



# summer of bliss



A SAMPLER



A collection of extended excerpts of new books by bestselling authors!



Lose yourself in summer bliss...

Whether it's relaxing in your backyard or lounging poolside, these new reads are sure to make those lazy summer days something to remember!

**\*\*Enjoy this FREE digital sampler featuring extended excerpts of new books by bestselling authors!\*\***

Featuring extended excerpts of:

[The Summer Retreat by Sheila Roberts](#)

[The Bookshop of Yesterdays by Amy Meyerson](#)

[Steel Resolve by B.J. Daniels](#)

[Summer on Mirror Lake by JoAnn Ross](#)

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# SHEILA ROBERTS

## *the* summer retreat

A Moonlight Harbor Novel

"A delightful story of family, friendship and new beginnings."

—RT Book Reviews on *Welcome to Moonlight Harbor*

## *Chapter One*

---

Celeste Jones had kissed so many frogs looking for her prince, she should have turned green and grown warts on her lips. But she'd finally gotten it right in the man department. Emerson Willis was strong and smart. And sexy. Masculine and excitingly alpha. And a spectacular dancer. And sexy. And a cop. Did it get any sexier than that? They'd been together a year, and what a great year it had been. He'd spent so much time at her place, he might as well have moved in, but he felt it wouldn't look good, with her being a teacher and all. As if first-graders knew anything about the birds and the bees or cared what their teacher did in her off hours. As if anyone cared what anyone did with anyone else these days. It had been sweet of him to think of that, though, and she loved him all the more for it.

Still, why not make what they had official since it was so great? "We're having a good time," he was always saying. "Relax and enjoy the ride."

She could do that. Spring had come, and she was looking ahead to a summer of off-roading, trips to

Eastern Washington to visit the wineries, hitting the shooting range—you had to do that when you were with a cop—and meeting each other's families.

Nothing wrong with taking your family along on the ride. But whenever she tried to get him over to her mother's or suggested a trip to the beach to meet her sister, Jenna, and her great-aunt Edie, something came up to prevent it. Same with meeting his family. There was always an excuse. His parents were busy. He was busy. He had to work an extra shift. That seemed to happen a lot lately. Was it normal for a police officer to have to pull so many extra shifts?

If it wasn't for his reluctance to take things to the next level, Emerson Willis would be perfect. No, no, he *was* perfect. He just didn't want to rush into anything. And really, there was nothing wrong with that. Celeste had done her share of rushing and it hadn't led to anything good. But after all this time, it was hardly rushing to meet the parents.

They needed to have a talk, she thought as she left school late on a Friday afternoon. She and Emerson were planning to hit the gym together; then he was coming over to her place for pizza and to watch a movie. Before they got lost in movie land, she was determined they'd talk about what was going on in the real world. She stopped by Papa Murphy's and picked up a take-and-bake pizza, then popped into the grocery store for a six-pack of Hale's Ales, his favorite microbrew, to go with it, along with some salad makings.

She was getting into her car when he called on

her cell. “Can’t hang out tonight, babe,” he said. “I feel like shit.”

“Oh, no. What’s wrong?”

“I think I’ve got a fever. Maybe it’s the flu.”

Flu in late May? She thought people got that during the winter. “I’m sorry,” she said. “And here I just picked up pizza for tonight.”

“Freeze it.”

“It’s Papa Murphy’s.” Okay, did that sound like she was trying to guilt him or bribe him into coming over? Yes, she wanted to see him, but she didn’t want him to get worse. And while she wanted to see *him*, she didn’t want to see his germs. “I guess I’ll bake it and then freeze it. We can have it when you’re well.”

“Whatever,” he said.

*Whatever* was right. As if he cared what she was going to do with their pizza when he was sick. “Well, feel better,” she said. “Love you, Law and Order.”

“Back atcha,” he said and ended the call.

*Back atcha*. That was about as close as he ever came to getting mushy. Oh, he had no problem saying he wanted her, was crazy about her, was into her, but the *L*-word seemed to get stuck in his mouth.

A couple of times she’d tried to teasingly pull it out of him, offering to give him speech therapy. “Repeat after me, loooooove.” He would smile and shake his head and say, “You know how I feel about you.”

She did. Of course she did. Didn’t she?

“I’m not sure about this,” Celeste’s sister, Jenna, had said when she’d checked in after Valentine’s Day

and learned there was still no ring, no proposal, no mention of meeting the family.

“Remember, he was married once before,” Celeste had reminded her. “He’s just cautious. You should understand that.”

“There’s cautious and then there’s taking advantage of a woman,” Jenna had said.

That was when Celeste had to go...do something, anything. Bye. Her sister’s words had sounded like what their mother would say—if her mother knew that Celeste and Emerson had hooked up. Months ago. Fortunately, Mom never asked, and Celeste never volunteered the information.

But Mom did ask when she was going to meet the “amazing” man in Celeste’s life.

Soon, Celeste decided. As soon as he got well, she was hauling him over to her mother’s house. Even if she had to use his handcuffs on him.

Meanwhile, though, the poor guy. What could she do to help him feel better? Chicken soup! She wasn’t the most talented cook around, but she did make a mean chicken soup. And even though the weather was warm, when you were sick you needed soup. She went back into the store and bought a rotisserie chicken, then drove to her apartment and got to work.

Within an hour she was pulling a fragrant chicken rice soup off the burner to cool. That would make him feel better. While it cooled she redid her makeup, checked out Instagram and Facebook and texted her friend Vanita. Then she put her soup in a container,

hopped in her Prius and drove over to Emerson's apartment on her mission of mercy.

He rented a slick unit in a building that had a pool and a party room. Two bedrooms. Plenty of room to spread out. Okay, once they moved in together, someone would have to sacrifice some stuff because his place was pretty full and her apartment, also two bedrooms, was packed to the gills with furniture and cute garage-sale finds. Her second bedroom served as an office and craft room. They could always buy a house.

She wanted a house. And a yard. And kids. And a dog. Emerson needed to get with the program. She was enjoying the ride, but she'd enjoy it a lot more if she knew they were going to get serious. She was thirty-six, for crying out loud. Thirty-six and a half, to be exact. The alarm on her biological clock was going off. Yes, once he was well, they were definitely going to have that talk, she decided as she went up the stairs to his second-floor unit.

She was sure she heard music coming from inside as she knocked on the door. And voices. Did he have the TV on?

She was about to knock again when the door opened. There stood Emerson in swimming trunks, chest bare, muscles on display. Why?... What?... Was he taking a swim to cool his fevered brow?

"Is that the pizza delivery?" called a female voice.

Pizza delivery! Emerson had a fever going, all right, but it wasn't from the flu. "I thought you were sick." *You big, rotten lizard.*



He blinked as if trying to bring her into focus. “Uh, I’m feeling better.”

“I just bet you are,” she snapped and pushed past him.

“Celeste,” he protested.

There, coming out of his second bedroom, was a woman showing off long hair with an expensive rainbow tint job. Her hair wasn’t all she was showing off. That bikini barely covered anything. Not that she had much to cover.

Really? Emerson was cheating on her with that? Celeste looked so much better in her bikini.

“Not pizza delivery,” she snarled as she marched to the kitchen. “Chicken soup. For the sickie.” She slammed the container on the counter.

Emerson was in the living room now, looking back and forth between the women, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Celeste demanded.

He swallowed. “This is Becky.”

“Becky,” Celeste said sweetly. “I’m Celeste. The girlfriend. Emerson and I have been seeing each other for a year now. You know, hanging out, taking trips, going to the shooting range. Having sex,” she added, throwing him the look of death. “How about you, Becky? How long have you and Emerson been seeing each other?” *Having sex.*

Becky’s eyes were slits, and she turned them on Emerson. “You...bastard.” She wheeled around and marched back to the bedroom.

“Becky, wait,” he called. Then he frowned at Celeste. “What are you doing here?”

“I made you chicken soup because I thought you were sick. You’re sick, all right, you rotten, cheating douchebag.” She grabbed her offering. “You don’t deserve this.” And he sure didn’t deserve her.

Emerson trailed after her. “She doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Yeah, that was why he’d lowered his voice.

But Becky had heard. She’d gathered her clothes and was steaming toward the door. “Thanks a lot,” she yelled.

“Obviously, I don’t mean anything, either,” Celeste said and followed her.

“Beck, I mean, Celeste, wait!” he called.

Celeste stopped long enough to glare at him. “I wasted so many kisses on you. And a year of my life I’ll never get back.” She pointed a finger at him. “I thought you were so noble. A cop, for heaven’s sake. There oughta be a law against cheating and you oughta be sent to love jail. For life.”

With that parting shot, she banged the door shut and stamped down the stairs behind Becky, almost as fast as the tears racing down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Becky said as the two women walked to the parking lot, fuming side by side. “I had no idea. He said he was divorced.”

“Oh, he is. His wife was a bitch.”

“Wouldn’t have sex with him,” Becky added. “Didn’t really care about him.”

Celeste wiped away a tear. What a pair of fools they were. "How long...?"

"Three months."

Three months! For three months he'd been playing her, seeing another woman on the side. "So you were those extra shifts he's been pulling." Enjoy the ride, he'd kept saying. Some ride.

"He told me he had to work extra shifts, too," Becky said. She stopped at the jazzy little convertible next to Celeste's Prius. "I really am sorry."

"It's not your fault," Celeste assured her. "I just hope someday he gets what's coming to him."

The smile blooming on Becky's face looked positively evil. "He will. My dad's his chief. And Daddy feels strongly about his men living up to the badge they wear."

Celeste gave her a smile in return. "Good. I'm sorry we met like this. I hope next time you find someone who's not a...Emerson."

"I will," Becky said with confidence. "You, too."

Celeste thanked her and got in her car. With her chicken soup. Then she cried her way home. Emerson had seemed so perfect. She'd wanted him so much, given so much of herself to the relationship, and all she'd gotten in return was a broken heart.

"Girl, I don't know how you do it," her friend Vanita said later that night as they sat on Celeste's little balcony. She'd called Vanita, who had come over to be with her in her time of sorrow, bringing a listening ear and ice cream.

"What is wrong with me that I didn't figure out

what was going on?" Celeste gave her chocolate cherry ice cream a stir. Her second bowl, but who was counting? At least she wasn't eating out of the carton. She hadn't stooped to that.

"Other than the fact that you're too trusting and figure everyone has principles? Nothing."

"I shouldn't have gotten serious so fast," Celeste said with a frown. "Jenna's right. I'm always rushing into relationships."

"Well, I gotta say, he did seem like a keeper." She shook her head. "What a pile of poop that man is."

"Now I know why he never said he loved me. He didn't." Oh, boy, here came the tears again. Celeste dabbed at her eyes and took a big spoonful of ice cream.

"Be glad you found out now. What if he'd finally asked you to marry him? If he'd cheat on you now, you know he'd do it when you were married."

"I am so through with men."

"Your sister said the same thing and look at her now, with *two fabulous* men after her. Guys aren't all bad. Your perfect man will come along."

"There is no such thing."

Vanita pointed her spoon at Celeste. "Don't you go talking like that. You're gonna find someone who appreciates you. Meanwhile, don't be such a pushover for a great bod and a nice smile."

"I'm not *that* shallow!"

"No, but you're just too... I don't know. Eager."

Yes, she supposed she was. But darn it all, she only wanted a good man and that TV sitcom happy life

she'd yearned for as a kid. Not that her mother and grandparents hadn't given her and her sister a good life. But there'd been a key part missing. A dad. Her father had died when she was a baby.

So was that her problem? Was she always looking for the father she'd never had? Did she need therapy?

No, darn it. She needed a man who wouldn't cheat.

"You gotta start protecting your heart, girl. And don't be givin' it away to every man who comes along with a smooth line."

"Hey, no shaming," Celeste said irritably.

"I'm not shaming. I'm lecturing. Get tough."

Get tough. Yeah. She could do that. Next time she went to the gym and saw Emerson... Eew. She didn't want to go to the gym anymore. She was bound to see him there.

