each league, in Major League Baseball,” Caleb began in his serious voice. “The American League and the National League. The American League — ”

“Why don’t we let Mr. Dash talk?” Sienna interrupted. “We can learn a little more about baseball history next week, but I’ll bet he can tell us about the sport. Would that be okay?”

“Yes, yes,” Billy and Bailey nodded. Caleb pulled at his bottom lip, but he nodded after a minute too.

“Okay,” Dash began. “Does anyone know what this part is?” He ran his fingers over the inside of the baseball glove.

“Pocket!” Silas called out. He clapped in excitement.

Dash looked at the boy in surprise. “You’re right, buddy. That’s where players always try to catch the ball.” He picked up a ball in his other hand. “Now, does anyone know why baseballs have stitches on them?”

Silas grew sober. Caleb screwed up his face in concentration. No one answered.

“One thing the stitches do is keep the inside part where it’s supposed to be. There’s rubber inside this leather, but the rubber has to stay on the inside.”

“Can you imagine if our insides were on the outside?” Sienna asked them.

“Ewww!”

“We don’t have stitches, but what do we have?” she asked.

“Skin,” Caleb answered. “Lots of it.”

“Right.” Dash said. “The second thing the stitches do is give the pitcher control when he’s throwing the ball. He can hold the ball a

certain way, and spin the ball a certain way, to make the stitches catch the air and move.”

The boys stared at Dash without speaking.

“Too much?” he whispered to Sienna.

“Maybe. Let’s skip the rest of the mechanics and just take advantage of this sunshine.” She clapped her hands. “I want everyone to put on their coats and line up at the door. We have fifteen minutes before dismissal, and Mr. Dash is going outside to show us how to throw and catch a baseball.”

They were the only ones on the playground, which made it easy to pair up and practice throwing. Silas took one glove, Dash kept the other, and the twins and Caleb took turns throwing the ball to them both.

“Not bad,” Dash said. He struggled to keep from laughing every time a toss went wild. Billy had the least control of them all. Most of his throws ended up in the weeds or under a tree ten feet away. But no one seemed to care. Bailey retrieved them, and sometimes Caleb measured the distance of the errant throw by striding to the tree and back, doing calculations in his head.

“They’re a funny bunch, aren’t they?” he said to Sienna. “I don’t mean funny bad.” He wasn’t sure what he meant.

“Yes, they are,” she agreed. “But they’re my funny bunch.” She smiled. “And yours too, now that you’re spending time with them.”

She looked up at him, and for just a second the air held its breath again. Man, he’d miss her when she left. Who would he talk to about the crazy things that happened at the gym? Who would he send goofy pictures to? She liked the ones with dogs wearing silly outfits, or the videos of baby animals figuring out their legs for the first time. He found himself searching just to find ones she hadn’t seen before. Strangely, he thought about her more than he’d ever thought about

Edie in the course of a day, and he'd been married to Edie. With Sienna, though, it was easy.

When the warning bell rang, the boys lined up at the back door. Dash counted heads and came up with only four. "Where's Dawn?"

Sienna shaded her eyes. "Shoot. She's been doing this a lot lately. Dawn! Honey, it's time for dismissal. Time to come inside."

Dash scanned the edge of the playground, the swings, the slides, the trees at the border. A chain-link fence circled the whole space, so she couldn't have wandered off completely. "Go ahead with the boys," he said. "I'll look for her."

Sienna hesitated, but when Caleb tugged at her sleeve to inform her they had two minutes until dismissal, she hurried the boys inside.

"Dawn?" Dash traced a path from the open grassy area where they'd been playing to the edge of the school building. When he turned the corner, he saw her. She stood with her back to the parking lot, staring at the sky. "Hey, there."

She lowered her chin, looked at him with huge brown eyes and said nothing.

"Whatcha doing over here?" The bell rang, and he could hear the roar of bus engines on the other side of the building. Dawn's gaze cut to the parking lot, and fear flicked across her face.

"Ah, don't worry about the buses. Miss Cruz will make sure they wait for you." He had no idea if that was true. He hoped it was.

She dragged her fingers along the side of the brick building.

"You ever play baseball before?" he asked, more to hear himself talk than anything. "Or go to a baseball game? They're a lot of fun." An idea struck him. "Maybe we could all go to a game later this spring. There's a minor league team over in Silver Valley. The Panthers."

The back door opened and Sienna rounded the corner. Relief covered her face when she saw Dawn. "There you are! Honey, your bus driver is waiting for you. Are you ready to go home?" Sienna held out her hand, but Dawn didn't take it. Instead she took a wide berth past both of them and walked back to the school on her own.

"Boy, she's a tough one, isn't she?" Dash said as they followed.

"You have no idea. My biggest fear is she's going to just disappear one day, and I won't be able to find her."

"Wonder why she wanders off?"

Sienna shook her head. "Maybe it's a safety thing. If no one can see her, no one can hurt her?"

Dash rubbed the back of his neck. It made sense. He knew as well as anyone that trusting people could end in a world of hurt. It was just too bad an eight-year-old felt the same way. Dawn walked to the door and stopped. She stood in the sunshine for a long moment, studying Dash. She didn't say a word. Her expression didn't change. But she lifted a hand and waved at him in a stiff, awkward motion.

Then she was gone.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FIVE

They stood in a corner of the courtyard and watched the last bus leave. The other teachers drifted away, most heading for their cars, a few walking back inside the school.

“You have plans tonight?” Dash asked when they were alone. He stood beside her, leaning against the building, and she looked up to catch his profile against the afternoon light. He looked like a model. Like a statue sculpted from marble and then drenched in ink.

Sienna’s heart caught in her throat. *I like him. Really like him.* “Ah...not really official plans.”

He frowned. “Does that mean you have unofficial ones?”

“I usually have dinner at my parents’ house on Fridays, that’s all.” She cringed. Would that completely turn him off?

But his frown vanished, replaced by a smile. “That’s cool.” He ran one hand along her arm. “Maybe we could get together after that? I have some stuff to take care of at the gym, anyway.” He pulled out his phone and checked the time. “We close at eight. Can I text you after that?”

“Sure. That sounds perfect.”

His gaze moved to her mouth, and she wondered if he’d kiss her again. Part of her panicked that anyone driving by might see. The

other part of her wanted to kiss him first, no matter who was driving by. But he just squeezed her arm. "See you later, then."

"See you." She waved goodbye as he walked across the parking lot, backwards at first, as if to spend a few extra seconds looking at her. When he finally turned around, she took another minute to admire the way his jacket pulled across his back, the way his arms rippled with muscle. She'd felt those arms around her. She could only imagine what the rest of him would feel like.

*Oh dear Lord, have mercy.*

Finally she bit her lip and looked away. *I can't believe Dawn disappeared again.* She rubbed her arms against the brisk wind. Actually, she couldn't believe Dash had found her, or that Dawn hadn't run away from him. *She even kind of waved goodbye.* Sienna shook her head. Something new surprised her every day.

"Hey, Sienna."

Her feet fused to the ground. "Jason?" The parking lot was almost empty, the buses gone and the teachers close behind. She hadn't even noticed his distinctive yellow Volkswagen parked in one of the visitor's spots. But there he stood beside his car, his gaze steady upon her. "What are you doing here?"

He turned red and held up a fistful of papers. "Ah, advising the Christian Club? At the high school?" His voice climbed an octave, the way it always did when he was nervous.

"Oh. Is that new?" The schools shared a parking lot, which explained why he'd parked down here near Whispering Pines Elementary. The high school lot always filled up with teenage drivers.

"It's just the second meeting," he said. "We started last month."

"That's nice."

He cut a glance to the vehicles waiting at the light. Dash's was the last in line. "So, ah...Dash Springer?"



She waited, but he didn't say anything else. "What about him?"

"That's his truck, right? Just leaving?"

"Whatever you're asking me, Jason, just say it straight out."

His face went even redder than before. "I'm not asking or saying anything. Just heard that you two'd been spending a lot of time together."

"That's an exaggeration." What did *a lot* mean, anyway? They saw each other a couple times a week. Maybe. Besides, she was allowed to see other people. She and Jason had broken up months ago.

He studied her. "Is it?"

*You're the one who bought me that gift certificate*, she wanted to say. *You're the reason Dash and I met in the first place*. "Listen, it's not like you're thinking. I'm not dating him. We're just friends." But were they? It didn't feel that way anymore. She could read the heartbreak in Jason's eyes, and she wondered if her face gave her away.

He shrugged, and she knew from years of dating him that it was a self-defense mechanism, a way of closing himself off to hurt. "Sure, whatever, it doesn't matter to me." He kicked at the ground. "Just be careful."

"Meaning what?"

"You know. He was outta town for a long time. And I heard he got himself in some trouble. I just would hate to see you get caught up in something that..."

*Isn't Christian?* she wanted to finish, but she knew that wasn't fair. Jason wasn't trying to be mean or righteous; he didn't have it in him. "I'm a big girl," she said. "I can look out for myself. But thanks." She turned to go. "It was nice to see you."

"You too."

She didn't turn around at the longing in his voice.



DASH CRANKED the radio and sang along to a country song as he drove back to the gym. He didn't know the words, but it didn't matter; they all told the same general story about girl leaving guy and guy drowning his sorrows in a bottle of whiskey. Funny, though—the lyrics couldn't get him down today. Those kids had a way of putting him in a good mood. *Well, those kids and Sienna.* Even today, the frightening few minutes when they couldn't find Dawn, and then they did, made him feel more needed, more alive, than most other hours in his week.

When he reached Springer Fitness, he pulled around to the back lot. He had a few more hours to put in, but then he'd see if Sienna wanted to grab a drink. Jimmy's Watering Hole might actually be fun with her sitting beside him. He headed for his usual parking spot near the gym's back door and stopped. *Again?* The same group of teenagers was hanging out a few yards away. He peered through his windshield. Or maybe not the same group. He hadn't looked closely last time, but the tall, skinny kid with the crew cut looked new, along with a chubby girl wearing an oversized Yankees hoodie. He counted six of them this time, heads bent close together, a couple vaping, a couple smoking, the others passing around something he couldn't make out.

He laid on the horn. Chubby Girl jumped, and when she looked over her shoulder he could see bright pink hair and a face pierced with metal. The others mostly scowled, but Tall Skinny Crew Cut flipped him off. Dash got out of the truck in record time. "Hey!" He

strode across the parking lot. “Told ya once before, I don’t want you hanging out here.”

“It’s public property,” muttered one kid with dark hair and a faint moustache he’d probably spent a month trying to grow.

“Is whatever you’ve got also public property?” Dash shoved out one hand, palm up, as if to say *Let me see. Let me have some*. But they all put their hands in their pockets and stared either at him or the ground. He scanned their faces, trying to memorize them. “Find someplace else to hang out.”

A couple of them cursed under their breaths, but they were already slouching away, some in one direction, the rest in the other. Earbuds dangled from under their hats and hoodies and cell phones hung from their back pockets. Dash shook his head and watched them go. *Different generation, same stupidity*.

“Idiots.” He locked his truck and headed for the back entrance, his good mood gone.

“Coulda been a little nicer to ‘em.”

He froze at the voice.

“Hey.” The person attached to the voice grabbed Dash’s arm. “What, now you don’t talk to an old friend?”

It took everything in his power not to punch Al Halloran in the mouth. “We haven’t been friends in a long time.” He shook off Al’s hand on his elbow. “And don’t ever come up behind me like that again.”

Al guffawed. Dash could smell the liquor on his breath. “Ya know I’m blackballed in this town? Can’t get a job to save my life.”

“Could’ve told you that three weeks ago.”

“Wasn’t that hard for you.” Al looked up at the sign that read *Springer Fitness* and spat on the bottom step.

“You have no idea what I put into this place. And I don’t spend my days stoned out of my mind.” Dash pushed by him, keys in his hand.

“Wait.” This time Al grabbed Dash’s coat. “You gotta help me. I helped you. When you needed a job, I gave you one. Gave you a place to live too, for a whole year when you came out to California. You forget about that?” He burped and stumbled. Dash wondered how long he’d been drinking. Probably most of the day.

“I’ve been thinking more about all the ways you screwed me out in California.”

Al shrugged. “You took that money from Edie all on yer own, man.”

Yes. He had. And he’d been paying for it ever since. A thousand thoughts coursed through Dash’s mind, regret and anger and a kind of weird loss, too. He’d been so stupid to trust Al. So stupid to trust anyone. “Get out of here,” Dash finally said. “You make me sick.”

He turned away, done with the conversation, but apparently Al wasn’t, because he punched Dash in the kidney before he’d reached the top of the short flight of stairs. Pain shot through his back, and he staggered. “What the—” Another punch. This one took him almost to his knees.

With a roar, Dash righted himself. Red blurred his vision, and he swung out with both fists. *You ruined everything*, he thought as he made contact. Once. Then again. Al connected a single punch, and Dash’s right cheek exploded in a pinwheel of pain. Bone splintered and drops of blood sprayed both their shirt fronts. He wanted to stop. He couldn’t stop. Every heartache from the last decade pulsed through his clenched hands, every wrong he’d suffered and every mistake he’d made. He hit Al again. And then again.

Someone shouted from across the parking lot, and finally Dash dropped his arms to his sides. He touched his cheek, and his hand

came away red. Al crouched on the pavement a few feet away, holding his face. Blood poured from between his fingers.

*What have I done?*

Dash gulped in a few breaths of air. His heart pounded out of his chest, and he laced his hands behind his head. Finally he looked over to see Mac and Damian standing a few feet away. They stared at him, silent. He wiped his face with his sleeve and then took Al's arm and pulled him to his feet. "You tell anyone about this, and I'll call the cops so fast you won't have time to hide your stash." His hands trembled. In the blink of an eye he'd returned to the punk he'd been years ago, fighting, cursing, letting someone else get the better of his temper. He swallowed back bile and hated himself.

Al staggered away without another word.

"You okay, man?" Mac asked.

"Yeah." Dash wiped his face again and tasted blood. He couldn't look either of them in the eye. He ran his tongue along his bottom lip, cracked and bleeding. "Tell Hans I went home, would ya?"

"Sure thing."

He could feel their eyes on him as he climbed into his truck. Dash dropped his head onto the steering wheel and squeezed back tears of frustration. One moment of weakness and he'd flushed the last eighteen months down the drain. What if Al decided to report the fight? It wasn't likely, but he might. He wasn't sober and sure wasn't making rational decisions. Assault would violate his parole, Dash was pretty sure. And then he'd lose everything he'd worked so hard for.

He drove straight home and took a long shower. He didn't want to be that guy anymore. He'd come back to Whispering Pines wanting to leave that guy far behind him. He closed his eyes and rinsed

under the spray. Tiny spots of Al's blood covered one wrist, and he rubbed them until the skin went raw.

When the water cooled, he toweled off but left the house dark. He'd tried so hard. He'd toed the line, made amends, spent time with his mom, focused on the sunny days and not the dark ones. He'd learned from the past. Built a business. Repaired old friendships. And then Sienna had walked into his gym. She'd changed him, she and her students. Somehow, over half-hour training sessions and a handful of dinners and reading kids' books, he'd become different. Happier. Less high-strung and more at ease in his skin. He sank into his recliner and stared into the cold ashes of the fireplace.

He wanted to keep getting better, stay on the upward trajectory. He wanted to be proud of the way he spent his days. Most of all, he wanted to hold onto the feeling of deep-down happiness he'd discovered over the last three months. He folded his fingers together and stared at them.

*I have to tell her.* Sienna deserved to know his past. But his stomach churned at the thought. How could he tell her? A prison record? A backlot brawl? She wouldn't want to give him the time of day. Nor would he blame her. *She deserves so much better than anything I have to offer.*

He picked up his phone. Put it down. Picked it up again and pecked out a text message that took almost a minute to compose. Then he erased the whole thing. He couldn't do this in a text. He'd have to tell her in person, and that wasn't going to happen tonight, not when he looked like he'd just gone nine rounds in a boxing ring.

**Not feeling that great,** he finally wrote. **Take a rain check?**

He turned off his phone before he could see her answer.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SIX

Sienna had a craving for Ma's baked ziti and meatballs. She had no idea what was on the menu tonight, but Ma hadn't made Italian food in a while, so the chances were good. Between the fresh air, their anxious search for Dawn, and the awkward adrenaline spike of seeing Jason again, she was starving. Ma always served dinner right at six, which meant Sienna had plenty of time to go home and change. Maybe even sneak in a cat nap.

**Can I bring anything for dinner?** She kept one eye on the parking lot and Jason's yellow Volkswagen. When he swung by her car and beeped, she gave a casual wave and then slid down in the seat. Just in case he meant to roll down his window and issue her a few more warnings about Dash.

**Oh honey I thought I told you? We're going to Silver Valley. Your father has a dr. appt & then he's taking me to dinner.**

Sienna rubbed her finger over the screen. Ma must've forgotten to tell her, or she'd been so preoccupied with imagining Dash naked that she'd missed the message altogether. Well, that was nice. Her parents rarely went out together, just the two of them. She wondered where they'd left Louie. After his suspension, he'd been on a short leash.

**Your brother is with the Adams**, her mother added, as if reading Sienna's mind. **I asked Doris to send me hourly reports.**

She couldn't tell if Ma was joking. Probably not. The Adams were about as straight-laced a family as you could get, next to the Kingsleys. Their only daughter Tera changed her hair color monthly, but other than that she was an honors student who'd tutored Louie back in middle school. Since they lived right across the cul-de-sac, they were an easy ask when Ma needed a favor. *Bet Louie's dying right now.* Doris Adams usually roped her guests into playing cards or watching political talk shows and discussing the fate of the country.

**Have a great time!** she wrote back. She slid up in the seat and started her car. She thought about texting Dash, but he'd mentioned having a few hours' of work at the gym. No reason to bother him now.

Back at her apartment, she poured a glass of wine and considered her options for dinner. She did have some cold cuts in the fridge. She could order delivery from Gino's Pizzeria, two blocks away. Or she could venture downstairs to Zeb's. She glanced outside. After the frigid cold of winter, Whispering Pines was enjoying an early spring thaw. Tiny buds clustered on the trees along Main Street. Birdsong filled the air. Best of all, the sun stayed up longer, lingering on its way into the hills.

Sienna sipped her wine and watched the Friday late afternoon traffic on the street below. Whispering Pines never got much of a rush hour, but at half past five there was a steady stream of cars and pickups passing her window. She recognized a few. There went Connie Masters in her red BMW SUV, probably toting all six kids inside. And Bruce DeLeon in his sticker-covered pickup with the bumper hanging off the back. She smiled. How long would it take for



her to feel comfortable when she moved to London? Would she immediately put down roots the way Max had? Or would she miss the ones she was leaving behind?

As she absently counted cars and tried to guess who drove them all, a small red sedan pulled to the curb, engine running, flashers on. Trouble? Sienna leaned closer to the glass but couldn't make out the faces of anyone inside. The car looked familiar, but a half-dozen people in town probably drove the same one. The engine wasn't smoking and all four tires were intact, so those were good signs. Maybe the driver was lost? Finally the passenger door opened and a man stepped out. He bent down and said something through the window, pounded a fist on the roof of the car, then scowled and walked into the diner.

Sienna's eyes widened. *Mac Herbert?* That hadn't been Damian Knight's car he'd gotten out of. And he hadn't looked happy. But she couldn't imagine the laidback construction worker fighting with anyone. The red car did a U-turn and pulled away, but not before Sienna caught sight of a sticker on its back bumper.

*No way.*

Now she knew why the vehicle looked familiar. Sienna parked next to Polly Preston, and that *Vegan and Proud Of It* stickered red sedan, almost every day at work. Was that who Polly had been texting in the hallway? And who Harmony had told her wasn't good enough to waste time on? Sienna made a face. Probably. Harmony would never think a blue-collar worker measured up when it came to relationship material.

And that was a darn shame.

“Hi, JOSIE,” Sienna said as she walked into Zeb’s a few minutes later. She hadn’t decided on the diner just because she thought Mac might still be here, but now she was glad she had. She pulled up a stool next to him at the counter. “Hi, Mac.”

“Hey, Sienna.” He didn’t smile, just stared into his coffee.

“Well, this sure is a surprise,” Josie said as she tossed a paper placemat and napkin in front of Sienna. “Don’t your mama usually have Friday night dinners at her place?”

Where else but in a town the size of Whispering Pines would the local diner waitress know that? Everyone sure did know everyone else’s business around here. Well, except maybe when it came to Mac and Polly. Sienna considered that for a minute. She’d never thought much about it, but how many other people kept secrets like that one? Big, juicy, you’d-never-guess-in-a-million-years secrets like that one?

“Sienna?” Josie waved the tail end of a pen in front of her face.

“Sorry. Ah, Ma and my pops are on a date,” Sienna said. “So no cooking for her tonight.” She scanned the menu, but she knew most of it by heart. “I’ll have a turkey club with fries. Thanks.”

“BLT for me,” Mac said. He hadn’t looked up from his coffee.

“Is everything okay?” Sienna asked after Josie had disappeared into the kitchen. She didn’t expect him to answer, but he looked so down, she couldn’t help asking.

He shrugged and rubbed a hand over his face. “Women.”

Josie returned from the kitchen. “What about women?”

Mac looked up. “You got super-sonic hearing or something?”

“Of course I do. How else do you think I manage in this place? I got fourteen different people hollering at me they need water or a menu or some napkins or their burger isn’t cooked right or where’s the bathroom...” Josie stopped for a breath. “I gotta hear ’em all.”

Mac spun his mug in a slow circle. “There’s this woman I’ve been seeing. She kept wanting to be casual, not go out in public together or anything. An’ I thought that was fine at first. I thought she’d come around. But now we’ve been spendin’ all this time together and she still—” He flattened his hand on the counter. “I don’t think I’m good enough for her.”

*That’s Harmony whispering in Polly’s ear,* Sienna thought. She’d bet a hundred dollars on it.

“You listen to me,” Josie said. “You *are* a good man, Mac Herbert. A *very* good man. Any woman who doesn’t see that is a purebred idiot. This woman sounds like she’s messed up in the head. Who wouldn’t want to parade you around town? Handsome guy like yourself, local football star, works magic with those hands...”

“Aw, now you’re just tellin’ lies,” Mac said, but he smiled.

“I’m doin’ nothing of the sort.” Josie patted Mac on the shoulder. “You keep your chin up. If this one don’t come around, there’s other fish in the sea.”

“Not in Whispering Pines.”

She swatted him with a towel. “Stop bein’ fresh. There’s plenty of single women here in town.” She walked back to the kitchen.

Silence hung over them. “I’m sorry,” Sienna said after a moment. “But Josie’s right. If this woman is hung up on money or materialism or whatever, then she’s not right for you. You’re a good guy. You deserve better.”

“I guess. That’s what Damian keeps saying. I just really like her, you know?”

“I know.” *Sometimes you can’t help who you fall for.* Money didn’t matter. Jobs didn’t matter. Even if two people belonged to different worlds and had different histories, well...that didn’t matter either, did it?

“Why are women so complicated?” Mac asked. “Why don’t you just say what’s on your mind, instead of making us try to figure it out?”

“I don’t know. I think men and women are wired differently.” She thought of Dash, of the things she wanted to tell him sometimes, the things she could read on his face that he never spoke aloud.

“Well, it makes it damn hard to have a relationship.”

Sienna’s phone buzzed, and she looked down. **Not feeling that great. Take a rain check?**

Disappointment swept over her. **Sure. Feel better soon,** she typed. He didn’t answer.

Mac ate his sandwich, paid his bill, and left. Sienna ate her turkey club in silence. She hoped Dash wasn’t coming down with something. Her students hadn’t been sick, but in an elementary school there were always germs hovering around.

“Anything else, honey?” Josie came flying by. The door opened and closed, more and more people filling the diner by the minute.

“No, I’m good.” Sienna finished her sandwich and wondered if she was hungry enough for a slice of cheesecake to go.

“Well, would you look at what the cat dragged in.” Josie set down her coffee pot and brushed her hands on her apron. She pointed at the only empty stool at the counter, right beside Sienna. “Have a seat, Al.”

*Al? As in Al Halloran?* Sienna tried not to stare as he slid onto the stool, but it was hard not to, mostly because of the black eye and split lip he was sporting. Dried blood spotted his shirt. He wore fraying work pants and smelled like a dumpster.

“Good Lord, what happened to you?” Josie dumped a handful of ice cubes into a towel and handed it to him.

He ducked his chin and didn't answer her question. "Evenin', Josie. I ain't stayin'." He pulled his baseball hat low and kept his face averted. "I'll just take a cheeseburger to go." He took the makeshift ice pack and pressed it to his cheek as he walked to the restroom.

"What on earth..." Sienna began.

"You know Doc Halloran?" Josie asked when Al was out of earshot.

"Sure. That's his son, right?"

"Yep." Josie looked around and then lowered her voice. "He moved away for a while, was workin' odd jobs and such. He got in some trouble with the law here, don't know if you heard, but he was takin' pills from his daddy's office. Back when he was still in high school." She snapped her gum and hollered across the diner, "I see ya wavin' your arm, Henry. I'll be there in a minute. Can't you see I'm havin' a conversation?"

She turned back to Sienna. "His father threw him out after that mess with the pills an' told him never to come back. Think he spent time out west somewhere. I was surprised to see him show up a couple weeks ago."

Sienna didn't let on that she'd heard most of that gossip back in high school and the rest from Dash a few weeks ago. She wondered how much had followed Al. More than that, she wondered who'd used him as a punching bag tonight, and why. *More secrets*. Maybe there was a full moon tonight. Or maybe Mercury was in retrograde.

"I'll take my check, Josie. Thanks."

"Sure thing, sweetie. Be careful out there."

The temperature had remained mild even after sunset, and without a sharp bite in the air, Sienna decided to walk off her dinner. She headed down the block and turned onto Park Place Run. Every restaurant blazed with light, and as she walked she peeked inside at

the couples sharing tables, the families, the single men at the bars draining beers and watching basketball games. Typical Friday night in Whispering Pines. The cop on duty drove by at a snail's pace. Traffic had thinned out, and except for one other man walking his dog, Sienna didn't see a soul. After a while, the restaurants and boutiques gave way to buildings with luxury apartments on their second and third floors. Park Place Run finally dead-ended into a thicket of pines that made their way down to the river.

She liked this walk that meandered around the backside of Main Street. Normally she didn't see anyone else this far down the block, but tonight an SUV sat in front of Divine Designs, the salon where Ella Ericksen worked. To Sienna's utter surprise, Ella climbed out of the SUV dressed in jeans and a light jacket and a black watch cap.

Sienna almost called out a greeting, but then, to her astonishment, Ella opened a paper bag, took out some cans of cat food, and spooned the contents into a row of bowls on the ground. *What is she doing?* Sienna squinted into the shadows. Maybe she'd mistaken Ella for her sister Becca. Ella Ericksen would never be slumming after dark, feeding stray cats. But no, that was definitely Ella's highlighted blonde hair under the watch cap and her signature stiletto boots. After she'd emptied the cans she returned to the SUV, grabbed some blankets, got down on her hands and knees, and spread them on the ground beside the bowls. Then she sat back on her heels and whistled. Three cats appeared from the bushes, the strays Sienna had seen all winter long. They skittered by Ella, giving her a long look before gulping in the food. She didn't touch them or talk to them, just waited until they finished eating. Then she got into her SUV and drove away.

**U WON'T BELIEVE what I just saw!!!** Sienna texted Dash as soon as she got upstairs. She shrugged off her coat, kicked off her shoes, and waited for him to answer. He'd never believe her. She wished she'd thought to take a picture of Ella kneeling in the dirt, but she'd been so surprised it hadn't occurred to her.

She checked her phone, but he hadn't texted back since his only message two hours ago. *That's strange.* Even if he was at the gym, busy, sleeping, showering, he always returned her messages. She turned her phone off and back on, but still nothing. She turned on the TV and flipped through Friday night shows. Checked her phone again. Showered, changed into her pajamas, and made a mug of tea. The wind had picked up, and it whipped against her front window. She bet the strays were especially grateful for Ella's blankets right about now.

She still couldn't believe Whispering Pines's Queen Bee was feeding stray cats on the side. *Guess you really don't know some people.* She wanted to ask Dash what he thought, if he was surprised, if he'd known all along, but he never answered.

**Hope everything's OK** she finally texted before going to bed. It wasn't like him not to respond, even with just a quick emoji, but then again, considering what she'd found out about Mac and Polly and Ella tonight, it was possible she didn't know what he was like at all. Maybe he was out, ignoring her, sleeping, or a rash of other possibilities.

Or like Ella, maybe Dash just had secrets of his own.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SEVEN

Every time Dash looked at his shiner in the mirror, shame crept over him. Al had only landed one punch, but it had been a good one. The morning after, Dash had a black eye and a split lip. His cheek ached to the touch.

“What the hell happened to you?” Hans asked when he showed up at the gym.

Dash yanked a ball cap over his eyes. “Ran into a door last night.”

Hans gave him a sideways look but didn’t say anything else.

**Sorry I didn’t get back 2 u,** he texted Sienna around noon. **Still not feeling too good.**

**Sorry to hear it. Anything I can do?**

**No but thanks.** He couldn’t see her, not in this condition. He stuffed his phone into his gym bag and spent the next two hours pumping so much iron he grew lightheaded and his legs trembled. Around three he told Hans he’d pay him overtime to man the front desk for the rest of the weekend. Then he went home and climbed into bed.

Didn’t drink.

Didn’t eat.



Didn't sleep much, either.

Sunday night he heard a knock on his door, but he didn't answer it. He just pulled the sheets over his head and waited for whoever it was to leave. When he finally crept to the living room and looked outside, he found a cooler on his front step. He tipped up the lid. Three plastic bowls sat inside, their contents still warm enough that the tops were coated with condensation.

**Hope you're feeling better**, read Sienna's handwritten note on top.

"Man, I sure don't deserve you," he said as he carried the cooler into his kitchen. He ran one hand over his hair, oily and matted to his head. He hadn't showered in two days, and everything in the place stank. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself*, he tried to reason, but it was hard. Seemed like every step forward he took, he slid three steps back. Maybe he didn't have it in him, to rise above. Maybe he was the same as Al, destined to make bad decisions for the rest of his life.

He opened a container of chicken noodle soup, thick with pasta and chunks of meat that made his mouth water. Under that was a container of tomato soup, and then one more of chicken noodle. She'd tucked a sleeve of crackers down beside them, too. Dash rubbed his jaw. Didn't hurt quite as much as it had a couple days ago. He checked his reflection in the darkened kitchen window. Looked like maybe the swelling around his eye had gone down, too.

He sat down and ate an entire bowl of soup and most of the crackers. *I am not like Al Halloran*. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. So he'd lost his temper. It happened. Probably would again. But he didn't have to let it control him. He closed his eyes and savored the spices on his tongue. Sienna didn't know him as a lousy punk who'd broken the law. She thought he was a decent guy who

owned a gym and taught self-defense classes and read to kids on Friday afternoons. So he'd try to be that guy. He'd try every day, even if he slipped up once in a while.

**Thanks 4 the soup**, he texted when he finished. **It's delicious.**

**Feeling better?**

**A little.** He still didn't have any intention of letting her see his face, not until the bruises had faded. **Think I need to rest this week**, he added. **OK if we don't work out?**

She took a few minutes to respond, and he imagined she was probably wondering what kind of superbug could keep him down for longer than a day or two. **Sure**, she finally answered. **Let me know when you're feeling up to it.**



SIENNA DIDN'T SEE Dash all week. She stopped at the gym after work on Tuesday and Thursday, hopeful that whatever illness he'd caught had passed, but Hans only shook his head when she asked.

"He's been coming in, mornings," Hans said when she pressed him. "But he's gone by one or two. Says he's not feeling too good."

So she ran on the treadmill and lifted weights and sent him a couple texts so he knew she was diligently working out. He answered both times, with smiley emojis and comments like **Looking good** and **I knew you could**. But she missed him. She missed seeing him, talking to him, watching him read to her kids at school. Telling Caleb and the others he wouldn't be coming on Friday almost broke her heart.

"Is he okay?" Billy asked in a worried voice.

Bailey pulled at his bottom lip, a tell-tale sign of tears about to start. Caleb tapped his fingers on the table so hard she thought he

might bruise the tips. She finally took them outside for an extra hour of recess rather than try to do read-along without Dash. But as soon as the buses pulled away, she sent him a text.

**My mom's making dinner tonight for a small army.** She didn't technically know if that was true, but she'd hedge her bets. No way her parents would be going out two Friday nights in a row. **Want to come over?**

She kept one eye on her phone and the other on the parking lot, just in case Jason was up at the high school for another after-school club meeting.

**Love to. What time?**

Sienna's heart jumped. She hadn't expected him to say yes. She'd half-expected him not to answer at all. *He must be feeling better.*

**6,** she typed with a smile. **See u then.**



DASH PULLED up outside the Cruz's house at five minutes to six. Checked his reflection in the rear view mirror and hoped he looked presentable. It wasn't a date or anything, he knew that, but he liked Sienna's parents. He'd only met them twice before, but he wanted to make a decent impression.