What if she did run into him? What if he told her he realized he'd been a fool and he wanted her back?

Heaven help her, she'd probably take him with open arms. She had to get out of town.

"Why don't you go spend some time with your sister this summer," her mom suggested when Celeste told her that she and Emerson were no more. "Life is always good at the beach."

"Life isn't good anywhere right now," Celeste grumbled.

"It'll get better," her mom promised. And if anyone should know, it would be Melody Jones. Widowed young and left with two little girls to raise, she'd carved out a happy life for herself. And all without a man. "Meanwhile," she added.

“I know. Look for the rainbow in the storm.”

“Exactly.”

Her mom was right. What was the sense in moping? When the going got tough, the tough...went to the beach.

So as soon as school was out, Celeste packed her bikini and flip-flops and drove to Moonlight Harbor, a small beach town on the Washington Coast, to stay with her sister and niece and great-aunt. Jenna had been more than happy at the idea of her sister coming for a long stay. Between running the Driftwood Inn, keeping her massage business going, and being mother of the year, Jenna was always busy. She'd insisted she could use the help as much as Celeste could use a change of scenery.

And there was no better place for that than Moonlight Harbor. Mom had brought Jenna and Celeste there for many happy visits when they were kids, so it felt like coming home as she drove through the white stone gateway at the town's entrance.

There was Nora Singleton's ice cream parlor, where their great-uncle Ralph took them for sundaes back when he was alive. There were the cute cabana shops she'd enjoyed visiting her last time down. There were the deer, grazing on the grass in the median. They drove the town's gardeners nuts, eating up flowers before they could bloom and strolling across lawns like they owned the place, which they did, but Celeste thought they were sweet. She loved their big, trusting brown eyes. They all had brains the size of a peanut and often trotted out in front of oncoming

cars, but luckily for the deer, people always stopped for them. Yes, here people cared for the clueless and trusting. Moonlight Harbor was the perfect place to mend a broken heart.

Or get stopped by a cop. She could feel her sunny smile slipping away as she pulled over. She was scowling by the time one of Moonlight Harbor's finest came up to her car window. He was cute, with sandy hair and hazel eyes. He, too, probably had a six-pack just like Emerson.

"What?" she demanded, making him blink.

"Uh, you've got a taillight out," he stammered, his cheeks turning pink.

"Oh." Okay, she needed to holster her guns. "Um, thank you, Officer. That was really nice of you. I'll get it fixed right away."

He nodded and told her to have a good day, then returned to his car.

"Everyone is not an Emerson," she told herself. But she was so over cops.

The very thought of Emerson put that frown back on her face, until she pulled into the parking lot of the Driftwood Inn. A one-story building with only twenty rooms, it was a relic from the sixties. But it was a refurbished relic with lots of charm, painted blue with white trim. The office had driftwood outside it and a fisherman's net hanging on the front exterior. And the pool, that was the best. It had a mermaid swimming under a full moon painted on the bottom. The whole place called, "Come on back

to when life was simple. Stay and have a good time.” She intended to.

Her sister was working the front desk when she walked in, and Jenna’s face lit up at the sight of her. “You’re here!” she cried and rushed to hug Celeste.

“I am so ready to turn into a sand crab,” Celeste said.

“And we’re all ready to have you. Perfect timing, too, since my latest maid quit.”

“You’re going to work me to death in housekeeping on my summer break?”

“Only mornings,” Jenna said with a grin. “Come on, let’s go over to the house.”

“Don’t you have to stay in the office?”

“No one’s due to check in,” Jenna said. “Besides, my cell number is posted in the rooms. If anyone has an emergency they can call me.”

Only the week before Jenna had been summoned to a room to deal with an overflowing toilet. Her sister was a saint.

Their great-aunt’s house where Jenna and her daughter, Sabrina, lived was an old, two-story charmer complete with gables and a big front porch. Jenna had focused her first summer on getting the motel up and running. This summer the house was getting a facelift with blue paint and white trim to match the motel. Work had begun, and the second story was already half-painted.

They went inside to find Aunt Edie settled on the couch, crocheting granny squares for an afghan. Jolly Roger, her parrot, was perched behind her, supervis-



ing. She was wearing her favorite elastic-waist slacks and a pink sweatshirt that clashed with her cherry-red, tightly permed hair and her coral lipstick.

“Look what I found,” Jenna announced.

“Oh, Celeste darling!” Aunt Edie cried, pushing herself up from the couch and coming to greet her great-niece. In her early eighties and still active and happy, she was an inspiration.

“Thanks for letting me come,” Celeste said, bending over to hug her. What there was of her. Father Time had stuck Aunt Edie in a compactor, shrinking her.

“You know you’re always welcome here,” she told Celeste. “Isn’t she, Roger?”

“Always welcome,” Roger repeated, walking along the top of the couch back. “Call the cops.”

“No more cops,” Celeste cracked.

This made her aunt look at her in concern. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” Celeste said. “I had a lucky escape.”

“Not all police are like that. We have some good ones here. And several of them are single.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jenna grinned. “Frank Stubbs would be more than happy to help you heal your heartache.”

“I was thinking of that nice Victor King,” said Aunt Edie.

“I might have met him on my way in,” Celeste said. “Kind of tall. Blushes easily?”

“That would be the one,” Jenna said. “He’s a sweetie.”

“There is no such thing. Not when you’re talking about cops.”

“Oh, my,” said Aunt Edie, sounding worried.

“Call the cops,” advised Roger.

“We have to teach him some new words,” Celeste said. “Emerson’s a rat. Can you say that, Roger? Emerson’s a rat.”

Roger shook out his feathers and shut his beak.

“You men all stick together,” Celeste muttered.

“Well,” Aunt Edie said briskly. “You know where to put your things. I’ll get some lemonade and cookies.”

“And I’ll call Sabrina,” Jenna told Celeste. “She and Tristan are at the tennis courts with Jennifer and Hudson, trying to play tennis.”

“Don’t drag her away. I’ll see her soon enough.”

“No, she’s going to want to see you. Anyway, she’ll just bring the whole gang here. They’re all addicted to Aunt Edie’s cookies.”

Lemonade, cookies and her family. What more did a girl need?

Sex.

Sigh.

## *Chapter Two*

---

Celeste's first evening with the family was a happy one. The kids returned from the tennis court sweaty, happy and hungry, and devoured Aunt Edie's beach sandies, one of her cookie specialties. Of course, everyone decided to hang out for dinner and Pete, Aunt Edie's not-so-handy handyman, was sent across the parking lot to fetch goodies from the Seafood Shack. After eating more than his share of the popcorn shrimp, he announced his intention to go to The Drunken Sailor for a beer.

"Too damn noisy here," he complained.

"Gee, we hate to see you go," Jenna murmured as he slumped out the back door, Aunt Edie seeing him on his way. "Why she keeps him around, I'll never know."

Pete, with his laziness and mooching, was a constant irritation for Celeste's hardworking sister, so of course she couldn't help teasing, "He's her boy toy."

Who knew what was going on between Aunt Edie and grizzled, old Pete? Probably nothing, since she had to be a good ten years older. But it was fun to yank her big sister's chain.

Jenna looked as if she'd eaten raw seaweed. "Eew. Just, eew."

"Love is blind," Celeste quipped. Boy, was it ever. She suddenly didn't feel in such a party mood.

But there had to be partying when you had a teenager. And partying was the best medicine, so Celeste was soon engrossed in the fun and games. Aunt Edie hung around for the milder ones like Apples to Apples. After she went to bed, the kids all wanted to play Spoons, a more rambunctious game that required cards, some spoons and a very competitive spirit.

"Nobody beats me at Spoons," Celeste bragged, and she proved her superiority when she almost broke poor Tristan's wrist wrenching one from his hand and making him yelp.

"You gotta be tough," she informed him with a smirk.

That was true on so many levels.

The kids finally went home, and Sabrina went to bed to read the new novel she'd started about a blind female superhero who was busy saving her fellow teens in a post-apocalyptic world where all the parents had been killed.

"I'm glad you're here," she said before she left, hugging Celeste.

"Me, too," Celeste said.

"Me, three," Jenna said.

With everyone else gone, the two sisters poured themselves some lavender lemonade and moved to the living room. "Was it cheesy of me to invite myself down for the whole summer?" Celeste asked as

they settled on the couch. "I mean, you're stuck sharing a bed with me."

"Just like every time you visit. You know that's not a problem. I'm glad you're here. That way I can keep an eye on you."

Celeste frowned. "Obviously, I need someone to keep an eye on me."

"Don't beat yourself up over the cheater. That's all on him, not you."

"I shouldn't have rushed into the relationship. You tried to warn me, but I didn't listen."

Jenna shrugged. "Women in love do stupid things."

"I'm done being stupid. And I'm done falling for a handsome face and a hot bod. Maybe I'll find me a rich, old geezer who needs a trophy wife."

"Yeah, I can see *that* happening."

"Or maybe I'll stay single and adopt a child." It wouldn't be the traditional family Celeste had always dreamed about but, oh, well. "And get a dog," she added with a smile. "Dogs are loyal."

"Which is more than you can say for some men," Jenna said, and Celeste knew she was talking about her ex, Damien the *artiste*, who'd left her for another woman.

"Well, then," Celeste said, raising her glass, "here's to dogs."

"To dogs," Jenna said and they clinked glasses and finished their lemonade. "And now I need to go to bed. I've got a ton of paperwork waiting for me tomorrow and clients lined up for massages as soon as Courtney comes in to relieve me."

“And I have to start my first day as a maid,” Celeste said.

“It should be a light day. We’re only half full at the moment, and all you need to do is make the beds and clean the bathrooms.”

“I can help work the check-in desk, too, you know.”

“I might take you up on that.”

“Anyone interesting staying here?” Celeste asked as they went upstairs to the bedroom.

“Two couples, a family with two little kids, a group of girlfriends who are taking three of our rooms, a pair of newlyweds—make sure you call ‘housekeeping’ loudly before going in—and we’ve got more people checking in on Friday and one on Sunday. That should be enough to keep you busy.”

“I’d say so.” But Celeste wanted to be busy, too busy to think about her lame love life. Doomed to be a love loser.

Oh, yeah, that was positive thinking. Look for the rainbow in the storm, she reminded herself. That wasn’t hard. She was with the people she loved best and she was at the beach. She’d do a beach walk first thing in the morning before starting maid patrol. Maybe she’d get lucky and find an agate.

She didn’t find an agate the next morning, but she did find some inspiration. The steadiness of the waves, the vastness of the ocean, the cry of the seagulls—it reminded her that there was a big, beautiful world out there and more to life than one disappointment. The waves swooshed in, washed away the writing in the sand and provided a clean slate, so

to speak. That was what she was getting down here. Now, if she could just forget what had been written...

When she returned to the house Aunt Edie was already at the stove, making breakfast. Jenna was giving Pete his to-do list for the day and Pete was complaining about his sore back. Yes, some things never changed.

The aroma of coffee drew Celeste over to her aunt's vintage coffeemaker. She pulled a mug from the cupboard, filled it and took a sip. Oh, yes, a great way to start the day.

There was something so cozy about hanging out in her aunt's kitchen. Maybe it was because the kitchen was packed with happy memories—baking cookies with Aunt Edie, working on crafts at the kitchen table or playing anagrams, drinking hot chocolate in the morning and eating...

"Pancakes," she said happily, looking over her aunt's shoulder. "Do you need help?"

"No, you sit down and enjoy."

"That won't be hard. Pancakes are the best."

"Pancakes are the best," Roger echoed from his kitchen perch.

Jenna was getting up as Celeste sat down. "Where are you going?" Celeste asked.

"That paperwork is calling. Come on over to the office when you're done and I'll give you the key to the supply room."

"She's gonna work you to death," Pete predicted.

Jenna frowned at him. "A motel is like a farm, Pete. We all work. It's what keeps us in pancakes."

He grunted. "You're gonna kill me."

“You’re too tough to die,” Jenna said, obviously unconcerned with Pete’s precarious future. She kissed Aunt Edie on the cheek, said, “See you later,” to Celeste and left.

“That woman’s a slave driver,” Pete said and forked more pancake into his mouth.

Celeste didn’t mind working. She much preferred staying busy to sitting around moping over the sad ending to her latest love story.

She was happy to find no plugged toilets on her first day as a maid, and only nice guests who all told her how much they were enjoying their stay.

“I love it here,” said one of the women who were having girl time at the beach. “Good stress relief.” Her name was Shari and, chatting with her, Celeste learned that she was a nurse.

“Good to know in case I hurt my back or something,” Celeste joked.

“Be careful how you lift things,” Shari cautioned.

Hopefully, Celeste wouldn’t have to do much heavy lifting.

An older couple asked about the best places to eat in town, and Celeste was happy to tell them. “And don’t forget Good Times Ice Cream Parlor,” she added. “Their huckleberry ice cream is to die for.”

The newlyweds had the Do Not Disturb sign hung on their door. No visiting with them. Celeste figured she’d have to come back later with clean towels. Maybe days later.

She was wheeling her cart of cleaning supplies and dirty towels to the supply room to start a load of



wash when Jenna's other Driftwood Inn resident and part-time handyman, Seth Waters, appeared. Unlike Pete, he actually paid rent on his room. He had a mold removal business that kept him busy most days, but he helped around the place when he could.

He was gorgeous and sexy and crazy about Jenna—and as commitment-shy as she was. The looks they sneaked in each other's direction were hot enough to set the dune grass on fire, but so far they were resisting becoming a couple. Talk about willpower.

Then there was Brody Green, the other man in her sister's life. He was always taking her out to eat. With a man like Brody you'd never need dessert. Two great guys. At some point Jenna was going to cave and give love a second chance, but it was still anyone's guess which one she'd cave with.

Right now Seth looked pretty yummy in his paint-splattered T-shirt and jeans. It wasn't hard to figure out what he was dressed for.

"Welcome back," he greeted her. "Your sister sure didn't waste any time drafting you."

She held up her scrub brush. "You can call me Your Majesty. I'm now queen of the toilets."

"That's some kingdom. So your life's gone to shit?"

She suddenly found it difficult to hold her lips up in a smile. Did he know? "You could say that."

He sobered. "It really has, huh?"

Okay, he *hadn't* known, and she was paranoid. And looked like a loser. "Let's just say I needed a change of scenery for the summer." It had been easy enough to arrange. She'd sublet her apartment for the sum-

mer to a new hire at school who'd moved up from Oregon. She was staying at the Driftwood free. She would come out ahead financially.

"Can't find a better place to forget your troubles. See you around."

She stood for a moment, watching him walk away. With that dark hair, swarthy skin and gorgeous muscled bod, he was a walking work of art. Why was Seth Waters here, in Moonlight Harbor? Alone, no less. Why wasn't he married and making house payments? She'd asked her sister on more than one occasion, but Jenna was evasive.

Seth Waters was a mystery. What woman would let him out of her sight?

Speaking of double lives, what was Emerson doing right now?

Who knew? Who cared? She hoped he'd gotten demoted and was giving out parking tickets. Even that was too good for him.

He'd taught her a valuable lesson, though. From now on, she was going to guard her heart like Fort Knox. No more sexy alpha males. No more jumping into anything.

When Jenna and Aunt Edie's friends came over for their usual Friday-night gathering, she was reminded that she wasn't the only woman ever to have man problems. Annie Albright, who was a waitress at Sandy's, one of the town's favorite restaurants, was on the verge of leaving her alcoholic husband.

"I hate to do it," she told the others, "but he's out of control and I don't think it's good for Emma."

"I'm glad you're finally realizing that," said Courtney Moore, who was her best friend. "He's a mean drunk."

"He hasn't hit me," Annie said, defending her husband.

"Yet," Courtney said. "I've heard him yelling at you. It's only a matter of time."

"You don't want your daughter exposed to that," put in Nora Singleton, who had brought dessert from her ice cream parlor for everyone. "And if you move out, maybe it'll be a wake-up call for him."

"Sometimes we all need a wake-up call," said Taylor Marsh. She'd gotten one when she stayed at the Driftwood in December, and now she and her family were living in Moonlight Harbor and she was working for Brody, selling houses.

Annie wiped at the corners of her eyes where the tears were gathering. "I hope so. I still love him."

"Oh, sweetie." Tyrella Lamb gave her a hug. Tyrella owned Beach Hardware. She'd had her share of trouble, her husband dying only a few years earlier. "We're just going to have to pray that boy out of his alcohol addiction."

"Good luck with that," said Courtney, the cynic. "Men," she added in disgust.

Celeste's feelings exactly.

"Not all men are evil," Tyrella lectured. "And what's with this attitude when *you've* found someone online?"

"Found him and lost him ASAP," Courtney said with a frown. "You know how he said he had such a

great job, VP in charge of marketing? Well, that great job actually vanished six months ago. The guy's out trolling for a sugar mama."

Patricia Whitehead, who owned the Oyster Inn, shook her head sadly. "What is wrong with men these days?"

"There've always been no-good ones," Aunt Edie said as she passed around a plate of cookies. "Don't give up," she said to Courtney. "I didn't start out well, either, but then I wound up with Ralph and he was worth the wait. I think if you're patient, a good man eventually comes along."

Patience. Was that all there was to it? Celeste sighed and spooned the last of the ice cream from her bowl.

Patience was certainly paying off for Jenna. Brody was crazy about her, and it was nice to see a man showing her the appreciation her ex had deprived her of. She was keeping him in the friends corner, but it was obvious he was determined to turn their relationship into something more serious.

Celeste could see her sister being happy with either him or Seth, she thought as he escorted the sisters into the Porthole for dinner on Saturday night. It was the town's nicest restaurant, and it offered a killer view. He'd secured a window seat so they could watch the waves curling onto the beach in a lacy froth.

"How much did Jenna pay you to bring me along?" Celeste asked, only half teasing.

"Since when does someone have to pay me to take out two beautiful women?" he replied. Oh, yeah.

Brody Green was a charmer. And as good to look at as the view out the window.

Drool-worthy, charming, well-off. Yeah, not a bad choice. “Could we clone you?”

Jenna groaned. “One of him is enough.”

“More than enough,” he said, winking at her.

“Well, it’s very inconsiderate of you not to have a younger brother,” Celeste told him.

“I don’t think you need any help from me,” he said. “The men are going to be lining up from here to Moclips.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

“Just because one man blew it?” Brody looked suddenly self-conscious and Celeste realized her sister had been talking about her. Who else knew she was a love loser? She gave Jenna a scowl that promised an inquisition when they got home.

He cleared his throat. “So what would you ladies like to drink? I’m guessing white wine?”

“Poison for my sister,” Celeste muttered.

“Check out that view,” Jenna said. “What a gorgeous night.”

The rest of the evening went smoothly with talk of how things were going at the Driftwood, the listing Brody had just gotten—“Let me know when you’re ready to buy a house, Celeste. I’ll find you a deal”—some Chamber of Commerce gossip. And of course, Brody asked Celeste how it felt to be back in Moonlight Harbor.

“Guess you two spent time here when you were kids,” he said.

“We always loved coming down,” she told him. “I’m glad Jenna’s settled here.”

“I’d love it if Celeste and Mom would move down, too, and we’d all be together,” said Jenna.

“If my mom and sister moved here, I’d relocate,” Brody said. “That would be two interfering women too many.”

Jenna was not going to interfere in her sister’s life. It wasn’t interfering to help her find her feet socially and introduce her to some of the decent men in town. Starting with Pastor Paul Welch. A minister could be exactly what Celeste needed, and this one was good-looking, sweet, had his act together. Oh, yes. Celeste could do a lot worse. Victor King would be a good choice, too. He was tough on crime but soft on women, so easily embarrassed it was adorable. Celeste had options, and there was nothing wrong with introducing her to them.

Okay, she shouldn’t have told Brody why Celeste had come to town for the summer. That had been...

“None of his business,” Celeste said later, as soon as Brody had dropped them off. “I suppose the whole Friday-night group knows about me, too.”

Only Nora and Tyrella, and thank God they hadn’t opened their big mouths and stuck in their feet like Brody had. “I’m sorry. It sort of came out when he asked me to dinner.”

Celeste glared at her. “Don’t tell me, let me guess. You said, ‘I’m not going out with you unless you take my sister, too.’”

“Something like that.”

“I’m a big girl. I can treat my wounds on my own.”

Jenna cocked an eyebrow. “And that’s why you came down here, to treat your wounds on your own?”

“I needed a change of scenery and some sister time. So sue me.” Celeste plopped on the bed and kicked off her shoes. “What I don’t need is everyone in Moonlight Harbor knowing every frickin’ detail of my life.”

Jenna sat down next to her. “I’m sorry. Really, really sorry. I shouldn’t have blabbed. But remember, everybody has breakups.”

“And you had to explain why you wanted to bring your sister along on a date.”

“That wasn’t how it went.”

“Close enough.”

“I didn’t want to abandon you the minute you got here,” Jenna said in her own defense.

Celeste sighed. “I hate being a love loser.”

“You know that old saying—you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince.”

Celeste had done a lot of frog-kissing. She hoped her prince was waiting for her in Moonlight Harbor. If he was, Jenna was determined to find him.

## *Chapter Three*

---

Celeste had never been an early riser and on weekends made a habit of sleeping in. Which she was doing Sunday morning, splayed out on her stomach, one pedicured foot sticking out from under the covers, when Jenna shook her by the shoulder and announced it was time for breakfast.

“I’ll get something later,” she mumbled and turned her head away.

*Oh, no. Nice try.* “There is no later. We have to get out the door to church in forty minutes.”

Celeste turned back and gaped at her. “Church?”

“Yeah, you know, that place Mom always took us to when we were growing up.”

“I’m done growing up.” Celeste settled back onto the pillow.

Jenna pulled it out from under her.

“Hey!” she protested.

“Now that you’re here for the summer, you have to come with us and set an example for Sabrina.”

“Is Aunt Edie going?”

“No, she’s old and she doesn’t like the loud music.”



Celeste grabbed her pillow back. “Tell Sabrina I felt it was my duty to stay home and keep Aunt Edie company.”

“Come on, don’t give me grief. It’s only an hour out of your day.”

“An hour of lost sleep.”

“Come on,” Jenna repeated. “Please?”

“Oh, all right. But I’ll probably sleep through the sermon.”

Not once she saw Pastor Paul she wouldn’t.

Forty minutes later they were walking into the church foyer. Sabrina’s two best friends, Jennifer and Hudson, had been waiting for her and instantly swept her off to hang with the other kids, the three of them talking and giggling.

What a difference from when they’d first come to town and Sabrina had resented not only being at church but also being in Moonlight Harbor. Jenna had been relieved when she’d finally found some friends.

She’d also found a boyfriend. Tristan was a nice kid, but four years older than Sabrina. Due to their age difference, and rampaging hormones, Jenna had limited boyfriend time to parties and hanging out at the house. He’d just graduated from high school and would be going off to college in the fall, and she suspected her daughter’s year-long romance would come to a painful end once he met some cute college girl.

Sometimes it seemed that all the women in her family were love-challenged. Sabrina had fallen for a senior when she was only a freshman. Celeste fell for users and losers. Their mom had never found an-

other man to take their father's place. And there was Jenna herself. After her disastrous marriage she was standing at the edge of the love pool with just one toe in the water, even though Brody was ready to catch her and urging her to jump in. Would she jump if Seth was in the pool? In spite of the chemistry between them, he wasn't holding out open arms.

She'd figure that all out once she helped Celeste get her love life right.

Maybe it wouldn't be so hard, considering the way Celeste was looking at Pastor Paul, who was approaching them. She could almost see the thoughts swirling in her sister's head. *Prince or frog?*

"Yes, he's single," Jenna said.

"Just because he's in a church doesn't mean he's got it together," Celeste whispered.

"This man does," Jenna assured her. "Hi, Paul," she greeted him. "I don't think you've met my sister yet. Celeste, this is Paul Welch, our pastor."