He raised one hand to knock, but the door opened before he could. An older, shorter version of Sienna greeted him with a smile. "Dash! We're so glad you could join us. I'm sure Sienna's told you I always cook way too much food for just the four of us. I hope you're hungry." She motioned him into the living room, similar to Dash's own but filled with pictures and pillows and well-worn furniture. The

whole place smelled delicious, like some kind of slow-cooked meat and tomatoes.

*I should've brought something.*

The thought occurred to him about ten minutes too late. People brought gifts when they were invited to dinner. They didn't just waltz across the threshold empty-handed. *Idiot*. He should have picked up a plate of cookies or a bottle of wine—not that he knew what kind, but he could've asked someone. Or Googled it.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring anything," he said as he followed her into the dining room.

She turned with a wide-eyed look. "What on earth would you bring?" She pulled out a chair and patted it. "You're our guest. Now sit down and make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to drink?"

"Got it covered," Sienna said from where she'd appeared in the kitchen doorway. She wore jeans and a blue shirt and had her hair pulled back from her face, the way he liked it, so he could see her entire expression. She held two glasses of beer and handed him one. "Nice to see you." Her gaze skated over his face and lingered on his bruised cheek.

"Thanks. You too." He took a few sips of beer, glad for the distraction. A moment later, the front door opened and closed with a bang, and Sienna's father walked into the dining room, followed by a teenage kid with shaggy dark hair and a scowl.

"Louie, say hello to Dash Springer," Sienna's mother. "I think you know him, yes?"

The kid's scowl disappeared. "Hey, man." He stuck out one hand and pumped Dash's in greeting. "Yeah, I've seen you around." He gave Sienna and her mom a curt nod and then vanished.

"Louie, where are you—"

“He’s in a mood tonight,” Sienna’s father said in a low voice. “I told him he couldn’t spend the night at Carlos’s.”

“Well, that’s too bad. He knows the rules,” Sienna’s mother said. “Three months of positive check-ins from the school, a report card that’s passing, and we’ll talk about it. Until then, he’s stuck under this roof where we can keep an eye on him.”

“That’s what I told him,” Sienna’s father said as he took his seat at the head of the table. “He didn’t much like it.”

“When is he *not* in a bad mood?” Sienna sat beside Dash. “He’s sixteen. I keep telling my parents they’re all that way, moody and difficult.” She touched her glass to Dash’s. “He’ll grow out of it. Right?”

“Sure.” Dash glanced over his shoulder, but Louie didn’t reappear or join them. *Maybe it’s just as well.* He’d given Dash a strange look, hesitant and suspicious, and he wondered if the kid knew more than he let on. Dash wasn’t sure news of his fight hadn’t hit the Whispering Pines rumor mill. For all he knew, Mac or Damian or Hans had been talking at the gym.

“Let’s eat,” Sienna’s mom proclaimed, and for the next hour they got to work devouring everything on the table.

AFTER DINNER HAD BEEN CLEARED and Dash had eaten two pieces of apple pie with ice cream, they sat in the living room. He and Sienna shared the couch, and her parents bookended the stove in matching easy chairs.

“Hear your gym is doing well,” her father said. “Glad to hear it.”

“Thanks.”

“I keep saying I should get myself a membership there, but I don’t know.” He patted his belly. “Might be too far gone at this point.”

“Exercise would help your back,” Sienna’s mother said. “The doctors keep telling you that.”

“What’s going on with your back?” Dash asked.

“Ah, bulging disks, tight muscles, you name it, I’ve got it.”

“He won’t take any pain meds.”

“Because they don’t help.”

“I filled that prescription just in case.” Her mother picked up a magazine and began flipping through it, the pages snapping in quick rhythm as if signaling the end of the conversation.

Sienna nudged Dash, and when he looked over, she rolled her eyes. *Sorry*, she mouthed. *Family drama*.

But he didn’t mind. If she thought this was drama, her eyes would pop out of her head at the tales he could tell. Plus it beat sitting at home in his silent living room, staring at the TV or the fireplace. “Well, any time you want to come down to the gym, let me know,” he said. “Be happy to see if we can help you out.”

Her father grunted something that was either a thanks or a refusal. Dash couldn’t quite tell.

“Sienna says you might be selling your house?” her mother said as she put down her magazine.

“Oh, I, ah...I’m not sure. It was just a thought.” He glanced at Sienna, who gave him a smile with both palms up. *Guilty*, her expression said. He bet she told her parents a lot of what happened in her life. Maybe all of what happened. He ran his fingers over the stitching in the cushions. He hadn’t been that close to his mom, though they’d talked more after he came home. One thing about her, she’d never judged him too harshly. Never told him he was a hopeless cause, never threw him out of the house. *She gave me more second chances than I deserved*. Missing her now cut him to

the bone. He cleared his throat. "It's a pretty big house for one person."

"Well, I can give you the name of a good realtor if you need one."

He nodded. Selling the house wasn't a fully formed thought. He was just trying to make it through each day, stay out of trouble, gain a foothold, make sure the business stayed afloat.

"Ma, how about we don't give him the full interrogation," Sienna said.

"It's fine. I don't mind." He checked the time. Almost eight. "I should probably go. Gotta open early at the gym tomorrow."

"Oh, okay." Sienna jumped up at the same time he did. "I'll walk you out."

"Thanks," he said as she closed the door behind them. They stood on the narrow front steps, shivering in the cold.

"I thought spring was here," she said as she looked up. "It's almost April." Stars cut the black with a thousand pinpricks.

"Guess it's taking its time."

She rubbed her arms. "I wish it would hurry up."

"Want my coat?" He felt like a chump standing next to her when she wore only a hoodie.

"No. It's okay. I like the fresh air." She breathed in deeply, and he noticed the swell of her chest, the pink in her cheeks, the fine hairs that blew around her face. Sudden desire surged through him. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to do a lot more than kiss her.

"You have amazing parents," he said instead. He took one step away from her, one step down, but that was a mistake, because that meant now his mouth was even with hers.

"I know. I'm really lucky." She reached over and touched his cheek. "This looks like it hurt."

He closed his eyes for a brief moment. He hadn't wanted her to notice.

"Are you okay?" she asked in the stillness, and he wanted to tell her everything. He took her fingers in his. They were chilled to the bone, and he rubbed them until they turned warm against his skin. Her gaze moved from their joined hands to his face, and her lips parted. Her eyes turned dark, and a smile touched the corners of her mouth.

*She feels it too.* He could sense it in the dark, a heartbeat between them, a butterfly caught and waiting for escape. He leaned forward, aching to taste her.

"Sienna!" The door burst open, and a square of bright light fell across the steps.

Dash dropped her hand. Sienna blinked. "Ma?"

"Oh, I'm—honey, I'm so sorry." The woman held a can of paint in one hand and a plastic shopping bag in the other. "Sienna mentioned you might want to do some sprucing up," she said to Dash. "We have three gallons of this, never even opened. The other two are in the garage. It's a nice blue color, thought maybe you could use it. And there are some paint rollers and brushes in the bag." She thrust them at Dash, so he had no choice but to take them.

"Ah...thank you."

"And now I'm gone," she said, and shut the door behind her.

Dash looked at Sienna, who had buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking, but whether with laughter or tears, he wasn't sure. "Sienna?"

She looked up at him through splayed fingers. "I'm sorry. She's not usually that crazy. She must really like you."

"Yeah?" He set down the can and the bag. "What about you?" He slid his arms around Sienna, settling them into place like they'd



belonged there always.

She looked at him without speaking, pinning him with those light brown eyes. The wind blew her hair across her face, so that when he kissed her again, he tasted it against her lips.

“I really like you too,” she whispered. She took his face in her hands, her fingers brushing the tender skin above his bruised cheek.

“Good,” he said. “So does that mean you’ll help me get this stuff back to my place? If you’re up to it, we can start painting tonight.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-EIGHT

“You didn’t have to take all this,” Sienna said as they climbed the front steps of Dash’s house a half-hour later. “Ma likes to push things onto people.”

He unlocked the door and turned on the lights. “She’s a hard woman to turn down.” He set down the two cans of paint he’d carried inside and took the last from her. “But I don’t mind. I appreciate it, really. It’s more than generous.”

“I know she likes to feel helpful.” She set down the plastic bag of supplies and looked around. “Were you serious about painting tonight?” Her shoulders felt tight, her nerves on edge from being alone with him again. The last thing she wanted to do was roll up her sleeves and grab a paintbrush.

“Not really.” He slipped off his jacket and tossed it onto a chair. “Unless you want to.”

She pulled her hair off her neck. “Not really,” she echoed.

“Let me get a fire going.” He crouched down and crumpled newspaper into the stone fireplace. “Help yourself to a beer,” he said over his shoulder.

She found a six-pack in the fridge and popped the tops off two bottles. She opened a few cupboard doors but couldn’t locate any

glasses, just plates and bowls and a few dusty canisters that looked like they hadn't held anything in a while. She returned to the living room.

"Your mom's a fantastic cook." He took the beer she handed him as tiny flames caught.

"I know. That's half the reason I still go to dinner there."

Dash stood to his full height, a few inches taller than she, and leaned against the wall. "What's the other half?"

She took a long drink. "Ah, family and all that. We've always been close. It killed my parents when I moved out after college. They didn't see any reason for me to spend good money on rent when I could just live at home." She ducked her chin. "I did stay until last year. Then I figured at twenty-five it was time to leave the nest."

He didn't say anything, and she looked up. "I know. I'm awfully sheltered."

"I was thinking you're awfully lucky. Not a lot of people have that kind of relationship with their parents."

"But you've done so much!" she blurted out. "Traveled across the country, lived on your own, started a business..."

The look on his face changed. "Doing a lot doesn't make me a better person, Sienna. It just means that's where I ended up."

"I guess."

"Besides, you're about to go on this grand adventure out of the country. I've never done anything like that."

*Right. London. A grand adventure.* She took another swallow of beer. The fire caught and grew behind them.

"You excited?" His voice was gruff.

"Of course. Scared, too, but now I know how to defend myself against sketchy street criminals, so..." She flexed one arm and struck a self-defense pose. "No one better mess with me."

He laughed. "I don't think anyone will."

*Except you. I want you to.*

He looked at her for a long minute in silence. Then he set his beer aside. "I'll miss you."

Her heart stopped. "I'll miss you too." She set her own beer next to his on the side table. "But I'm not leaving for another two months."

"Good." He took her in his arms again, and there were no teachers walking around the corner or mothers bursting through the door to interrupt them. He brushed his lips to hers, as if to tease, and his hands tightened on her hips. She slipped her arms around his neck, wanting this, wanting him, wanting everything she could imagine and then some.

*Tonight.*

It would happen tonight, finally, with the most amazing man in the world.



DASH COULD BARELY CONTROL HIMSELF. She tasted better than his memory, and this time there was no holding back. Her hands went to the back of his neck, pulling his mouth closer, her tongue inviting his, and a groan escaped from deep inside him. They wouldn't even make it to the bedroom if she kept this up. He cupped her ass in his palms, fusing her to him. There was no mistaking his want, and he knew the moment she felt him, the moment he settled against her and her hips made the smallest motion of acquiescence.

He slid his mouth down her neck, feeling the smooth skin inch by inch. Her head fell back and her breath hitched, turning him on in ways that hadn't happened since he was a teenager.

"Dash, oh..."

He loved it. He loved feeling her in his arms, hearing her loss of control, knowing it matched his own.

Then she stopped and pulled away.

“What? Did I do something wrong?” He held her at arms’ length, trying to interpret the troubled look on her face. “I’m sorry. I thought —”

“It’s not you.”

“Then...”

“I have to tell you something.” Her face turned bright red. “At least, I think I should. Max said I should.”

Now he was completely lost. “Max?”

“Remember when I said you’ve done so much, and I really haven’t?”

“Yeah.” He stepped away, grabbed his beer, drank the rest of it without stopping.

“Jason—my ex—was the only guy I’ve ever really dated.”

“Okay.” Was she going back to him? Was that what this was about? Guilt?

“He wanted us to wait until marriage. For...” She waved her hand in the air. “You know...”

“Oh.” *Wait until marriage?* Finally the awkward look on her face made sense. “You’re a virgin?”

She cringed, closed one eye, looked at the floor, and nodded.

“Wow.” He wiped one hand over his face. “I’m glad you told me.”

“Does it change everything?”

“No. Well, I mean, it changes some things.” He wasn’t about to toss her over his shoulder and carry her into the bedroom, tear off her clothes and move his way down her body the way he’d been planning. If she’d never slept with anyone before, then she deserved the royal treatment. He glanced around. Even with a fire going, this

house was pathetic. He couldn't remember the last time he'd run a vacuum or dusted.

She finished her own beer and put the empty bottle aside. "It's okay. I get it."

"Hey." He put a hand on her arm. "You get what? This doesn't change how I feel about you." He cocked his head. "Or, quite frankly, what I want to do with you."

"Oh."

"But it does change how it's going to happen."

"Meaning what?"

He took one of her hands in his. "Are you sure you want this?"

"Yes." She rubbed her thumb against the back of his hand. "I really do."

"Then we'll do it the right way, not at the end of a long night and a long week and in my crappy house."

She smiled a little. "It's not crappy."

"It's not where you should sleep with someone for the first time." And as he spoke the words, the enormity of what she was giving him swept over him. "Let me make it special. Let me find a place, take you to dinner, light some candles, the whole nine yards."

"Really?"

"Of course really." He pulled her in for a kiss, and this time there was less passion and more certainty. More promise. "How about next Friday night? I'll cut out of work early." He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "But don't make any plans for Saturday morning, okay?"

Her cheeks pinked, her eyes glowed, and the way she looked up at Dash made him feel like an honest, true, good man for the first time in years. "Okay."

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

“Today’s the day!” Sienna announced Tuesday in class. “Who’s ready to watch some baseball?”

The kids crowded around her, buzzing with anticipation. They’d been counting down to the Silver Valley Panthers’ opening day game for nearly two weeks, and now that the day had arrived, gloriously sunny, they were almost bursting out of their skin.

“Mr. Dash is here!” Caleb announced. He ran to the door to let Dash inside. “Mr. Dash, are you ready? We’re ready. Are you?”

“I am, Caleb.” He looked over the kids’ heads and grinned at Sienna, and fireworks went off inside her head. And down her spine. And other places. Many other places.

*...don’t make any plans for Saturday morning, okay?*

He hadn’t yet told her where he was taking her to dinner on Friday, but it didn’t matter. She’d eat pizza on paper plates in the middle of an open field if it meant she could get naked with him afterwards.

Heat crawled over her cheeks, and she busied herself with getting the students ready for their field trip. *I will miss you so much*, she thought as she watched Dash laugh with the boys. The Allbright

Award was only for a year, true, but so much could happen in that time. So much had happened just in the few months since she'd met him. An entire life could shift in twelve months.

"Thanks again for chaperoning," she said as they made their way to the waiting bus.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world." They climbed onto the bus, counted the kids three times, then took their seats for the twenty-minute ride to the stadium. Sienna had offered the field trip to other classes in the school, and to her surprise, both Polly and Harmony had jumped at the chance to join them.

Now as the bus creaked and bumped its way over Sunrise Mountain, she walked to the back of the bus, where the other two teachers sat with their students. "Everything okay back here?"

Harmony looked up from her phone with a bored expression. "Sure."

Polly nodded. Sienna glanced around and then slid into the seat beside her. "Can I give you some advice?"

Polly gave her a puzzled look. "About what?"

High-pitched shrieks of excitement filled the bus. Sienna grabbed the seat back and leaned in closer. "Don't listen to your friend when it comes to men."

Polly didn't answer at first. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Listen. We both know Harmony's got this whole I-have-to-find-the-perfect-rich-husband-or-I'll-die thing going on." Sienna looked over her shoulder. Harmony had put her phone away and was reapplying her lipstick.

"She's not really like that," Polly began, but she picked at a cuticle and fell silent.



“Polly, there’s no such thing as the perfect guy. And being rich doesn’t mean he’ll be the perfect husband.” Sienna tried to figure out her next words without betraying Mac’s confidence. “If you meet a guy you like, and he doesn’t make a million dollars or own a yacht, don’t immediately write him off.”

“What are you, the Whispering Pines relationship expert?”

*If you only knew.* “Believe me, I’m not. At all. I just hate seeing people miss chances. Or pass up really good guys because they’re worried about what their friends might say.”

Polly glanced up.

“Like Mac Herbert, for one,” Sienna said casually, as if the thought had just occurred to him. “I’d definitely go for someone like that, someone who’s nice and has great hands and who could build me a dream house from the ground up.”

Polly’s cheeks turned pink.

“Miss Cruz, we’re here!” came a voice from the front of the bus, and Sienna stood. *Give him a chance*, she mouthed. She hoped Polly actually would.

The bus pulled into the stadium parking lot, and chaos ensued. Forty sweaty bodies pressed for the door, and it was all Sienna and Dash could do to keep their five students headed in the right direction. Polly and Harmony had tickets for the opposite side of the stadium, and in a moment, they were gone.

“This is a little like herding cats,” Dash said as they approached the main gate.

“More than a little.” She pulled the tickets from her purse and handed them to the attendant. “Everyone in Miss Cruz’s class, eyes on me!”

They froze in place, little statues with wide eyes and mouths. Sienna dropped to one knee in front of them. “What did we talk about

in class? About staying together?”

“We stay together all the time,” Billy and Bailey said in unison.

“What if you need to go to the restroom?”

“We ask you or Mr. Dash.” Caleb tugged on Dash’s pant leg as if in emphasis. “We never go anywhere alone.”

“Right.” Sienna gave Dawn a pointed look. “Never go anywhere alone.”

As usual, the girl didn’t say anything, but she met Sienna’s gaze with a steady one, and Sienna hoped that was enough.

“All right then, team, let’s go.” She took Dawn’s tiny, warm hand in hers and led them through the maze of concrete walls. Dash followed behind with the boys.

“Miss Cruz, look!” Caleb pointed at the Silver Valley pitchers warming up in the bullpen. Two young men, one a head taller than the other, wound up and let the ball fly in a steady rhythm. The catchers squatted at the opposite end of the bullpen, returning the pitches and pounding their fists into their gloves.

They stayed and watched for a few minutes, the boys rapt, Dawn less so. Sienna turned around for two minutes to tie Silas’s shoes, and when she stood up again, she saw that Dawn had wandered over to a kiosk selling programs, hats, and giant foam fingers. The guy behind the counter leaned down and asked her something, but she just stared and pinched her hands together. He frowned and made a comment, and Dawn’s face fell. Sienna walked over as the girl’s bottom lip pushed out.

“Come on, come on,” Billy called, almost delirious with excitement. They walked inside the gate, and he pointed at the enormous red signs hanging overhead. “We’re in Row F,” he shouted, and was about to dart away before Dash plucked him by the sleeve.

“Wait for everyone else, buddy.”

They managed to find their seats along the first-base line, third tier up. They had a decent view, and if a foul ball made it this far, Silas might even have a chance at catching it. The crowd settled in around them, and soon the players trotted out for introductions.

Sienna sat on one end of the row with Dash on the other end and the kids in the middle. Every few minutes he looked over at her and grinned. She grinned back; she couldn't help it. *If anyone had told me six months ago I'd be sitting at a baseball game with a bunch of little kids and a bodybuilder as a chaperone, I'd never have believed it.* Life sure was funny that way. She tugged a Panthers baseball hat over her ponytail and hoped London would treat her with the same good fortune.

To her utter surprise, the students sat rapt with wonder as the game began. From the opening pitch to the third out of the fourth inning, they remained silent, only cheering when the Panthers scored two runs in the third. Caleb pressed his hand against her leg every so often, leaning forward in his seat to watch. Silas had his glove positioned against his chest, his gaze on every foul ball. Sometime in the fifth inning, Sienna finally relaxed. She'd spent two sleepless nights worrying about taking the students out of their familiar environment. Turned out she didn't need to. They were having the time of their lives.

*This was a good idea.* The sun warmed her face, and she slipped on her sunglasses.

“Miss Cruz?” Dash called down the row. “I'm going to take these two to the bathroom.” He motioned to the twins squirming in their seats.

“Okay, sure.”

“Want anything? Popcorn? Peanuts?”

Caleb jumped up and down. “Yes, please! Peanuts.”

“Silas has a peanut allergy, so, no,” she said as she sat him back down. “But some popcorn would be nice, thanks.”

Dash nodded and directed the twins ahead of him up the stairs. Sienna leaned over to ask Dawn if she needed to use the bathroom too, but at a loud crack from the field, a roar swept over the crowd. Everyone around them leaped to their feet. A Panther had hit a grand slam, and four players made their way around the bases, pumping their fists and waving to the crowd as they crossed home plate. *Six—zero*, read the flashing neon sign behind the outfield.

“Miss Cruz, did you see that?” Caleb asked, his cheeks flushed with excitement. “A grand slam is very uncommon in a minor league game. Last year the Panthers only had two, and they were both at away games.”

“I did see it, and it was very exciting.” She slipped up her sunglasses and scanned the row. Silas bounced on his tiptoes, the glove still cradled to his chest. Billy and Bailey were climbing back down the stairs with Dash behind them. And Dawn—

Sienna’s gaze lighted on the empty seat beside Silas. *Oh, no. Please, no.* She’d looked away for thirty seconds. Not even thirty. Her entire body went cold. “Caleb, did you see Dawn leave?”

He shook his head.

“Silas? Do you know where Dawn went?”

His face furrowed for a moment, and then he turned and pointed to a sign that read “Restrooms.”

Sienna pushed her way down the row. “You boys stay right here. Don’t move.” She grabbed Dash’s arm. “Did you see Dawn up there?”

He shook his head. “She’s gone?”

Sienna nodded as panic closed her throat. “Silas thought she went to the bathroom.” She tried to push away all the horrible news stories about abducted children and predators who waited outside public restrooms for children. *This is my worst nightmare.* She stumbled up the stairs. A stadium filled with two thousand fans and a little girl who didn’t speak.

If anything happened to Dawn, Sienna would never forgive herself. Ever.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY

“Physical description?” asked the security guard.

Sienna twisted her fingers in the hem of her shirt. “She’s about four feet tall, blonde hair in braids. She was wearing a blue T-shirt and jeans.” Goosebumps covered her arms. She’d been up and down every floor of the stadium, in and out of every women’s room. It was as if Dawn had virtually vanished. “Also, listen, she probably won’t talk to whoever finds her.”

The security guard’s pen stopped moving on his notepad. “I’m sorry?”

“She’s selectively mute. She doesn’t talk.”

He scratched the back of his thick neck. “Ah, okay.” He shoved his notepad into his back pocket and repeated Dawn’s description on his radio. “I’ve got four men here. They’ll scour the place.” He patted Sienna on the arm. “Don’t worry. We’ll find her. She’s probably just looking at stuffed animals in the souvenir shop.”

Sienna tried to draw a full breath and failed. She’d already been through the souvenir shop. Twice. She’d left Dash with the other students, but he texted her every few minutes.

**Anything yet?**

**What can I do?**

**Nothing**, she kept saying. **Just make sure the others are OK.**

But as her thumbs typed the messages, other thoughts echoed inside her head. *I'm a failure. I lost Dawn.* It was the one thing she'd feared more than anything else. She wondered if the London school would revoke her position if they found out. Probably.

"Why don't you wait by concession stand in case she shows up?" the guard suggested.

Sienna nodded. What would she tell Dawn's foster parents? Or the principal, or the other students? Worse, what would she tell Dawn if they found her and she'd gotten hurt or scared and Sienna hadn't protected her the way she'd promised to? Her throat hitched. She laced her hands around the back of her neck. *Don't get hysterical. You won't be any good to anyone if you can't hold it together.*

On wooden legs she walked to the first-floor concession stand, where the air was ripe with the scents of popcorn and hot dogs and cotton candy. "Dawn!" She cupped her hands around her mouth and called until she was hoarse. She heard the missing child announcement over the loudspeaker, garbled and brash. She circled the entire stadium again, checking every nook where a small, anxious girl might hide. Nothing. Back to the concession stand, where a different, lanky security guard shook his head when she asked.

"We'll find her, ma'am," he said.

She turned away without answering.

"Sienna? Is that you?" Darryl Cobalt, the head custodian from work, walked over carrying a paper tray of hot dogs and fries.

"You're not at school?"

"I always take off opening day. Sixteen years and running." He frowned. "What's wrong?"

She pressed her lips together. "One of my students is missing."

He handed his food to a friend and took her in his arms for a quick, hard hug. "Oh, honey. I heard the announcement. Didn't know that was one of yours. Let me help. Where have you already looked?"

"Everywhere I can think of." And that meant maybe Dawn wasn't here anymore, maybe someone had taken her and she was far away by now, speeding toward another town with someone she didn't know. A pedophile. A child trafficker. Or just a lonely person who wanted a child of their own. She looked around for a place to sit. Her legs weren't going to hold her much longer.

Dash materialized from nowhere. "Where's the last place you saw her?" His blue eyes bored into hers. "Before she disappeared?" The four boys stood behind him, hands clasped tightly in a chain.

"You didn't need to come down."

"Of course I did. You think I could sit up there and do nothing?" He turned and pointed at the boys. "You guys stay right here with Miss Cruz, okay? I'm going to go find Dawn." He turned in a slow circle. "If I were her, where would I go?"

"I have no idea. I don't know why she disappeared in the first place."

"Too loud? Too many screaming fans? Too unfamiliar?"

Darryl reappeared with a tray of sodas and french fries. "I'll watch the boys if you both want to go looking," he offered. "I wouldn't be able to jest set by if it were me," he added.

"Thank you," Sienna said and pressed his hand in gratitude.

The eighth inning finished with another run scored by the Panthers, and together they walked to the top of the stairs. The teams switched sides and a few spectators began filing out,



apparently confident in their home team's four-run advantage. Sienna flattened herself against the wall to let them pass.

"She's gotta be here," Dash said, almost to himself. He kept studying the walls, the doors, every crevice and every dark corner. "Dawn!" he called out. "Dawn, it's Mr. Dash! Come on out, now."

Nothing. More people walked by on their way to the exits. Most gave them no more than a cursory look. A couple, mothers with kids in tow, looked on more kindly. Sienna's panic grew. It had been almost thirty minutes since Dawn had vanished.

Suddenly she saw a small door marked *Private* to her right. Its seams blended into the concrete blocks painted in team colors of red and blue. It almost didn't look like a door at all, but for the small metal handle. *It can't be.* "Where does that go?"

Dash tried the handle, and it creaked open. "I have no idea." He stuck his head inside. "Up to the next deck?"

"There isn't one."

"Are you sure? Must be access to the roof, then."

Visions of baseball fans falling to their deaths filled Sienna's head. Wouldn't they keep access to the roof firmly locked? Her heart thumped. "Do you think she went up there?"

"Only one way to find out. Dawn?" he said into the dark stairwell.

*She isn't going to answer,* Sienna almost said, but he already knew that. As he took a few steps up into the darkness, she wiped her forehead and realized she smelled of perspiration. She'd also completely shredded the bottom hem of her shirt, and she'd stepped in a puddle of ketchup at some point. She was dissolving into a certifiable wreck with every passing minute.

"Yes, I know it is," he was saying.

*Is he talking to her?*

“Miss Cruz is awfully worried about you. We need you to come down so we can all go back to school together.”

In disbelief, Sienna stuck her head under his arm and looked up. Far at the top of the dark stairwell, a pair of eyes blinked down at them. “Dawn?”

“Mr. Dash?” came Dawn’s plaintive voice. It was the sweetest sound Sienna had ever heard.

“Yes, sweetheart. I’m right here.” He glanced at Sienna. “And I’m not going anywhere. You’re safe with me.”

“I think I’m ready to go home now.”

ON THE BUS ride back to school, Dawn sat pressed up against Sienna. She stared out the window without speaking, but every so often, Sienna felt a small hand in hers.

*I can’t believe you found her*, she mouthed to Dash, who sat across the aisle. Actually, she couldn’t believe any of it had happened. It was like they’d been thrust into an after-school TV special. Her heart had only just returned to normal.

*How is she?* Dash mouthed back.

*Okay.* She glanced at Dawn, whose head bobbed with the bumps in the road. Her eyes had closed, and her fingers grew slack in Sienna’s. *I think she’s sleeping.*

When they reached the school parking lot, Sienna let Dash stay on the bus, guarding over Dawn while she released the rest of her students to their waiting parents.

“You lost a student?” Harmony said in passing. She arched a brow.

“Nope,” Sienna said, the blood hot in her cheeks. “Just got separated for a few minutes.”

Harmony gave a little sniff and turned to her own brood, none of them learning disabled or mute in the least. Sienna shook her head. *There's one in every crowd.*

"Don't let her get to you," Polly said from behind. "She's kind of a snob."

"Kind of?"

"She means well. She's from old money, that's all. Her parents have always made things go away. The biggest thing she ever worried about was when the nail salon in Silver Valley closed down and she had to find a new manicurist."

Sienna laughed. "How tragic."

Polly gave a little shrug. "We've been friends forever, so I take her and her attitude with a grain of salt."

Sienna didn't have much to say to that, so she returned to the bus, where Dash sat next to a bleary-eyed Dawn.

"Just woke up," he said.

Dawn rubbed her eyes.

"How are you feeling, honey?"

She shrugged.

*Oh, well.* Sienna supposed she couldn't expect a miraculous return to full speech just because Dawn had uttered a few sentences back at the ballpark. Still, they'd made a start.

"Wait for me?" Sienna asked as she took Dawn's hand. "I'll just be a minute." The day felt unfinished. She wanted to talk to Dash before he left.

"Sure."

But the conversation with Dawn's foster parents lasted almost twenty minutes by the time Sienna had reassured them that no harm had come to Dawn, but that she would certainly make an appointment with the school psychologist first thing Monday morning.

She hurried from the principal's office back outside, but the bus was gone. So were almost all the vehicles.

Except Dash's truck.

Something lifted inside Sienna, a headiness that carried her across the pavement to where he waited for her. *I can't wait until Friday*, she wanted to say. I want to see you tonight. Watching him with Dawn, watching him worry and take action, had made her fall for him even harder.

"Everything okay with the parents?" he asked.

Sienna nodded. "They were a little freaked out, of course, but who wouldn't be?"

"What about you?" He tipped down his sunglasses and looked at her over the tops. "You still freaked out?"

"I wasn't—" Then she stopped. Who was she kidding? Of course she'd been freaked out. An entire volume of worst-case scenarios had coursed through her mind in a matter of minutes. "I'm okay. But I'm really glad you were there. I don't know who would've found her if you hadn't."

"I'm sure you would've."

"I don't know about that. She was pretty well hidden."

He reached over and tugged the bottom of her shirt. "You should have more faith in yourself."

Heat flashed through her.

"You're a good teacher. And the smartest person I know." He hadn't yet let go of her shirt.

"That's nice of you to say."

"I'm not just saying it."

She took a step closer, so if he wanted to, he could touch more than her shirt. *Kiss me. Here. I don't care who sees us.*

"Want to grab some dinner later?" he asked.

“I’d love to.”

“I’ve got a few things to wrap up at the gym,” he went on. “If you want, follow me there. You can leave your car, and we can take a drive over to Silver Valley.”

Whether it was dinner, dessert or something more, she didn’t care, as long as she was with him. “I’ll be right behind you.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-ONE**

“You’re prettier than I remember.”  
Sienna froze. The voice came from her left, gravelly and low.

“You were in the diner the other night, right?”

She turned in slow motion. Dash had just left. She could still see his taillights turning the corner. The rest of the parking lot was empty; even the principal had departed after the buses left. But now, somehow, Al Halloran stood a few feet away, stinking of booze and body odor. The bruises on his face had faded, but the sneer that replaced them was worse.

“It’s just you an’ me, princess.” He wiped a hand across his face. “Thought maybe you could help me out.”

She backed toward her car. “With what?”

“I need a job. Asked Dash, but he said he couldn’t help me.”

“I’m sure there are other places you could—” For every step she took away, he took a step toward her. Closer. Closing the distance. Her heart skipped, jumped, settled back in her chest. He wouldn’t hurt her. Would he? He barely looked as though he could stay on his feet. She dug her keys out of her purse and held them between her

fingers, the way Dash had shown her in one of their first training sessions.

“You won some big award, huh?” he asked.

The shift in conversation threw her. Her keys slipped in her hand, sweaty with nerves.

“Good for you,” he went on, as if they were having a friendly conversation. “Most people in this piss-ant town don’t do much. Go to school, get a job, have kids, die and get buried here.

“But some people leave.” He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. “Like Dash. An’ me. ’Course, some of us make decisions that don’t turn out to be the smartest, too. He tell you about his time living in L.A.?”

“Yes.”