Celeste's eyes got big. "P-pastor?" she stuttered.

Paul Welch was the polar opposite of balding, potbellied Pastor Munsen, the minister at the church they'd attended growing up.

"Welcome to Moonlight Harbor," he said to Celeste.

"Thanks. You're a pastor?"

He raised his eyebrows curiously. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No, it's just that you don't look like a pastor."

"What does a pastor look like?" he asked, an easy smile on his face.

“Old. I mean...not like you.”

“Give me time, I’ll get there,” he said. “I hope you enjoy your visit with us today.”

“I will if you’re not boring,” Celeste teased, recovering from her shock.

“I’ll try not to be,” he said, still smiling. Someone called to him and he moved on, but not before saying, “I’m glad you could join us today, Celeste.”

Jenna elbowed her. “See what you missed when you didn’t come to church with me last summer?”

“Old.” Celeste rolled her eyes. “You could’ve warned me.”

“About what? That I have a cute pastor?”

“And an ulterior motive for getting me here.”

“You needed to get to church,” Jenna said as her friend Tyrella walked in. She waved and Tyrella joined them.

“You look too cute,” she said, giving Celeste a hug. “I swear, God overblessed you two when it came to looks,” she continued, hugging Jenna, also. “Have you been introducing her around?” she asked Jenna.

“Only to Pastor Paul so far.”

“I bet he’ll have trouble concentrating on his sermon now,” Tyrella joked. She waved at Hyacinth Brown, who was standing nearby, talking to two other women while simultaneously assessing Celeste. “Hyacinth, come on over and meet Jenna’s sister.”

Jenna didn’t know Hyacinth very well. She was a skinny little thing with big brown eyes who dressed in drab colors. She’d pretty much kept her distance

since Jenna had been attending the church. Jenna had put it down to her being shy.

But now she felt the chill as Hyacinth said a polite hello to Celeste. Okay, so Hyacinth wasn't simply shy. She was also insecure and not open to welcoming single women into the church family, especially curvy ones with platinum hair, green eyes and plenty of personality. Considering who their pastor was, that shouldn't have been surprising. Half the women in church crushed on Pastor Paul, and Jenna supposed Hyacinth was a member of his fan club. Maybe all that volunteer work she did around church had a hidden agenda.

"Is this your first time here at Moonlight Harbor Evangelical?" she asked Celeste.

Celeste nodded. "I came with my sister."

"Oh." Hyacinth took a moment to digest that. "Are you visiting?"

"I'm here for the summer. I'm going to help out at the Driftwood Inn. How about you? Have you been in Moonlight Harbor long?"

"Two years," Hyacinth said, and didn't volunteer any more information about herself. *There will be no effort made to become friends.*

"She owns the fabric store," said Tyrella. "And you're offering quilting classes right now, aren't you?"

Hyacinth nodded but didn't share any information about her classes, either.

"She made all the banners in the sanctuary," Tyrella went on, "and she and Susan Frank are on the decorating committee. Actually, they *are* the dec-

orating committee. They do the flowers for church every week.”

“That’s appropriate,” Celeste quipped.

Hyacinth managed a wilted smile. “So you’re here with your...husband?”

Talk about the third degree. Was it because she’d seen Paul talking with Celeste?

Celeste’s smile suddenly looked a little wilted, too. “No husband. Not even a boyfriend.”

“Oh.” Hyacinth sounded surprised.

“I’m in between men,” Celeste said lightly, hiding her heartbreak.

Apparently, Hyacinth didn’t approve of being in between men. “I hope you enjoy your visit,” she said briskly, then excused herself and went back to the group of people she’d been talking with before Tyrella called her over.

“Yeah, I’ll bet you do,” Celeste said.

“A pretty woman in between men, just what the other single women want to see,” Tyrella cracked. “Come on, let’s go get a seat.”

Jenna enjoyed the service. She didn’t play an instrument and could never manage to sing in the same key as everyone else, but she loved music and she loved the morning’s selection of songs, which were all positive and encouraging.

Pastor Paul’s sermon was encouraging, too, although a couple of times he seemed to lose his place. Funny how those times coincided with when he happened to glance over at Celeste. “I know some of you have been going through hard times,” he said.

That was for sure. One of their members was battling melanoma. An older man had recently lost his wife. Annie, who'd slipped in late, was struggling with her alcoholic husband, and Jenna saw she was dabbing her eyes. And then, suddenly, right next to her, her sister was taking a shaky breath.

Pastor Paul looked Celeste's way at that moment, and Jenna could have sworn that if he hadn't been in the middle of a sermon, he'd have hurried over to offer comfort. "But," he began. "Uh. But..." He cleared his throat and stared at his notes. "We can't lose hope."

Celeste sniffed, and Jenna took her hand and squeezed it.

"Let's remember to embrace those difficult times in our lives," he concluded, "knowing that they're building perseverance and helping us mature in our faith. All things work together for good for those who love God."

"Even those who haven't been in church for a while," Jenna whispered to her sister.

"He's so right," Tyrella said as they walked out of the sanctuary to an upbeat song the musicians were playing. "I have no idea why it is, but the times we seem to grow the most are when we're under pressure. Like diamonds," she added.

Celeste sighed. "I think I'd rather stay a lump of coal."

"Too late for that," Jenna said, linking arms with her. "You're already a diamond in the rough."

“Okay, then, let’s settle for that. I don’t want to be under pressure anymore.”

“As if you have a choice,” Tyrella scoffed. “Life’s gonna squeeze you whether you want it to or not. May as well work on learning to sparkle.”

Celeste had plenty of sparkle. She just needed to find a man who appreciated it.

Paul was at the door, shaking hands and visiting with people as they left. “A very good sermon, Pastor,” Susan Frank was telling him as they approached. She saw Jenna and managed her usual sour smile. “Good morning, Jenna. Say hi to your aunt for me.”

“I will,” Jenna said.

Not that it would make any difference. Aunt Edie hadn’t been in Susan’s clothing shop since Susan had dissed Jenna and her brain baby, the Seaside with Santa festival. That had been the end of a beautiful retail relationship.

“Thanks for coming,” Paul said and smiled at Celeste.

Oh, yeah. He’d be stopping by the house for a visit before the week was out.

“Can I drive home?” Sabrina asked as they crossed the parking lot.

Her baby was now fifteen and going to driving school every afternoon. Jenna didn’t know which was scarier—seeing her daughter growing up so fast or having to ride with her behind the wheel. But Sabrina had to log in a certain number of hours, and it was a short drive from church to home, so she handed over the keys.

And then turned into Nag Mom. “Don’t forget to adjust your mirrors,” she said as Sabrina buckled her seat belt.

“I know, Mom.”

“Are we gonna die?” Celeste joked from the back-seat.

“Mom will probably have a heart attack,” said Sabrina.

It was a possibility. Jenna had sprouted two new gray hairs since Sabrina started driver’s ed. Of course, she’d pulled them. She hoped she didn’t wind up bald by the time Sabrina got her license. At least sixteen was still several months away.

“Make sure there’s nobody behind you,” Jenna cautioned. “Look out for Willie Jorgenson.”

“I see him, Mom,” Sabrina said, her tone of voice adding, “Stop already.”

“Okay, good,” Jenna said.

Just then the boyfriend walked past and Sabrina had to wave at him as she backed up. A yelp behind them made her slam on the brakes, pitching Jenna forward. Thank God for seat belts!

Susan Frank walked past with a scowl. “Watch where you’re going, young lady,” she called, and Sabrina’s cheeks flamed. Jenna’s cheeks were feeling a little hot, too. That would’ve been all they needed, to clobber her nemesis with the Toyota.

“You have to watch where you’re going,” she scolded.

“I am,” Sabrina said, her voice filled with teen umbrage.



Yes, how dare Susan Frank have the nerve to try and get them to hit her?

They made it out of the church parking lot without taking anyone down, and Jenna released the breath she'd been holding. No toddlers had been squashed and Susan had been allowed to live another day.

Sabrina drove down the street, then turned the corner. "Well done," Celeste said from the backseat, and Jenna echoed the praise. *Yes, positive reinforcement. Don't forget that.*

"Hey, Hudson's driving, too," Sabrina said, looking in the rearview mirror and waving.

"Never mind her," said Jenna. "Watch the road."

"I *am*."

"The part of the road that's in front of us."

They turned onto Sand Dune Drive. "Watch out for the deer," Jenna warned, praying the doe and fawn she'd just seen wouldn't decide to cross the street until they'd driven by. Deer could be unpredictable.

"I see them, Mom."

"She sees them, Mom," Celeste teased from the backseat.

"Good." Deep breath. A quick stop at the grocery store, where they survived getting in and out of the parking lot, and they made it safely onto Harbor Boulevard. Sabrina was doing fine and the Driftwood Inn was in sight. "Don't forget to turn on your—" Jenna began, then shut up as her daughter flipped on the turn signal. "All right. Good," she said again as they pulled into the motel parking lot.

“You did great,” Celeste complimented Sabrina and she smiled.

“See, Mom? I did great.”

Jenna nodded, her heart rate coming back down to normal. “Yes, you did.” *Do I have any new gray hairs?*

“I’m going to have a nervous breakdown before she gets her license,” she predicted as she and Celeste followed Sabrina, who was already running up the steps of the half-painted house.

“I don’t know why you’re so nervous,” Celeste said. “She did fine.”

“She’s improving. But before you got here, she backed into the front of Tristan’s car and took out one of Nora’s rhododendrons.”

“Oh, well, that’s part of the process, and rhodies are replaceable.”

“Yes, but Sabrina’s not. I worry about her getting hurt.”

“You just plain worry.”

“I do,” Jenna admitted. Parenthood was the most stressful job in the world.

“If you want, I can go out with her,” Celeste offered. “I can probably stay a little more mellow.”

“I don’t know,” Jenna said. The thought of her daughter driving was nerve-racking. Her daughter off driving with Celeste or anyone else for that matter, with her nowhere around, was terrifying.

“I’ve never even had a speeding ticket,” Celeste reminded her. Which, considering how her sister drove, was a miracle.

“We’ll see,” she said, making no commitments.

Courtney worked the office on Sunday mornings and Jenna had an hour before she was scheduled to relieve her, so the sisters grabbed sandwiches and hit the beach, Sabrina joining them to demonstrate her kite-flying abilities. Celeste found a small agate and proclaimed it a sign that sunny skies were around the corner.

“Actually, they’re already here,” she said as they walked back to the house. “This is the best place in the world to be.”

“It sure is,” Jenna agreed, looking to where Seth stood on a ladder, turning Aunt Edie’s house back to the pretty shade of blue it had once been.

“Does Brody know he still has competition?” Celeste asked.

Jenna’s gaze zipped away from the hottie on the ladder. “He doesn’t have any.”

“Right. And my eyes have been pecked out by buzzards.”

“He doesn’t want to get involved with anyone,” Jenna said. No need to specify which *he*. Her sister knew.

“Except you. Don’t forget I caught you together on New Year’s Eve.”

“He was wishing me a happy New Year.”

“Right,” scoffed Celeste.

But she left it at that, and Jenna was glad she did. There was no point in talking about Seth. The two of them had stalled out and that was that.

“A smooth morning,” Courtney informed her as

she walked into the motel's office later. "Everyone checked out on time and our one check-in is safely installed in room twelve. And now I'm off to go home and play with fabric for a couple of hours. I've got some dresses to deliver to Patricia's boutique tomorrow."

And Jenna had some new pictures to post on the Driftwood's Facebook page and paperwork to do, which kept her busy for the afternoon. As she walked back to the house later, she caught sight of a Jeep parked outside room twelve and couldn't help wondering about the person occupying the room. A Henry Gilbert had made the reservation, and he'd taken the room clear until the end of August.

Guests usually booked for a weekend or at most a week. What was his story? Did he have a wife with him? Maybe he was a teacher and had summers off; that would explain why he was staying so long. It was about the only explanation Jenna could come up with, except for the guy being a dot-com millionaire. But that wasn't likely. Cute as the Driftwood Inn was, no millionaire would bother renting a room there.