“And his ex-wife?”

The word dug into her. “Yes.” She swallowed. “Listen, I’m not sure why you’re here, but—”

He was on her before she realized he’d moved. Quick as a cat, he grabbed her arm, shook her hand until her keys fell to the ground, and pinned her against the car. Sienna’s bladder threatened to release. The tang of metallic fear filled her mouth.

“I need money,” he said, his face close to hers, his breath vile. “Gimme yours.”

*I’m being robbed?*

The thought astounded her. This didn’t happen in Whispering Pines. Not in broad daylight. But he bore down on her wrist, and she whimpered in pain. *He’s going to break my arm.* The door handle dug into her back, and her feet twisted against the pavement. Sheer panic washed over her. *I’ll just give him my wallet. There’s not much in there. And I can cancel my credit cards before he uses them. Maybe.* The problem was, despite what he’d said, he didn’t seem

interested in her money. He seemed much more interested in hurting her.

*It doesn't matter how big or strong your attacker is. If you have the moves, you can get away.*

*If you have the moves.*

Sienna stopped thinking. Stopped panicking. She hung onto Dash's words inside her head and let herself go as loose as a rag doll, and when Al's hand slipped an inch on her wrist, she acted. In a flash she spun, ducked under his arm, and shoved him to the ground. He landed with a splat, legs splayed, a look of surprise on his face.

"Damn, princess." He spat. "You could-a just said no."

"Leave me alone." She grabbed her keys from where they'd fallen near her front tire.

He raised both palms as if in surrender. "Fine. Can't believe someone as smart as you would be spending time with Dash Springer, to be honest."

"Don't talk to me." Her legs shook as she yanked open the door, and she had a hard time keeping them under her. *Just get in. Close the door. Close it on his hands if he tries to grab you again.*

"You know he spent time in prison, right?"

"What?" All the blood left her body. She felt it run through her stomach, down her legs, and out her feet. *Prison? Dash?*

"Felony theft," Al went on as he got up. "That's a pretty serious crime. Not like he ran a stop sign or forgot to pay a few parking tickets. Seems to me you could do a lot better than someone like that."

Sienna's throat closed. She hadn't studied law, but she was pretty sure felony theft meant Dash had stolen a large amount of money. Not a wallet. Not a hundred dollars. Thousands and maybe



tens of thousands of dollars or property. *Why would he do that? Could he have done that?*

She started the car without another word. Al could be lying. He probably was. He probably was trying to bring Dash down with him. Without another look behind her, she squealed her tires as she left the parking lot and headed for town. *I'll just ask Dash. I'll tell him what Al did, what he said, and he'll tell me it's crazy.* She repeated the words inside her head until she'd convinced herself.

But as she neared Springer Fitness, two police cars sped by, lights whirling. They pulled up outside the gym. Three cops jumped out and hurried inside, faces somber and hands on their hips, cradling their guns. A small crowd of spectators stood on the sidewalk, and she could hear murmurs as she parked and walked toward them on wooden legs.

*Might-a been going on since he opened the place*

*Someone said they're kids*

*He's not, he knows what he's doing*

*It's always the ones you never think...*



DASH WHISTLED as he pulled into the parking lot, whistled as he unlocked the back door, whistled all the way to the front desk. “Hey, man.”

Hans looked up from his phone. “You’re in a good mood.”

Yeah, he was. It had been one heck of a day, but everything with Dawn had ended up okay. And everything with Sienna was ending up more than okay. The way she’d looked at him in the parking lot, the way she’d smiled when he suggested dinner...he was pretty sure

she felt the same way he did, lit up and overflowing, like a fizzy glass of champagne whenever their paths crossed.

*Maybe something'll happen tonight*, he thought as he glanced at tomorrow's training schedule. He didn't want to wait until Friday to be with her, and he didn't think she did either. He had two early clients tomorrow, but if dinner with Sienna turned into dessert and then something more, he wouldn't mind a late night. *Not at all.*

"Hey, boss?"

Dash looked up at Hans's tone of warning. "What is it?"

Hans's head bobbed toward the locker room, where two guys in their late teens huddled just outside the door. Dash didn't recognize them. "Are they members?"

"Said they wanted to check out the place. I gave 'em a tour and then left 'em in the locker room. But that was a half-hour ago."

Dash tapped the counter. Something felt off. "I'll see if they want anything else." If they didn't, he'd show them the door. He was all for welcoming new clients, but these two looked like they were more interested in a free place to hang out, shave and shower.

"Can I help you?" he said as he approached them. Then he realized two other guys, not much older, stood just inside the locker room. One held a red duffel bag. The other was bent over his phone texting like mad.

"Give it to me," hissed the guy with the bag.

Dash froze. *The kids from the parking lot.* The ones who'd been smoking, vaping, passing around drugs—at least a couple of them now stood inside his place of business. And unless he was mistaken, that duffel bag didn't hold workout clothes.

"What the hell are you doing?" He grabbed the bag, and its contents spilled everywhere. Baggies of weed. Baggies of white powder. Bottles upon bottles of prescription drugs. *No.* He glanced

over his shoulder at the sound of sirens. Down the street. Getting closer. He had no idea where the Whispering Pines cops might be headed, but he couldn't be found with any of this inside his gym.

The teens cursed. One of them kicked the wall, then the bag. Dash dropped to his knees and began shoveling the drugs back inside. "What the hell are you thinking? Inside my gym?" He didn't want to know what they'd been planning. To stash them in a locker? To set up a side business for his clients? *I should've called the cops months ago.* But he'd never imagined these kids would have the balls to walk in his front door and bring their stupid decisions here.

"Here." He shoved the bag at the closest one. "Don't let me ever see you in here again." The sirens had gotten closer. Then they stopped. Dash turned in time to see three cops walk into the gym. Hans gave him a thumbs-up from the front desk, and his heart dropped as he realized that his trusty right-hand man had called the police.

*Except Hans doesn't know about my prison record.*

*Or the fact that I'm on parole.*

*And being found anywhere near illegal drugs gets me tossed back in prison.*

Dash cracked his knuckles and took a deep breath. Maybe he could talk his way out of this. Maybe the cops would ignore the teens and take his word for it there was nothing to see here. He was the owner, after all. He'd been doing nothing but walking a straight and narrow line since the day he came back into Whispering Pines. *I'll explain I didn't know anything about it. That they just showed up today. Hans'll back me up.* Then a fifth teen walked out of the locker room with a pill bottle in his hand and a look of total fear on his face.

Dash went cold. He recognized the shaggy hair, the faint moustache, the dark eyes and high cheekbones Louie Cruz shared

with his sister. No wonder Louie hadn't wanted to sit down and share a meal with Dash the other night. For all Dash knew, he and his buddies had been planning this for months. *Are you kidding me?* This would destroy his parents, not to mention Sienna. Dash didn't know whether to shake sense into the kid or level him with one punch.

"Dash?"

He jerked back to his visitors to see Ernie West, the local police chief, pull out a notebook and lick one fat thumb to flip to a blank page. Dash thought of Sienna on her way to the gym, probably just moments away. What if she got there in time to see her little brother led away in handcuffs? He had seconds to act. And so Dash pivoted, stepped between Louie and the cops, and wrenched the bottle from Louie's hand. Then he clasped his fists behind his back and waited.

"Yeah, Ern?"

"Got a call from Hans that you've been having some trouble down here." Ernie squinted at Dash, then at the knot of teens who remained frozen in place. He scribbled something on his notebook and looked up again. "You wanna fill me in?"

"Don't know much. These kids just showed up today."

Ernie sighed and pushed back his hat. "Search 'em," he directed the other two cops. "Start with the bag." He scribbled some more notes. "Principal at the high school called us last week. Said he found a few kids selling their parents' pills in the student bathrooms during lunch. One girl got airlifted over to Silver Valley after OD'ing. Hw wanted to know if we'd seen anything outside of school." He stared at the teens. "You all got some ID for me?"

Dash could feel the fear rising off them. He stood his ground, but sweat poured down his back. He kept his hands behind his back, gripped together so tightly his fingers tingled from lack of blood.

The bag was opened first, the kids questioned in turn. Every one of them had something else on him, in a pocket or slipped down the back of his jeans. Every time a bottle or baggie or pocket knife was added to the growing pile in the middle of the floor, Dash cringed.

“Sorry to have bothered you,” Ernie finally said. “Looks like we got what we need here.”

“Sure thing.”

Ernie gave him a long stare and then tucked the notepad back into his pocket. “Ya know I gotta ask, Dash.” He motioned to Dash’s hands. “Got anything there to show me?”

He thought about lying, about just shaking his head and hoping for the best. But he’d known from the beginning this wouldn’t end well. He’d known it was just a matter of time before his past met his present and twisted everything up. Without looking at Louie, he released his hands and dropped them to his sides.

Ernie gave a sigh and took the bottle from Dash’s hand. He held it up to the light and read the label out loud. “Oxycontin. 100 tablets. Prescribed to Sal Cruz.” He shook the bottle, clearly full. “This gets about five grand on the street. But I’m guessing you already knew that.” He tossed the bottle into the duffel bag. “You’d better come down to the station.”

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-TWO

“I don’t understand,” Ma kept saying. She sat at the dinner table with Sienna and her father. Louie was in his room, grounded for the unforeseeable future. “What was Louie doing there? He doesn’t even know those boys.”

“Maybe he does,” Sienna said. Just because he’d never brought them over to play video games didn’t mean he hadn’t developed a new set of friends. She wondered now if that had been the root of his fistfight with Jack and Carlos. Maybe Louie’s two childhood friends had seen him drifting and tried to stop him. Louie wouldn’t tell them. He hadn’t said a word since they’d picked him up at the police station after questioning.

*He wasn’t found with anything on him, the police chief told her parents. He’s clean, at least as far as that goes. He shook a fat finger at Louie. But I’d advise you to choose some different friends to spend your time with.*

Sienna hadn’t gone into the station at all. She’d waited for her parents outside, watching as Dash arrived in a police cruiser. Head down, he’d followed the officer inside, back stooped, neck red. Like a guilty man walking to his execution.

She twisted her fingers together and thought about what Al Halloran had said. *I didn't know Dash at all*, she thought, and it seared her to the bone. Behind Mr. Nice Guy who read to her students, behind his bravado at the gym, behind the tattoos and the seeming remorse over his past life, Dash Springer had turned out to be just another good-looking jerk.

"Honey?" Ma patted her shoulder. "Do you want some dinner? I have a roast in the oven." She got up and knocked over the salt shaker. Her hands shook, and she wiped them on her apron as a tear sneaked from her eye. "I'll just have to make some vegetables..."

"I'm not hungry."

The doorbell rang, and they all jumped.

*They released him*, Sienna thought suddenly. It was all a mistake, and the cops had released Dash, and he'd come here to apologize and tell them what had really happened. "I'll get it." She rushed through the living room and pulled open the front door.

"Hey, Sienna."

Her heart squeezed, retracted, and settled back into its broken form. "Hi, Jason. What're you doing here?"

He looked down at his feet. "I heard what happened. Just wanted to see if there was anything I could do."

*Like what?* she almost asked, but that wasn't fair. It wasn't Jason's fault she'd chosen the wrong guy to fall for.

"Jason!" Ma materialized behind her. "How are you? Come on in. Sienna, open the door. Put down an extra plate in the dining room. Sal!" she called over her shoulder. "Jason Kingsley's here. Would you get him something to drink?"

Sienna stood in the foyer, arms crossed, as he walked inside.

"I'm really sorry," Jason said. "I know you liked him."

*And trusted him.*

She wanted to weep. Yes. She had. She'd almost let down all her guard, run into Dash's arms, and told him things she'd never told anyone else. She'd almost *done* things she hadn't done with anyone else. Sienna straightened her shoulders. *Thank goodness I didn't.*

"Are you going to press charges?" Jason asked, hands in his pockets. He looked earnestly at Sienna, with the same kind eyes, the same open expression he always had. Like he had nothing to hide and everything to give her, if only she'd take it.

"For stealing the pills?" He must've done it when he was over for dinner, they'd all reasoned, gone into the medicine cabinet and palmed her father's pain pills. "I don't think so. He'll have enough other charges brought against him."

"Organizing a drug ring in his gym is pretty serious," Jason said. "Plus I heard few of those kids were under eighteen."

And if anything Al Halloran had told Sienna was true, this wasn't the first time Dash had gotten in trouble with the law. Her gut burned, turned over, tightened into a ball of hurt and betrayal. She hadn't seen any of it, hadn't thought he was anything except a guy with a few bad breaks who was trying to get better.

"What's this?" Jason touched her wrist in the spot where a bruise had bloomed. "Did he hurt you?"

"No." Her other hand flew to cover the bruise. *Actually, he helped me.* If she hadn't known how to get away from Al, things in the school parking lot might have ended a lot worse. Dash had saved her, at least in that way. He'd taught her how to stand up for herself, how to think through panic, how to trust her instincts and act without fear.

But that just made her heart ache even more.





DASH SAT in the single cell at the police station with his hands clasped between his knees. He stared at the cracks and stains in the floor and rehashed the last three hours until his head hurt. He'd waived any phone calls, having no one to talk to. According to Ernie, he'd stay here overnight, then be transferred to the county jail in Silver Valley in the morning. If he'd simply violated his parole, then he probably would've been released until a future court date, but theft of narcotics, possession and intent to sell were new charges. He wouldn't see the inside of his house or his gym anytime soon.

*In a minute I'm gonna wake up from this.* He'd blink, roll over in his bed, and it would all be a nightmare.

But he didn't. He made a fist and released it, over and over again. When it came right down to it, he didn't care that he'd covered for Sienna's kid brother. Louie had his whole life ahead of him. If he was smart, he'd take this as a warning and straighten up before he turned eighteen. He didn't need a police record, sealed as a minor or not, and he didn't need to be expelled from school. The others would be, and then good luck getting an equivalency diploma. Dash had done time before. He could do it again. The thing that killed him would be losing the gym, his clients, all the people who'd trusted him and believed in him.

Then he readjusted that thought as he scraped one tennis shoe along the ground. The thing that killed him the most was knowing he'd disappointed Sienna. *We had something.* His jaw ached from clenching it, from holding back the anguish of hurting her. He'd been thirty minutes away from taking her to dinner, sweeping her off her feet, telling her he'd never felt this way about anyone.

And just like that, the universe snapped its fingers and took it all away.

If his mother was still alive, she'd say it was a rash decision. She'd say he should've turned them all in, including the sixteen year-old kid brother of the woman he was falling for. But Dash lived rashly. He knew that. He'd tried to improve over the years, tried to resist acting in the heat of the moment, but it simply wasn't in his nature. At least this time his actions had saved someone else. Maybe that was a sign of improvement.

He sighed. It was done now. For Louie, for Sienna, to protect her family, he'd do it all again.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-THREE**

“It’s right around the corner from my flat,” Max said. “We can literally walk to each other’s doorstep in under five minutes.”

Sienna propped her tablet on the dresser in her bedroom. Clothes, books, boxes and suitcases covered every unoccupied inch of space. She’d spent two days after Dash got arrested feeling sorry for herself. On the third day, she’d gone to the police and reported Al Halloran’s assault.

“I know I should’ve come in sooner,” she said, “but I did take pictures.” She showed the chief her phone, with the photos of her arm all black and blue. He’d taken down her information, tsked under his breath a few times, and put out an arrest warrant.

“Ain’t promising anything,” he said. “I got a feeling Al’s probably long gone. But we’ll do our best.”

She nodded and left, wanting to ask about Dash but not knowing how.

Now her focus was on finishing school and planning for her move to England. She still had two months, but with any luck she could move up her departure date. No reason to stay in town after school finished in mid-June. Max was apartment hunting for her now, and

Sienna had emailed the headmaster at the preschool to ask if she might start a couple weeks early.

*We may have an opening at the end of June*, he'd written in response. *I can email you the details as soon as I know more.*

It was something to hang onto.

"Did you see this one in person?" she asked Max. "Did you go inside?" She'd found the cutest little apartment in Max's neighborhood the other day—at least, it looked cute from the pictures and the descriptions online. But she didn't know if that was British sleight of hand, if "trendy and cozy" actually meant "leaky, exposed pipes and a bed that shares space with the kitchen."

"I'm going tomorrow. I'm sure it'll be perfect."

"Are you bringing all those books?" Jason asked as she signed off with Max. He sat on the end of her bed, a legal pad on his lap and a pen in one hand as he checked off her lists. "You know you have to pay if your bags are overweight, right?" He pointed at a table in the corner, piled high with file folders and textbooks she wanted to bring with her.

"Maybe I could ship them ahead of time? I could use Max's address until I have one of my own."

He made a note. "I can find out shipping rates if you want."

She sank onto the bed. "This is getting real, isn't it?"

"Sure is." Jason's cheeks colored and his gaze dropped, the way it always did when he got close to her. "I'm going to miss you."

"I won't be gone that long. Just a year." But even as she said it, the days and weeks and months stretched out ahead of her. Anything and everything could happen in that time.

"Still," he said, and let the word hang in the air.

She knew what he wanted her to say, that he should come visit her there, or that they could Skype, or that she'd miss him too. But

as much as she wanted to, she couldn't. He'd been so steady over the last few days, so helpful as she sorted through the mess of her life. A couple of times she'd almost thought they might get back together. Jason would never break her heart, she knew that with certainty. He'd never lie to her, or conveniently forget to tell her about some awful mistake in his past, or twist up her heart so that she lay awake at night pining over him.

But she would never lie awake at night pining over him.

Realizing that made her next words a little easier. "Jason, you're a great guy. And there's no way I can thank you enough for being here for me." She took a deep breath. "But I think we both know we're better off as friends. There's someone amazing out there for you," she went on before he could say anything. "Someone who's going to make a great minister's wife someday."

He rubbed his jaw. "I don't have to be a minister."

"Yeah, you do. And you'll be a great one. You'll be just what Whispering Pines needs when your father retires."

He didn't say anything to that. They sat there for a while in silence.

"Is it Dash?" he asked after a while. "Are you in love with him?"

"No." She shook her head. She didn't love Dash. She couldn't. Maybe she'd been close to falling in love with the man she'd thought he was, but that had turned out to be a mirage. Okay, so she hadn't slept more than a handful of hours each night, staring at her ceiling, replaying the moments they'd spent together, the meals, the kisses, the way he'd fallen into her life like an unexpected blessing. But obviously he'd had a double identity behind all that.

She hadn't spoken to him since the arrest. She wasn't even sure she could, if the jail allowed visitors or phone calls, though in a town this small, Ernie would probably break the rules. *He lied to me*, she

thought as she lay awake at night. *He didn't really lie*, came the next thought. *He just didn't tell me about a pretty bad part of his past*. She tried to put herself in his position. Would she have confessed an arrest and jail time to someone she wanted to spend time with?

*Probably not.*

But that didn't change the heaviness in her heart. When she added in the fact that he'd stolen drugs and involved her younger brother, everything turned darker. Josie kept her up to date on Dash's situation—*he's got a court date comin' up, guess he's using some public defender over in Silver Valley, Ernie says he'll probably be servin' time*—and Sienna thought about reaching out, but what would she say? Better to move on, both literally and figuratively.

Jason got up and laid her list on the bed. "Guess I'll get going."

"Thanks for all your help. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome." He rested one hand on her shoulder, strong and true. "I'll be here if you need anything, Sienna. Always."

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-FOUR

One Saturday Sienna went over to her parents' house to help Ma plant some early annuals. It had become their tradition over the years, bringing color to the yard in raised beds that her father had built years ago. This year they didn't talk much. Her father puttered around in the garage, sticking out his head every so often to ask a question.

"You're storing things here, Sienna? How much stuff are we talking about?"

"What's in these boxes behind the lawnmower?"

"I'm ordering lunch. Who wants pizza?"

"Sal, there are plenty of leftovers from last night," Ma said with a huff. She rubbed her face and left a streak of potting soil across one cheek.

"I know. But your son asked for pizza. And I'm kind of in the mood for some, myself."

Ma's eyes glittered black. "*Louie* doesn't get to make the requests for meals around here." She sighed and looked at Sienna. "But since you're in the mood, pizza does sound good. Get an extra pie for us, would you?"

Sienna sat back on her heels and surveyed their progress. “It looks good.” They still had an afternoon’s worth of mulching to do, but pinks and reds of all kinds filled the beds along the front of the house, and she knew they’d mature to gorgeous blossoms by the time summer rolled around.

*I won't be here to see them, but...*

She blinked away tears. She was an emotional wreck these days; it seemed like the smallest thing could turn her into a weepy mess.

Later, after they’d devoured the pizza and planted two more beds in the backyard, she stood and stretched. “Guess I’ll be heading home.”

To her surprise, her mother burst into tears.

“Ma? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing...” She found a tissue in her pocket and blew her nose. “I just can’t believe you’re leaving.”

“I’m only going about four miles that way.” She pointed toward town.

“You know what I mean. You’re my first baby. And now here you are in a few weeks, going off to another country. For a whole *year*.” Her voice broke on the word.

Sienna pulled her into a fierce hug. “I’ll miss you too. But it’s not like I’m going to the wilds of southern Thailand where there’s no cell service. London’s a big city with running water and electricity and everything. Plus Max and Nate are there.”

“Call me every day.”

“You know it’s a six-hour time difference, right?”

“I don’t care.”

They hugged for another long minute, and then Sienna kissed her parents goodbye and headed around the house to the driveway. Everything ached from the physical work of the day, from her back



and neck to her arms and legs. But it was a good exhaustion, a feeling of accomplishment. *Like after a good workout.*

But that thought, like most of the ones she had these days, brought her back to Dash. Everywhere she turned, a memory. It crushed her.

The front door opened, and she turned to see Louie standing on the top step. His hair was mussed, his eyes red, and he wore a Knicks jersey over pajama bottoms. He'd come out to grab some pizza earlier and then promptly disappeared again. *You look terrible,* she wanted to say, but he probably knew that. She hoped he got himself straightened out. She wasn't sure what had driven him to change his circle of friends in high school, but she hoped he had the brains to realize he'd made a colossal mistake.

"See ya," he mumbled.

She waved goodbye and got into her car. Out of habit, even though she knew she shouldn't, she scrolled through her text messages and missed calls, looking for one she knew hadn't come. Wouldn't come. Dash's silence had left a hollow spot in her heart, worse than anything she'd felt before.

She glanced in the rear view mirror as she pulled away. Louie was saying something to Ma, but she couldn't read his lips. It looked intense, from his face and her reaction, but she couldn't imagine what he might be saying that was all that earth-shattering. Maybe he was finally passing all his classes at school. Or apologizing for putting the family through so much angst. Whatever it was, Ma would fill her in eventually.

*Time to leave the drama behind.*

Sienna turned up the radio and thought about British pubs and fish and chips and a whole new world ahead of her.



“WELL, I’LL BE A SON-OF-GUN,” the guard muttered as he walked down the hall.

It was Monday, the beginning of his first full week in jail, and Dash lay on the flat mattress in his cell staring at the ceiling. In an hour he’d walk down to lunch, eat some slop that was barely edible, get some TV time or maybe play ping pong, then retire back to his cell. He didn’t talk much to the other inmates; his court date was set for the day after next, and then he’d likely be transferred to Rikers Island or maybe Otisville Federal. He figured he was looking at three to six years, depending on whether his public defender was a slick talker. Right now Dash was betting on no.

The guard stopped outside of Dash’s cell, rattled some keys, opened the door. “You’re outta here.”

Dash leaned up on one elbow. “What?”

The guard shrugged. “Charges’re dropped.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m escorting you down to release.”

Dash sat up, swung his feet to the floor, and looked around for a camera, a reality TV host, a joke played on him at the expense of the viewing audience. He hadn’t heard from his lawyer. *Why would the charges be dropped?*

“You comin’, or I gotta drag your ass there?”

“I’m coming.” He slid on his shoes, grabbed a newspaper and a journal he’d been allowed to keep, and followed the guard down the hall, past the common rooms, the dining hall, and into the processing room, where he was handed his wallet, cell phone and the clothes he’d been wearing upon arrival.

*Don’t say anything. Don’t question anything.* If they’d made a mistake, he wasn’t going to be the one to tell them. But no one

stopped him, even looked twice at him, as he took his things and walked out into the late afternoon sun. Dash stopped. He'd been inside that dim concrete building so long, he'd forgotten what sunshine and freedom felt like.

He blinked and tried to get his bearings. He'd have to call someone to pick him up, but there was a pretty good chance his cell phone had died a long time ago. He stopped on the sidewalk and took a long, deep breath of fresh air. The sky, a gorgeous blue above, was cut through with jetlines of white.

*Sienna.*

In a few weeks, she'd be getting on a plane that would take her far away from Whispering Pines. He hadn't stopped thinking of her, not for one day. She was the only thing that had gotten him through this horror, the memory of her smiling across the classroom, grimacing during a workout, laughing over beers in his living room. If he ever saw her again, he'd tell her the truth. About everything.

"Need a ride?"

He didn't recognize the voice right away. The sun beat down from above, and he had to shield his face as he looked in the direction of the parking lot.

"Come on." The person who belonged to the voice took his arm.

*Sienna's mom?*

"We've got a lot to talk about. If we hurry, you can catch her at school." She tugged him to her car, and he got into the passenger side without a word. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall, but dressed in a black sweatshirt and black leggings and a fierce expression, she slipped on her sunglasses and gunned the engine like James Bond's sidekick. "You do want to see her, don't you?"

There was nothing in the world Dash wanted more.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FIVE**

“**W**atch your step! Caleb, please wait for Silas.” Sienna steered her students toward the line of buses and waited until they all got safely on. The day was gorgeous, a mid-April afternoon lit up with sunshine. The buses pulled away, then most of the teachers’ vehicles, until she was left with only a handful of other cars in the parking lot. She lifted her face to the sun. At this rate, she’d get a tan before the week was through.

She dug into her pocket for her keys, but instead her fingers closed on a flimsy stub of cardboard. She pulled it out, puzzled.

**Silver Valley Panthers, Seat One**

It was like a punch to the gut. The ticket bent in her hand, the ink worn and the edges torn. She could almost feel the sun on her neck, hear the crack of the bat, see Dash at the other end of the row.

“Sienna!”

Now she could *hear* him, his deep baritone voice calling her name, the way he had so many times that spring. In the gym. In her classroom. In her dreams before she woke, when the world hadn’t spoiled things yet.

“Sienna!”

She crumpled the ticket. She had to stop torturing herself. Dash was sitting in a jail cell miles away. He wasn't jogging across the parking lot like a lunatic, waving one arm and calling out her name.

He couldn't be.

But somehow, in some miraculous reality, he was. With her mother close behind.

"Ma?"

Dash skidded to a stop in front of her. Sienna's mother stayed a few steps behind and pretended to look at her phone.

Sienna stared at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

"No, I mean, *how* are you here? Aren't you supposed to be in—"

He took one step closer, then another, until the space between them narrowed to a breath. He was pale and thin, like he hadn't eaten or slept much. "I got released. Just today, just a couple hours ago. The charges were dropped. I didn't do the things they said."

She glanced at her mother, confused. Ma looked like she'd spent the better part of the last two hours either crying or yelling. Maybe both. "Does this have anything to do with what Louie was telling you the other day?"

Ma's mouth opened and closed a few times before it settled on some words. "Your brother told me he'd taken the pills. Said he didn't know why, that he was doing it to fit in." She turned bright red. "I had no idea. When he told me, I just..." She pressed her lips together. "At least he did the right thing. Finally."

*But too late!* Sienna wanted to say. *After everything was blamed on Dash!* She didn't know whether to cry or rip Louie's head off when she saw him. "Where is he now?"

"Your father and I thought it'd be best if he spent the night at the police station." Ma straightened to her full five feet. "The chief said

they probably won't charge him with anything official, but he needs to know what could happen if they did."

Sienna took Dash's hand. Warm. Strong. He folded his fingers through hers. "But you had the pills when the cops got there. I don't..." Then understanding swept over her. "You covered for him?"

Dash shrugged. "He's a kid. I didn't want that mistake to haunt him for the rest of his life."

*Like mine did.* She could read the rest of the words on his face. She couldn't believe it. First he'd saved Dawn. Then he'd saved Louie. "What are you, some kind of guardian angel?"

He laughed. "Oh darlin', I'm not anything close to an angel."

*Darlin'...*

She loved the way it sounded on his tongue. And yet there was still something she needed to know. She took a deep breath. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything."

"Why didn't you tell me you spent time in prison?"

He took a long moment to answer. "How did you find out?"

She wouldn't tell him that Al had practically assaulted her in the parking lot; she had a feeling if she did, he'd end up back in jail for murder. "I ran into Al Halloran. He said felony theft?"

Dash visibly cringed.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Would you have gone out with me if I had?" He shook his head. "It's a long story. It's the worst story of my life, actually, and if I could live one hour over again, it would be the hour I broke into Edie's apartment and tried to take back what was mine."

"You told me she cleaned out your bank accounts. So you tried to get the money back?"

“All I wanted was the title to my Mustang. It was the first car I ever bought, and I restored the whole thing top to bottom. She loved driving it, though, so I put her name on the title too. She moved in with her boyfriend after I kicked her out, so I knew where she was living. Al and I went there one night when I thought she’d be working.”

“If both your names were on the title, they couldn’t have prosecuted you for theft.”

“They didn’t. Not theft of the car anyway.” He ran one hand over his forehead. “I was pissed. She had stacks of cash under the envelope where we found the title.”

“So you took the cash.”

“She’d stolen almost ten grand out of our joint account, and probably less than a thousand was money she’d actually earned. Yeah, I took it. Not all of it. Five grand. Figured that was compensation for what she put me through.”

Sienna tried to imagine that kind of betrayal and heartbreak.

“She came home from wherever she was, found us there, and called the cops.”

“Why didn’t you just return the money?”

He shrugged. “I was stupid. I figured any judge would take one look at the situation and understand. Maybe even make her pay me back the whole amount.”

“I’m guessing that’s not how it went down.”

Gently, as if she might break, he took her face in his hands. “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you. It’s a lousy part of my history, and I’m embarrassed as hell about it. I’m hoping it doesn’t matter now.” He dropped his hands and took a step away. “But I understand if it does.”

She tugged at his belt until he was pressed up against her again. "It doesn't. I don't care about what happened in the past."

"Really?"

"Really."

Then, in the heat of the sun and in plain sight of anyone who might be walking by, Dash bent and kissed her, and she stopped thinking about everything else. His tongue moved inside her mouth, slow and deliberate. His hands slid down to cup her hips, and everything inside her went white-hot. She threaded her fingers through his hair, wanting him closer. He moved his lips to her neck and closed over the spot where her pulse jumped.

A moment passed, or maybe ten minutes or an hour or a day. Sienna had no idea how long they stood there. Her entire world narrowed to this spot and this man.

"This is real," he said when he finally stopped kissing her. He took her hands in his. "Came out of nowhere and knocked me off my feet."

She nodded.. "For me too."

"But I don't want to be the guy that asks you to stay in Whispering Pines. I know you have a whole amazing experience ahead of you, and I would never get in your way. That's not why I'm here." He looked over his shoulder. "Actually, I wouldn't be here at all if your mom hadn't picked me up from jail and driven like a bat out of hell."

"She has her moments." Sienna paused. "So why *are* you here, exactly?"

"To tell you how I feel. That I want this, and you. I want to give us a try." He kissed her again. "I'm crazy about you, actually."

Her heart soared. "I'm crazy about you, too."

"How long before you leave for London?"



“Two months. Give or take.” Crazy that she’d been counting the days just a few hours ago. Now they couldn’t stretch out long enough.

“Sounds like plenty of time for us to figure out the next step.” He put a finger under her chin. “If that’s what you want.”

*I want you.*

*And us.*

“I do.” *So much.*

“Maybe we could start with dinner tonight?”

“I’d love that.” She couldn’t wait to welcome him back into her life.

And into her arms.

And maybe, down the road, into her bed.

*Down the road?* shouted her girl parts as they walked to her car.  
*It better be tonight.*

Sienna smiled. She also couldn’t wait to check one last item off her list—and then start a brand new one. She had a feeling Dash Springer’s name would be all over it.



Thanks for coming on this journey with Sienna and Dash – I hope you loved their story! The final book in this series is *Winter’s Wonder*, where you’ll meet another sweet girl who falls for a bad boy. Holiday charm and a few miracles abound...spend one more season in the sweet small town of Whispering Pines and enjoy!



# WINTER'S WONDER

## BOOK FOUR

***“People have forgotten this truth,” the fox said. “But you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed.”***

***~The Little Prince***



Zane's not the bad boy he was when he left Whispering Pines. He's back, and (mostly) reformed. Nowadays, he works security in a gated community. His life is simple and good. The only thorn in his side is the stray dog scaring residents and the cute do-gooder who takes him on for trying to chase the dog off.