Oh, well. She was sure she'd meet him eventually. Who knew? Maybe she'd even make a new friend to add to the growing list of previous guests who were fast becoming regulars.

By evening it was time to close the office and have a life. Tristan swept Sabrina off to hang out with their friends, and Aunt Edie and Pete settled in with cheese and crackers to watch reruns of *Murder, She Wrote*.

Jenna decided to expose her sister to more Moon-

light Harbor men. “The Drunken Sailor has line dancing on Sunday nights,” she said to Celeste.

“Don’t they have normal dancing anywhere?”

“Not on Sunday night. Come on,” Jenna coaxed. “You’ll love this. I promise. Anyway, it’s either that or TV with Aunt Edie and Pete.”

“When do we leave?”

Half an hour later the sisters entered the popular pub. The place was busy and Jenna saw plenty of people she knew, including Seth. He was playing pool with a couple of guys, leaning on his cue stick, waiting for his turn to clear the table. He looked gorgeous as usual in jeans and a fitted shirt that showed off his pecs and broad shoulders. He sent her a casual wave. She waved back, ignoring the flash of heat in her chest as she and Celeste walked to the bar.

The bar was a long one that offered plenty of seating and gave drinkers a ringside seat to watch the dancers on the large, wooden dance floor. Several male patrons were already parked there for the night, including Brody.

“You made it,” he said, flashing his gorgeous Brody smile. “Want your usual?” Jenna nodded and he turned to Celeste. “How about you, Celeste?”

“Beer,” she said, and he ordered one for her and a giant Coke for Jenna.

Victor King, who was one of the Sunday-night regulars, had seen them come in and he hurried over to say hi. “I think you two might have met,” Jenna said when she introduced him to Celeste.

His face flushed and he nodded. "Did you get your taillight fixed?" he asked.

"Not yet, but I'm going to. So don't even think about giving me a ticket," she said with a frown.

The flush got redder but he tried for suave anyway. "Don't worry, I'm off duty. Are you here for the dancing?"

"Looks like it."

Celeste wasn't exactly being her usual cute, flirty self. What was her problem? Jenna wanted to kick her.

"Well, uh, guess I'll see you on the dance floor," he said, and boot-scooted away.

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded after they'd gotten their drinks and were making their way to the dance floor where the dancers were gathering.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Victor's a nice guy."

"He's a cop. I am so done with cops."

"They aren't all like Emerson. In fact, I bet hardly any are like Emerson. Victor certainly isn't."

"I don't care. Not interested, so he can keep his nightstick to himself."

Jenna shook her head. This was why her sister had man trouble. She couldn't tell the good ones from the bad. "You know what your problem is?"

"Right now? You."

Jenna gave up.

The rest of the dancers drifted in. Jenna waved to two of her favorite dance-floor buddies, Patricia Cho and her friend Barb, two pretty fifty-something danc-

ers who were new to town. They had the moves and could out-dance all the younger women.

Many of the dancers wore boots and almost all of them wore jeans with T-shirts or sleeveless tops. Celeste in her ballet slippers and short black-and-white polka-dot skirt stood out like the diamond in the rough that she was, and Jenna caught more than one man checking her out.

Courtney made it, looking stylish in jeans and a frayed top that looked like a Courtney creation. “Got everything done and now I can play,” she announced.

Victor joined them on the dance floor, offering to help Celeste with her steps, to which she replied, “You just watch yours, Mr. CSI Moonlight Harbor.”

If that was meant to discourage him, it had the opposite effect. He did his usual Victor King blush but he also smiled. “You’re pretty funny.”

Celeste just rolled her eyes.

“You can help me anytime,” Courtney said, and it seemed that between her and Celeste they were going to keep poor Victor’s face looking sunburned all night long.

Tyrella arrived next. “Good, I made it. I got talking on the phone and lost track of time. Thought I was gonna be late.”

“You cut it close,” Jenna said as Austin Banks, their fearless leader, greeted everyone.

Austin was a transplanted Texan, and tonight she was dressed in tight jeans and a Western shirt, with gold hoop earrings dangling from her ears. Her husband, Roy, sat by a computer and speaker setup,

happy to run the music and watch the others work up a sweat.

“Are y’all ready to shake your booty?” she asked.

“Ready,” called Tyrella, who had plenty of booty to shake, and several other dancers gave Austin an enthusiastic *yes*, as well.

“Good,” she drawled. “I see we got a couple of newcomers tonight. We’re glad to have y’all with us. We’re gonna start out with ‘Deep South,’ which we learned last week. It’s a four-wall dance, and you newcomers don’t worry. You’ll catch on. We start with a rolling grapevine.”

“A what?” Celeste whispered.

“You’ll pick it up,” Jenna said.

Austin demonstrated the steps, then they all did them together.

“Now with count,” she said, and they started in again.

Celeste kept up fine.

Until about three-quarters of the way through. Then she began to get lost. And once the music began and they started the dance in earnest, she looked exactly the same as Jenna had on her first night, losing track of the steps and turning in the wrong direction.

But Victor was on hand to help her and she was embarrassed enough to let him.

“Your sister seems to be finding her feet,” Brody observed as Jenna joined him at the bar when the dancers took a drink break.

She looked to where Celeste and Victor stood talking. Celeste wasn’t exactly in flirt mode, but she



wasn't frowning anymore. "I hope she gives him a chance."

"I feel sorry for the poor guy if she's anything like her sister."

"Now, what's that supposed to mean?"

"You Jones women are hard to win over."

"We Jones women haven't always made the best choices. That's why we're cautious."

"When are you going to stop being so cautious?" he asked softly.

"Do we have a deadline?" Brody was everything a woman could want. He was fun to be with and handsome and honest. A loyal friend. A great kisser. What was her problem?

Seth Waters.

But Seth was never going to commit. He'd said as much. In some ways he was even more bound by his past than Jenna. Even though he'd gone to prison for something he hadn't done, she suspected he still carried the stigma.

She cared about Brody. A lot. But it was hardly fair to commit to him when she still felt the crazy pull of attraction to Seth. He, too, was handsome and honest and loyal.

And she was... a mess. It had been a year since she'd come to Moonlight Harbor. Surely, it was time to start getting un-messed.

Well, her sister first. Then she'd worry about her own love life.

Still, poor Brody. "Are you getting tired of waiting for me to get myself together?"

He smiled his killer smile. “What do *you* think?”

She felt guilty about not being able to make up her mind. “I think maybe you should give up.” It wasn’t fair to keep him in limbo.

“Give up on the prettiest woman in Moonlight Harbor? How stupid do I look?” He turned serious. “I know you’re waiting for that wound to heal, Jenna. And I know there are lots of men who’d like to help you with that. I happen to think I’m the best man for the job.”

He was working on proving it as he ran a finger along her bare arm, making her nerve endings do a little line dance of their own.

“You are more tempting than chocolate cake,” she informed him.

It was true. Brody was practically irresistible.

“That’s what I like to hear. So how about it? Give in to temptation.” He leaned in close to her, their shoulders touching. She could feel his breath warm on her neck and that started a line dance in a whole new region.

She *should* give in to temptation, as he’d said. Make the logical choice. Have her chocolate cake and eat it, too.

“Here’s your Coke,” said Misty, the bartender. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she added with a smirk.

“You are. Go away,” Brody told her.

Austin was starting to teach a new dance. “Speaking of going away,” Jenna said and stood up to leave.

He caught her hand. “As long as you come back.”

Good Lord, Brody Green really was something else. Only an idiot wouldn't grab him by his besotted heart and hold on for dear love.

Obviously, she was an idiot. How was she ever going to be able to help her sister with her love life when she couldn't even sort out her own?

Celeste hadn't realized how much fun line dancing could be. "That was great," she said later as Jenna drove them home. "And the best thing about it is you don't need a partner."

"Although it looks like you could have one if you want," said Jenna.

Celeste heaved a sigh. "I have to admit, Victor is nice. But I don't know if I can get over the fact that he's a cop." Anyway, he was almost *too* nice. He didn't give her that same live-wire sizzle Emerson had.

He also didn't have a black heart, she reminded herself. But if there wasn't any chemistry, what was the point?

And yet... Chemistry. What use was it if things always blew up in your face? Celeste heaved a sigh.

"He's a good cop," Jenna pointed out. "And a good man. That doesn't mean he's the right man," she hurried to add. "But you shouldn't rule him out."

"I'm not really looking," Celeste reminded both her sister and herself. "Not rushing into anything. Remember?"

"Dating isn't rushing."

"The way I date, it is." Deep inside, that burning

desire to find someone to fill the empty spot a dead father had left behind always seemed to push her into some man's arms. But in the end they were never the right arms. There'd been Billy Harris in high school. Captain of the football team—how clichéd!—and so in love with himself there hadn't been room for her in that relationship. He was followed by Richard, who wasn't as smart as she was. That wouldn't have worked. And in college it had been all about Kenny Norris. "This is it," she'd told her sister. Kenny was perfect—gorgeous and smart. Too smart. He'd excelled at making Celeste feel inferior, sneering at the romance novels she read, wondering about her inability to balance her checkbook, looking down on her career choice. "Not much challenge in teaching little kids," he'd said on their last date ever, to which she'd responded, "Little kids are our future." Then she'd added, "I don't think we're really a match." So much for yet another "this is it" relationship. She hadn't been a match with Theo, either, who'd been so charming and fabulous when they first began dating that she was sure she'd struck gold. But he turned out to be fool's gold. Theo was abusive. At least she'd seen the signs of that early on and got out before he started smacking her around. Then there'd been Josh, the musician, a very short-lived romance, followed by Edward. She was so sure *he* was The One that she'd gotten herself a subscription to *Bride* magazine. He'd seen a copy on her nightstand and had broken up with her the next morning. "Nothing personal, Celeste. I'm just not ready for that kind of commitment." She'd

made the mistake of asking when he thought he might be ready and that was all it took to send him screaming into the night. Or rather broad daylight. Finally, there'd been Emerson, the cheating lizard. Good grief. Talk about a pack of losers.

She couldn't afford to keep betting her heart on men like that. From now on she was going to guard it, even against nice, line-dancing cops.

Who had time for romance anyway? She was busy enjoying her family and helping out around the Driftwood.

Monday found her with the maid's cart, making her rounds and cleaning up after the guests who'd departed the day before. Happily, there hadn't been so many check-outs that she'd had to work all afternoon on Sunday, and she'd enjoyed spending time on the beach with her sister and niece and then later playing cards with Aunt Edie. Line dancing that evening had turned out to be fun, too. And today, after she was done working, she was going to grab a thermos of lemonade, a book and a beach towel, and find a spot on a sand dune to soak up some sun. Yep, life was good at the beach.

She knocked on the door of room twelve. "House-keeping."

There was no answer, so she used her key and went inside with her towels. Hearing the shower running in the bathroom, she decided she'd better leave the towels on the bed and scam.

As she set them down, she noticed a steno tablet

lying on the bedspread. Some sort of list was written on the top page.

None of her business, of course.

She craned her neck to see.

Kind of an odd list, with things written under columns. Odd column headings, too. *Where. How.*

The water was still running. She picked up the tablet. As she began to read what was listed under *Where* the hairs on her neck stood up. This was no grocery list. *Alley in back of the club, apartment parking lot, side of road—need to slash a tire for this to work.* She moved to the other column, *How.* The word at the top of that list made her heart stop. *Hunting knife.*

Knife? She gulped. What kind of sicko was staying in room twelve?

“What are you doing?” demanded a male voice.

Want to know what happens next?  
Order [\*The Summer Retreat\* by Sheila Roberts](#),  
available now, wherever books are sold!

Copyright © 2019 by Roberts Ink LLC

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

*The*

BOOKSHOP

*of*

YESTERDAYS

"Terrifically fun... Part mystery, part family drama,  
part a bookstore lover's dream, and then more."