Becca knows Zane's just doing his job, but she's trying to rescue a stray and the legendary playboy's tactics are making her job much harder. When she finds out he's not an animal-lover, she can't decide whether she should cut him loose or try and thaw his heart.

These two have little in common, except a red-hot chemistry that insists on rearing its head every time they're together. When Becca faces the animal rescue of a lifetime, can she count on Zane to come through, or do old habits die hard?

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

“**T**here goes Zane Andrews.” Ella Ericksen leaned over the window seat, nose pressed to the glass, and stared at the street below. “Yum. I’d sleep with him.” She wiggled her bottom, clad in bright pink velour sweats with sparkles splashed across both cheeks.

“I’m surprised you never did back in high school.” Becca bent over the striped kitten in her lap and inspected the cut on its head. It mewed softly.

Ella turned around and sat with a dramatic huff. “I never even hung out with him. He was too—I don’t know—unpredictable back then.”

Becca would bet he still was. They’d all gone to Whispering Pines High together, though Zane was a few years older than both sisters. Still, everyone knew him. He’d always reminded her of a wild animal, all rippled muscle, dark hair, dark eyes that held a teasing, impatient glint. Stunning to look at. Terrifying to approach.

Ella tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and inspected her manicure. “Did I tell you? Derek asked me to give him a second chance. I kind of promised I’d think about it.”

“Good. I like him.” Becca blotted away the last of the blood from the kitten’s cut, applied some ointment and then kissed its front paw.

“Ew,” Ella said. “Really, Bec? That’s disgusting.”

“And you talking about sleeping with Zane Andrews isn’t?” She set the kitten in a cardboard box lined with towels and carried it over near the pellet stove in the corner.

“Oh, honey,” Ella said with a smirk. “If you do it right, sleeping with a guy isn’t disgusting at all. It’s liberating. Exhilarating. Of course, if we’re talking about Zane, *sleeping with him* is way too tame a phrase for what heating up the sheets with that man would involve.”

Becca turned. “You’ll never change, will you?” She loved her older sister, but the two Ericksens were as different as night and day.

“How long is that one staying here?” Ella said rather than answer. She waved a manicured finger at the box. Two other cats, long-term residents of the sisters’ apartment, lounged on blankets beside the stove. Laurel and Hardy had come with Becca, a package deal she’d made her sister agree to when they moved in together. Lop, the rabbit, had his own cage in Becca’s room, along with Tucker, the gerbil, but Ella had drawn the line at four furry residents. The rest were only fosters that came and went, temporary visitors at best.

*Unfortunately*, Becca sometimes thought. She’d rather spend her time with animals than people, most days.

“Only until tomorrow morning, Scrooge.” Becca pulled off her bright green sweatshirt with *Whispering Pines Paws* on the front in white script. Underneath, a long-sleeved T-shirt stuck to her back and underarms. “It goes back to the shelter then.”

Ella craned her neck. “Is it—you know, like, okay?”

Becca smiled. As much as her sister tried to act impervious to the wounded animals Becca worked with, she had a soft side

underneath. Becca had even caught her feeding the stray cats in town on more than one occasion. “It will be. Just crawled up under the hood of Ron Thompson’s car this morning looking for some heat.”

Ella bounced up and inspected the thermostat. “Speaking of which...” She rubbed her hands together. “This is the most *horrible* winter so far. Cold and ice and freezing rain but no snow. When’s the last time we had a Christmas in Whispering Pines with no snow?”

Becca couldn’t remember. This far north in the state of New York, nestled at the base of the Adirondack Mountains, their small town always got more than its share of the white stuff, certainly in time for the holidays, and usually long before. She checked on the kitten, which had already curled its nose into its tail and was purring contentedly. *Wish I could drop off to dreamland that easily.*

She yawned. She’d spent six hours at the shelter today—six unplanned hours—since her manager had called in a favor yet again. Not that Becca minded. She’d logged over a thousand hours volunteering at Whispering Pines Paws by the time she graduated from high school, and after getting a business degree from a small liberal arts college in Connecticut, she’d come back to her hometown and happily taken on the position of financial manager at the shelter.

“I thought doing the books meant you wouldn’t be spending so much time on the rescuing side,” Ella said a few months ago. “All those poor animals...I don’t know how you stand it.”

But the rescuing made everything else worthwhile. Saving a family of guinea pigs abandoned in a box by the railroad tracks, or watching a pair of goats double their weight in a week, or bottle feeding a kitten whose eyes hadn’t opened yet. Those were the moments she clung to, the moments that made her feel like she was making a difference. Balancing the profit and loss columns in the



shelter's books? Not so much. There weren't ever profits, anyway, not for an animal shelter.

Ella pulled open the fridge at the same time Becca's cell phone rang.

"Do you think—" Ella began, but Becca only heard the shrieks on the other end of her line.

"Becca? Oh my God, *Becca?* Are you there?"

"Chrissy? What's wrong?" She envisioned an entire litter of puppies buried alive, or a devastating fire in the cat wing, or something infinitely worse, the way her manager was breathing and shrieking into the phone.

"No, nothing," Chrissy said, and Becca's heart rate inched downward a fraction. "I mean, I just—are you sitting down?"

"Yes." She shrugged at Ella, who was staring at her from the kitchen doorway.

"Billy proposed to me!"

"Oh. That's...congratulations?" Chrissy and Billy had been in an on-again, off-again relationship for as long as Becca could remember. If they weren't breaking up, they were talking about moving in together. But marriage had never been on the radar before now.

"Thanks. I didn't want to tell you, but..." Chrissy trailed off. "I'm pregnant."

Becca blinked. "Wow. I..." *Didn't expect that. Think you're crazy. Can't believe I didn't notice.*

None of the responses seemed quite right. Instead, she took a moment to steady her voice. *I'm not jealous*, she thought. *Of course not.* At twenty-four, she had no immediate plans for marriage and a baby, and little time for a boyfriend. Still, every once in a while, especially with the holidays approaching and mistletoe hanging in

every doorway around town, she couldn't help but be a little envious of people like Chrissy.

"Becca? Are you still there?" Chrissy bubbled into the phone.

She stood and began collecting the clothes she'd strewn around the living room—work boots by the door, woolen hat and gloves beside her chair, sweatshirt on the floor. "I'm here. And congrats, Chrissy. Really. I think that's great, all of it."

*"All of what?"* Ella mouthed.

Becca shook her head. *"You'll never guess,"* she mouthed back.

"Anyway, I know this is totally last minute," the manager went on, "and you have every right to say no, but I'm really, really hoping you won't."

Becca froze. Baby shower? Bridal shower? Bridesmaid? She waited for the request. She wasn't the type to handle any of those. And she and Chrissy weren't that close, despite having worked together for almost two years. "Um, what is it?"

"Billy got a transfer to the airport in Westchester. He's supposed to start working maintenance there next week."

"That's a long haul from Whispering Pines"

"I know. That's why we're moving." Chrissy paused. "This weekend."

"To Westchester?"

"Well, we're going to stay with his parents down there until we find a place. But, yes."

"What about the shelter?" Sixty-five animals, give or take depending on the day, flashed into her mind's eye. Jake and Snowflake had vet appointments tomorrow morning. Velvet was scheduled for his neutering. The entire back room of kittens had to be treated for ringworm, and their vet tech was out of town until the weekend.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. I want you to be general manager.”

Becca dropped onto her unmade bed. “What?”

“You know that place better than anyone else.”

“I do the *books*, Chrissy. The money. The fundraising. The marketing.”

“You do more than that and you know it.”

Becca broke out in a sweat. “I can’t run *all* of it.”

“You won’t have to. Not for very long. I already talked to the board of directors. They’re going to advertise for a full-time manager. But with the holidays and everything...”

And the pittance of a salary, and no benefits, and the fact that it was less than a month before Christmas, Becca guessed they wouldn’t be flooded with applicants. She twisted her navy-blue comforter in the fingers of her free hand.

“Listen, Julito and Kevin live next door. They take care of all the maintenance and they’re on call twenty-four seven. Shirley volunteers every day except Fridays, and Janet will be back from her training at Cornell in two days. You can do it, Becca. Please. I know you can.”

She couldn’t. She had no business even trying. Taking on the responsibility of all those animals, keeping them safe and healthy and trying to balance the shelter finances all at the same time...how could she?

Laurel the calico padded into her bedroom and jumped onto Becca’s lap. She purred loudly and rubbed her head against Becca’s leg. Three years ago, she’d turned up with her brother in a drainpipe outside of town weighing all of six ounces. Becca had bottle-fed her for three weeks. Today she weighed almost twelve pounds and serenaded Ella and Becca at odd hours of the day and night. The cat

thumped onto her side and looked adoringly at Becca, paws kneading the comforter.

Something in Becca's heart turned over. *Fine*. She'd be the crazy cat—and dog, rabbit, goat and occasional pig—lady of Whispering Pines. She stared into her closet, filled with sensible jeans and long-sleeved shirts and work boots. So much for a glamorous wardrobe like her sister's or a night when she didn't go to sleep with the scent of disinfectant on her hands.

"Okay," she agreed. She bent over Laurel and let the cat's soft fur tickle her nose. She'd always felt more at home around animals, anyway. They were much more loving and forgiving and much less judgmental than most people she knew. "I'll do it."

CHAPTER  
**TWO**

“One more,” Dash Springer said from above the bench. Zane grunted and shoved up the bar loaded with weights one last time. Sweat rolled down his face and his shoulders burned. Still, benching two-fifty wasn’t bad, considering he’d only been lifting seriously for a few weeks.

“Lookin’ good,” Dash said as he replaced the bar in the rack.

Zane sat up and mopped his face. “Thanks.” He grabbed his water bottle and scanned the small gym. Two soccer moms by the free weights. A guy he recognized from high school doing squats by the mirror. A few teens trash talking as they took turns on the pec machine. And three college-aged girls jogging on the treadmills to his left, ponytails and breasts jiggling nicely in rhythm. Not bad for four-thirty on a Thursday afternoon. Dash had done well for himself, building this gym up from nothing. Zane was glad to see it. Outcasts like the two of them hadn’t always gotten breaks in this small town.

“Sauna?” Dash asked.

Zane shook his head. “I’d like to, but I gotta head back out to the Glen. Couple residents keep complaining about a stray dog going through their garbage.”

“That’s the job of the security guard?”

“That’s the job of whoever they can get a hold of.” In most cases, that seemed to be Zane, rather than one of two sixty-year-old maintenance men or the other security guard, an overweight woman who spent her time eating cold Ramen noodles and reading magazines. But he didn’t mind the last-minute calls. He could be working a lot of places worse than a gated community in Whispering Pines. Plus, it wasn’t like he had to rush home to a wife and kids. He followed Dash to the front desk, where he grabbed a sports drink. Perks of helping his buddy build the gym included free membership and access to whatever happened to be in the cooler.

A bright red banner hung over the desk. *Join Springer Fitness for its 2-Year Anniversary! Saturday, December 1, All Day. Free Access to Classes and Machines, Steam Room and Whirlpool. Party into the Night with a DJ!*

“You ready for Saturday?” Zane asked. Dash sat on a stool behind the desk and typed something into his laptop. Hans, the gym’s nineteen-year-old clerk who was built like a Mack truck, sat on the other stool, going through paperwork and answering the phone when it rang.

“I guess so. The Corner Lounge is donating a bunch of food and one of Hans’s friends is set up to DJ. I’m just hoping for a decent turnout.”

“You’ll get one,” Zane said. He pulled on a woolen hat and shrugged into a leather jacket. He had jeans in the car. Good thing, too, because this winter had turned out to be a raw son-of-a-bitch, and she was just getting started. He could see streams of white coming from people’s noses and mouths as they hurried by outside. Chasing down a stray dog wasn’t his first choice for today’s waning hours of daylight, that was for sure.

“See ya,” Zane said and trotted out into the cold. Truly, he had no patience for strays. They got into things they shouldn’t and generally caused smell and destruction. He’d gotten the security detail job at Mountain Glen as a favor from a friend, and he had no intention of screwing it up. That meant chasing out anyone or anything that didn’t belong. He shrugged his shoulders against the bitter wind. A dog would be easy to get rid of. He’d taken care of a rabid fox and a mangy-looking barn cat back in the fall.

He pulled himself into the cab of his black Ford pickup, cranked the heat and the heavy metal tunes, and swung a sharp U-turn in the middle of Main Street. One dog to take care of and he’d be on his way home to a hot shower, dinner in the microwave and a night in front of the TV. Sounded pretty much like heaven.

Less than ten minutes later, Zane pulled into the long, curving drive that led up to Mountain Glen. Most of Whispering Pines, at least the Whispering Pines he remembered, was made up of one-story houses and modest lawns and the blue-collar workers who came home to them. Sure, he’d known the occasional rich kid in school, but most of the money in this part of New York clustered in Silver Valley, over the mountains to the west.

That had changed since high school. Red Barn Road was lined with homes built in the late eighteen or early nineteen hundreds. A recent renovation boom had turned them into gems that sold for a half-million or more. Just past them spread wide open farmland, which had been sold three years ago to a developer who thought Whispering Pines needed a gated community. Mountain Glen was born.

Zane pulled up to the gate and waved his ID in front of the sensor. A moment later, the gate lifted. Inside the booth Sue nodded at him, fork in hand and a noodle slipping from her mouth. He’d

never thought a place like Mountain Glen would survive, but forty homes nestled on this road that curved along the mountain, and a good thirty of them had families living inside.

He pulled around to the small brown building behind the security booth and parked. He jumped out and was about to make a mad dash for the warmth of the maintenance shed when a Mercedes SUV drove by, slowed and beeped. Margery Holmes, mother of four, rolled down her window and wiggled her fingers.

“Hi, handsome.” Bright blonde hair puffed out from her head in all directions, and she smiled with the frozen look of someone with a tad too much Botox. He knew the look. Half the women in Mountain Glen had it.

“Hiya.”

“Nice calves,” she added, her gaze falling to his bare legs still clad in long gym shorts. “Coming from the gym?”

*Naw, this is my usual December attire,* he thought about saying. But he had to kiss ass around here. So he just nodded, raised a hand in hello-goodbye and hurried to the shed. She beeped again and pulled away. Zane had never felt like a piece of meat before he started working in Mountain Glen. But too many bored housewives lived here while their husbands commuted to jobs in cities over the mountain, leaving before the sun rose and returning home long after it had set. The wives ogled at him and made up problems with their security systems and then giggled when he came inside to fix something that wasn't broken.

Inside the small but neatly organized maintenance shed, Zane dropped his shorts and pulled on his jeans before checking the clipboard hanging by the door. Sue was on until midnight, and he had the early shift tomorrow. He flipped on the small TV sitting next to the coffee maker and tuned in the weather.



“Looks like no snow for at least another week,” the reporter was saying. “But temperatures will hover around twenty during the day and drop down into the single digits at night.”

Zane turned the TV off again. What he wouldn't do for some good old-fashioned snow. He wouldn't have guessed it, but living in Georgia for almost eight years had made him miss the seasons. He swapped his sneakers for work boots and pulled on a pair of leather gloves. He hadn't seen the stray dog in a couple of days, but they'd gotten two calls that morning about it. He scowled and unlocked the gun safe hidden inside a closet next to the bathroom. He'd bring his pistol just in case he came across anything dangerous. A guy one town over had been bitten by a rabid skunk just that fall.

Back outside, he followed the main road straight to the back of the complex. Streetlights above him cast down weak yellow light, and he shivered in the cold.

“Hi, Zane!” Gloria Hanson yanked open her front door as he passed. Looked like she was wearing some kind of flimsy red bathrobe and not much else.

He raised his chin in hello and kept walking.

At the next corner he turned. Kelly Turner and Liv Yedziniak had both called in sightings of the dog. In front of the Turner house, he stopped and looked around. A few pieces of garbage lay on the driveway, but the can itself had been righted and pulled near the door. He walked over and knocked.

Kelly opened it an inch, her eyes big in her head. She looked about eighteen.

“Hi there,” Zane said. “Heard you saw that stray dog again?”

She opened the door all the way. “Yes. Twice this morning.” She wore a tight-fitting T-shirt and jeans. “I yelled at it, but it didn't even move. It just growled at me.” She touched his arm. “I have a

newborn,” she went on. “I can’t have, you know, a dog like that outside. It might attack Carter or something.”

Zane doubted that, considering she carried the child everywhere she went, but he kept his mouth shut. She hadn’t let go of his arm. “Dennis has his phone turned off when he’s in meetings, so I couldn’t call him.” But the way she was looking up at Zane, he wondered if she would have bothered contacting her husband.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll look around.”

“Thank you.” Her gaze dropped to his groin, then back to his face. “I appreciate it.”

“Uh huh.” Back on the street, he followed a few paw prints in the dusting of snow along the curb, but they soon faded. He strode through the Yedziniak’s lawn next, which backed up to a pine grove. No more houses on this end of the complex, though more development was scheduled for the spring, and all these trees would eventually come down. Zane walked over to the tree line and peered inside. At five o’clock, darkness had already descended, and the streetlights didn’t permeate the tightly packed pines. *It’s probably living back there.* As the thought coalesced in his mind, he saw movement, a quick flash of brown beneath the green. His hand tightened on his pistol.

He gave a low whistle. Waited. Whistled again. A moment later a long, dirty snout emerged, followed by a painfully thin body and bright yellow eyes.

“Well, there you are, you scavenger.”

“Hey!”

As quickly as it had appeared, the dog vanished into the trees. Zane whipped around, irritated. *I almost had it. Woulda come to me in another minute.*

A petite figure in a red ski coat and jeans marched toward him. “What do you think you’re doing?” Her arms pumped and her breath came out in long white ribbons. As she neared him, he could see a long blonde ponytail under a red wool cap and mismatched mittens on her hands, one blue and one black.

“I’m taking care of my property,” he retorted. He’d almost squeezed off a shot, she’d startled him so. “Who the hell are you?”

She walked straight up to him, and only when she stopped and met his gaze did the iron in her stance falter. “Zane?”

He stared. She looked a little familiar, and under other circumstances she might be cute, but he couldn’t place her. She didn’t live in the Glen, he knew that much, which meant she was trespassing. “Sorry. Do I know you?”

“Becca Ericksen.” Even in the low light, he could see a blush deepen on his cheeks. “We went to high school together. Well, not together. You were a few years ahead of me.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He kind of remembered her, but high school had been a blur of cutting class and getting high and chasing cheerleaders in short skirts. Becca didn’t look like she’d traveled in those circles.

“As of last night, I’m the manager of Whispering Pines Paws,” she added.

“The animal shelter?”

“Yes.” She glanced at the trees. “Someone called me about a homeless dog out here.”

He waved in the general direction he’d seen it disappear. “You didn’t need to come out. I can take care of it.”

She looked at his face, then the trees, then the gun in his hand. “*Take care* of it? You know shooting a domestic animal is—”

“Whoa.” He held up his palm. “Stop right there. I wasn’t going to shoot it.”

“You’re holding a gun.”

“It’s a pistol I carry for the security job. It’s registered to me and fully legal. I don’t know that the dog isn’t rabid. Or dangerous.”

“Well, the law says you can’t discharge a firearm within five hundred yards of a residence.” She turned and pointed, as if he was a child. “Looks to me like that’s a residence.” She pointed in the opposite direction. “And that. And that over there too.”

“I don’t need you to tell me what the gun laws are.”

She dropped her arm. “Fine.” She walked closer to the trees. “Could you tell if it was hurt?” she asked over her shoulder.

Just what he needed, a bleeding-heart animal lover. He huffed out a breath and walked over to join her. “No. It didn’t look hurt. Just skinny.”

She nodded and rubbed her arms as if to warm herself. “I’ll bring one of the guys from the shelter out here tomorrow, see if we can catch it. Please don’t kill it before then.”

Did she really think he’d do something that cold-blooded? “I’m not going to kill it,” he said tightly.

Her nose had turned pink, but bright blue eyes blinked up at him. He had no idea what her figure looked like under all those clothes, but the parts he could make out looked pretty cute. “Will you need any help?” he asked before he could stop himself.

“No,” she answered. “In fact, it might be better if you weren’t here at all.” And with that, Becca Ericksen turned on her heel and left, taking her perky behind and her attitude with her.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

“Are you ready yet?” Ella stood at the bathroom door, tapping the toe of one stiletto brown suede boot.

Becca yanked a brush through her curls with one hand and tried to apply mascara with the other. “Five minutes.”

“You said that five minutes ago. And five minutes before that.”

“Relax. It’s not like we’re going to the Oscars. Last time I checked, there wasn’t a limo waiting downstairs.” Becca dropped the mascara and the brush at the same time. Whatever look she had going on now would have to be good enough. “What should I wear?”

Ella followed her into the bedroom. “Something that doesn’t look like you’ve been mucking stalls all day.”

Becca’s shoulders tightened. “There aren’t any horses at the shelter, El.”

Her sister waved a hand. “Whatever. You know what I mean. Wear something sexy.” She rifled through the hangers.

“We need to go into your closet for that.”

“Yes, we do.” Ella strutted into her adjoining room. Thirty seconds later she reappeared holding something that looked like black lace and a bikini and not much else.

“What is that?”

Ella laid the outfit on Becca's bed, shooing away Laurel and Hardy. "Leggings and a bustier. Put a camisole underneath and you're good to go."

"A bustier? It's like five degrees outside!" Her fingers had only begun to thaw about an hour ago, after cleaning cages and dog runs all day and walking back and forth between the outside kennels and the warmth of her office. "Forget it." She pulled clean jeans out of her bottom drawer.

"You are *not* wearing jeans to a Christmas party." Ella wrestled them away from her.

"It's at a gym," Becca pointed out. "Don't you think you'll be a little overdressed?"

"It's still a party."

"Fine," Becca said. "I'll compromise." Instead of the bustier or leggings, she pulled on the jeans but added a low-cut black sweater. The necklace she rarely took off, a silver paw print, dangled against her bare neckline. She added large silver hoop earrings and a pair of black boots—not stilettos, but with a manageable yet stylish two-inch heel. Then she turned in a circle. "There. Acceptable enough?"

Ella bounced up. "Yes. How you got those boobs when I'm flat as a pancake, I will never understand," she said as she walked out into the hall.

Becca wouldn't either, but she wasn't about to complain. Her hourglass figure was the only thing that made her feel like an honest-to-goodness woman most days. She fed her rabbit and checked on the sleeping gerbil before heading out into the cold. She wasn't the party type, but she had to admit, after two ten-hour days at the shelter, it was kind of nice to be wearing something other than work clothes.

Twenty minutes later, they swung Ella's two-door Honda into a parking spot at the opposite end of Main Street. "See?" Ella said as they hurried down the sidewalk. "I told you there'd be a lot of people here." The wind cut through the buildings and took Becca's breath away. She pulled her coat around her neck and wished she'd worn a hat. They pulled open the steamed-over front door of Springer Fitness, and rock music, animated conversation and the smell of spicy, tangy foods washed over them.

"Hello, welcome, thanks for coming!" Dash Springer squeezed his way through the crowd. He kissed Ella's cheek and nodded at Becca. "You can put your coats over there and help yourself to food down by the aerobics room." He gestured at the far side of the gym. "Good to see you!" he boomed over the music.

Becca smiled in response. They'd met once or twice, though she'd never held a conversation with him. He had enormous arms and shoulders, a square jaw, blond crew cut, and looked like the perfect person to own a gym. Rumors held that he'd run into trouble while living out west, and that he'd come back to Whispering Pines looking for a clean slate, but Becca didn't put much stock in rumors. Anyway, he'd made a success for himself, and he'd been dating straight-laced Sienna Cruz for the last six months, which spoke volumes. *Wonder how she managed to tame him?* Ella had said more than once.

*Bet there's no taming Zane Andrews.*

Without warning the thought flashed into Becca's mind. She tried to put Zane's face out of her head, but it was admittedly hard. If he hadn't been halfway to shooting an innocent dog the other night, she might actually have found him good-looking. Sexy. Downright appealing. But he didn't strike her as an animal-lover, or even an animal-tolerator, so that meant he was off-limits. Becca hung up her

coat and looked around for familiar faces. Even though she'd been back from college almost two years, most of her friends from high school had left Whispering Pines and moved on to bigger or warmer locales. Her only close friend still in town was home with the flu and a cranky one-year-old.

*Might as well get some food.* The last thing she'd eaten was a slice of cold pizza around two o'clock. She walked past a group of teenagers writhing to the music and wondered how the four kittens were doing that had arrived at the shelter that morning. Found under the porch of an abandoned house, they looked to be three or four weeks old. No mother in sight. She'd gotten them set up in the quarantine wing, tended to them all day, and Shirley was coming in at eight to bottle-feed them again, but Becca still worried.

A broad back rose up in front of her, and she ran into it before she had a chance to stop herself. "Uff!" Her jaw clamped down hard, and she pinwheeled backwards.

The owner of the back turned, reached out a hand and grabbed her arm to right her. A minute later, Becca realized she was looking into the face of Zane Andrews. Again. For the second time in less than a week. Piercing brown eyes met hers.

"Sorry," he muttered. "You all right?"

Her face grew hot. "I'm fine. I should probably apologize to you. I wasn't looking." Head in the clouds, mind on her animals, she had blinders on when it came to the real world. *I run into things more often than you'd guess*, she almost said, but she couldn't make the words form. For an instant she got lost in his gaze, a mix of interest and appreciation as he took in her outfit. He wore a tight-fitting black T-shirt with a denim shirt open over it and faded jeans. Didn't show much skin, but he didn't have to. Muscles were evident on every single inch of his body. Five o'clock shadow, mussed black hair and



a dimple that punctuated his smile. *Wowza*. Becca knew instantly why every red-blooded woman in town wanted to jump into bed with this guy.

“Where do I know you from?” he asked.

Her cheeks flamed. He didn’t remember? She was that unforgettable? Of course, to be fair, she’d been bundled up against the elements the other night, and it had been dark outside. Still, she bet he would’ve remembered Ella.

“I was at Mountain Glen the other night trying to find a stray dog. And you were about to shoot it.”

His expression changed. “That was you?” He leaned closer. “Ah. The blue eyes. Now I remember. And no, I was not about to shoot it. I thought I made that clear.”

She took a step back. Zane Andrews didn’t need to be looking at her eyes. Or any other part of her. Self-conscious, she crossed her arms over her chest at the same time his cologne teased her nostrils. “Have you seen it again?” she asked to distract herself. “The dog?”

“Nope. But it gets into the residents’ garbage all the time. I’m sure it’ll turn up.”

“Please don’t hurt it.”

“I wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

Her shoulders scrunched up to her ears. “There are some pretty cruel people out there. You’d be surprised.”

“Actually, I probably wouldn’t be. But you don’t have to worry. I’m not gonna take it home and adopt it, but unless it comes after my jugular, I’ll leave it alone. I just need to relocate it,” he added. “Can’t have strays wandering around the community.”

*No, of course not. They’d disrupt the perfect lawns and landscaping of the Glen.* She fought the urge to roll her eyes. “Next

time you see it, just give us a call,” she said. “I sent one of my techs out there yesterday, but he couldn’t find it. You don’t need to bother yourself with it.”

“It’s not a bother.” Zane gave her a half-grin. “I like to take care of things myself.”

She bet he did. *Is he talking about something other than a stray dog?* She was so out of practice flirting or being flirted with, it was hard to tell. She tried to think of something else to say, something clever and teasing, but not a word came to mind.

“Anyway, nice seeing you.” He winked. “Enjoy the party.”

“Sure, yeah, you too,” she stammered as he walked away. *Nice job, Bec. Totally savvy.* Face flushed from their exchange, she made her way to the food as her mind vacillated between admiration at the way Zane filled out a pair of jeans and worry over the dog finding a way to stay warm. She piled a plate with mozzarella sticks and potato skins, thought a minute, then added some carrot and celery sticks for an effort at nutrition. Finding a space by the aerobics room, she leaned against the wall and surveyed the crowd. The DJ had switched to holiday tunes, and now a large group of people swayed to “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.” Near the women’s locker room, Ella pointed to a swatch of mistletoe and then laughed as her ex-boyfriend, Derek, leaned over for a kiss.

A wave of nostalgia came over Becca. She’d always liked Derek, and though Ella had broken up with him half a dozen times in the last year, he always came back. Truly, Christmas made the world seem more magical. Despite the sadness and cruelty she saw on a regular basis, the crisp air of December, carols on the radio and people’s genuine good cheer made up for the rest of the year. She smiled and tapped her toe to the music. It wouldn’t matter that she didn’t have someone to kiss under the mistletoe. She had a collection of fur

babies both at home and at the shelter, and they were enough to keep her warm and happy.

“Having a good time?” Out of nowhere, Zane materialized again beside her. Becca almost dropped her plate in surprise.

He held out a plastic cup. “Punch?”

She eyed it suspiciously. “What’s in it?”

He chuckled. “I’m not sure. Knowing Springer, some kind of protein mix and all-natural fruit puree. No alcohol.” He winked. “Though I’m sure we could get some if you wanted.”

Dear God, he was flirting with her. Becca took the cup and tried to steady her hand. “No, I’m good,” she lied. Actually, a shot of vodka was just what she needed right now. Her pulse spiked as Zane leaned against the wall beside her.

“Haven’t seen you around town much.”

She took a sip of the punch. “Wow, do you use that line on everyone?” Then she bit her bottom lip. *Too snarky, Bec.*

But he just smiled. “Not everyone. Just people I haven’t seen around town much.”

She smiled. “I’m at the shelter most of the time.”

“Ah.” He drank his own punch and looked at the crowd. “You ever take time off?”

Why? Was he going to ask her out? Her heart rate continued to skyrocket. No. Of course he wasn’t. Zane Andrews could have his pick of any woman in town. He was probably just making polite conversation. Or Ella had sent him over to keep her company.

“It’s hard,” she finally managed to say. “Always something to take care of there. Homeless animals don’t really follow a nine-to-five schedule.”

He took a drink, gave her a long look. “I’ve known plenty of animals in my time,” Zane said. “They had pretty good intuition.

Knew how to take care of themselves.”

A strange feeling passed through her, and for just a second she wondered how much this guy hid behind his good looks and bravado. *Do you take care of yourself? Have you always had to?* But she'd never dare ask Zane Andrews that question. Like animals, people were good at hiding their pain. And maybe she was reading too much into the conversation.

“True,” she finally agreed. “But just because they can doesn't mean they should have to.”

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

**T**wo days later, Zane slipped out of the security booth as soon as Sue drove up in her Chevy Blazer. Usually he spent an hour or so after his day shift updating paperwork or hanging out with the maintenance guys. The TV in the shed was always tuned to a game or a reality show, and the coffee stayed hot around the clock. But today he had someplace to be.

“Anything I need to know?” Sue settled into the single captain’s chair of the booth. She glanced at the cameras, then at Zane.

“Nope. Quiet day.”

She nodded and pulled out a stack of women’s magazines. “Hope it stays that way through midnight.”

“Can’t imagine it won’t.” He touched two fingers to his forehead in goodbye and then jogged in the direction of the maintenance shed. He pulled off the requisite blue security hat and ran one hand through his hair. Needed a cut, and badly. It fell into his eyes and made the back of his neck scratch.

Then Zane froze. “Well, there you are.” To his right, almost in the middle of the road, stood the stray dog. It looked like some kind of German shepherd mixed with mutt, with long, skinny legs and a long,

skinny snout. It cocked its head, and its tongue lolled out of its mouth for a second. Then it licked its chops.

“Lookin’ for food?” he said, turning slowly. He held out one open hand, trying to coax the animal closer, but the dog took one step back. The wind blew, ruffling its short brown fur, and Zane could see every one of its ribs.

*Next time you see it, call us. We’ll take care of it.* Becca’s voice flashed into his head.

But as much as he’d like to see her again, Zane preferred to take care of his own problems. One of the maintenance guys opened the door of the shed and gave him a quizzical look. *I got it*, Zane mouthed. The guy shrugged and headed toward the pool building with a bucket and a squeegee.

“C’mon...” Zane said in a low voice. He walked closer. The dog watched him. No tail wag, but no growl either. It wasn’t wearing a collar. Zane wondered where it had come from, and what it was living on. Didn’t look like much. “Hey, buddy, just let me—” He leaned in to grab it around the neck, but it took off. Zane cursed under his breath. The dog dashed a few yards away and then turned and looked over its shoulder, panting. Zane went to follow, but this time it took off at full speed. In seconds it was gone.

“Fine.” Zane threw up his hands. “You win.” He turned and walked back to the maintenance shed. Stupid animal. It had to be starving. And cold. Why didn’t it let him take it inside, instead of fending for itself against the elements?

He stripped off his long-sleeved blue shirt, ditched the blue uniform pants for comfortable faded jeans and pulled on a Clemson sweatshirt. He glanced out the window that faced the complex, but the dog was long gone. *I could leave it some food.* He hated to put out anything that might attract critters, but the thing looked starved.