—AIMEE BENDER, *New York Times* bestselling author  
of *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*

AMY MEYERSON

*A Novel*

## CHAPTER ONE

---

---

THE LAST TIME I SAW MY UNCLE, HE BOUGHT ME A DOG. A GOLDEN retriever puppy with sad eyes and a heart-shaped nose. I didn't have her long enough to give her a name. One moment she was running around my living room with the promise of many adventures together and the next she was gone. It was the same way with Uncle Billy. One moment he was waving goodbye as he reversed out of my driveway. Then I never saw him again.

Mom never wanted a dog. I'd begged her, promising to walk the dog every day, to scrub the living room rug after any accidents, but Mom was insistent. It wasn't about the rug, or the countless shoes the dog would ruin. It wasn't about love, either. She had no doubt I would love the dog. Of course, she would love it, too, but a pet, like any relationship, was about accountability, not love. I was on the brink of my teenage years, of boys and friends who mattered more than allowance, more than dogs, more than family. We'd been over it. No dog. I knew this. Uncle Billy knew this, too.

The dog was a birthday present. For my twelfth birthday, my parents had rented out an arcade and batting cages in Culver City. It was the beginning of 1998. We always celebrated in January, since I was born so close to the end of the year.



My friends crowded behind the plate, cheering as I nudged the batting helmet out of my face and timidly stepped into the cage. Dad offered me last-minute advice to keep my feet shoulder-distance apart, my right elbow up. I expected Mom to remind me to be careful, but she was at the concession stand, making a phone call.

*All right, Miranda, you can do this*, Dad said after a swing and a miss. Mom appeared at his side and whispered something into his ear. I swung at the next pitch once it had already sped past the plate. *You should know by now not to count on him*, Dad said to Mom. *Miranda*, he called to me. *Keep your eyes open*.

*He promised he'd be here*, I heard Mom whisper.

*Let's not get into this now*, he whispered back.

*He shouldn't make promises if he isn't going to keep them*.

*Suze, not now*.

I tried to focus on my cocked elbow, my loose knees, just as Dad had taught me, but their hushed tones distracted me. There was only one person who made them whisper like that. I hated when they talked about Billy that way, like they were trying to protect me from him, like he was someone I needed to be shielded from. I turned away from the pitching machine, toward my parents. They were leaning against the cage, staring each other down.

The impact sounded before I felt it. An incredibly loud clap and then my shoulder ignited. I screamed, falling to the ground. Two more balls whizzed by my head. Dad shouted for someone to turn off the machine as he and Mom raced into the cage.

*Sweetheart, are you okay?* Mom pulled the helmet off my head and brushed the sweaty hair off my forehead. The pain had knocked the wind out of me. I panted on the cold cement floor, unable to respond. *Miranda, talk to me*, she said a little too frantically.

*I'm okay*, I said between exerted breaths. *I think I just need some cake*.

Normally, this would have made them laugh, but they continued to cast concerned and disappointed looks at each other as if the welt rising on my shoulder was somehow Billy's fault, too. Mom huffed at Dad, then stormed off to the concession stand to collect my birthday cake.

*Is Mom okay?* I asked Dad as we watched her talk to the teenager behind the counter.

*Nothing a little cake can't fix,* Dad said, ruffling my hair.

After the cake was devoured and the bag of ice Mom made me hold on my shoulder had melted down the front of my T-shirt, I joined my friends in the arcade, ignoring the sharp pains that shot down my arm as I rolled the skee-ball up its narrow lane. Between rolls, I glanced over at my parents. They were cleaning up the remains of my birthday cake, Mom furiously scrubbing the plastic tablecloth until Dad pulled her away and held her in his arms. He stroked her hair as he whispered into her ear. I couldn't understand why she was so upset. Billy often didn't show up when he said he would. In fact, I couldn't even remember the last time he'd been to one of my birthday parties. If an earthquake hit in Japan or Italy, he'd be on the first plane out with the other seismologists, engineers, sociologists. He didn't usually have time to let us know he was leaving. Instead of disappointment, I felt pride. My uncle was important. My uncle saved lives. Mom taught me to see him this way. After a recital or debate, a Sunday barbecue without Billy, she would tell me, *Your uncle wants to be here, but he's making the world a safer place.* He was my superhero. Captain Billy, who saved the world not with superhuman powers but with a superior brain. Even when I was too old to believe in superheroes, I still believed in Billy. I thought Mom believed in him, too, yet there she was, crying over a birthday party.

MY BEST FRIEND, JOANIE, AND I WENT TO BED EARLY THAT night. I was half-asleep and hazy, but the ringing doorbell was

real, the tiptoes downstairs, the whispers. I slipped out of bed, into the hall where I saw Mom at the front door below, her satin bathrobe pulled snugly around her small frame. Billy stood outside on the porch.

I started to run toward the stairs, ready to pounce on Billy. I was getting too big to jump on him, yet I thought even when I was an adult I would greet him that way, breaking his back with my love for him. When I got to the top of the stairs, Mom's words startled me.

*What the fuck is wrong with you? It's 3:00 a.m.* I froze. Mom rarely raised her voice. She never cursed. *You've got some nerve, showing up in the middle of the night and blaming me. Some fucking nerve.*

I stood paralyzed at the top of the banister. Her anger was glorious, unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

*You made things this way.* She tried to keep her voice down. *You hear me? This was your choice. Don't you dare blame me.*

Billy turned away as Mom continued to yell about the hour, telling him he was an asshole and something called a narcissist and other names I didn't understand. When he spotted me at the top of the stairs, his cheeks were red, his eyes were glassy. Mom followed his gaze to me. Her cheeks were pale and she suddenly seemed very old. I looked between their expressive faces. They weren't fighting about my birthday. Something else had happened.

*Honey, go back to bed,* Mom called to me. When I stalled, she added, *Please.*

I darted back to my room, disturbed and inexplicably embarrassed by what I'd seen.

Joanie tossed when she heard me crawl into bed beside her.

*What time is it?*

*It's after three.*

*Why is someone coming over so late?*

*I don't know.*

Joanie rolled over, mumbling incoherently. I couldn't fall back to sleep. Mom's words raced through my brain—*some fucking nerve and asshole and don't you dare blame me. This was your choice.* Sunlight bled through the curtains as dawn became morning. I'd stayed up all night, and I still couldn't figure out what choice Billy had made, what he'd blamed on Mom, what I had witnessed at our front door.

LATER THAT MORNING, DAD TOOK JOANIE AND ME FOR PANCAKES.

*Where's Mom?* I asked Dad as we got into his car.

*She's sleeping in.* Mom never slept past seven, but Dad's tone discouraged further questions.

When we returned from breakfast Mom was still in her satin robe, her auburn hair tangled around her face as she folded chocolate chips into batter. Normally, singing was an essential ingredient in any recipe. Mom's mellifluous voice would weave its way into a pie or lasagna, making the cherries or the tomatoes sweeter. As she continued to flip the cookie dough, over and over again, the kitchen was painfully silent.

She looked up when she heard me in the doorway. Her eyes were puffy, her cheeks still colorless. *How was breakfast?*

*Dad let us get three different kinds of pancakes.*

*Did he?* She returned her attention on the bowl of cookie dough. *That was nice of him.* I wanted her to start singing, to break her own trance. She continued to watch the dough thud against the sides of the mixing bowl, and I wondered if the cookies would taste as good without her secret ingredient.

WE DIDN'T HEAR FROM BILLY FOR A FEW WEEKS, NOT UNTIL HE stopped by to take me out for my birthday. I had no idea where we were going. That was the fun of a day with Billy. Whatever activities I would have proposed—an afternoon at the pier or

Six Flags—wouldn't have been half as exciting as whatever adventure he had in store for us.

The labored breaths of Billy's old BMW echoed through the house. I waited for the familiar sounds of his car door shutting, of Mom rushing to meet him at the front door, peppering him with questions. Where were we going? Would there be other children? Were there cliff edges or high distances I could fall from? Seat belts? Life jackets? She never seemed completely satisfied with his answers.

That afternoon, Billy honked his horn and Mom called, *Billy's here*, from behind her closed bedroom door.

*Don't you want you say hi?* I shouted to her.

*Not today*, she shouted back.

I hesitated before I left the house. Mom's bedroom door remained closed. It didn't matter, anyway. Billy didn't ring the bell, just waited in the car with the engine still running.

*There's my favorite girl*, Billy said as I hopped into the car. He always called me that, his favorite girl. It would have embarrassed me if my parents said anything so sappy. With Billy, it made me feel like the kid I still wanted to be but knew at twelve was no longer cool. We turned out of the driveway, and my house retreated into the distance. I wondered if Mom was watching us leave from her bedroom window.

*Boy, do I have a surprise for you.* Billy shot me one of his oversized smiles. I searched his face for any of the strain I'd seen on Mom's. Billy looked content, giddy.

*A surprise?* Although I never would have admitted it to Joanie, a surprise from Billy was still a greater thrill than stealing lip-stick from the drugstore, a better rush than driving too fast down Highway 1 with Joanie's older sisters.

*Hey, reach in there for me.* Billy pointed toward the glove compartment where a black envelope rested on top of his car registration. It was the right size to hold tickets to Universal Studios or a concert at the Hollywood Bowl, but Billy never would have

given me a present so straightforwardly. There'd be no fun in it. I had to earn his gifts through solving his clues.

I tore open the envelope and read the riddle aloud. *My flag is red, white and blue, though I'm not a land you call home. You might think it a lozh'—I didn't know how to pronounce that word—but at my closest point, I'm two and a half miles from American soil.*

*France?* I guessed. Billy looked dubiously at me. *Canada?*

*Canada's flag is only red and white. You're getting warmer, or should I say colder, much, much colder.*

*Russia?* I asked uncertainly.

Vernvy! he said in his best Russian accent.

*You're taking me to Russia? Was there an earthquake?* I pictured Billy and me in shearling hats, trekking through snow to survey the damage to a remote town.

*I think your mom would have my head for that,* Billy said.

With the mention of Mom, Billy and I quieted. I knew we were both remembering how our eyes had locked while he fought with Mom in the middle of the night.

*Is everything okay with you and Mom?*

*Nothing for you to worry about.* He paused, began to say something, then paused again before rolling to a stop outside a building on Venice Boulevard that looked condemned. *Now, let's see about that clue.*

*This is where we're going?* I asked, counting the storefront's boarded-up windows. Usually, his adventures involved state parks and mountaintops, secluded beaches. *Something in that building has to do with Russia?*

Vernvy! He hopped out of the car and bowed, motioning me toward the metal front door. It was unlocked, and he held it open for me.

*Are we allowed to be here?* I hesitated, peeking behind him into the dark interior. *It looks closed.*

*It's not open today, but the manager owes me a favor. It's always more fun to have a museum to yourself, don't you think?* He walked

inside and waved me to follow. *Trust me*, he called. Trust me. His mantra. And I always did.

The front room was dimly lit. Glass cases lined the austere walls. Opera played softly from hidden speakers. The case beside the door was filled with taxidermy bats, moles and other small rodents. The next case held shimmering gemstones.

*It's modeled off nineteenth-century oddity museums*, Billy explained. *Science, art and nature displayed together for the well-rounded mind. A wunderkammer, if you will.*

A wunderkammer. I tested the word in my mouth, waiting for its magic to hit me. Billy's eyes drifted toward a case in the far corner of the room. It was filled with miniature figurines—painted elephants, clowns, a ringmaster, acrobats. The case was labeled The Russian Circus.

I peeked inside the glass, searching for something amiss, a figurine that didn't belong, a riddle scribbled across the circus tent. Sure enough, the next clue was taped to the back of the case.

**Like the fabric of my name, my title is lowly yet noble.  
I'm named not for the rough wool I bear but the origin  
of a river in Northumberland.**

Billy laughed when he saw the bewildered look on my face. He rubbed my head and guided me into the next room. It was as overwhelming as the first room was sparse. The walls were cluttered with detailed renderings of dogs in garish frames. There was one portrait of a person, a faded painting of a man with a beard and top hat called Baron Tweedmouth. Beside his portrait, a placard offered a brief history of the lord, a Scottish businessman and member of the House of Commons.