Still, it had obviously taken care of itself this long, right? The wind whipped again, and that decided it. He pulled open one of the storage closets in the back of the shed where the guys kept rock salt and birdseed and—yep, there it was. A big bag of cheap dog food.

“Don’t think he’ll care if it’s the generic brand.” Zane dumped some kibble into a plastic bowl. Feeding strays went against his better judgment, but if he could get the animal to come here for food instead of rummaging through the residents’ garbage, at least he could get his hands on it and take it over to the shelter.

He hoped.

He twisted the top of the dog food bag back into place and picked up the bowl. At the last minute, he grabbed a few clean towels from the pile near the bathroom. Then he went back outside and arranged the towels and the bowl against the one protected corner of the shed where the wind didn’t howl. He hoped he wasn’t inviting a party of wild animals out of the woods. The last thing he needed were skunks and groundhogs taking up residence in prestigious Mountain Glen.

He dusted off his hands and headed for his truck. No more worrying about it. Whatever creature wound up here, he’d take care of it. He had more important things to do.

On the local radio station, Miranda Lambert started singing about doing somethin’ bad as Zane pulled out of Mountain Glen and headed for town. *Wouldn’t mind doing somethin’ bad with her*, he thought with a grin. His groin stirred, but it wasn’t the thought of the country singer doing it. Nope, he’d had a tough time keeping his mind off a certain other blonde since the previous weekend at Springer’s party.

Becca Ericksen.

As soon as he’d left the party at the gym, he’d gone home and dug out his high school yearbook. He felt like a jerk, not

remembering her, so he'd flipped through the pages until he found her three years behind him. She was a skinny little thing with big eyes, but she'd had a curvy figure even back then. He found her on the group pages in the Student Council and Yearbook Club and Chorale, whatever that was, which pretty much explained why their paths had never crossed.

*Maybe that needs to change.*

Something about Becca had stuck with him for the last two days. Maybe the fact that she hadn't thrown herself at him. Maybe the fact that she had a job where she honest-to-goodness saved other creatures on a daily basis. Maybe just the cute way she blushed when he looked at her.

He eased his truck down Red Barn Road, then followed County Route 78 through town until he reached Garrison's Feed 'n Seed near the interstate. The best place to buy anything from hunting equipment to tools to rabbit food, the store had been a fixture in Whispering Pines for three generations. A handful of pickups were parked in the front lot, but Zane pulled around back to the Christmas tree display.

"Hey, man," Reid Garrison said as Zane walked up to the rows of pines. "What's going on?" He grabbed Zane's hand in a hearty shake. "I hear you've been taking care of the lonely housewives out at Mountain Glen."

Zane whistled. "This town loves its gossip, doesn't it?"

"Is it true? You been warming beds out there?" Reid grinned. They'd played ball together back in high school, and they'd had more than their share of fun when it came to warming beds.

"Nope. I'm walking the straight and narrow. Trying to keep a low profile." He strode down the line of trees. He wasn't sure how tall a tree he should get. Six feet? Seven?



Reid followed him. "Doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun."

Maybe not, but Zane had faced his share of jealous boyfriends and angry husbands. He'd vowed to stick to single women from here on out. "How much?" he asked, pointing to one full spruce. A little shorter than all the rest, it made up in fullness what it lacked in height.

"For you? Forty bucks. Friends and family discount. I'll trim and wrap it for you too." Reid hefted the tree onto his shoulder and carried it across the lot. "Need anything else? Wreath? Stocking stuffers?"

"Nah." Zane wasn't much for the holidays. He didn't have anyone to celebrate with now that his mother and sister had moved down south. He waited, paid, helped Reid toss the tree into the bed of his truck and then picked up a tree stand at the last minute. "Thanks, man. See you around."

Reid waved and loped back inside the Feed 'n Seed. Zane jumped into his truck and cranked the heat. The wind had picked up, but the forecast still had zero snow for another few days. Zane shivered. He could do without the bone-chilling temperatures, especially if they didn't bring anything good for skiing or snowmobiling. As he neared Main Street, he checked the GPS on his phone. A right turn onto Jefferson Avenue, then a left onto Lower Road would bring him where he wanted to go. He checked the clock again. Ten minutes to five.

On impulse, he swung into the drive-through of the local coffee place and ordered two large hot cocoas. Five minutes later, he was negotiating the potholes of Lower Road until it came to a dead end at two long, low buildings. *Whispering Pines Paws*, read a sign near the front door. Peeling white paint outlined a cluster of paw prints at the bottom. *Animal Abandonment is a Crime!* read another bright red

sign. *Punishable up to \$2500*. He didn't see a single soul, human or animal, anywhere. A chain-link fence lined a dog run on one side. A walking path wound behind both buildings and disappeared into the fields beyond. Two overflowing garbage cans sat beside the curb, near a pile of crates and carriers of all sizes. Even through his closed windows, he could hear the sound of barking, from high-pitched yelps to low, throaty woofs.

*Maybe this was a mistake.*

Well, he'd come this far. And he was more than a little curious to see where Becca Ericksen spent her time. Zane parked, took a deep breath, grabbed the two cups of cocoa and headed inside with his best grin on.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

Becca stared at the man who'd just walked inside Whispering Pines Paws. He was tall, dark and handsome and held two cups of what smelled like heavenly hot cocoa. Then she looked down at herself. Dirty jeans, salt-stained work boots and a long-sleeved shirt covered in cat hair. In one hand she held a broom. In the other, the file of a no-show adopter. She watched Zane's expression, a mix of curiosity and something else, probably a certain level of disgust, as he took it all in. Then she burst into tears.

"Whoa. Ah, Becca?"

She cried harder, until tears blurred her vision and her nose began to run. She dropped the broom and leaned against her desk chair. She couldn't sit on it, since it was piled high with files and bills and a cat bed that needed cleaning. And she just cried. For a solid minute, sobs burst from her chest and out of her throat. This was ridiculous. It was heart-breaking. Running an animal shelter was non-stop work, both physical and emotional, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could do it. To add insult to injury, Mr. Good Looking, who didn't even like animals, had just shown up to witness her frazzled state. Finally, she drew one hand across her face.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice hitched. She looked around for a tissue but couldn’t find any, so she just used her sleeve instead. “It’s been a really long day.” From the kennel behind them came the echoes of thirty-three dogs of various shapes and sizes. Julito and Kevin would be in at five-thirty to feed them, but she knew their barks of frustration came from being pent up in this cold weather, not just their hunger.

“Sounds like it’s been a rough day.” Zane held out a cup. “Hot cocoa?”

*Hot cocoa.* As if a warm beverage could fix all her problems. But she took the cup anyway. “Thanks. That’s very, ah, thoughtful.” And more than a little puzzling. What was he doing here? She sniffled away her remaining tears.

He looked around. “Must be tough running this place by yourself.” He ran one hand over paneling that had separated from the wall near the door. A space heater hummed at his feet and two gray cats lay curled up next to it. The baseboard was split, and she had towels stuffed in the cracks along the window. “Needs some work, huh?”

Her face heated. “Yes, it does. But in case you didn’t guess, the donations aren’t exactly pouring in.” She looked at a crumpled flyer lying on the desk. *Spend Christmas with One of Santa’s Elves!* read the bright red and green letters. Three of their good-natured senior cats were pictured at the bottom with Christmas hats plopped onto their heads. Chrissy had planned an extravagant adoption event back in the fall, hoping for at least twenty of the shelter’s animals to go home in time for the holidays. But with Chrissy’s sudden departure and the lack of volunteers and manpower, Becca had shelved that idea. Now she only hoped she wouldn’t have to take in any more animals, because they were full to the gills. She’d already

turned the back bathroom into a kitten sanctuary and doubled up some of the smaller dogs in the kennel.

"I didn't mean it as a criticism," Zane said in a slow drawl. She heard he'd lived down south for a while, and it sounded as though he'd picked up an accent in those years. Not that she was really noticing, and not that she found it sexy.

"Just an observation." He looked back at her, at the pictures and clipboards hanging askew on the walls, at the cats by the heater. "Need some help?"

Her eyes burned, and she almost dissolved into tears all over again. "I thought you said animals could take care of themselves."

He grinned. "I wasn't talking about the animals, necessarily," he said. "I just meant if you need a hand, I'm pretty good with repairs. And I wouldn't charge you."

*He's trying to be nice*, a voice inside her said. *Be nice back*. "Thanks for the offer. There are a couple of guys next door who usually take care of that stuff. It's just hard for them to keep up with everything. I'll keep you in mind."

Zane nodded. He took another look around the office, set down his own cup and backpedaled for the door. "Hang on a minute."

Becca frowned. He hadn't said what he was doing here. Maybe he'd caught the dog? Or maybe he'd *done* something to the dog? She hurried to the window in time to see him walk around to the bed of his truck and drop the tailgate. *Please tell me he didn't use his pistol*. She couldn't deal with a body that needed cremation. Not today.

But a moment later, Zane pulled out what looked like a pine tree. He walked up the path and inside the front door. Just outside the office, he set it on the ground and shook out its boughs.

“Thought you might like a little cheer,” he said from the other side of the tree. She couldn’t see his face, and it was probably good he couldn’t see hers either, considering two minutes ago she’d thought he was bringing her a dead dog.. *I’m an idiot. I assumed the worst, and here he is with a Christmas tree.*

But this Zane made even less sense than the one with the gun. At least that Zane resembled the guy she remembered from high school, the bad boy who was cocked and ready to go off at a moment’s notice. This guy? She’d told him off not once but twice in the last week. She looked and smelled about as appealing as something that had crawled out from under a porch. So why was he standing in her hallway with a Christmas tree?

He poked his head around the side of the spruce. “Here? Or would you rather have it in the office?”

“Um, probably out there. The cats will climb it if it’s in here.”

He nodded, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth, then disappeared again. She heard grunting and caught sight of him on his hands and knees. The tree swayed precariously from side to side, and a few curse words punctuated the grunts. Becca watched, curious. She should probably offer to help, but she had even less experience setting up a Christmas tree than running an animal shelter. A moment later the tree stopped moving, and Zane emerged from around it.

“I didn’t think to get any decorations,” he said. “I’m sorry.” He grabbed the top and shook it hard. It didn’t move. Red-faced, he edged his way around and joined her in the office again. “But I thought you could use a little holiday spirit.” He grinned. “I guess I’m glad you don’t already have one.”

“That’s kind of low on our list of priorities.” Becca finished the sinfully sweet cocoa and dropped the cup in the trash can. “So thank

you.” It felt like she should do more than that, so she held out her hand. “Really. I appreciate it.”

He looked at her hand, then back up at her face. Heat rushed into her cheeks. *What? What are you looking at?* “I washed,” she said after a minute.

He laughed. “No, it’s not that. I’m sorry.” He grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I just...” He didn’t finish.

“What?”

From the kennel behind them, doors opened and closed, and the barks and whines and yelps escalated to a high-fevered pitch. Julito and Kevin must have arrived with food.

Zane said something else, but she could barely hear him over the din. She took a step closer, and so did he, so when he bent and repeated the words, his breath fell hot against her cheek.

“I wondered if you wanted to get dinner sometime.”

CHAPTER  
SIX

“Wait a minute,” Ella said. She stared into the bathroom mirror, mascara wand in hand. “You’re going to dinner with *who*?”

“Zane Andrews.” Becca stood in the doorway and waited for her sister’s reaction. It didn’t take long to come. Ella dropped the mascara and turned, her mouth a wide O.

“You are *not*.”

“I am. In about a half-hour.” She walked into her bedroom, peeling off her Whispering Pines Paws sweatshirt.

Ella followed her and planted both hands on the doorframe. “Do you mind telling me how *that* happened?”

Becca still wasn’t entirely sure. “He came by the shelter yesterday and asked me.”

Ella looked as if she didn’t believe Becca. She narrowed her gaze. “I didn’t even know Zane knew you.”

“We talked at the party last weekend.”

“Hmm.”

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know Zane’s reputation, Bec.”



Her face flamed. "I think I have enough self-control that I'm not going to jump into bed with him."

Ella's expression changed. "Just be careful. That's all. I would hate to see you get hurt."

"I'll be fine." She half-wondered if Ella was more jealous than anything else, but she kept that thought to herself. She was still on pins and needles at the whole notion of going out on a date. With someone as gorgeous as Zane Andrews. She glanced at the clock by her bed. "Oh, no. He's picking me up at seven." She dashed into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"Hey, I wasn't done in there," Ella spluttered. But Becca dropped the rest of her clothes and jumped under the spray.

"Sorry!" she called as she lathered up.

When she emerged ten minutes later, Ella stood in the bathroom, arms crossed, makeup half-done, scowling.

"All yours," Becca said apologetically. She wrapped the towel around herself and inched past her sister, back into the bedroom, where she stood in front of her open closet. "Now, what am I supposed to wear?" she muttered. Turner the gerbil blinked at her and wriggled his whiskers. "Yes, you're very helpful. Thanks."

"Something sexy," Ella called from the bathroom.

Leave it to her sister to have supersonic hearing. "I'm going to have to raid your closet again for that," she called back.

"Yes, you are," Ella said. She reappeared in the hall, hair sprayed into place and makeup fully applied. "Come on."

"I'm not going for slutty, just saying," Becca said as they walked into Ella's room.

Ella rolled her eyes. "There's a big difference between slutty and sexy." She went through her drawers, clicking her tongue until she pulled out a filmy green shirt with buttons down the front. "Here. Put

a camisole underneath and a tight pair of jeans, and you're good to go."

Becca held the shirt up to the light. Totally see-through. "It's December. And it's freezing outside."

Ella looked at her like she'd grown an extra head. "So what? Are you *eating* outside? No. Last time I checked, they had heat in restaurants. Now put it on."

AN HOUR LATER, Becca sat across from Zane at Marc's Grille and tried to remember how to breathe. He wore a black button-down shirt and dark jeans, a leather jacket over both and hair that fell into his eyes. Large hands. Large build. Large everything, arms and shoulders and torso. He reminded her of some kind of exotic wild animal.

"Drinks?" the waiter asked. Becca took the menu he held out. *Yes. A very, very stiff drink*, she wanted to say.

"Rum and coke would be great." She glanced around the room, taking in the greenery hanging along the windows and the long, sleek bar. Classical holiday music played at a muted volume, and a large wreath hung above the door. Beautiful. Tasteful. And all she could do was feel the nerves climb up and down her spine.

"I'll take a Sam Adams draft," Zane said.

The waiter nodded and left them alone, and Becca proceeded to fiddle with her napkin, her water glass and finally the menu itself.

"Hey," Zane said.

She glanced up.

"I don't bite." He gave her a slow, casual grin. "Unless that's what you're into."

Oh, God. She looked back down at the menu. *Get a hold of yourself, Bec. You're acting like no one has ever taken you to dinner before. He's flirting with you. Flirt back. Do something back.* She licked her bottom lip and ran a finger down the menu.

"See anything you like?"

She lifted a brow. *Just you*, she wanted to say. Instead, she gave him a small smile. "I'm thinking the salmon. What about you?"

"Filet." He closed his menu and set it aside as their drinks arrived. "I like a woman who's not afraid to eat," he added after the waiter had taken their orders. "I've been out with too many women who had salad and water and thought that was a meal."

She bet he'd been out with many women, period. "I suppose it would be better if I did like salad and water, but—"

"No," he interrupted. "You look good just the way you are."

Her face flushed. Warning bells went off in her mind—*he's been around, he's only looking to get laid, he disappeared after high school to shake some problems with the law*—but her body went warm in a matter of seconds and didn't listen. Instead, she rested her chin on one hand and let her gaze meet his. Let it hold his. She'd spent enough time approaching wild animals to have an idea how to tame the restless glint in their eyes.

"So do you," she said boldly.

He grinned. "Thanks. It's mostly good genes. A free membership at Dash's gym helps."

"I bet. You helped him build it?"

Zane nodded. "He's a good guy."

Becca took a long sip of her drink to steady her nerves. *He's a regular guy. You're a regular girl. Stop freaking out.* "So you work security over at Mountain Glen?" she asked. Their salads arrived,

and the distraction of food made it easier to talk to him like a human being.

He nodded. "It's pretty boring, if you want to know the truth. But there are some million-dollar homes over there, and if they want to pay me to drive around every hour or sit in a booth by the gate and check visitors' IDs, I don't mind."

"Or take care of stray animals that may or may not be rabid."

He grinned. "That too."

There was so little she knew about him. So much she wanted to ask. But she hardly knew where to start, and she didn't want to scare him off. "What's the most exciting thing that's happened to you?"

"At Mountain Glen? Or in life?"

She wasn't sure she wanted to hear his answer to the second one. She could only imagine the things he'd done and seen. "Let's start with Mountain Glen."

Their entrees arrived, and he cut into his filet. "Let's see...there was the time JoJo Kettering backed her minivan into the Yedziniak's brand new fence. Or the time Wiggles the potbellied pig got loose in the pool area." He whistled. "That almost made the local paper."

She laughed. Good looks, a rock-hard body, and a sense of humor to boot. No wonder women drooled over the guy.

"Actually, last summer I found a couple of teenagers having sex in one of the empty houses."

"You did not."

He chuckled. "I did. Neither one of 'em saw me until I was right on top of 'em." He paused with a wry grin. "No pun intended. It was pretty funny watching that poor kid try to get his pants up in record time."

She smiled. "That *is* pretty funny, if you're not that kid or his girlfriend."

“Ah, it’ll make for a good story they both can tell in a few years.” He winked. “We all have some of those, right?”

Good stories about getting caught having sex in public places? She bet Zane had a dozen or more. She, on the other hand, had to think hard to remember the last time she’d had sex at all.

“Otherwise,” Zane went on, “it’s pretty quiet over there. Just me and another security guard.” He shrugged. “It’s okay. I’ll take peace and quiet.”

“You’ll get that in Whispering Pines, that’s for sure.” She took her last bite of salmon. “Yum. This was so good.”

“So what did you do after high school?” Zane asked as the waiter cleared their plates.

“College for four years at a little school in Connecticut.”

“You major in animal science or something?”

“Nope. Business and accounting. Kind of boring, I know.”

“I haven’t found one thing about you that’s boring yet.” His gaze seared hers, and all the lovely warmth from earlier in the evening returned tenfold. “So if you were a business major, how’d you end up working at the shelter?”

She cleared her throat and focused on the twinkling white lights in the restaurant’s front window. “I volunteered there all through high school and summers during college. When I came back, they were looking for a business manager.”

“But it sounds like you’re doing all the managing right now.”

“Temporarily. Until the board hires a new general manager, but that probably won’t be until after the first of the year.”

He nodded and took the check when it arrived, sliding a hundred dollar bill inside the leather folder. “Do you like it?”

“I do. Some days it breaks my heart, and I know I’ll never get rich working there...” She wondered how sappy she sounded and then

decided she didn't care. "But I feel like I make a difference, and that counts for something. At least to me. Animals can't help themselves when they're in trouble." She shrugged. "But if I can help them, then it seems like I have to try."

His eyes hadn't left her face. She couldn't read his expression. Was he bored? Amused? Marveling at how utterly naïve she sounded? "Ready to go?" he finally said.

She nodded, disappointed. She must have bored him, or he wouldn't be taking her home at a quarter to nine. *I don't need to worry about his reputation, Ella.* Zane definitely didn't want to take her to bed. He held her coat and then slipped on his own and walked her to his truck. It sat by the curb, black and chrome and enormous.

"Can I ask you something?" she said as they reached the passenger side.

"Of course."

She rubbed both arms to warm herself. "Why did you ask me out? I mean, I had a nice time, and I like you...but we both know I'm not really your type." She didn't know if she was being stupid by stating the obvious, but the words were out by the time she'd thought to reconsider.

For a long moment, he didn't answer. *I shouldn't have asked.* Maybe it was some crazy dare. Maybe he was regretting it now. He certainly seemed like he was regretting it now, because—

"You're different," was all he said, and she had no more time to think before he leaned down and kissed her.

His hands went to her face, brushing the loose hair from her cheeks, and his tongue teased its way inside her mouth. A rush of sensations made her woozy, and it was all she could do not to collapse into him. As it was, he backed her into the truck, and the cold metal against her back mixed with the heat from everywhere

else and filled her up. She kissed him back as if her life depended on it.

As if she'd never kissed anyone before.

As if she'd split apart in the next second, and every last inch of her was intent on holding herself together as he moved his mouth to her temple, her ear, her neck, the palm of one hand.

"Does that mean different is good?" she said when they finally broke apart.

He grinned. "Yes, Becca. Different is good." He ran one hand down her cheek. "I like you too," he added, and his voice was husky in the night air. "And I'd like to get to know you better. If that's okay."

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

Zane waited until Becca had disappeared into her apartment before pulling away. Why had he asked her to dinner? Well, for one, she was a cute little package with a curvy figure and bright blue eyes. For two, she was one of the only women in town who hadn't thrown herself at him since he'd been back. Actually, she'd made it pretty clear on their first two meetings that she wanted as little as possible to do with him. So he liked the challenge of winning her over.

He turned onto County Route 78 and then Red Barn Road. In truth, though, he'd asked Becca out for another reason, one he had a harder time figuring out. The way she treated her animals, the way she devoted herself to their wellbeing, hit a nerve deep inside him. *"I feel like I make a difference, and that counts for something."* He'd never spent time with a woman who said things like that. He hadn't been lying; she *was* different, and he liked that about her. He'd pretty much taken care of himself his entire life. He preferred to rely on no one, to trust no one, which he supposed in some strange way made him a lot like those strays she took in.

*Speaking of strays—*



Zane slammed on the brakes about a quarter mile from the front gate of Mountain Glen. A pair of beady eyes stared at him from the shoulder of the road. He flicked on his high beams in time to see the dog disappear into the weeds. *What's that thing doing out here?* It had to be close to zero degrees. He figured the dog had found itself a nice cozy place to sleep at times like these. He peered into the dark, but it had vanished.

Zane shook his head and continued past Mountain Glen to the first turn on the right, then followed the private road until it dead-ended. Three modest but well-kept mobile homes lined the side facing the mountains. He pulled up next to the first one and killed the engine. *Home sweet home.* He jogged to the front door, shivering against the cold, and gave another glance into the dark. Why was he so worried about an animal? That dog had obviously taken care of itself up to now. It had a place to live, in the woods or wherever. And it knew how to get food. It would survive.

*But surviving isn't the same as living, is it?*

The odd thought bounced in and out of his head as he kicked off his shoes and hung up his coat. He checked the wood stove in the corner, fed it a few more logs, helped himself to a beer and sank into the worn but still-comfortable plaid couch. Kitchen, living room, bedroom and a bathroom. Clean and private, it cost him a cool three hundred bucks a month as long as he kept the security job at Mountain Glen. Nope, it wasn't a bad place to live, not for a bachelor.

He turned on the television and skimmed through the channels. Christmas shows flashed onto the screen every few seconds—the Grinch, Charlie Brown's spindly tree, the kid with the Red Rider BB gun, and a church choir singing hallelujahs. He finally stopped at a motorcycle-rebuilding show and muted the volume. Thoughts of Becca returned in full force. She must have taken wardrobe advice

from her sister tonight, because that see-through green shirt had Ella Ericksen written all over it. Zane drank and closed his eyes. He'd struggled to keep his eyes from wandering too often to Becca's cleavage, to the skin he could just make out under the green fabric. He wondered what she tasted like. What she'd feel like under his touch. But just as a fantasy of that green shirt coming off took shape in his mind's eye, something Becca had said took its place.

*Just because animals can take care of themselves doesn't mean they should have to.*

Zane frowned. *I don't need to take care of that dog. It's freezing outside.* And it was warm and toasty in here. The fire was blazing and the beer tasted good going down. But he knew he'd never forgive himself if he found the animal turned into an icicle in the morning.

He thought about opening another beer, but the sound of the wind whistling through the trees took him to the window over the kitchen sink instead. He framed his eyes and looked into the dark. Less than a half-mile away, a few lights glittered in the homes of Mountain Glen. Unlike his own place, bare of a single holiday decoration, most of the houses were lit to the hilt with lights and figurines and life-sized Santas on their roofs. Even from here he could see the Yedziniak's place, with red and green lights that bounced to music until eleven every night.

Probably added hundreds to their electric bills, not like the Glen residents had to worry. He dropped his hands. Last thing he wanted to do was go out into this cold, but he couldn't get the thought of that dog out of his mind. Cursing under his breath, he pulled his boots back on, then his coat, then his hat and gloves. For good measure, he wrapped a scarf around his neck—an early Christmas gift from

Mandy McCracken, seventy-five and the only other woman in town besides Becca that had never hit on him.

He headed for his truck, swung it in a tight circle and drove back to the main road. Ten seconds later, he was pulling up to the front gate. Sue gave him an odd look, but he didn't stop to chat. Slowly he drove around the perimeter of the community, high beams on, looking for the dog. The only thing he saw was Ralph Neiderbaum driving his golf cart with his St. Bernard trotting behind. The pair lumbered along, and Ralph raised a hand in hello. Zane waved in return and then doubled back to the maintenance shed.

If he couldn't find it, he could at least leave some more food for it. Over the last two days, the dish had been licked clean, and he had a feeling he'd be buying more dog food out of his own pocket before too long. He left his truck idling, ran inside and carried the bag around back, where he dumped more food into the dish. He bent down. *Well, look at that.* For the first time, he noticed that the pile of towels had been pushed together in the corner, and a few telltale brown hairs stuck to them. Maybe the thing wasn't totally dumb and had taken advantage of this shelter after all.

He rolled down the top of the now-close-to-empty bag and stuffed it under one arm. He'd done what he could. He turned to go and caught a flash of movement in the bushes across the sidewalk. A moment later, the dog emerged and stood under the streetlight, panting. Its skinny sides moved in and out with the effort, and he could make out the shadow of its ribs. Still, it didn't look injured, and when he dared to walk toward it, it backed toward the bushes again. Zane stopped where he was. Across the lawns, Christmas lights still flashed and "Winter Wonderland" still played. They watched each other. Zane whistled once, low and long. The dog licked its nose and took a step toward him.

“Maybe we’re more alike than not, huh, buddy?” Zane whispered into the dark. Two strays, both solitary for the night, both looking for a place to keep warm. Taking slow, deliberate steps, Zane made a wide circle around the food and the towels and backed away. The dog cocked its head. After a moment, it trotted toward the dish.

“There you go,” Zane said, but the animal’s ears went back at his voice, so he didn’t say another word. It trembled in the cold, and although its nose was going a mile a minute, and it kept licking its chops, it refused to put its head down long enough to grab a bite to eat. Instead, it just stood there and watched him.

*I know that feeling. Don’t trust anyone in the world. Better to be alone than risk getting hurt.*

Great, now he was commiserating with a dog? Without allowing himself to think about it anymore, Zane dropped the food bag inside the shed and hopped into his truck. He put it into reverse and backed slowly away. The dog’s yellow eyes stayed on him the whole time.

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

“Let’s bring Freckles and Missy too,” Becca said. She pointed at the carrier that held two young cats. “They’ll be good with the kids.”

Shirley nodded. “Here you go, munchkins,” she murmured as she picked up the carrier and took it outside to Becca’s idling SUV. Becca followed with Dinah, a beagle mix, straining at her leash. Dinah jumped into the front seat and looked around, tongue lolling, tail wagging a mile a minute.

Becca wiped one arm across her forehead. Despite the frigid air temperature, she was sweating. Probably should’ve packed a change of clothes, but she’d been running late this morning. She hoped the elementary school kids wouldn’t mind her messy hair or smeared makeup or inevitable rings under her arms.

“Is that all of them?” Shirley asked. She blew on her bare hands and peered inside the SUV. Two lop-eared rabbits, Sunny, the enormous orange long-haired cat, and Miles, the lab mix, sat patiently in the back two rows of seats.

“That’s all I can manage by myself.” Becca climbed into the driver’s seat. As it was, she hoped Donna Dawber, the teacher who’d

made the arrangements for this school visit, would have a couple of hale and hearty guys to meet her at the door and help out.

*Speaking of hale and hearty guys...*

Her mind whirled as she backed out of the shelter driveway and headed for the elementary school on the other side of town. *That kiss.* That whole date, from beginning to end. It gave her goosebumps every time she thought about it. I'd like to get to you know better. That sounded promising, right? She sure wanted to get to know Zane better, too.

Dinah stuck her wet nose into Becca's armpit, and her hands jerked on the wheel. All thoughts of Zane disappeared. "Whoa, sweetheart!" She guided Dinah back to the passenger seat and focused on the road ahead of her. In the back, Sunny howled. A moment later, Freckles chimed in. *Terrific.* Becca turned on the radio.

Thankfully, it never took longer than ten minutes to get anywhere in or around Whispering Pines, and soon she pulled around the circular drive of the elementary school. Miles woofed. Dinah jumped against the window, leaving muddy paw prints and a long streak of saliva. Becca checked the heat, locked the doors and left the SUV running as she dashed inside.

"Hiya, Bec!" Eva Hadley sat at the desk just inside, with fresh makeup and perfect hair and a designer red sweater. Christmas holly was strung across her desk, and a reindeer figurine jumped back and forth over a ceramic housetop to the tune of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

Becca wiped her nose. She probably looked about as red-nosed as Rudolph right about now. "Hi, Eva." She'd gone to school with the Hadley sister, one of four in town, all blonde-haired and blue-eyed and each more curvy than the last. "I'm bringing in some of the animals from the shelter. For an assembly?"

Eva nodded. "Sure." She waved her manicured nails at the open doors of the auditorium behind her. Young voices chattered and squealed. A class of what looked like kindergarteners straggled inside to join them. "They're getting ready for you."

Becca's heart jumped a little. She'd helped Chrissy with this assembly in the past, but she'd never done it solo. She hoped the animals behaved. She hoped the *kids* behaved. Last year, one little boy had insisted on pulling one dog's ears and throwing a tantrum on stage when his teacher told him to stop. "Should I just bring them in?" She looked around. "Is there anyone who could help me?"

Eva's eyes widened for a moment.

Becca stifled a giggle. *Like I would ask her to ruin her nails by carrying in the cats or helping with Dinah.* "I didn't mean you," she clarified. "I know you can't leave your desk."

Thankfully one of the custodians emerged from the office. "Becca. Need some help?"

She nodded, grateful. Ron Taylor had worked at the school as long as she could remember. He followed her out to the SUV and took both cat carriers in his two hands. She swung the vehicle around and parked in one of three empty visitor's spots, then gripped Miles and Dinah's leashes in one hand and picked up the rabbit cage in the other. She wouldn't have to go to Dash's gym as long as she was managing the shelter, that was for sure. Her arms ached with the effort of getting them all inside.

"You can go in the auditorium's side entrance," Eva said. She motioned to a small door down the hall where Mr. Taylor was just disappearing. Unlike Becca, he seemed to be having no problem with the cat carriers. She stretched out her arms for a little relief, hoping Miles and Dinah wouldn't take off. But the dogs only loped down the hall as if they'd been there a hundred times before.

Thankfully, Donna Dawber met her backstage and took the rabbits. “Thank you for doing this, Becca.”

“Of course.” She did enjoy bringing animals to the school. Not only did she love seeing the kids’ faces, but it gave the animals a chance to leave their kennels and cages as well. And each year, one or two of the ones that went to school were adopted in time for Christmas. Becca hoped that would happen again. As much as she loved them all, they deserved real homes, where their owners could shower them with love twenty-four seven.

“How are your students this year?” Becca asked Donna as they settled the cats and rabbits on long tables at the back of the stage. The two dogs would remain leashed at her side.

“Good, but a handful,” the woman said as she tugged the tablecloths into place. “But what else is new?”

Becca tried to smooth her hair as the dogs wound themselves around her legs. She went over her rehearsed speech in her head, but just then, the curtain rose and two hundred little faces looked back at her from the auditorium. Everything she planned to say vanished. Jenny James, the school principal, stepped to the microphone and began to speak. Thankfully, she did most of the official talking, and Becca just chimed in here and there.

The next hour was a blur of keeping the animals calm, making sure no one pulled the dogs’ fur too much and answering questions that ranged from, “Is that rabbit the Easter Bunny?” to. “How do you know it’s a boy dog?” Becca smiled though her arms ached from holding Miles and Dinah’s leashes. They were two of the shelter’s mellowest dogs, but even they got excited as the children petted them and tugged on their tails and looked into their eyes from an inch away. Surprisingly, only one little girl burst into tears when Miles



licked her face from bottom to top with his enormous tongue. Other than that, no injuries and no freak-outs from child or beast.

“Thank you for coming,” the principal said as the hour wound to a close. She patted Dinah and Miles and then, almost as an afterthought, patted Becca’s shoulder as well. “The kids always look forward to this tradition.”

“You’re welcome.” Exhausted, Becca sank onto the top step of the stairs leading down to the floor. Dinah and Miles joined her, one on either side. The students wandered out behind their teachers, and soon silence settled into the auditorium. Behind her, Donna fussed with the cat carriers. “I’ll take care of those,” Becca said. “I’m sure you have to get back to your class.”

The teacher nodded. “I do. It was good to see you.” Without another word, she disappeared into the wings.

Becca rolled her neck and looked around. Mr. Taylor had vanished. All the other teachers had disappeared too. Her back ached. Her shoulders ached. She had about fifty emails to answer and a potential adopter coming in later that afternoon. And right now it looked like she was by herself trying to herd these animals back to her car. “Well, here goes nothing.” Dinah gave her a sloppy kiss on the chin. Behind her, Sunny meowed.

“Yes, I know you’re ready to go,” she said. She’d have to take the dogs out first and then return for the cats and the rabbits. She stood, biting her bottom lip. She hated leaving them in here alone.

“Need some help?”

The voice came from the shadows at the back of the auditorium. Becca squinted. She couldn’t see who it belonged to, but something about it sounded familiar. Zane? It couldn’t be him. Her mind probably just wanted it to be him because she hadn’t stopped thinking about him since their date. *He’s working right now*, she

reminded herself. *He works daytime security out at Mountain Glen, remember?*

But apparently today, he wasn't. He walked down the center aisle toward her, hands in his pockets and a half-smile on his face.

"That's a lot of critters." He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked up at her.

"What are you doing here?" *Oh, suave, Becca.* Wildly, she tried to channel her sister. *Say something flirtatious. Or maybe don't say anything at all. Just try to look cute.* "I mean, don't you have to work?" Obviously, her mouth had no intention of listening to her brain.

"I'm on the second shift today. Four to midnight."

"Oh." She stood there like an idiot, with Miles pressing into her leg and Dinah wriggling with pleasure at the appearance of another visitor.

"I stopped by the shelter." He took one step up the stairs. "They told me you were here instead." He took another step.

He'd come looking for her? "Yes. It's an annual thing. So here I am." She spread her hands wide, going for cute, and instead dropped Miles' leash. Instantly, the dog bounded down the steps and jumped on Zane. He backpedaled, tripped and landed on his backside with ninety pounds of Labrador planted on his chest.

"Oh, Miles! No! Bad, bad dog..." Becca scurried down the stairs. "I am so sorry," she said as she hauled the dog up by its collar. "Very bad," she said, with one stern finger on Miles's nose. The dog looked at her sheepishly, then gave Becca an enormous swipe of his tongue. Zane chuckled, still on the ground.

Wonderful. If Zane had come here with the tiniest intention of seeing her, maybe picking up where they'd left off the other night,

maybe asking her out again, she was pretty sure the dog had ruined that. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"It's all right. I've been tackled by worse." Zane hopped to his feet and dusted off his hands on his jeans. Oh, they were such nice jeans too, with a tiny tear in one thigh and tight enough that she could see every inch of muscle that rippled as he stood there.

"Still want to help?" she asked with a smile.

"Actually, I want to do this." Without another word, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

The world spun. Or the floor spun. Something definitely turned her dizzy the minute he put his lips on hers, and Becca forgot about the dogs and her emails and her frazzled appearance and kissed him back. His hands went to her face, holding her tenderly at first, until his tongue eased its way inside her mouth, and then one hand slipped to the back of her neck, the other to her ass, and it was all she could do to stay upright.

*We probably shouldn't be doing this in an elementary school,* came the thought, but she was powerless to consider it or stop what was happening. She melted, just fell into him. She moved her hands to his hair, feeling its thickness between her fingers.

"Nice to see you again," he finally said with a smile. One thumb brushed her bottom lip.

She couldn't think of a thing to say. Her face felt heated, her legs like Jell-O, and her girl parts were jumping up and down in celebration.

"Guess we probably shouldn't do this in an elementary school, huh?" he said, echoing her earlier thought. "And not when you have a handful of animals to keep track of."

Becca whirled and looked around. "The dogs!"

But they were sitting on the stairs, chins on their paws. Miles licked his chops. Dinah whined. The rabbits slept in their cage, but Freckles and Missy were pawing at their carrier, and Sunny had started her plaintive howling again.

“I have to get them back to the shelter,” Becca said, much as she’d like to stay right there and do other things.

Zane nodded, strode over to the two dogs and wrapped their leashes around his hands. “I’ll take these two in my truck. You get the cats and the rabbit and meet me there. Sound good?”

It sounded more than good. Becca smiled. It sounded perfect.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

**Z**ane let Becca lead the way into the kennels at the back of the shelter, more to watch her from behind than because he couldn't figure out where to take the dogs. The yelping and scratching at the doors pretty much gave it away. She pointed at two empty runs as they walked inside. "Thank you," she said for about the fourth time.

"It's no problem." He eased the dogs back into their respective spaces and snapped the doors shut. He might almost feel sorry for them, except the place was well-lit and warm and each dog had a cozy-looking bed and some chew toys. Better than living outside, that was for sure. He turned around to ask Becca how long the dogs typically stayed, and how many they usually had there, but she'd already headed back to the front of the shelter. By the time he caught up with her in one of the cat rooms, she was kneeling on the floor in front of an elaborate climbing tree.

She twisted and looked over her shoulder as she hauled a scared-looking white cat from its hiding place. "Sorry I ditched you back there. I've got to give this guy his meds."

Zane nodded, but before he could ask what kind and why, she squeezed a dropper of something straight down the cat's throat. It

barely wriggled in her arms. Zane didn't blame it. Being in those arms and snuggled up to that chest would be a pretty nice place to hang out. She set the cat back on the floor and stroked its head.

He looked around. "You don't keep them in cages?" Cats of all sizes and colors walked, napped, and played in the room. Some watched him with suspicious eyes. A yellow one wound through his legs in a figure-eight motion. Another sat at the top of a set of built-in shelves and yowled.

"No. It's one of the things I always loved about this place. This room and the one across the hall are all open. We do have some cages in the back, for kittens or for cats who come in and need to be quarantined, but for the most part, they can come and go as they please."

He scratched the back of his head. Seemed like a lot to keep track of, but he had to admit, this arrangement looked a lot more comfortable than being confined to a two-foot square space.

Becca cocked her head. "Not sure what to make of it?"

He shrugged. He hadn't come to the shelter to assess its set-up or make friends with the animals. She stood and smiled, and when he leaned in to kiss her, she met him halfway. She slid her hands up his chest, and her lips met his. A cat pawed at his leg. Another mewed from somewhere close by. None of it mattered. All he could do was press his hands into the small of her back, pull her close and taste her. He couldn't explain the magnetism that drew him to her, the way he spent so much time thinking about her. He only knew he didn't want it to stop.

This time she pulled away first. Her cheeks had pinked, and she bit her bottom lip in that adorable way he'd noticed the first night she showed up at Mountain Glen. "This is nice," she said. "But—"

“I know.” He kissed the top of her head. “You have work to do.” He took a step back. “I wanted to ask you to dinner again.”

She tucked a strand of her flyaway hair behind one ear. “I’d like that.”

“Tomorrow? I’ll pick you up at eight?”

She nodded. “Okay. Where are we going?”

He winked. “That’s a surprise. You’ll have to wait and see.”

“YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY NOT WEARING anything from your closet,” Ella said the next morning. “I have the day off, and we’re going shopping.”

“I don’t have the day off,” Becca answered, “and I’m sure I can find something appropriate for dinner without going shopping.” Even as she said the words, she still couldn’t believe them. Another dinner with Zane. Another chance to spend time with him. Laugh with him. Get to know him. Maybe even feel him.

“Isn’t there anyone who can cover for you?” Ella wandered into Becca’s bedroom, still in her robe and slippers. “Even for an hour at lunch? There’s a new place over in Silver Valley, a little boutique with all this great stuff from the city.”

“Sounds like it’s out of my price range.” Becca pulled on a pair of jeans and a blue Whispering Pines Paws sweatshirt. She tied back her hair and dabbed on a little blush and eyeliner.

“You didn’t let me finish.” Ella stretched out on Becca’s twin bed. “It also has a consignment shop attached to it. One of the girls in the salon got a whole bunch of designer stuff for, like, thirty bucks the other day.”

“Really?” That did sound reasonable. She hedged. Their vet tech was working full days again, and she had two volunteers plus Julito

and Kevin coming in later. “Okay,” she said as she pulled on her hat and coat. “One hour. Can you pick me up at noon?”

Ella waved her fingers in the air. “Of course. I don’t have anything else going on today.”

BECCA THOUGHT about that comment twenty times that morning. “*I don’t have anything else going on today.*” How had she and Ella grown up in the same home, with the same parents, and turned out so different? Her sister worked in a trendy salon four days a week. She changed her hair style, her makeup, and her clothes by the month. Everything rolled off her, and if she’d ever felt mad or sad or frustrated by life, Becca hadn’t seen it. In contrast, by nine o’clock, Becca was covered in cat vomit. By ten, she’d turned her sweatshirt inside out in a vain effort to mask the other odors attached to it, which ranged from bleach to dog snot to grime to dish detergent. By eleven she’d cried twice, once over a failed cat adoption and once over a twelve-year old boxer who had to be put down.

“*Please bring me a change of clothes when you come,*” she texted her sister, imagining Ella still lounged on her bed, feet up, nose in a fashion magazine. Why on earth Zane had chosen Becca over her infinitely more glamorous sister, she had no idea.

By the time noon rolled around, she’d managed to settle down two new pups in the kennel, go over website updates with Shirley and talk to the vet tech about Toodles’s tooth infection. “I think he needs those back ones taken out,” she said with a sad look at the thirteen-year-old tabby who slept in the office.

“He’ll be fine without them,” the tech said. “Tell you what, I’d be happy if all I had to do was mush on good food all day long. Chewing is overrated.” She gathered Toodles into her arms as the front door



whooshed open. Cold air filled the foyer and the office, along with Ella, who'd changed into a bright blue ski jacket, black print leggings and over-the-knee boots. Her hair was curled into ringlets and it looked to Becca like she'd applied long, false eyelashes. She wrinkled her nose and held out a shirt and jeans to Becca. "It stinks in here."

"Hello to you too." Becca pulled off her sweatshirt. "It was a rough morning. Actually, we just finished cleaning."

Ella didn't bother to answer. Instead, she inspected the Christmas tree standing in the foyer. "This is cute."

"Thanks." The other day, in one rare slow afternoon, she and Shirley had decorated it with gold and silver balls from Shirley's basement. Becca had gift wrapped a few spare boxes and set them under the tree, so it looked as though Santa had visited the shelter early. "Zane brought it," she added.

Ella turned, brows lifted. "Seriously?" She clicked her tongue a few times. "Don't take this wrong, Bec, but I can't believe he's into you."

Only the fact that Becca knew every last secret about her older sister, along with the fact that Ella never, ever thought before speaking, kept the comment from being a raging insult. She pressed her lips together and said nothing.

"I just mean," Ella added, "he's not your type at all. Is he?"

*Have you been reading my mind?* "Not really, I guess." They both knew her type was the quiet, studious kind, like the few guys she'd dated in college. Not men built like Mack trucks. Not former bad boys who'd dropped out of high school and reappeared after years with rumors dogging their heels.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," Ella went on. "You remember what he was like in high school. And I'm pretty sure he's not looking

to settle down.”

“Well, neither am I. Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.” But her face grew hot.

“You deserve someone great, Bec, someone who thinks the sun rises and sets on you.” Ella looked around. “Kind of like how you feel about these animals.”

Becca stuffed her dirty clothes into the laundry bag. That was about the nicest thing her sister had said to her in a long time. “Let’s go, okay? Let’s find me something rockin’ to wear tonight.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Zane had to fight to keep his hands at his sides when Becca answered the door. For a second, he thought he was looking at Ella. But, no, those eyes and that figure belonged to Becca alone.

“You look amazing,” he said.

She glanced at her black leather pants and a form-fitting silver sweater that clung to every last curve. Black stilettos brought her four inches closer to his height. A necklace, one he’d noticed before, lay nestled between her breasts. He reached out and touched it. “Nice paw print.”

She blushed adorably “Thanks.”

“Well, hello there,” purred Ella. She emerged from the kitchen wearing pink sweatpants and a tight black T-shirt with an angel on the front. Not like Ella Ericksen was an angel, not from what Zane remembered from high school. “Take care of my little sister tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be on my best behavior. You ready?” he asked.

Becca nodded, took one step, and teetered in her heels, and that broke the tension circling the room. He offered her his arm, and she took it with a grateful smile. She grabbed her coat and a bright red

scarf and wrapped herself up as they descended the stairs. “You still haven’t told me where we’re going.”

No, he hadn’t, because part of him was afraid she’d back out. “I thought I’d cook for you. If that’s okay.” Outside, their breath turned to cool white streams in the air.

She stopped on the sidewalk, brows lifted in surprise. “At your place?”

“I do my best cooking there,” he said with a grin. Wasn’t the most upscale place in the world, but he hoped Becca wouldn’t mind. He’d seen her surrounded by cat puke and dog poop, after all. Even his tiny trailer would be a step up from the shelter.

Down the block, a cluster of teens stood outside the fire station singing Christmas carols. Thin and clear, the words floated down Main Street. “Deck the halls with boughs of holly...”

Becca took his hand as she hoisted herself up into the cab of his truck. “I love this time of year,” she said, her face glowing as she watched the carolers. “It’s kind of magical, isn’t it?”

He jogged around the truck to his own side. He didn’t put much stock in the traditions of the season, but it was hard to be a Scrooge in a town where mistletoe and holly decorated every storefront and the neighborhood kids sang Christmas songs on Main Street. “Sure. A regular Norman Rockwell scene,” he said as he turned the key and the V-10 engine roared to life.

“Was that cynicism I heard?”

He shrugged. “I’m not really into the holidays.” And there were so many reasons for that. He didn’t need to revisit his past, didn’t need to think about the nights his mom could barely put food on the table, let alone buy Christmas gifts. His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Holidays were for people with money or people who believed in crappy miracles, and Zane wasn’t either.

Becca's face clouded. "I'm sorry."

He pulled away and kept his eyes on the road. He wondered if she could read his mind, could somehow see into his past. He almost wouldn't doubt it, the way she seemed to tune into what each of her animals needed. *You're goin' out with the cat whisperer again?* Dash had asked him earlier, and though Zane laughed off the comment, it wasn't entirely unwarranted. He felt calmer around Becca, like he could be himself, like he didn't need to work hard to impress her.

They passed Mountain Glen, lit up against the night sky. He slowed out of habit and scanned both sides of the road, but he hadn't seen the stray dog in almost three days. Still, the food he dumped in the dish continued to disappear, so unless they had another homeless animal hanging around, the dog was still there.

He turned down the private road, pulled up to his trailer and parked. He'd spent the better part of the afternoon cleaning up inside and out. He'd lived here almost a year and never invited a woman over. When he led Becca up to the door, a funny feeling squeezed tight in his chest. *Hope she likes it all right.*

She stepped inside and took a long look around. He'd bought some cinnamon candles for the bathroom, and though he hadn't lit them, their scent filled the trailer. She slipped off her coat and laid it over the back of the couch. "Cozy," she said. "I really like it."

"Yeah? Me too." It wasn't much to look at, with the worn furniture and plain blue curtains hanging over the windows. But it was home. It was his.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked. "I have beer and wine." Then he stopped and scratched the back of his neck. "Although I'm not sure I have a corkscrew, come to think of it." *Damn.* He'd picked up a bottle of red and a bottle of white at the local liquor store, but he

couldn't remember the last time he'd actually opened anything with a cork.

"Beer's fine," she said. She leaned on the kitchen counter.

He popped the tops off two light beers and then slid teriyaki pork chops and rolls into the oven. He'd picked up pre-made salads in the grocery store earlier and hoped she didn't mind the store-bought variety.

"I have to say, I didn't think this was where we'd be eating," she said. "Didn't peg you as a cook."

"I learned to make a few things when I was living down south." He leaned against the counter beside her, close enough that the heat from her hip seeped into his.

She turned toward him. "Tell me about that."

He took a long drink, letting the cool beer slide down his throat. "Want to sit down?"

Rather than answer, she tiptoed her way to the couch and collapsed at one end. "I thought you'd never ask." She pulled off her shoes and tossed them aside. "These things are killing me."

He laughed. "I can imagine." Another long drink. Another appreciative look at Becca. "Why the getup, anyway? I mean, don't get me wrong That is a very sexy outfit, and a lesser man than I would already be getting you out of it."

She turned three shades of red.

"But it's not really you," he finished.

She crossed one leg over the other and shook her hair over her shoulders. "Is that a bad thing?"

Then he realized what she was doing, why she looked all dolled up, why she was playing coy and batting her lashes like the housewives in Mountain Glen. He set down his beer and wrapped both hands around one knee. "No. But that's not why I asked you

here. It's not why I asked you out the first time, or why I came to the school yesterday. I'm not looking to get laid." He chuckled. "Not that I would turn you down, don't get me wrong. But that's not what this is about."

The tight smile around her lips vanished.

"I like you. I like your company. You're..." *different*, he wanted to say, but he'd already told her that once, and he wasn't sure how she'd taken it. "You're unique," he said instead. "Very cool. Very independent." *Not like the other women around here.*

She bit her bottom lip. "I like you too." But she still looked guarded, and he could guess why.

"Listen, I know what this town is like, and what people say about me. For the most part, they're right. I was no good when I left Whispering Pines eight years ago. I dropped out of school. Hung with the wrong crowd. I was pretty much down for drinking and screwing and having a good time with whoever would go to bed with me." The words came out almost before he could stop them. He hadn't planned on a confessional tonight, but the simple honesty in the way she looked at him kept him talking.

"But I'm not the same guy I was back then. I left because I was screwing up everything I had here, which wasn't much to begin with. Down in Georgia I got it together. Not right away, but eventually. I got my GED and held down a job for the first time in my life. And I got smarter about how to treat women, believe it or not."

She studied him with those serious eyes. "So why did you come back to Whispering Pines?"

He cleared his throat. "I missed my roots, to be honest." He pointed one finger at her. "Don't tell anyone that."

She smiled and crossed her finger over her heart. "I promise."

“It wasn’t just that. I was staying at my mom’s place, but she got a new boyfriend and he didn’t want me living there. My sister was shackled up with a guy and I didn’t have the money or the references to rent a place on my own. I’d kept in touch with a couple buddies up here, and one of ’em told me about the security job at the Glen.” He spread both palms wide, “So here I am.”

Her glance moved across the room, taking it all in. He braced himself for her next question, but she only said, “You don’t have a single Christmas decoration in here.”

He finished his beer. He’d hoped they wouldn’t go down this road. “Christmas has never been one of my favorite holidays.”

“Why not?”

The timer on the oven beeped, giving him an excuse to jump up and change the conversation. *Because that was the day my dad walked out.* Rather than answer, he placed the rolls in a basket, settled the pork chops on a serving platter and motioned to the table he’d set for two.

“Dinner’s ready.”



CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

**B**ecca might actually have tasted the pork chops if Zane hadn't kept looking at her with those steady eyes. That half-grin. *Maybe I shouldn't have had that beer.* Her head spun, but if it was the man and not the alcohol as she imagined, she was in a whole lot of trouble.

"Tell me more about Georgia," she said. She didn't know many people who had left Whispering Pines, and even fewer who had come back.

"It's hot. And humid." He chuckled and helped himself to another pork chop and two more beers for them both.

"How did you end up there? In Georgia, I mean?" He'd already told her he left to get his act together, but she wondered what had taken him so far south.

His expression sobered. "I dropped out of high school after junior year. You probably know that."

She nodded.

"I got arrested a bunch of times up here for stupid shit. Shoplifting, trespassing, drinking, speeding...my mom figured the best thing would be to move and get a fresh start."

Becca didn't know a whole lot about getting arrested, but she did understand fresh starts. Feral cats came into the shelter battered and ferocious and scratching anything they could reach, but they just needed a quiet room and a wide berth until they realized everyone in the world wasn't out to hurt them. She wondered what had hurt Zane, why he'd ended up feral and ferocious too.

He looked at her across the table. "I was such a messed-up kid. My dad took off when I was eight." He stopped, a pained expression on his face. His fingers tightened around his spoon. His tongue worked inside his mouth, like he was trying to figure out words. "This is funny, actually, that I'm sitting here with you."

"Funny?"

"Just because you're so in love with animals. I told myself that when he left, on Christmas Eve by the way, that I'd never get attached to one again. 'Cause when he left, he took our dog." His eyes clouded. "Goldie. It sounds stupid now, but I loved that dog. She slept on my bed every night. I fed her every day when I got home from school."

"And he *took* her from you?"

"I think it was to spite my mom, because she'd brought Goldie home when the dog was just a puppy." He shrugged. "He ended up spiting me more than anything else, not like he ever knew that. I never saw the dog or my dad again."

Silence washed over them. Becca's heart hurt. What kind of father did that to his son? Or to his own pet? She could only imagine Goldie whining for Zane, or the kids waking up Christmas morning without their father and their canine best friend.

He resumed eating. "Anyway, I think that was when my messed-up life started. I stopped caring about anything and set my mind to having a good time, no matter the consequences. By the time I was

seventeen, my mom figured moving was the only way to get my head straight.”

Becca nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Like I said, I didn’t really clean up my act right away. But after a couple years down there, bouncing around from stupid job to stupid job, I finally woke up. Realized my life was going downhill unless I did something about it.”

“You seem pretty put together now,” she said.

He crooked that smile again, the one that went straight under her skin and made her heart flip. “I’m trying. Can’t say my halo is entirely straight, but my idea of a good time is a lot more legal these days.”

She smiled too. She couldn’t help it. His teasing confidence, his slow, sultry smile—and, okay, his body too—but mostly the way Zane told her everything straight out made her like him even more.

“What are you thinking right now?” he asked. Empty plates sat on the table between them, and he reached over and took her hand. His fingers stroked her palm.

“That you aren’t like any guy I’ve ever been with,” she blurted. At once, she wanted the words back. Why couldn’t she ever say something smooth and fun and flirty?

But he smiled. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

In the next instant he’d gotten up and rounded the table, and before she knew it, he’d pulled her into his arms. One hand lifted her chin, and his lips met hers. Hot. Sweet. Dangerous in the way it had the power to turn her dizzy. Every nerve ending, from her lips to her palms to her bare toes, hummed with want. Cinnamon mixed with butter and the smell of wood smoke and Zane’s faint, spiced aftershave sent her senses reeling. When he slipped one hand beneath her sweater, she nearly jumped.

She could feel him smile, his mouth against the hollow of her throat and the cool silver of her necklace. He lifted her from the chair and in another second they sank onto the couch. He pulled her onto his lap, those enormous hands holding her in place above him. For a moment, he just looked at her, eyes half-closed.

Becca leaned down to kiss him again. She wanted this, all of it, no matter the consequences. She wanted to lose herself in him, with him, to feel the magnificent energy that seemed to hum through him day and night. Without hesitation she kissed him more deeply, snaking her tongue to meet his. He groaned and moved his hands from her hips up her sides. Her bare flesh sparked at his touch. Heat flushed her face, her chest, the pooling desire between her legs. Something hummed from far away. Once. Then twice. Becca opened her eyes.

“Don’t answer it,” Zane said, recognizing the buzzing of her cell phone before she did.

*Oh, no.* She reached into her back pocket. Maybe it was Ella. Or a college alumni rep asking for donations. Or—

But, no. Of course not. She sat back, still on Zane’s lap, and trailed one hand down his chest.

“Is it the shelter?” he asked in a rough voice.

She nodded and listened to the voicemail.

“Bec? If you get this, you gotta come here. Please.” Julito’s voice shook. “I was taking Buddy out for a walk, having a smoke, and I came by the back door. There’s a carrier here with two cats inside. Left on the back porch. They look...not good.”

Her mouth went dry. Her dinner heaved in her stomach. *Zero degrees outside, and someone dumps two housecats locked in a carrier? Like garbage?* What if Julito had walked the other way down

the road? What if no one had passed the shelter at all until its regular opening tomorrow morning at eight?

“Becca?”

She slid off his lap and looked around for her shoes. Her eyes burned with tears. “I’m so sorry. I have to go.” Suddenly, she realized she hadn’t driven herself there. “Crap. Can you—”

He jumped up. “Of course. But you want to tell me what’s going on?”

Trying to keep composure, she did. She got the whole story out. Without another word, he put on his shoes and coat and held her arm as she wobbled to his truck in her stupid, impractical high heels. They drove the four miles to Whispering Pines Paws in silence. Becca’s heart thudded dully in her chest. Half of her ached for the helpless animals who’d been dumped on a doorstep. The other half ached for the ruin of her night. *So much for a romantic dinner date.* She glanced at Zane a couple times, but he kept his eyes straight ahead as he steered through the dark.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Not your fault,” he replied gruffly.

She reached for his hand, but he only squeezed it once before returning both of his to the wheel. By the time he dropped her off at the shelter’s front door with a brief kiss on the cheek, she was pretty sure he’d never want to see her again.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

Zane sat in the shelter driveway for a long time after Becca disappeared inside. He watched her kick off her shoes in the foyer and pull on a pair of clunky boots. Over the silver sweater went one of those baggy sweatshirts she always wore. He wondered if he should go inside and offer to help. Maybe. But right now, even though he knew it made him an arrogant ass, he was nursing a bruised ego. He wanted her out here, with him. Or back at the trailer, with him. Yes, he knew her job wasn't nine-to-five. But all he could think of was how Becca had felt in his arms, on his lap, warm and soft and reaching for him with a look that made him feel like the biggest stud in the world.

He was jealous of a couple of damn cats, as much as he tried not to be. Becca had chosen them over him. Maybe that was a harsh thing to think, but he couldn't help it. He slapped the steering wheel and put the truck into reverse. Stupid for thinking this way, for feeling this way. He was a grown man who didn't need a woman in his life. He could cook, clean, hold down a job and find himself a good time no matter where he went. He'd learned to live without needing anyone for a good long time now. And if he *wanted* a woman, there were a half-dozen he could call up right now, women who'd come

over without a second thought and spend the night without asking any questions. He didn't need to spend another minute wishing for the one who was comforting a starving stray animal at that very minute.

But the whole drive back to his trailer, different thoughts stayed with him. *Take care of me. Stay with me.*

He spent a long time staring at the ceiling after he went to bed.

BECCA PUSHED up her sleeves and wound a rubber band around her hair to keep it out of her eyes. "Where are they?" she asked Julito. "Still in the carrier?"

A ragged cardboard box with holes in the sides and top sat in the center of her desk. Not a sound came from inside.

He nodded. "I called Janet, too. She's on her way."

"Good." But their vet tech lived in Silver Valley, a good twenty-minute drive over the mountains. For just a second, Becca's eyes cut to the heavy blackness outside and taillights pulling away. Her heart squeezed tight for something she'd almost had. *Maybe I should've stayed with him. Maybe I shouldn't have answered my phone.* But that was as likely to happen as the sun never rising again. She'd never ignore a call from the shelter. She couldn't. She closed her eyes, took a breath and then opened them again.

"Let's see how bad they are." She squared her shoulders and opened the top of the box.

Two pairs of identical green eyes stared up at her. Fear dilated their pupils, and though they had nowhere to go, the cats tried to shrink away from her into the bottom of the box.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Can you get me a heating pad and one of those lamps from the storage closet?" she said quietly over

her shoulder. Julito vanished.

She pressed back the flaps of the box as far as she could and took another look inside. Bony. Matted. And they smelled of their own urine and feces. But beneath all that, she could see beautiful calico markings. They weren't big, though she couldn't tell if their size came from malnutrition or youth.

"Okay, babies," she murmured, "we're going to give this a try." She waited a moment. They didn't hiss up at her or lay their ears flat, all signs of feral cats. They didn't do anything at all. She touched one of them. It flinched, its coat rippling with the effort of trying to move away from her. She touched the other. No movement at all. Slowly, she ran her fingers down its spine. Then again. It blinked at her and opened its mouth without making a sound.

Becca slipped both hands under the cat and lifted it out of the carrier. It didn't wriggle or fight or do anything at all. She sat on the edge of her desk chair and continued to pet it, ignoring the greasy mats in its coat and the horrible stench it gave off. After a moment, the other cat poked its head out of the carrier to see what had happened to its companion.

"Curious, baby?" she said. "You're safe now. Nothing's going to hurt you here." She kept her voice low and continued to pet the cat in her lap. A minute passed. Julito returned with the heating pad and lamp. "Can you set up one of the cages in the back room? There are some clean towels and blankets in the hall closet too."

He nodded. "What do you think? They'll survive?"

"They're malnourished, for sure, and probably have worms and mites, but they're not as bad as I thought they would be." Janet would be here soon, and she could turn over the medical stuff, the serious stuff, to her. "They're just so cold, both of them." The one in her lap had started to shake, though whether from nerves or a low



body temperature, she couldn't tell. Her temper flared. *Who the hell abandoned them on one of the coldest nights of the year?*

Julito left, and Becca reached toward the cat in the carrier. Its head ducked down again, but she reached for the soft spot behind its ears. "I ended a date early for you two," she said aloud. "An honest-to-goodness date, with a guy that's hotter than anyone I've ever gone out with." She bent close to the cat in her lap. "Am I crazy?" Yes, she answered herself. *I am most definitely crazy.* Ella would never let her hear the end of it.

*You did what? For a couple of cats?*

Then, at exactly the same time, both animals started purring. Rusty, broken, as if they hadn't made the sound in a long time—maybe ever—the rumble broke from both their throats. Tears slipped down Becca's cheeks. *I did this. For a couple of cats, yes.* If that made her crazy, and if she ended up an old maid because of it, then so be it.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

**Z**ane picked up his phone on the first ring when Becca called the next morning. He'd thought about calling her or texting her last night, but he hadn't wanted to bother her. Plus, he wasn't sure what to say. When he saw her name on the screen of his phone, his heart lifted.

"I'm sorry," she said at once.

"You don't have to apologize." He scanned the security cameras in the booth. Nothing out of place. Not even a sign of the dog. He hadn't seen it in days.

"I kind of feel like I do. We were having a good time...I mean, I was, anyway."

"So was I. But you were doing your job. That's okay." And that was the thing. As frustrated as he'd been at the fact that Becca had up and left as soon as they started getting cozy, he couldn't be angry. "How are they?"

"The cats? They'll be all right." He could hear the relief in her voice. "They're very undernourished, and one of them has frostbitten feet that might need special treatment, but otherwise they'll survive."

The Yedziniaks drove through, the gate opening over their Mercedes SUV. Carl gave Zane a half-salute. Tina winked. Zane just

nodded and looked back at the cameras.

“Are you free tonight?” Becca asked. “I wanted to make it up to you,” she said.

He thought about teasing her and asking what that meant, what it might involve. But it didn’t matter, because the answer would be yes no matter what she said.

“Sure,” he answered. He wondered if she could hear his smile over the phone. “What time and where?”

SHE’D SUGGESTED drinks at Jimmy’s Watering Hole, maybe dinner after that, but she wasn’t free until seven, so Zane stopped into the gym for a quick workout to get rid of some of the pent-up frustration still lingering after last night.

“Hey, man, haven’t seen you in a while,” Dash said above the blender. He poured two protein drinks and slid them across the counter. Zane recognized the women who took them, two secretaries who came in every day around five to take spin class. They loosened their ponytails and batted their lashes, but Dash just turned to the sink and washed out the blender.

“I’m impressed,” Zane said when they finally took their drinks and wandered away. “You’re a changed man since you met Sienna.”

Dash grinned like a kid in school. “Guess I am.”

Zane wondered how that felt, being tied down to one woman and not minding in the least. Becca’s face flashed into his mind’s eye, but that was stupid. They barely knew each other. They had almost nothing in common. He didn’t even know where things stood after last night.

Dash leaned his forearms on the counter. “We should double sometime. You and me and Sienna and Becca.”

Zane felt his face redden. He and Becca had gone out what, twice? And already his buddy was treating them like a couple. The strange thing was, he almost didn't mind. "I'm meeting her tonight at Jimmy's," he said. "You guys should stop by. Seven."

Dash grinned again. "Sounds like a plan."

THE FIRST THING Becca saw when she stepped inside the bar was Zane, all six-foot-something of him, broad-shouldered and messy-haired and talking to a dazzling brunette who made all the other women sitting at the bar look like they were washed in sepia. Becca's heart ricocheted around and settled somewhere inside the back of her throat. Every time she laid eyes on this man, another part of her went unpredictable, sparking off into little explosions.

"Hi," she said as she approached them. The bar was nearly full, the tables too, and a few Christmas trees stood around the room. One was decorated completely in coasters with different beer slogans. Another looked as though a dump truck of tinsel had backed up and unloaded onto it. The third had nothing at all except a giant light-up star on top.

Zane turned at her voice, and his face brightened. "Hey, you." He didn't lean over and kiss her—disappointing—but he did squeeze her arm and draw her close. "This is Sienna," he said. He looked around. "She's here with Dash Springer. From the gym?"

Becca nodded. "You spent last year in England, right? I remember reading about it in the papers."