*Rumor has it*, Billy said, *in 1858 Lord Tweedmouth went to a Russian circus where he saw this fantastic performance by Russian sheepdogs. After the show, he made an offer to buy a pair of dogs, but the ringmaster refused to separate the troupe. So, story goes, Tweedmouth bought the whole lot and bred those sheepdogs to create the retriever.*

Billy gestured toward a filing cabinet beside the portrait. *Open it. It's part of the exhibit.* I tore through reproductions of Baron Tweedmouth's papers, fairly certain where this was headed. I loved that about Billy's adventures. Even though I always figured out where the quest was going before we got there, he refused to let me rush through the lesson. Billy stopped me when I discarded a copy of the baron's breeding records. *Historians found those records in the 1950s and realized the Russian circus was a myth.* Billy pointed to a description of a retriever's keen nose. *See here? Retrievers were already used for tracking before 1858, so Lord Tweedmouth couldn't have bred Russian sheepdogs to create the retriever.* His finger continued down the page, tracing the lineage of Tweedmouth's dogs. *Instead, he bred the retrievers he already owned to produce the perfect hunting companion.*

*Does this mean what I think it means?* I danced like I had to pee.

*Depends on what you think it means.*

I flipped over the breeding records and found the next clue written on the back.

**Don't call me a beauty, a goddess, the prettiest of the lot. You might consider these pet names the same but only one has a certain ring to it.**

I examined each portrait until I located a tweed water spaniel named Belle. Beside her portrait, a plaque explained that Belle was bred with Nous, a yellow retriever, to create the golden retriever.

*No way,* I shouted. *No freaking way.* I jumped up and down, hugging Billy, screaming unintelligibly.

*Not so fast,* Billy cautioned. *You have to find her first.*

I searched the crowded room for an envelope that may have contained the next clue. On the far wall, a photograph of a modern golden retriever hung between its ancestors. Its simple black frame pulled away from the wall. I slid my hand into the



empty space, removing an index card. It listed an address on Culver Boulevard.

Outside, I didn't wait for my eyes to adjust to the light, just took off down Venice past other storefronts that looked condemned and auto-body shops.

*Miranda, slow down,* Billy shouted, panting as he raced to catch up with me.

At the light at Culver and Venice, I jogged in place like a runner trying to keep her heart rate up. *A dog, a dog, a dog, a dog,* I said. The light changed and I sprinted across the street.

Billy's laughter trailed me as we raced past the historic hotel, the restaurants that lined Culver Boulevard. The address was a few blocks down, a pet shop that sold parakeets.

*The owner also breeds goldens,* Billy explained as he caught his breath.

Inside, the store smelled faintly of nuts. A large, balding man stood behind the counter reading the paper. When he saw us, he disappeared below the register, returning with a golden retriever puppy. I carefully lifted the dog from his hands. The puppy's body was warm and emitted a sweet barnyard scent. She was drowsy at first. As I nestled her against my chest and rubbed my cheeks across her silky fur, she roused to life, offering me sticky kisses. I did my best to keep hold of her, but she was too excited for the embrace. The storeowner suggested I let her run around the store. We watched her sniff the dusty corners and pounce at the metal bases of the birdcages. Billy rested his arm on my shoulders, and I was ready to tell him that he was positively, absolutely my favorite person in the world, then I remembered Mom.

*You talked to Mom? She's okay with this?*

Billy lifted the dog off the floor, laughing as she lunged at his face. *How could your mom say no to this face?*

*Seriously, Uncle Billy. She said I can't get a dog.*

*You want a dog, don't you?*

*More than anything.*

Billy put the dog on the floor and put his arm around me. *Sometimes your mom needs a little help seeing things clearly. Once she sees how much you love this dog, no way she'll say no. Trust me, okay?*

Even as he said it—*Trust me*—I knew I shouldn't. Mom was never going to let me keep the dog. But I wanted to believe in the power of Billy, the magic that everything would turn out fine simply because he promised it would. And I wanted Mom to believe in it, too.

*JOANIE'S GOING TO BE SO JEALOUS, I GLOATED ON THE DRIVE home. A puppy. A freaking puppy. Uncle Billy, this is the best birthday present ever.*

We pulled up outside my house, and Billy held the puppy as I lugged the dog supplies out of the back seat. When I went to collect the dog, he didn't let go. He rubbed behind her ears, suddenly serious. *I'm sorry you had to see that, between me and your mom.*

*It's no big deal, I said uncertainly.*

*It is a big deal, he asserted. The dog squirmed in his hands. Things with me and your mom, whatever happens, I just want you to know it isn't your fault.* I tried to take the puppy, to run into the house so Billy would stop talking, but his grip was too firm. It hadn't occurred to me that anything was my fault until he said that. *Just keep her out of your mom's shoes, and your mom won't be able to resist her.* Billy handed me the dog. *I'll see you soon,* and I decided to trust those words more than the ominous ones that preceded them. We would see Billy soon. Everything would be fine.

*Mom, I screamed as I ran inside. Mom, come quick, you won't believe what Billy got me.*

Mom tore open her bedroom door and raced into the hallway above the foyer. She was in her robe. Dark circles engulfed her eyes. *Jesus, Miranda.* She put her hand on her chest. *You frightened me. I thought something was wrong.*

*Look.* I held the dog toward her.

Stillness immobilized her face as she looked between me and the yelping puppy. *You can't keep that.* Mom raced downstairs and lifted the puppy from my hands. *We're taking this back immediately.*

*You haven't even met her yet.* The dog licked Mom's face. *See, she's sweet?*

*You know it's not about that,* Mom said. The puppy continued to bark.

*I just thought once you saw her you'd change your mind.*

*Miranda, we've been over this. We're all too busy to take care of a dog.*

*I'll take care of her by myself. You won't have to do anything.*

*It's too much responsibility,* she said.

*I'm not a kid anymore. I don't need you to tell me what's too much responsibility.* My tone shocked us both. Mom waited for me to calm down. When it became clear she wouldn't engage, I stomped upstairs, screaming, *You won't let me do anything.* I knew I was being dramatic, prematurely acting the temperamental teenager, but I slammed the door so hard my bedroom floor shook.

Mom threw open the door. *Don't you slam this door.* Her voice was calm, her golden eyes clear and furious. *You broke the rules. You knew you weren't allowed to get a dog. You do not get to throw a tantrum.*

I knew she was right, but I was at that age where it didn't matter if she was right, not if it meant I couldn't do what I wanted.

*Where's the dog?* I said instead. She was no longer holding it.

*Crap.* Mom raced downstairs and cooed to the puppy. *Miranda, she called up to me, where'd Billy take you to get this dog?*

*I'm not telling you,* I yelled. When she didn't shout back, I admitted, *A pet shop in Culver City.* I didn't tell her it was a bird store.

Once Mom had left with the puppy, I called Billy to tell him

what had happened. He didn't answer his car phone, so I tried him at home. *You won't believe it*, I screamed into his machine. *Mom made me return the dog. She's such a bitch.* After I hung up, I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. I'd never called Mom a bitch before. I said it again to our empty house. *You're such a bitch.* I kept saying it, hoping it might feel fair. It never did.

All afternoon, I stayed in my room. I heard Mom come home. I heard Dad return from the tennis club. I heard them talking in the kitchen. I knew she was telling him what had happened, that Dad would come upstairs and act the mediator.

At six-thirty, Dad knocked on my door.

*I'm not hungry.*

Dad opened the door and sat on the bed beside me. *I know you're upset. We've been over this. It isn't the right time to get a dog.*

*That's bull—* Dad shot me a look. *It's never going to be the right time.*

*Maybe so. You have to respect that, Mimi. We're a family. We make decisions together. Why don't you come downstairs. We'll have a nice dinner. I think that will be best for everyone.* Dad nodded approvingly at me, a gesture I knew well. I would make the right decision. I wouldn't disappoint him.

At the table, I watched Mom poke her chicken breast without taking a bite, uncertain what I should say to her. I wanted to apologize for calling her a bitch even if she hadn't heard me.

Instead, Mom broke the silence. *I'm sorry we fought. Billy shouldn't have put you in that position. That wasn't fair of him.*

I stabbed a bite of chicken and threw it into my mouth, chewing aggressively. So this was how she wanted to play it. It wasn't my fault. It sure wasn't her fault, either. It was all Billy. He had chosen to buy me the dog, just like he had chosen to do whatever it was she'd blamed on him the night of my birthday party.

*So, this was Billy's choice, too? You're saying I shouldn't blame you?* I'll never forget the wounded expression on Mom's face as she

realized I was referring to the fight I'd overheard, that I was using her words against her.

*It doesn't have to be anyone's fault, Dad said. We can all take responsibility for our actions.*

*I'm sorry I slammed the door, I said, but the damage was done.* Mom nodded, accepting my apology. Accepting what had shifted over that dinner.

LATER THAT NIGHT, I CALLED BILLY AGAIN.

*Me and Mom are done, I shouted into his machine. I'm going to stay mad at her forever.*

When Billy didn't return my message, I figured he probably didn't want to risk Mom answering if he called me back. I tried him again the next day. He didn't pick up, so I told his machine, *I'm going to call you tomorrow at exactly 4:15. Make sure you're home, so we can talk.* The following afternoon, he still wasn't there. The only other place I knew to reach him was at Prospero Books.

In addition to his work with earthquakes, Billy was the owner of a neighborhood bookstore, not in his neighborhood in Pasadena, but in Silver Lake, Los Angeles. Billy called seismology his real job, Prospero Books his fun job. When I asked him why he didn't make his fun job his real job, he said he had a responsibility to protect people because he knew how to learn from earthquakes what others couldn't.

On afternoons when he hadn't planned a scavenger hunt, he would take me to Prospero Books, and the store was its own kind of adventure. We'd walk through the maze of shelves, and Billy would tell me to pick a book, any book, but to choose wisely for I would only get one. It was there I discovered Anne of Green Gables, Mary Lennox and, more recently, Kristy, Claudia, Stacey and their friends in the baby-sitters club.

A male voice that wasn't my uncle's answered the phone. *Prospero Books, where books are prized above dukedom.*

It was probably the manager, Lee, but I didn't want to get into a whole conversation with him about how he couldn't believe that I still hadn't read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.

*Is Billy there?*

*I think he's at the lab. He's planning to stop by on Sunday. Can I take a message?*

I hung up before Lee realized it was me.

Sunday was still five days away. I couldn't wait that long, so I tried Billy's house again that night, once Mom had gone to bed and Dad was in the living room watching the nightly news. *Billy? It's your favorite girl*, I said pathetically into his machine. *Are you getting my messages? I really need to talk to you.*

After a few more messages, I started to panic.

*I tried to keep the dog*, I pleaded into his machine. *You have to believe me. I did everything I could. You know Mom. You know how she is. Please don't be mad at me. Just call me back.* He didn't return my calls, and by the weekend, I knew calling him again was pointless. Billy's silence spoke louder than words. He wouldn't be coming over for Sunday barbecues, not any time soon. He wouldn't be picking me up for any more adventures.

I decided I needed to see him in person. He couldn't look me in the eye and banish me from his life. I knew where he was going to be on Sunday. I knew I could find him at Prospero Books.

JOANIE HELPED ME PLOT THE ROUTE ACROSS THE CITY. SILVER Lake may as well have been San Francisco, it took so many freeways to get there. The bus took the residential route, Santa Monica Boulevard all the way until it ended at Sunset Junction. No transfers necessary. If everything went smoothly, it would take an hour and a half.

I told Mom I was staying at Joanie's where the supervision consisted of her teenage sisters sequestered in their rooms. I'd gone there enough times without anything terrible happening

that Mom had stopped calling Joanie's mother to make sure she was home.