Sienna smiled. "I did. Can't wait to go back sometime." She glanced at Zane. "It's just a certain someone here in the States that brought me back."

As if on cue, Dash emerged from the crowd. “Hey, Becca. Good to see you.” He pumped her hand up and down. “What’re you drinking?”

“Rum and coke,” she said. Dash nodded and wriggled through the crowd again.

“I love your necklace,” Sienna said.

Becca’s fingers went to the paw print.

“Becca does love her animals,” Zane said before she could answer. For a minute, she thought he was poking fun or being sarcastic, but she didn’t see any of that in his face. “Cats doing better?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Oh, right, you run the animal shelter outside of town, right?” Sienna asked. “Zane told me you were up half the night with them. That’s wonderful. I could never do it, though. Too much heartbreak.”

Dash returned and handed Becca her drink. He snaked one arm around Sienna’s waist, and the two of them melted into each other and disappeared into the crowd.

“Want to grab a place to sit?” Zane asked.

She nodded. He smelled delicious. His smile ate her up, and all she could do was sip her drink through her little red straw and marvel at the fact that someone like him wanted to spend time with someone like her.

“I have a confession,” he said into her ear. Behind them, people began to cluster around the karaoke machine.

“What’s that?”

“I was kinda jealous of those cats last night.”

She set her glass on the bar and dropped both palms onto Zane’s legs. Solid muscle. Rippling under her touch. Suddenly she wondered what he looked like naked. She wondered how he *moved*

naked, what majestic beast he might look like in the bedroom. *Get control, Becca. That's not what you want, remember?* Ella's warning came to her mind, and she slid her hands away. "I'm sorry," she said. "I get a little crazy when it comes to the animals."

He tipped her mouth up to meet his, apparently not caring that they stood in the middle of a crowded bar. "I know." He kissed her gently. "It's part of what I like about you." He smiled against her, not quite breaking the kiss.

*I wonder what the other parts are?* She didn't dare ask him. But she wanted to ask him. She deepened the kiss, hoping he could read her desire inside it. Then her stomach rumbled. *Oh, fantastic. Utterly romantic.*

Zane laughed. "Don't worry. I'm hungry too. Let's grab a booth." He laced his fingers through hers and scanned the room for an empty one. Karaoke had started up, and while the early renditions of "All I Want for Christmas is You" and "Santa Baby" sounded pretty good, she knew that as the night wound on, the drunken versions around midnight would be a lot less in tune and a lot more entertaining.

"Hmm," he said as the waitress set down paper placemats in front of them and brought another round of drinks. "Harder for me to touch you this way." He crooked one brow, and she smiled.

"Then I guess we better eat these burgers in record time."

But by the time the food arrived, the music was in full swing, and people kept stopping by the booth to say hello, and all they could do was touch hands every once in a while. *It's okay, Becca told herself. You can be alone with him later.* They had plenty of time to get to that point. She smiled at his jokes and gave him a thumbs-up when he dominated a darts game with some high school buddies.

It was nice and warm in the bar, and the booth was cushy and roomy. She could stretch right out if she wanted to, just relax while Zane socialized. Maybe she could even close her eyes for a minute or two...

“Becca?” Zane’s voice came from somewhere far away, and suddenly her head jerked off her palm and nearly hit the table.

“Did I fall asleep?” *No. I did not.* Last night she’d ditched him for work, and tonight, she’d ditched him for dreamland?

He just smiled. “Maybe a little cat nap. No pun intended.”

“Ha, ha. I’m so sorry.” All she seemed to do was apologize to this guy. She scrubbed her face. “What time is it?”

“About midnight.” The lights came on a moment later, blinding her. The karaoke machine squawked off after a guy finished the last painful notes of “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer”.

Zane swept their empty plates and glasses to one side. “You ready to go?”

Becca nodded, gathering her coat and scarf and gloves into her arms. She could have sworn the booth moved a little as she followed him, because the next thing she knew, he was catching her by the arm. “Whoa. I’m driving you home.”

“No, I’m—” She stopped herself. For one, she probably wasn’t fine, as she’d been about to say, and for two, she wasn’t about to turn down the chance to say goodnight to Zane in the warmth of his truck. “Okay.”

“Where’d you park?”

“Back lot.”

“Good. It won’t get towed or ticketed there.” He helped her into her coat, wrapped her scarf around her neck and kissed the tip of her nose. His own gloved hand reached down to take hers, and in

her still half-dreamy state, she thought she would have followed him anywhere.

*He's like a lion.* Regal. Wild. People watched him go like the king of the forest. She studied his profile as they walked into the cold, the air so frigid it bit her skin. The wind caught his hair and lifted it a little. She let him guide her to his truck and then hoist her into the passenger seat like she weighed nothing at all. She pulled off her gloves and stretched out her fingers as the truck roared to life and heat puffed from the vents. *Don't take me home yet,* she almost said, but as she opened her mouth, a yawn split it in half. She'd be poor company tonight if he took her back to his place, and they both knew it.

“What time did you get to bed last night, anyway?”

She stifled another yawn. “I don't know. It was after two.” And she'd gotten up as usual at six-thirty. “It was worth it. The cats were sleeping when I left. Cozy and warm for the first time in who knows how long.”

He smiled. “Becca Eriksen the animal tamer. Services rendered at all hours of the day and night, hmm?” He eased the truck to a stop, and she realized with dismay they sat outside Zeb's Diner, with her apartment one lousy floor up.

*I would like to tame you,* she thought with a crazy smile.

“I wouldn't mind that,” Zane answered, and Becca realized with embarrassment that she'd said the words aloud. He traced the length of her torso, from her chin to the crease of her hip. He slipped one finger inside the hem of her shirt, teasing her bare skin before he kissed her, long and slow, until her insides turned to liquid. “I think you've already started.”

She placed both palms flat against his chest, feeling the planes of solid muscle, like a wall holding her up. “Walk me upstairs?”



CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

She didn't have to ask twice.

He took her gloved hand in his and led her inside. It probably would have taken them a few seconds to climb the single flight of stairs if they hadn't stopped more than once to kiss. At one point, Becca started to say something, but the roar of desire inside Zane's head made it impossible for him to focus.

Finally, he turned her around, placed both hands on her hips and steered her up the stairs ahead of him. "Lead the way." At the top, she unlocked a white door with a bright red stocking hanging in the center. A three-inch-tall E in bright silver sparkles adorned the decoration. He shook his head. He'd never met someone so enamored with the holiday season.

As they stepped inside, Becca turned on a light. "This is it. Living room, kitchen straight ahead, bathroom second door on the left and Ella's room across the hall from mine."

He'd been here once before but hadn't bothered to look at the surroundings. "Your sister's not around tonight?"

"I think she had a date. Her social calendar is kind of hard to keep track of."

He took in the Christmas tree in the front window and the holiday cards taped above the doorway. “Nice place.”

“Small place.”

But it didn’t feel small. It felt cozy and lived in, from the family photos on the walls to the blankets on the couch to the stove in the corner and the two cats sleeping beside it. “Oh, boy,” he teased. “Animals here too?”

She smiled as she stifled another yawn. “Animals everywhere, if you’re spending time with me.”

Funny, but the thought didn’t make him cringe or turn around and head for the door the way it had in the past with other women he’d dated.

“Do you...” Her cheeks turned pink, and she gestured down the hall. “Want to stay a little while?”

Oh, did he.

*What is it about her?* He’d never been with someone who turned him on so quickly and so completely. He prided himself on being in control at all times, at being the one to set the pace. With Becca, that had changed. He thought about her all the time. Wanted to please her, to impress her, to do the right thing even if it wasn’t his first instinct.

“Sure,” was all he said.

She bit her bottom lip. “Give me about five minutes, then meet me in the bedroom.”

“You got it.” He sank into a chair in the living room and appreciated the view as she walked down the hall. She went into the bathroom, and he could hear the water run and then the sound of tooth-brushing. A few minutes later she emerged and went into the bedroom. The door clicked shut behind her, and a faint light turned on. Zane watched the shadows beneath the door move, counting

down the seconds. He wondered what she was changing into. Maybe nothing at all, though he doubted that. Becca Ericksen probably had some cute little cotton sleepshirt with paw prints on the front.

He pulled out his phone and checked his email to pass a few more minutes. Nothing major. No texts from anyone, either. He caught himself yawning and glanced at the time.

*One o'clock in the morning?*

He got up and walked down the hall. When he got to her bedroom, he rapped softly. No answer. He rapped again, then turned the knob and peeked inside. *Ready for me?* were the words on his tongue, but they died when he saw her curled up on the bed. She hadn't even bothered to get under the covers. *She's exhausted.* No wonder, if she'd been up late saving cats the night before.

He took another step inside, disappointed but not about to wake her. He was almost right about her choice of sleepwear. She had on a baby doll t-shirt with a cat face and short shorts that barely covered her perky behind. Desire surged through him, but he pushed it away at the sound of her quiet snores. Her hair had fallen onto her face, and she breathed with the heavy, deeply contented sleep of the dreamless.

He ran one finger over her cheek. *Angel*, he thought, then blinked at the word and wondered where it had come from. Something brushed against his bare leg, and he jumped. A yellow-eyed cat blinked up at him and meowed. He nudged it aside with his foot, then bent and kissed Becca on the cheek. She sighed and rolled over, and he knew he wouldn't be getting lucky tonight.

He backed out of the bedroom and took a detour into the bathroom to relieve himself. To his surprise, the cat followed him and jumped up on the sink. Zane finished and washed his hands, but as

he did, the animal meowed and gave him a reproachful look. Zane turned the water back on. To his surprise, the cat stuck its head under the faucet and lapped at the stream.

He chuckled and waited another minute until the cat finished drinking. Then he followed it into the living room and checked the stove. The frost on the windows indicated another sub-zero night, but inside the apartment everything glowed with warmth. The cat curled itself into a ball on the rug, and on impulse, Zane bent down and petted it. It didn't open its eyes, but its whole body stretched in pleasure, and a moment later, it began to purr.

*This is crazy.* He didn't even like animals. And he'd promised himself he'd never get attached to one again. *You're in a world of trouble, Andrews.* First he was falling for Becca, then her pets. He gave the cat another pat just as the front door opened and a breathless Ella rushed inside. When she saw him, she gave a squawk of surprise.

"Oh! I...ah...."

"Hey, Ella." He straightened.

"Hey yourself, handsome." She slipped off her coat to reveal a see-through black shirt and skin-tight jeans. "You're here late."

"Uh huh."

She looked down the hall. "Is Becca here?"

"Yep. Sleeping."

Ella lifted one brow. "Did you wear her out?"

*I wish.* But the thought was a silly one, not one he really meant. "Sure," he said, deliberately vague.

Ella's gaze roamed over him, eating him up. "I don't get it," she finally said. "You and my sister. Unless you're a changed man, the two of you have zero in common. And you know she's way out of your league, right?"

That, finally, was the thought that dogged him through his days. Becca Ericksen was the kind of person Zane would never be, selfless and kind and utterly unconcerned with how others saw her. She wanted to make the world better. She championed the underdog.

What did he do?

He went storming through life as if it was his entertainment. He moved from woman to woman and job to job as they pleased him, discarding them when he was done and not caring what wreckage he left in his wake. He rubbed the back of his neck. He'd tried to be a better man these last few weeks, tried to be the kind of man she'd want to spend time with. Maybe he could be. Maybe despite what Ella said, he and Becca had a chance. He'd let her sleep tonight, right? The old Zane would've woken her up as he was taking her out of her nightclothes. That had to count for something.

"I'm a changed man," he said as he buttoned up his coat. "You'll see."

Ella's gaze never left him. "Okay. If you say so." But the doubt in her voice followed him all the way down the stairs and out into the frigid night.

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

Six hours later, Becca sat straight up in bed. “What time is it?” She fumbled for her phone and squinted at the screen. Seven-fifteen. In the morning. She still wore her pajamas and she was lying alone under the covers, which meant she’d fallen asleep after inviting Zane to meet her in the bedroom.

She fell back on the pillows and groaned. “I didn’t. Please tell me I didn’t.”

Laurel the calico cat jumped onto the bed and started kneading the covers. Becca covered her face with both hands. Well, that was the end of it. If Zane had any suspicions about her interest before last night, they’d certainly been confirmed by her inability to stay awake around him.

Her phone buzzed with a text, and she removed one hand from her face long enough to check it.

**Good morning, Sleeping Beauty.**

Her face flushed. **Good morning. Sorry I fell asleep.**

**It’s OK. I know u were tired.**

She ran her thumb over the screen. *I bet even an exhausted Ella would’ve figured out how to seduce Zane into her bed, though.* Sometimes she felt like such a naive little girl around him. She

sighed. **I'll make it up to you.** She wasn't sure what she meant, but she'd ask Ella. The Queen of Seduction would surely have some pointers.

**I can't wait.**

But despite her best intentions, Becca managed to see Zane only once over the next week. Overtime shifts for him and multiple adoptions and intakes at the shelter for her meant they had to settle for a meal at the diner in between running in opposite directions.

"The three kittens in the back are almost ready to go to foster homes," she said over club sandwiches. She mashed a French fry into a pool of ketchup at the edge of her plate. "And I think—" she crossed the fingers of her free hand, "—there's a family coming up from Albany tomorrow to look at Buddy. He's the mastiff mix," she explained. "The one who's been there since the summer? I'm so happy he might be finding a home because—"

"I know," Zane said, "because he was abandoned in a house after the owner left and by the time Janet found him he was just skin and bones."

"I already told you the story?"

"Yes." He reached out and touched the soft spot under her chin. "But I don't mind. I like your stories."

Her stomach flipped, the way it always did when he talked to her, when he looked at her with that intense gaze, as if a four-alarm fire wouldn't drag him away. "I'm so scattered sometimes," she said. "I'm sorry."

He took her hand. "Stop apologizing."

She looked down at her sweatshirt and jeans and clunky work boots. Yet again she wished she could look more like her sister, or some of those women who lived in Mountain Glen who always looked so put together. She just didn't have time. Or energy. She

wondered how much that bothered him, though. She saw the way his gaze was drawn to Ella sometimes when she waltzed into the apartment.

“It’s supposed to snow,” she said to distract herself.

He looked outside to where clouds scudded along the horizon. “Good. It’s about time.”

“Maybe we’ll have a white Christmas.”

His thumb rubbed the inside of her palm. “That would be nice.”

“I thought you didn’t like Christmas?”

He shrugged. “Maybe I changed my mind.”

She smiled. She couldn’t help it. “Good.”

“I want to ask you something,” he went on. His hand hadn’t left hers.

“Sure.” Her cell phone buzzed in her pocket, but she left it alone. She was trying to be better about not panicking and checking it right away, at least not when she was with Zane. *A minute. Or two.* The world wouldn’t end in that amount of time. No one would die. Her phone buzzed again. She ignored it again.

“There’s a Christmas party over at Villa Venezia this weekend. The home owners’ association of the Glen is throwing it.” He turned red. “They’re giving me some kind of award.”

“Really? That’s so cool! What’s it for?”

He ducked his chin. “Being a good security guard or something, I guess. They weren’t clear on the details.” He looked proud and embarrassed all at once. “So you want to go with me?”

“Of course.”

His face brightened. “It’s Saturday night, starts at seven.” He hesitated. “Is that okay? We can go later if you want.”

“That’s perfect. I only work ’til three on weekends. Janet does rounds at five, Julito will check in around seven, but I don’t need to



be there.” She swallowed as she said the words. She usually did stay past three, sometimes even past seven. Closing the door on those furry faces broke her heart night after night. “*Where are you going?*” they seemed to ask. “*Why can’t we go with you?*” She was glad the board would be hiring a new manager soon. She didn’t have the heart or the constitution to do it long-term.

“Do I have to wear a fancy dress?” she asked.

“Wear what you want. You’ll look great.”

“But it’s a fancy party, right? And if you’re being honored...” She wanted to stand beside him, to champion him, to make him proud.

“Well, I am gonna dig up a suit. You might not recognize me.”

“Ooh, then I will most definitely wear a dress.” She lowered her lashes and channeled her inner Ella. “Maybe holiday red and cut down to here.” She traced a finger down her own chest, collarbone to navel.

“Or up to here?” He moved his hand along her thigh, knee to hip.

“Or maybe both.” Their gaze locked for a long few seconds across the table, and something inside Becca turned over. *I’m falling for this guy. Head over heels over something else altogether.*

“I can’t wait,” he finally said. “I’ll pick you up at quarter to seven. And Becca?”

The door burst open with a group of teens, and a rush of cold wind blew napkins and paper menus across the diner. The waitresses hurried around to retrieve them, and Becca grabbed a few that had landed on their table. By the time the door had closed and order restored, she almost forgot he’d started to ask her a question.

*Ah, Becca?*

“What were you saying before?”

He glanced over her shoulder. “Nothing. Not important.” But his eyes betrayed the words, and Becca spent the rest of the night wondering what Zane hadn’t had the courage to say.

WHAT ELSE HAD he wanted to ask her? *Promise me you won’t leave in the middle of dinner. Promise me you won’t answer an emergency call from the shelter.* He knew that sounded small. He knew her work came first. Still, sometimes he wanted to tell her they were just animals. They’d be fine. And despite what he told his buddies, he was damn proud that the Glen’s association was recognizing his work. He’d never gotten so much as a certificate for perfect attendance or good effort when he was in school. This was a big deal. He wanted Becca there when he received it.

But he couldn’t tell her that straight out. Besides, it was part of what he liked about her, that devotion to anything with fur and four legs. She had a heart bigger than anyone he’d ever met, and he had no right to be jealous. He squashed the thought that maybe it was more than jealousy. That maybe her leaving jolted him back to the days of his father leaving with Goldie in tow. *It’s not the same thing,* he tried to tell himself. But he didn’t always believe it.

He pulled up to the Glen and relieved Sue at ten minutes to four. “Anything I need to know?”

“Nope.” She hauled herself out of the captain’s chair and hefted a tote bag of magazines onto her shoulder. “Snow’s comin’, though. Maintenance said they’d be on call if we need ’em to plow.”

“Good.” As if on command, a flake danced through the air. Then two. Zane grinned. “It’s about time.” He spent the next eight hours watching the ground turn white and wondering what to buy Becca for Christmas.

BY THE TIME midnight rolled around, the snow had tapered off. So much for the three-plus inches the weatherman had predicted. Zane did a last check of the cameras, then pulled on his woolen hat and headed for his truck. Out of habit he rounded the corner by the maintenance shed. He hadn't seen the stray in a while, but the food always disappeared. Still, he was beginning to wonder if another rogue animal was helping itself to the dish instead.

"Maybe it's found a better place to hang out." Maybe it had even found itself a home. He glanced at the dish and the blankets in the corner. This time, a pair of yellow eyes looked back at him. Zane took a step back, startled. Curled into a ball, the dog lifted its head but didn't move. Nor did it growl or put its ears back, the way it often did.

"Well, hey there." He stopped where he was and put his hand in his pockets. "Guess you didn't find yourself a penthouse suite somewhere else, huh?"

The dog stared at Zane for another few seconds. Then, with a faint thump, it bumped its tail against the ground. Zane zipped his jacket up to his chin. *Goldie used to wag her tail like that.* Slowly at first, then working up to a steady drumbeat until her entire body wriggled with the effort. Then she'd launch herself into Zane's young arms and lick his face until it tickled.

He turned on his heel and walked away. *Stop thinking about her. Stop thinking about dogs at all.* He rubbed his arms to thaw them. Less than five minutes outside in this weather was enough to freeze them solid. He pulled himself into the cab of his truck and turned the heat to high. A mile to his place, a shower, and then a long, deep

sleep if he was lucky. He turned onto Red Barn Road and gunned it, forgetting about the slick inch of snow that had fallen.

“Whoa!” He hit a slippery spot, fishtailed and nearly went off the road. *Slow down, idiot.* Too much on his mind. Too many weird emotions playing in his heart. He took his foot off the accelerator and straightened the truck just in time for a deer to skitter from the woods. He mashed the brake pedal to the floor, jerked the wheel, missed hitting the deer by about a foot and crashed his right front tire into what felt like the world’s biggest pothole just short of the turn onto his road.

“What the—” A string of curse words left his lips. As soon as he pulled to the shoulder, the truck clunked to a stop, and all the air whooshed out. Definitely a flat. Probably also a bent rim, if not damage to the axle too. Zane pounded the steering wheel in frustration. One whole paycheck gone, not to mention the use of his truck for at least a day. And the thermometer on his dashboard read minus two degrees.

“Who was wishing for a white Christmas?” he said as he locked the truck and left it where it was. He pulled on a pair of gloves and bent his head into the wind for the quarter-mile walk home. What had started out as a pretty fine day, asking Becca to the Christmas party and watching her say yes in the cutest way possible, had turned black twelve hours later.

Zane shivered. The wind went straight through his jeans and leather jacket. *Only an idiot doesn’t buy a ski jacket when he moves back north.* First thing tomorrow he’d head over to the Feed ’n Seed and buy the warmest hunting parka they had. He cupped his hands to his mouth and blew. He hadn’t even left a light on in his trailer. Clouds covered the moon and the stars, so he almost didn’t see what waited for him on his porch.

He stopped on the front step and grabbed the flashlight he kept in the corner. He was digging into his pocket for his keys when he finally saw what hung at eye level. "What the..." He focused the beam of light on the enormous pine wreath in the center of his door. It was decorated with silver and red bows and smelled like the forest around him.

*Thought you could use a little Christmas cheer, read the note attached to a perky red bow in the center. Can't wait for the party. Becca.*

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

To her surprise and delight, most of Saturday passed uneventfully for Becca. Two potential adopters came in to fill out applications, and a Boy Scout troop from Silver Valley spent the morning walking dogs. They brought a reporter from the local paper, too.

“And how long have you been here?” the woman asked as she looked around the cluttered office.

“As manager? A little less than a month. I’ve managed the books for a couple of years though, and I’ve been a volunteer for as long as I can remember.”

The middle-aged woman’s eyes widened behind her glasses. “Goodness. I don’t know how you do it.”

Becca lifted her palms. Papers littered her desk. A shepherd mix, new to the shelter as of this week, slept at her feet. The space heater whirred, cats meowed from the other room and her head and arms ached. “You just do.”

The woman looked up as she added a decisive period to whatever she was writing. “You know that story *The Little Prince*? About the boy prince that meets a fox?”

“I think maybe I’ve read it. But a long time ago.”

“I never forgot that one line, something about always being responsible for the things you tame. It’s a sweet thought, isn’t it? And a powerful one.” The reporter looked around again and tapped the end of her pencil on her chin. “I’ll tell you what. I’m going to see if I can come back after New Year’s and do a feature story on this place. Looks like you operate on a shoestring budget. No offense,” she added.

“None taken. It’s true.”

“But from what I’ve seen, these animals look happy and well cared for.” She tucked away her things. “I didn’t even know you were here, and I’ve lived in Whispering Pines my whole life. Maybe if we do a story on you, you’ll get some donations. Volunteers. Whatever you need.”

*We need everything*, Becca almost said. Instead, she just smiled. “Thank you. That would be wonderful.”

She hummed her way through the rest of the day, half her thoughts on the shelter and the rest on the outfit she’d bought to wear to the Christmas party. It wasn’t red, and it wasn’t slit all the way up or down anywhere, but she still hoped Zane would like it. *This time I’m not leaving, no matter who calls me.*

Then Janet walked into her office at ten minutes to three, face somber as stone.

Becca sat on the fraying couch with a tubby orange cat in her lap. “Oh, no. What is it?”

“It’s not good.”

For a moment, Becca wanted to press both hands to her ears. *I don’t want to hear. Whatever you have to say, just keep it until tomorrow.* Instead, she transferred the sleepy cat to the couch and brushed her palms on her jeans. “Tell me.”

“You know Helen Kramer.”

“Of course.” She’d been out to the woman’s house a couple of times last year.

“She passed away last night.”

“Oh, no. That’s terrible. How? She wasn’t that old.”

“I just got off the phone with her son. They’re not sure, exactly. He had the neighbors go over there this morning when he couldn’t reach her. They found her in bed. They think maybe a stroke or a heart attack.”

Becca pressed her lips together. “And the cats?”

“They’re all still there, from what the neighbor says.” Janet paused. “How many did she have?”

“Twenty-one. Always twenty-one, remember? It was the number of years she’d been married to her husband before he passed.” Kooky and solitary, Helen Kramer had adopted cats from Whispering Pines Paws a few times over the years, replenishing her brood as they died. Becca and Chrissy and the managers before them had long since given up trying to convince her to stop. Instead they’d scheduled home visits every few months to check on them and make sure Helen was managing all right.

“Where are we going to put twenty-one cats?” Janet asked.

Becca clasped both hands at the back of her neck. “We have barely any room here. Did her son say he wouldn’t take them?”

“He didn’t sound happy with the situation,” Janet added.

“Well, his mother just died. I can’t blame him.”

“No, I mean...he didn’t sound like he knew she had that many cats.”

Becca frowned. “I thought everyone in town knew.”

“He doesn’t live here. I think he’s down outside of Albany. He said he’s coming up later today to take care of things.”



“Meaning we should probably get those animals out of there as soon as possible.”

Janet nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Okay.” Becca looked around. “Well, maybe they can stay in the house for now. Call him back and tell him we’ll have someone go over and take care of food and water and litter boxes, at least until after Christmas.” She didn’t want to move that many cats from the only place they’d called home. Animals were funny when it came to change, especially felines. Sometimes they did all right. More often, they retreated, grew despondent and stopped eating. She knuckled her fingers against her forehead. “And maybe tomorrow we can start setting up cages in the back bathroom so we can bring them in on the twenty-sixth.” She hadn’t planned on working full days either the day before or after the holiday, but it didn’t look like she had much choice.

“Okay. I know Julito’s visiting his parents today. I’ll see if Kevin’s around.”

“I’m going to a party tonight in Silver Valley,” Becca said with a glance outside. Snow had started falling again, thick white flakes that coated every surface in minutes. “I’ll have my phone, but I hope you and the guys can handle things. I’ll come in first thing tomorrow.”

“Are you going with Zane?”

“Yes.”

Janet grinned. “Good for you. That guy’s a stud with a capital S. We’ll be fine. I’ll talk to Helen’s son and get things squared away. You go have fun. Don’t think twice about this place.”

“Thanks.” And for a few hours, Becca foolishly thought that might actually be possible.

AT PRECISELY QUARTER TO SEVEN, Zane pulled open his front door. His truck was still out of commission, so Becca was taking him to the party. "Sorry you had to—" *pick me up*, he meant to say, but the words died in his throat when he saw her.

"Wow," was all he managed to say before he swept her inside and laid a kiss on her. He skimmed his hands down her curves before settling them on her hips. "What do you have on?" he said when he finally stopped kissing her long enough to take a closer look.

She took a step back and shrugged off her long red coat. Underneath, she wore a long leather skirt and a tight-fitting red shirt decorated with sparkles and a zipper up the front. The zipper ended just above her breasts, where creamy pink skin took over. He reached out and touched her necklace. "Very nice."

"It's not quite a dress."

"Do I look like I care?" He tugged at the zipper. "May I?"

She closed her hand over his. "And unwrap the package before Christmas? That would put you on Santa's naughty list."

He let go of her zipper and kissed her neck instead. "I stopped believing in Santa in the third grade." She tasted like soap and fresh air, and he ran his tongue along her skin, nibbling in a few places until he felt her tremble.

"Zane."

He lifted his head. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and fastened those bright blue eyes on his. "You make me all unsteady."

He smiled. "You do the same to me."

He pretended to tug at her zipper again. "Want to skip the party?"

She put her cheek to his. "I do." Her breath whispered across his skin. "But I spent a lot of time getting all dressed up so I could go out

with you and show the world I own more than sweatshirts and jeans.” She sat back and ran one forefinger over his bottom lip. “Plus you’re getting an award! We have to go, at least for a little while.”

He ducked his chin. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Don’t say *whatever*. It’s a big deal.”

Man, she made him feel important. He loved that about her. He loved the glow in her eyes when she chided him, told him to care. *She’s getting under your skin*, a voice inside him warned. *She’s taming you*. But he didn’t mind. Ella was right: Becca Ericksen should have been out of his league. Smart and focused, she lived her life devoted to a cause that would never give back half of what she gave to it. People like her changed the world, saved it and made it better, while people like Zane messed it up with mistakes.

But tonight when he stood up to accept his award, with Becca on his arm, people would see that he was a different man.

“I’ve never met anyone like you,” he said.

Her mouth pursed in a cute pout. “Is that a good or a bad thing?”

He moved her hair behind her shoulders and gave her one last chaste kiss on her cheek. As it was, if he did anything else, touched her in any other way, they’d never leave the trailer.

“It’s a good thing, Becca. A very good thing.”

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

They pulled around the circular drive of Villa Venezia, where a valet whisked Becca's car away. Zane took her hand as they hurried through the snow and into a foyer so large everything echoed.

"Wow." Becca looked up at a ceiling hung with twinkling white lights. An enormous Christmas tree decorated with blue and silver globes stood in one corner, while a string quartet played in the other. People filled the ballroom straight ahead. Wait staff circled with trays of appetizers—to Becca's relief, because she'd realized about halfway here that she was starving.

Zane wore a dark suit, a black button-down shirt and a tie with a subtle Christmas pattern on it. The entire look combined in a mass of raw sexuality the way it always did with him, and she didn't miss the admiring stares of other women as they walked into the ballroom. Her chin lifted a little. *He's my date, yes. Zane Andrews.* The thought gave her a rush.

"Champagne?" he asked, taking two glasses from rows sitting on a damask-covered table along the wall.

"Sure." One glass wouldn't hurt, though she'd better find some appetizers to snack on too. Zane had said something about his truck

being in the shop, which was how she'd ended up driving, but she didn't mind. The bubbly liquor tickled her nose and added to everything else making her smile—the man, the party, the way things inside her melted when she dared to think about where the night might go.

Becca recognized a few faces, but most of the guests seemed middle-aged, if not significantly older. She found a corner to stand in while Zane greeted a group of men by the bar. He laughed, shook hands, ran his fingers through his hair and mussed it up. Becca took a bacon-wrapped scallop from a passing waiter, then two skewers of sesame steak. More guests arrived, and the band started to play tunes from the fifties and sixties. Becca tapped the toe of her boot. The next time she looked at the bar, two women had sidled up to Zane, one blonde and one red-haired, and it wasn't hard to read their body language. They obviously knew him, probably from Mountain Glen, and they wouldn't mind knowing him a lot better. Preferably naked. And preferably in their beds while their husbands were at work.

She tried not to care. He smiled as they flirted, but he didn't look like he was interested in anything more than casual conversation. Becca finished her champagne and wondered if it would be a bad idea to have a second glass. *We'll probably be here a while, between dinner and the awards.* So she helped herself to another full flute the next time a waiter walked by.

Zane separated himself from the crowd and returned to her side. "So tell me, what's a woman like you doing all alone tonight?" he said with a wink.

"Hoping you'd walk across the room and ask me that," she answered.

His arm went around her waist, tight and possessive. “Want to dance?”

She managed to nod as she drank half her glass of champagne and then abandoned it on a tray of empties nearby. “Run-Around Sue” changed into “Unchained Melody”, and as Zane took her in his arms, Becca closed her eyes. His muscles tightened under her touch. He ran his hands up and down her back, tousling her loose hair, until she felt as though every inch of her was spinning out of control.

The song ended much too soon, and reluctantly she opened her eyes. “How much longer do we have to stay here?”

He gave her a teasing smile. “How about until after dinner? I think they’re doing the awards after that. We can skip dessert.”

Becca nodded, trying to keep the words, *You can be my dessert*, from coming out and making her sound like an idiot extraordinaire.

One of the women from the bar waved them over. “Join us,” she said too brightly, and to Becca’s dismay, Zane did. The woman gave Becca a dismissive glance and patted the chair beside her. “We have room.” She wiggled and shook out Zane’s napkin, making a show of smoothing it in his lap. The woman’s husband, deep in conversation with the man beside him, barely looked over.

Another round of champagne arrived, followed by glasses of wine for the women and beers for the men. Becca pushed hers aside.

“Not a drinker?” the blonde asked. Her slender fingers caressed the stem of her wine glass. The question seemed to be directed at Becca, but the woman’s eyes hadn’t left Zane’s mouth.

“I’m driving tonight,” Becca said. She helped herself to water and a piece of bread instead.

“Oh. Of course.” The blonde giggled and mouthed something to her friend across the table. “So glad we hired a limo for the night.

These parties always end up going late.”

But Becca was more interested in the food than the liquor or how late the party might go. Salads arrived, then choices of chicken, steak or salmon. Conversation at the table swirled between stocks, a legal case and a spa that was opening up downtown.

Only once did the redhead turn to Becca and ask a question. “Do you work? Or...” she trailed off, as if she couldn’t think what the other options might be.

“I’m the temporary manager at the animal shelter in Whispering Pines.”

“Oh.” The woman nodded. “Well. That seems like a very selfless job.”

“Thankless too, if you ask me,” the blonde interjected.

Zane closed his hand over Becca’s. “She’s amazing. You should see her in action.”

“Really?” The blonde turned back to her wine. “My son wanted a *Labradoodle* for his birthday last year. Of course none of the local shelters had anything. We had to go all the way to *Indiana* to find a breeder.” She tsk-tsked as if Becca was personally to blame for the inconvenience.

*That type of dog is more inbred than any other. And do you know how most breeders treat their animals?* Becca pressed her lips together to keep the words from spilling out. Suddenly her cell phone buzzed. She pulled it from her clutch purse, but too late to catch the call.

*Janet, Vet Tech*, read the screen. Too late, she remembered that she was supposed to be ignoring all calls from the shelter. Tonight was about Zane and his award. The cats would be fine. She’d check in first thing tomorrow. But Becca’s fingers still grew slick as she waited for a voicemail.

Zane leaned over. "Everything okay?"

"I'm sure it is," she lied. Janet wouldn't be calling her, not in the middle of this party, unless something was very much not okay.

He reached under the table and squeezed her thigh. Then he finished his beer and signaled the waiter for another.

Janet didn't leave a voicemail. A moment later, she called again. Becca stared at the phone, willing it to stop. Willing everything to be okay.

"You have to answer it?" Zane asked. She couldn't read his expression.

"No. I don't know."

"Yes, you do. It'll kill you if you don't."

The women at the table were watching her now, looking back and forth from Becca to Zane with curiosity.

"I'll just be one minute. I promise." Becca punched the answer button and jerked to her feet, almost taking the tablecloth with her. She found a corner by the bar and turned her back to the crowd, pressing her other ear with one finger to drown out the party noise. "Janet? Hello?" For a few seconds, all she could hear were faint voices in the background. Then a car engine. "Janet?"

"Bec? Can you hear me?"

"What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to call you."

Becca found her way out of the ballroom and down an empty hall. "What's happening?"

"Helen Kramer's son got to the house a couple of hours ago. According to one of the neighbors, as soon as he opened the front door, he threw all the cats outside."

"*What?*" Becca reached for a wall to steady herself.



“He propped open the front and back doors, left them wide open and went through the house until all the cats were out. Neighbor said he was ranting about the smell, how he’d never be able to sell the house, other crazy stuff.”

“He threw them into the *cold*? And the snow?” Becca stared into the dark. How could someone be so cruel?

“I’m here right now, and Julito and Kevin too.” Janet went away from the phone and said something Becca couldn’t make out. “We’ve got a lot of them. I think most of them. It’s a good thing you told me earlier there were twenty-one, so we could keep track. They didn’t go too far, mostly under the porch and around by the shed. But we’re still missing a few, and the weather’s getting really bad.”

*Yes, it is.* Becca watched the snow fall outside. *What kind of person throws helpless animals outside on a night like this?* “I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“I don’t want to ruin your night.” Janet stopped. “I just don’t know if we can find them all in time. I don’t have enough hands. And I can’t reach any other volunteers.”

“It’s not your fault.” Becca took a deep breath and glanced down the hall. Zane was headed her way. He’d understand, wouldn’t he? But her heart ached at the questions on his face, the disappointment, the hope that she’d stay and the realization that she wasn’t going to. “How many are missing?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe five or six? Some headed for the woods. Those are the ones I’m worried about.”

Helen Kramer’s property bordered Mountain Glen, which backed up to about twenty acres of thick pines. If the cats found their way in there on a night of heavy snow and freezing temperatures, they’d almost certainly die. Becca had no choice. “I’m on my way.”

“You’re leaving,” Zane said as he reached her. “Aren’t you?”

“I have to. I’m sorry.” She took his hand. “It can’t wait.”

He clutched a glass of beer, half-full. A tiny muscle worked in the side of his jaw.

“Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad. How could I be mad? You’re running out into a blizzard to rescue...what is it this time? A pair of goats? A blind horse? You’re Mother Theresa of the animal world, Bec. There’s no way I could be mad.”

Her face flushed. “You’re being a jackass.”

He looked over his shoulder. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be. I just thought we could enjoy this night all the way through.”

“I know. And I’m so, so proud of you for getting this award.”

“I haven’t gotten it yet.” He was trying hard not to mind, not to ask her to stay. She could read the words on his face.

“You know Helen Kramer? She lives in one of those old homes behind the Glen.”

“Sure. Her son went to school with me. Good guy.”

“A *good* guy? No. He went over to her house tonight, opened all the doors and threw her cats outside.”

He frowned. “Why?”

Tears of frustration rose in her eyes. “I don’t know. Because he’s a heartless asshole?”

Zane rubbed his thumb along his glass. “I remember him being a decent guy. Maybe there’s something you don’t know. Maybe he had a reason.”

“A reason to toss twenty-one cats outside on the coldest night of the year?”

His eyes widened. “Twenty-one? That’s a lot of animals to be living in someone’s house.”

“So it’s okay, what he did?”

“Hey, I didn’t say that. I only meant—”

“I know what you meant.” It took all her strength to focus on the words. “Animals can take care of themselves, right? They’ll be fine. They have intuition.”

His expression hardened, and she pushed away all her feelings, every last little part of her that had fallen for Zane Andrews over the last few weeks. Her sister had been right all along. They had little in common. It was silly to think otherwise.

“You can get a ride home?” she asked.

“I’m sure I can.”

As if on cue, the blonde from their table walked down the hall. “Zane? Everything okay?”

“Yup,” he answered. “Becca was just leaving. Can you give me a ride home?”

She sidled up and slid one arm through the crook of his elbow. “*Absolutely.*” She tilted her head at Becca. “So sorry you have to go. Did Zane tell you he’s getting an award tonight? It’s the first time we’ve ever given one, but I know I speak for all the residents when I say he deserves it.” She squeezed his arm. “He makes us feel safe twenty-four-seven.”

Becca nodded. “I’m sure he does,” she said through tight lips. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to get my coat.” Five minutes later, with tears stinging her eyes and the wind swirling around her, she slid into the driver’s seat of her car and headed into the storm.

CHAPTER  
EIGHTEEN

Zane watched Becca go. *You're leaving me. Again.* This time he didn't even try to pretend it didn't hurt, or that it didn't remind him of his father, walking out with Christmas carols still playing in the living room and Goldie whimpering as he dragged her out the door. *Yes, animals have intuition. Yes, twenty-one cats is about twenty too many to be living in a house. And why do you have to be the one to save them?*

The thoughts warred inside his head and settled into an ache behind his breastbone. Maybe he wasn't nearly the changed man he wanted to believe. Maybe he was just a jealous jerk who wanted his date to stand beside him.

"Everything okay?" Belinda Zimmerman asked, her arm still attached to his. "Why did she have to leave, anyway?"

"Emergency at work." Suddenly Zane felt like the world's biggest loser. Here he stood, sulking because his girlfriend—and, yes, he had started calling Becca that in his head and in his heart—was putting in unpaid overtime to rescue animals in a snowstorm. He wondered if she would even stop to change her clothes or just barrel into the drifts in her impractical leather boots and skirt. *Go after her. Help her.*

He wrestled himself out of Belinda's clutches. "I've gotta go, too."

"What? No. What about the award? I have a speech planned and everything." She pouted and stamped her foot.

"And I'm sure it's a terrific one. You can give it to me another day, okay?"

She sighed dramatically. "Fine."

Zane turned toward the coat check and then realized he didn't have a set of wheels. Plus he'd had a couple beers too many over the last hour. "Belinda, can I ask you a huge favor?"

She narrowed her gaze and licked her bottom lip. "Anything you want, handsome."

He tapped the enormous diamond ring on her left finger. "It's not exactly what you're thinking." *Or hoping for.*

Belinda's come-hither look vanished. "Morals. Just what I don't like in a guy." But she smiled. "Fine. You're a decent guy, Zane. What do you need? A ride? Want to borrow the limo?"

"If you can spare it."

"We've got it for the whole night. The driver's probably outside playing games on his phone to pass the time. Lord knows we won't be leaving this place anytime soon. Just send him back when you're done."

On impulse, Zane leaned over and kissed her cheek, coming away with a mouthful of makeup. "Thanks a million."

"You're welcome. Better hurry. She's got a good ten minutes on you, and that snow doesn't look like it's letting up anytime soon."

That was his fear. With another quick thank-you Zane grabbed his coat, waved goodbye and hopped into the backseat of a stretch limo for the ride back over the mountain to Whispering Pines.

BECCA STOPPED at the shelter long enough to change into a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and a spare pair of Julito's work boots. She only had thin black stockings underneath, but they'd have to do. She didn't have time to run home for anything else. She grabbed a black wool hat and wrapped her long red coat around herself. Then she headed straight for the Kramer house.

A plow passed her on Main Street, scraping the latest coating of snow from the road. She slowed, fishtailed a little and then righted the car in time to slide through the yellow light by the diner. She forced herself to take a breath and uncurl her fingers from their death grip on the steering wheel. The drive over the mountain had been treacherous enough. She didn't need to end up in a ditch less than a mile from where she needed to go.

*He didn't even try to stop me. Or offer to come with me.* Her thoughts bounced as she turned the wipers to high. Maybe she'd misread their relationship. Maybe she really was just another warm body to Zane, a way for him to avoid loneliness around the holidays. Maybe this call was a blessing in disguise after all. Up ahead, the Methodist Church cast light onto the pavement, and bells played faintly. The week leading up to Christmas, the church played carols every night from seven to twelve. She'd always liked that tradition, the idea that Christmas should last longer than a brief twenty-four hours at the end of December.

She said a quick prayer to the tune of "What Child Is This?" and then turned and followed County Route 78 out of town. Just past the Whispering Pines limits, the road worsened. She cut her speed to twenty. Then fifteen. No moon, no stars, just snow falling from what seemed like every direction. She stopped thinking about Zane and focused on the cats.

“Just another half-mile,” she said aloud to calm herself. She squinted into the distance. When the lights for Mountain Glen appeared, she’d know to look for the narrow road on her right.

*Mountain Glen. Zane. The woman from the party.* So much for not thinking about him.

An SUV passed her in the opposite direction, spraying up snow. She braked and slid to the left. “Hang on,” she willed her tires. There. Faint glimmers up ahead. That meant the road to Helen’s would be about another hundred yards on her right.

Becca almost missed it. At the last minute, she swung the wheel hard and swerved across both lanes into Diamond Road. Her SUV slid wide, heading for the ditch. Becca held her breath. Somehow she stayed on the road. Creeping along at ten miles an hour now, she nosed the vehicle forward. In a few minutes, she spied figures standing along the drifted shoulder, and as soon as she rounded the curve, the Kramer house came into full view, lit up like the Fourth of July.

She whispered a prayer of thanks, pulled into the unplowed driveway and jumped out into the storm. The sharp wind nearly took her breath away, and she buttoned her coat all the way to her chin.

“Bec?” Janet emerged from the dark, covered in snow from head to foot. Her cheeks were bright red, her nose running furiously. “We’ve got eighteen of them.” She motioned to the front porch, where Becca could make out the shapes of Julito and Kevin and cat carriers of various sizes.

She looked around, trying to get her bearings. “Do you have any idea where the others are?”

Janet bounced on her toes and rubbed her arms. “No. I’m going to do another sweep back by the garage.” She pointed at the small structure behind the house.

“What about the woods?”

“We found two right at the edge. Julito wants to go back in there, but it’s slow going. The snow’s deep, already almost a foot in places. Plus there are a few inside in rough shape.” Janet nodded toward the porch. “I told him to stay with them, get a couple of heat lamps rigged up and find any blankets and towels he could. We’ve got to get them back to the shelter. Kevin’s got a friend with a van. He should be here soon.”

Becca understood the words Janet didn’t say. They needed to focus on saving the ones they had instead of going after ones they might not even find. She squinted into the dark. “Do you have an extra flashlight? And a pair of gloves?”

“Bec, tell me you’re not. You’re not dressed for it.”

“If we don’t have all twenty-one, I have to try. I won’t go far. Just to see if there’s any prints, any sign they went in the woods.”

“The guys have extra supplies in the house.”

“Where’s Helen’s son?” If Becca had any strength left at the end of this night, she’d throttle him with her own bare hands.

“Don’t know. Staying in a hotel somewhere, I think.”

Becca darted inside the porch, took a quick look at the cats huddled in their cages, then pulled on a pair of thick leather gloves and took the Maglite Kevin handed her. “Be careful,” he said. “Remember there’s a ravine about a hundred yards in.”

“Thanks.” She took another thirty seconds to breathe in the protective warmth and light of the house. Then she bent her head against the wind and headed for the darkest, thickest part of the woods. If she were an animal, lost and scared and seeking shelter, that’s where she’d go. No question about it.



CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

The limo moved slowly through the storm, its tires cutting an even path over the mountain. Zane's legs jiggled with nerves. He checked his phone half a dozen times and finally sent Becca a text that didn't go through. When he looked outside, all he saw was white against dark. Falling snow and sky. Suddenly, the limo came to a sharp stop, and Zane pitched forward.

"Sorry, sir," said the driver. "Looks like there's an accident up ahead." As he spoke, red lights whirled through the dark, and an ambulance squeezed by them on the shoulder.

"Whereabouts are we?"

"Just over the top of the mountain. Think we got a pickup that went into the ditch."

"Can you get by?"

"Not right now. They probably called for a tow." The wipers flicked snow from the windshield, but as fast as they cleared it, it fell and stuck again.

They were about four or five miles from the edge of town. Ten o'clock on a Saturday night, the roads fast shutting down, and he was stuck in the back seat of a limousine that wasn't going

anywhere. *You can take that white Christmas and shove it where the sun doesn't shine*, he thought. Who'd wished for snow, anyway?

Then Zane blinked. If he hadn't been so caught up in thinking about Becca, he would've realized a solution ten minutes ago. If anyone could help Zane tonight, it was Dash Springer, who in addition to owning a gym also ran the only towing company in Whispering Pines. He just hoped Dash was on his way to this wreck, and not on the other side of town pulling someone else out of trouble.

BECCA TOOK her time walking through the drifted snow. It took her a long five minutes to reach the edge of the woods, but by the time she stepped inside the thickly packed pines, the wind and snow ceased. The world became silent. Almost peaceful, if not for her constant shivering. Becca shone the flashlight ahead of her.

*There.*

Without the wind blowing snow every which way, paw prints showed up clearly. One set wove a serpentine path through the trees. She bent down to make sure they weren't rabbit or deer tracks. Someone shouted behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Janet holding two cats, one under each arm. Becca wiped her nose. Good. Maybe only the last one had ventured this way. She straightened and pulled off her gloves to blow on her hands. She could barely feel them. She could barely move them. Her eyes watered, and suddenly the wind must have shifted, because the far-away sound of church carols floated to her.

She jammed her hands back into the gloves and pulled her hat down as far as it could go. At least it wasn't below zero tonight. The

temperature had actually warmed up to almost fifteen degrees, according to the weatherman. Thus all the snow.

Becca followed the footprints. “Hey, baby,” she called into the dark. “You out there? You don’t have to be afraid. I’m right here.” She swept the flashlight left to right, straining for a glimpse of anything that looked alive. As she walked, the branches brushed her shoulders, dumping snow onto her again and again. Twice, she had to stop and rub her face. Her eyelashes felt stiff. Her nose and lips burned.

*Five more minutes and I’m turning around.* She’d be no good to the other twenty cats if she caught frostbite tonight.

Something moved in the stillness. Becca froze. She lowered her flashlight and let her eyes adjust to the dark. She whistled, and a meow echoed from the trees to her right. In tiny, incremental movements, Becca turned. She whistled again. It meowed again.

“Okay, I’m coming in there,” she said quietly. She eased her way to the tree and pulled back the low-hanging branches. A terrified-looking black cat, its long hair dragged down with snow, looked back at her. It opened its mouth and meowed again.

Becca squatted and reached forward, but the cat turned and bolted. “No!” Thankfully, the black cat was easy to spy against the white snow, and the drifts were so deep in places, it made little headway. It emerged from the other side of the tree and stopped, panting.

“Baby, let me help you,” Becca said. She propped the flashlight against a fallen limb and took halting steps through the snow. This time, exhausted, it didn’t even meow a protest. When she bent down and scooped it into her arms, it closed its eyes and nestled into the warmth of her chest.

“There you go,” she murmured. “Everything’s all right now.” Tears slipped down her cheeks but froze in an instant. “We’ve got heat and warm blankets and your friends waiting for you.” She turned back toward the house and stopped. The flashlight must have burned out; either that or the snow had picked up enough that she couldn’t see its beam anymore. *Which way do I go?*

“Just follow your steps back,” Becca said to herself, but that was easier said than done. She couldn’t see the lights from the house either, which meant she had to bend over to find her earlier tracks. A branch swiped her across the cheek, and she almost lost her balance. The cat dug its claws into her chest, trying to climb up her shoulder. “Oh, no you don’t.” She tucked it inside her coat and tried to circle around an enormous tree, but almost at once, the ground sloped downward.

“The ravine.” Becca eyed the subtle shift in the drifted snow. It wasn’t steep or particularly deep, but the ravine ran about a quarter-mile along this part of the woods. She and Ella had played here as children a few times, before her sister discovered boys and makeup. *I wonder if it would be easier to go this way.* Though Kevin had warned her about it, the ravine was a straight shot back to the road, without any trees blocking her way.

As if making up her mind for her, Becca’s feet slipped in the snow, and before she knew it, she was tripping down the slope. She gripped the cat tightly, but it barely moved in her arms. *You know, don’t you? You know I’m trying to save you.* Zane was right about one thing. Animals did have tremendous intuition. She ran her gloved fingers over its head, trying to soothe it. “Five minutes, ten tops, we’ll be back safe and sound,” she said aloud.

She yawned. Events from earlier in the night seemed to have happened a hundred years ago. Or perhaps not at all. Her eyesight

fogged. One foot in front of the other, she trudged through the snow, now up above her ankles. *Take your time, Bec.* But she could barely feel her extremities, and fatigue crashed over her in waves.

*Maybe I'll just rest for a minute. Catch my breath.* That seemed like a good idea. With the sound of Christmas music still in her ears and the cat pressing into her ribs, Becca sank to her knees in the snow and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

“T hanks, man.” Zane leapt from the passenger side of the tow truck before Dash had come to a complete stop in front of his garage.

“No problem. Good luck.” Dash tossed Zane the keys to his spare Volkswagen before heading out to pull another car out of a snow bank.

It took a couple turns of the key, but Dash’s car finally roared to life. Zane hoped the thing had some decent snow tires on it, because the skies had opened up and the roads were horribly slick. He pulled onto Main Street and downshifted as the car caught an icy spot and drifted. Thankfully, it didn’t look like many other people had braved the storm, so it wouldn’t matter if he couldn’t quite stay in one lane. He blew on one hand and steered with the other, back and forth to warm his fingers as he made his way through town. He wasn’t dressed for tromping around in the snow, but he didn’t dare waste time going back to his place for boots and a warmer coat. Plus, he wasn’t sure he’d make it out of his private road again, not the way this stuff was sticking to the ground.

He curled and uncurled his fingers around the steering wheel. He was pretty sure he knew the turn for the Kramer house. He’d spent a

few nights partying there back in high school, since Jared had had an unlimited supply of pot and a mother who worked the night shift. He turned on the wipers and the defrost, but both whined and sputtered and did little to clear his view. Thankfully the plows were keeping downtown Whispering Pines drivable, so it was only when he turned onto County Route 78 that the trip became treacherous.

Zane had tossed his phone onto the seat beside him, and he glanced at it every few minutes. No call from Becca. No text. What did he expect? She probably thought he was still enjoying the party. *But that's not my scene. Never was, never will be.* He slowed as the lights of Mountain Glen poked through the dark. A moment later, he spied tire tracks turning down a narrow road.

“Hope this is it.” He eased the car in a wide circle, turning the high beams to low to reduce the glare of the driving snow. He'd almost made the turn when all his traction went. The car slid a few feet and then went nose-first into a ditch.

“Hell!” Zane pounded the steering wheel. He tried to back out, but putting the car in reverse only spun the tires and dug him in deeper. Finally he turned off the engine, opened the door and stepped into snow up to his ankles. Still cursing under his breath, he struggled back to the road. Was this the stupidest idea in the world? Maybe Becca wasn't here. Maybe he should've gone to the shelter first. For all he knew, she was already settling twenty-one cats into bed.

He bent his head against the wind, and snow peppered his bare neck. Suddenly a horn squawked, and he looked up in time to see a truck bearing down on him. He stepped to the side as it pulled up and stopped. A dark-skinned man sat in the driver's seat with a middle-aged woman beside him. No sign of Becca.

“You're Zane,” the woman said.

He nodded and realized the back seat was filled with cats in carriers. A few meowed. Most just stared at him with huge eyes. “Where’s Becca?” He drew one arm across his face to shake off the snow.

The man jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “She went into the woods. Kevin’s looking for her now.”

“The *woods*?”

“We called the police to come help,” the woman said. “She’s been gone a long time.”

“How long?” Zane’s hands fisted at his sides.

“Ten minutes or so. Maybe it’s not that long, but—”

Zane turned away before she could finish. Not that long? This time, as well as he could manage, he jogged through the snow. It came up over his dress shoes and soaked everything below his knees, but he barely felt it. The only thing he did feel, the only thing that mattered at all, was the pain circling his heart every time he thought of Becca.

A dark shape flashed at his side, and he turned with a jerk. He hadn’t brought his pistol, and the last thing he needed was a wild animal attacking him in the middle of nowhere.

Two yellow, familiar eyes stared back at him. “What the hell are you doing over here?” The stray resident of Mountain Glen stood a few feet away, panting. Zane supposed it made sense. The dog probably circled most of this square mile of town, probably had hiding places and sleeping spots from here to the Glen and all the way over to the interstate.

He waved both arms. “Shoo. Get back to the Glen. Or someplace warm. You shouldn’t be out here.”

The dog barked in response.



“I’m serious.” He looked ahead to where the road curved. The Kramer house lay around that turn, which meant every second he spent out here talking to a stray dog was a second he wasn’t looking for Becca.

The dog barked again and then trotted into the dark.

Zane shook his head and walked on. But the dog reappeared almost at once. This time it ran right up to him, swerving to avoid tangling with his legs at the last minute. It backed away a couple of feet but didn’t leave.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

As he stood there, the dog trotted away again, then turned and barked. Turned back and did it again. Then again. Until finally Zane understood.

About a hundred yards from where he stood, if he remembered right, an old creek bed split the woods in two and ran perpendicular to County Route 78. He looked at the road, the house up ahead, then back at the dog. “You trying to tell me something, boy?” Because if he was crazy and about to listen to a dog for no good reason other than some kind of instinct scratching at his brain, chances were pretty good he’d end up frozen in a snow bank.

The dog barked again, and that was all it took. Zane left the road and followed the animal across an open field and down the ravine. Every so often it got ahead of him and disappeared into darkness, but a few seconds later, he’d catch sight of it again. Always waiting for him. Always barking if he got too far behind. By the time they reached flat ground, Zane was frozen through. He couldn’t feel his fingers, his feet, his nose. His breath whooshed out in long, slippery white strings, and more than once he wondered if that would be the last sight he’d see, his own air running out against the sky.

The dog walked more slowly now, picking its way through the snow. It didn't bark, but it looked back every few steps to make sure Zane followed. He blinked away flakes that caught in his lashes. "If this is a wild goose chase..." he muttered. Then he saw it, a flash of long red coat against all the white. As if to confirm, the dog let out a long, soulful howl.

All Zane's energy returned, all his hope, every thought of Becca that had kept him going through the last long hour. The dog nosed his leg as if to urge him on. *Well, would you look at that*, he thought as he stumbled toward Becca. All this time he'd thought he was the one saving the stray animal. Turned out it was the one saving him—saving both of them.

*IT'S A DREAM*, Becca thought more than once as she walked. Everything foggy at the edges, the heavy warmth that dragged at her bones, reminded her of some long, lazy dream that looped over and over.

Except she was freezing. And shivering. And trying not to listen to the very small voice inside her head that kept telling her it was okay to just sit down, curl up and go to sleep for real. Somewhere on the edge of her consciousness, bells pealed. *Christmas Eve wouldn't be the worst night to die*. Maybe there would be angels to welcome her, or a baby Jesus with his arms stretched wide.

"Becca!"

She stopped walking. *Strange*. She didn't usually hear voices so clearly in her dreams. She brushed the snow from her face.

"Becca!" Out of the dark, emerged a figure, waving one arm and staggering toward her.

*Zane?*

A siren whooped close by, and along the edge of the woods, red lights flashed. Becca stood perfectly still. The cat, still snuggled at her breast, lifted its head and blinked at her.

“I think,” she said in a small voice, “I think we’re being rescued.”

Then he was there, taking her into his arms, real and strong and smelling of cologne and fresh air and everything she wanted to breathe into her veins.

“Are you okay?” Zane murmured against her hair. He pulled back to look at her. “God, Bec you’re frozen through.”

She managed to nod. “I’m okay.” A movement caught her eye. “Is that the stray dog from the Glen?”

“Yup. Brought me here.” He shook his head and whistled. “I wouldn’t have found you otherwise.”

The snow eased as they stood there, and Becca looked up at a sky filled with stars. “It’s clearing.” *So beautiful. So endless and frightening.* The realization of how much she’d risked, rushing out ill-prepared into a frozen night, spread over her. Not the best decision she’d ever made, that was for sure. Thank goodness Zane had ignored her stupid comments and come after her.

He rubbed her arms and then peeked inside her coat. “Is it alive?”

“It kept me warm, so I think so. If I am, then it still is.”

He leaned down and kissed her, frozen lips to frozen lips, and she would have laughed at the sight they must have made if she’d had the energy.

“You are an absolute idiot for coming out here alone,” he said.

She frowned. Though she’d just been thinking the same thing, it wasn’t very romantic of him to say so. Or very keeping with the Christmas spirit.

He kissed the tip of her nose and added, “An absolutely crazy, selfless, beautiful, charming, melt-me-in-my-tracks idiot.”

*Oh...*

In the distance, church bells began to play “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” It was the most beautiful sound Becca had ever heard.

## EPILOGUE

**Z**ane tossed a couple of logs into the stove. Outside, snow fell in soft, lazy curtains that hugged the cozy trailer. Becca tucked her feet beneath her and snuggled deeper into the corner of the couch. Across the room, Dash Springer mixed up berry martinis in sugar-coated glasses.

“Another, Bec?” he asked.

She nodded, her eyelids heavy from the effects of the first drink, not to mention the hangover from the turkey breast the three of them had devoured for Christmas dinner. “Where’s Sienna tonight?”

“With her family. I’ll see her later.”

At Becca’s side, the black cat leaned into her leg and purred. It kneaded the worn couch cushion in a steady rhythm, its eyes closed as if self-hypnotized. She ran a hand over its head and down its back. She could feel its spine and ribs, but after a few weeks of living here, she guessed it would plump out nicely.

“What about your sister?” Dash asked.

“Believe it or not, Ella’s spending the day at Derek’s house. With his parents.” Becca still couldn’t believe it herself. The whole thing seemed awfully...well, *settled* for her sister. *But maybe this is a*

*Christmas for taming wild animals*, she thought with a glance at Zane.

“You’ll see your parents sometime next month?” Zane said as he joined her on the couch.

She nodded. “Ella and I usually go down in mid-January.” Normally, she couldn’t wait to escape to the Florida sunshine. This year though, Whispering Pines had a tighter hold on her.

“Did you think of a name for the cat?” he asked.

“I was thinking you should name it, since you’re the one adopting it.” Ella had forbidden her from bringing home any more animals, but to her surprise, Zane had offered to take it instead.

He chuckled. The stray dog lying in the corner looked up at him and thumped its tail. “You want to tell me how I ended up with not one but two animals in this house?”

*“You are responsible forever for the things you tame...”*

“Well, you couldn’t very well leave Stray living out in the cold after he rescued me,” Becca said. “And I think you need to work on his name too. Stray isn’t the most appealing name in the world.”

“Maybe not,” Zane said as he dropped his arm onto her shoulder. “But it’s pretty accurate.” Those deep, serious eyes caught and held hers, the meaning inside them clear.

*He’s one. I was one too, until I found you.*

Becca blinked. She wasn’t just responsible for the animals who trusted her, but for this man as well. When you tamed a wild heart, this was the trade-off. Knowing that the best place for them was in your protection and in your heart. He’d saved her too, in a way. He’d showed her to slow down, to take a breath, to trust someone else. She and Zane might have started off in different worlds, but they’d met in the middle. *He’s mine. I’m his.* The thought filled her with warmth.

Dash carried over two drinks and handed them off.

“Where you going?” Zane asked as his friend pulled on a heavy winter coat.

“Outside for some air.” He winked. “And to give you two lovebirds some Christmas time alone.” He whistled, and the dog hopped up and followed. Dash snapped on a red leash and led Stray outside.

“I was thinking Midnight,” Zane said after a minute. “For the cat.”

It had completed its ritual of kneading, but rather than settle in for a nap, it jumped off the couch and trotted toward its food dish.

“I think that’s perfect,” she said. She took a sip of her martini and then set it aside. *If I drink it too fast, my head will spin.* She wanted Zane to make her spin instead, and she wanted to be sober when he did, so she could remember every last place he touched her. The way he’d been stealing glances at her all afternoon and evening, she hoped the touching would happen soon. She was about bursting inside.

“What about the other cats?” he asked.

“From Helen’s house? We’ll keep them at the shelter as long as we can. Janet has some foster families that will probably take them in. It would be nice for them to have some regular love and attention.”

“Mmmm.” Zane played with her hair. “I think that’s a great idea.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I know someone else who’d like some regular love and attention.” He moved his mouth to her ear and then down her neck, igniting a series of sparks that heated up everything he touched and most of what he didn’t.

Becca turned and slipped her arms around his waist, wriggling closer until she sealed the gap between them. She hoped *regular* meant on a daily basis, maybe an hourly one, because the bits of time she’d spent with this man so far weren’t nearly enough. She

lifted her mouth to meet his and willed Dash to take a good long time walking the dog. She'd always believed in Christmas magic, but even she couldn't have predicted this happy ending. Snow and saved animals and the man of her dreams, all muscle and all heart, wrapped tightly in her arms. She couldn't imagine a more blissful ending to the holiday season.

"Merry Christmas, my love," he whispered.

*Merry Christmas, indeed.* Becca swooned as Zane picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. Looked as though Santa had been good to them both after all.



Reader, I hope you enjoyed this sweet small town series! If you did, I'd love for you to leave a review on the retailer where you purchased it. And [don't forget to sign up for my newsletter](#) to get your free short stories. Plus I give away a \$20 gift card to one newsletter subscriber each and every month.



If you like small town romance, you might enjoy my [Drake Isle series](#) [too](#). Set on a New England island off the coast of Massachusetts, this four-book series centers on the mystery of a girl who died on the local college campus years ago, and the ways she changed everyone who came after. Reviewers have loved it – I hope you will too!



**Ten years ago, Piper Townsend fell to her death from the top of a fraternity house, and no one on Drake Isle has ever been the same.**

Misterion College closed down. Blake Carter's fraternity and family name were scandalized. And the love of his life fled the island, brokenhearted after losing her best friend. Now Blake's a big-shot CEO, looking to expand his business and prove himself to his doubting, domineering father. The only thing stopping his island takeover?

Emmy Doyle.

Only Emmy's not so brokenhearted anymore. In fact, she owns a yoga studio in the oceanfront building Blake wants to buy. They haven't spoken in ten years. They're on opposite sides of a billion-dollar deal.

**But old flames die hard, and sometimes soulmates can set the world on fire all over again.**

Can Blake and Emmy make peace with the past and give in to true love? Or will they go down fighting and leave idyllic Drake Isle in ashes? If you like small-town romance and second chances, then you'll love this first book in the powerful Drake Isle series by a USA Today bestselling author!

**"A great summer read."**

**"A beautiful second-chance romance."**

**"The chemistry between Emerson and Blake blazes throughout the book."**

**“I want to live on Drake Isle!”**

[Start reading this compelling series today.](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allie Boniface is the *USA Today* best-selling author of over a dozen novels, including the Cocktail Cruise, Hometown Heroes, Whispering Pines, and Drake Isle series. Her books are usually set in small towns and feature emotional, sensual romance with relatable characters you'll know and love. A graduate of the University of Rochester and Case Western Reserve University, Allie now lives in a small town in the beautiful Hudson Valley of New York with her husband and their two furry felines. When she isn't teaching high school and community college English, she likes to travel, lose herself in great music, or go for a long run and think about her next story.

Visit Allie online [at her website](#) or any of her social media accounts. While you're there, make sure to [sign up for her newsletter](#), so you don't miss a single announcement about new releases, sales, contests, in-person appearances, and free opportunities for readers!