Before I mounted the bus steps, Joanie smothered me in a hug. *You're sure you'll be okay? Remember, when the bus passes Vermont, you have two more stops.*

*Thanks, Mom,* I said sarcastically, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

The bus wasn't as crowded as I'd expected. I found an empty row and sat by the window. Traffic was slow along Santa Monica Boulevard as we passed Beverly Hills into West Hollywood and the grimier blocks of Hollywood. At Hyperion, I got off the bus and headed toward the sign at Sunset Junction, pretending I was the daughter of an artist or musician, the type of kid who grew up in Silver Lake. Prospero stood tall on the sign above the bookstore, staff in his right hand, a book in his left, purple cape and white hair windblown behind him. I stopped outside the storefront, looking through the picture window filled with books. Jitters rose in my stomach, same as every time I saw the store's lime-green walls. I had a relationship to this space that no one else had, even if they came here every week, every day. Billy didn't tell anyone else to pick a book, any book, free of charge, as though the books were waiting just for them. I threw open the door, certain I would see Billy and everything would be fine.

Prospero Books wasn't a large store, but with high ceilings and well-spaced shelves, it seemed vast, even spacious. It had a unique smell, different from Billy's home in Pasadena, unlike any other bookstore. The earthiness of freshly cut paper mixed with the white musk perfume of the pretty girls who frequented the store and a trace of coffee that was almost floral.

*Miranda?* Lee said when he noticed me by the door. *What a nice surprise. Is Billy with you?*

*I thought he was here.* I didn't see Billy's leather satchel beneath

the desk chair or his mug with the San Andreas Fault marking California like a scar on one of the tables in the café.

I could feel Lee watching me. I didn't meet his eye because I already knew what he was going to say.

*I'm sure he's on his way, Lee said. Let me go call him.*

Lee told the woman working in the café to get me whatever I wanted. She winked as she handed me an enormous chocolate chip cookie, like it was some sort of secret between us. I took the cookie to a table in the far corner and watched Lee behind the front desk, talking on the telephone. He glanced up and found me watching him, a conflicted look contorting his face.

*Billy can't come in today, he said when he sat down at my table. He told me to call your mother. She's on her way.*

*You called my mom?* The lies raced through my brain. I wanted to pick up the latest *Baby-Sitters Club*. Dad said I could come. They were transparent lies that would only make Mom angrier. I'd told her I was at Joanie's, then taken the bus to Silver Lake when I wasn't even allowed to take the bus within our neighborhood. I'd gone to see my uncle even though I knew they were in a fight. I'd totally and completely disobeyed her. I was beyond dead. Grounded for eternity. But that wasn't the worst of it. What truly wrecked me was that Billy didn't want to see me. I fought back tears. I was twelve, which was almost a teenager, which was almost an adult. I was too old to cry.

*Hey now, Lee said when he noticed I was crying. What do you say you and me pick out a book? Would you like that?*

*Okay, I said even though I didn't want to pick a book, any book, not with Lee. I followed him to the teen fiction section where the spines were bright, the titles blurred from my tears. Lee showed me a few thrillers—R. L. Stine and Christopher Pike, not the type of books he normally tried to get me to read. I shook my head at every offer. I had thought that by the time I graduated high school I would have read every book in Prospero Books. Now I didn't want to read any of them ever again.*



Lee had to ring up a customer, so I returned to my chocolate chip cookie, no book in hand. I broke the cookie into pieces, then I broke the pieces into pieces, too upset to eat.

The tables around me emptied and repopulated. Lee remained behind the front desk. Every once in a while, he stood and checked the café to make sure I was still there. The sky began to darken and I started to worry Mom was so mad she'd decided not to get me.

What felt like hours later, the bell on the door chimed. I looked up to find Mom scanning the crowded tables. Relief washed over her face as she spotted me. When our eyes locked, I forgot I was mad at her and ran into her arms. I took in her warmth, the sweet lilac smell of her skin, feeling like a child and not caring who saw.

*I'm so sorry.*

She kissed my forehead. *I'm just glad you're okay.*

I understood then that my plan had been doomed from the start. Even if Billy had been at Prospero Books, he'd made his choice not to call me back. Here I was blaming Mom when she was the one to come to my rescue, not Billy.

ALONG THE I-10, I COULD TELL MOM WANTED TO TELL ME ALL the ways I'd been stupid, how Silver Lake was dangerous and something could have gone terribly wrong. Instead, she asked, *What were you hoping would happen if Billy was there?* She didn't sound mad, simply curious.

*I don't know, I admitted. I want you guys to make up.*

*It's not always that easy with adults.*

*Why not?*

Mom's hands gripped the steering wheel. *Billy and I have a complicated relationship.*

*What are you talking about? What happened when I saw you guys fighting?*

Her face softened as she turned her attention away from the road toward me. *It's too difficult to explain.*

*Will you try?* I held my breath. This was Mom's chance to tell me her side of their fight. I was willing to believe anything she said about Billy, no matter how terrible.

Mom's eyes narrowed as if she was having difficulty seeing the traffic ahead.

*You're too young to understand.* She said this gently, but it would have been better if her words were harsh, if she'd intended them to bruise rather than to protect me. I didn't want to be protected.

*Will you work it out?* I asked.

*I honestly don't know,* she said.

She did know. Whatever had passed between her and Billy, it had been too much for them to forgive. They'd said things they couldn't unsay. They lost each other in that fight. Or maybe they'd been lost to each other for years. I had no idea anymore. One thing I did know, what I felt acutely, was that Billy had lost me. I didn't want to be his favorite girl. I didn't want to hear why he'd sent Mom to Prospero Books, why he hadn't met me himself. Even if he turned up next Sunday, our relationship would never be the same.

Turns out it didn't matter what I wanted because Billy didn't stop by our house the following Sunday or the one after that. He didn't pick me up for an afternoon at Prospero Books. He didn't take me on any more adventures.

For months after he disappeared, I searched for signs of his imminent return. Instead of clues that would lead me to him, I found markers of his absence. The cloisonné plates Billy had bought us in Beijing were no longer displayed in the living room. The photograph of Billy and me at the aquarium was replaced with one of Dad pushing me on a swing. The cupcakes from the Cuban bakery in Glendale that Billy always brought over, no longer dessert at our Sunday barbecues.

By the time I reached high school, I stopped looking for Billy. He became a person of my family's past, someone I virtually forgot. When he finally returned, I hadn't thought about him in at least a decade. And at that point he was already dead.

But Billy's death wasn't the end of our story. It was only the beginning.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

---

I ALWAYS KNEW BILLY WOULD RETURN TO ME IN THE FORM OF A clue; I just didn't think it would take him sixteen years.

By then I was twenty-seven, living in Philadelphia, a dedicated, if overzealous, eighth-grade history teacher. I had just moved in with my boyfriend, the other eighth-grade history teacher at my school, and was testing the waters of cohabitation for the first time. The school year had just ended. Our students' term papers on the Emancipation Proclamation and the Underground Railroad had been marked and returned. Final grades had been submitted, and unless any parents complained, we were officially on summer break. Jay insisted we celebrate with a party. A housewarming party, even though he'd been in the apartment for half a decade, and the only thing new about the space was the fact that I lived there now, too.

Jay was headed out to buy booze for our big night. There was a state store a few blocks from our apartment, but he insisted on driving a half hour to Delaware where he could buy handles of cheap whiskey and vodka at a tax-free rate.

"You know you'll spend as much on gas as you'll save on tax," I argued, watching him dart around our living room, looking for his keys.

“It’s the principle.” He dug his hand between the couch cushions. It resurfaced with potato chip crumbs and lint, which he piled on the coffee table.

“That’s disgusting,” I said, stating the obvious. Jay blew me a kiss as he continued to mine the couch, unearthing his keys and jangling them in victory. “You know there’s a hook by the door precisely for that reason.” I pointed to the brass hook with a bird perched on top, my one contribution to the decor of our apartment.

“Is that what it’s there for?” he teased, pulling me onto the couch. Jay kissed my neck and cheek, pinning me on his lap. I pictured him at the liquor store in Delaware, filling a shopping cart with enough plastic bottles to make everyone at the party sick.

“We could just skip town for the weekend, drive up to a cabin in Vermont, go off the grid.”

Jay released me. I remained on his lap. “I thought you wanted to have a party,” he said.

I shrugged. Jay wanted to have a party. I wanted to want to have a party, but I rarely went to—much less threw—the type of binge-drinking-until-dawn rager ours promised to be. “It was just an idea.”

Jay lifted me off him and put his wallet and keys in his back pocket. “It’ll be fun,” he promised, offering me a quick peck before he headed out.

Although I’d been living with Jay for three months, the apartment felt no more mine than it had before my clothes were folded in his dresser, before my yogurt and grilled chicken filled his otherwise empty fridge. The apartment was decorated in the style of Jay’s mother, how she thought a single, twentysomething man should live. A dark couch that hid stains, leather armchairs that thankfully didn’t recline, a television consuming one wall, the others lined with muted abstract art.

The few objects I owned were in a small storage locker. An antique dresser I hadn't sold with my other bedroom furniture. A stone coffee table my mother had bought in the '70s in New York. A few framed prints from the Museum of Art, which weren't worth the fight to put up on the walls of my new apartment. Jay had no great affinity for the artwork his mother had selected, but it would have offended her if we'd taken down the paintings she'd bought from her artist friends. He said it was easier to leave the apartment be, to choose our battles. I wondered what that was like, living in constant fear of upsetting your mother.

I strolled into the kitchen to clear the countertops for the cases of alcohol Jay would be bringing home. My mail was stacked in a haphazard pile next to the fridge, mostly bills and offers for yoga classes, two thank-you cards from students who professed in sloppy handwriting that I was their favorite teacher and they would always remember our trip to Franklin's Print Shop. In addition to the cards, there was a padded envelope, my name carefully inscribed across the front—*Miranda Brooks*—more elegant than by my own hand. It didn't have a return address, but it had been postmarked in Los Angeles. I squeezed the package. Hard and square, clearly a book. Probably one of Mom's little surprises, even if it wasn't her handwriting on the front of the padded envelope. She was always sending me something, overcompensating for how much it hurt her that her only child had decided to live on the opposite coast. A cookbook with recipes far too involved for me to ever make. A how-to book for decorating on a budget, since she'd reasonably assumed that when Jay's apartment became our apartment the decor would be ours, too.

I unsealed the package and pulled out a paperback book wrapped in satiny emerald paper, a greeting card taped to the front. I ripped the paper off the book. It was a play I knew by

heart. *The Tempest*. Mom had named me after Miranda, in her estimation the purest, most beautiful girl in all of literature. On the cover of the paperback, a rogue wave threatened to capsize the vessel that transported the king and his entourage—including Prospero’s brother, Antonio—home from the princess’s wedding. Mom often sent me copies of my namesake when she found them at estate sales and antiques shops. A rare edition with gold leaf. An illustrated version from the ’50s. A miniature replica fashioned into a pendant or pin. This was a generic paperback, printed by the thousands, not Mom’s type of gift. Only, if the package wasn’t from her, I had no idea who else would have sent it.

I took the greeting card out of its envelope. On the front, a sketch of a blonde lounging on a beach smiled back at me. Her eyes were hidden behind cat-eye sunglasses, her pixie cut caught in a strong breeze. *Malibu, California* was printed across the cloudless sky above her, letters as white and glossy as the woman’s teeth.

The message written inside the card offered little clarity.

### **Understanding prepares us for the future.**

And that was it. No “hello from your dear old friend you’d entirely forgotten about.” No “here’s something that always makes me think of you, love your secret admirer.” No reference to the king’s doomed vessel drawn on the front of the play, to Prospero and his enchanted island. Just those weighty words in ink so dark it still looked wet.

*Understanding prepares us for the future.* I’d heard that phrase somewhere before. Possibly Dad? He was the type to forget to sign his name. If the message had been an adage on hard work or a Roosevelt quote, I would have assumed the card was from him. This wasn’t his brand of fatherly advice. Besides, Dad was more often the type to add his name to whatever present

Mom had bought me. Perhaps the phrase was a song lyric or a fortune-cookie truism, a catchphrase from one of those New Age books Joanie half-jokingly quoted. Only I heard *future* not in Joanie's raspy voice, but in a soft lullaby. A deep, dreamy voice that should have inspired comfort. Instead, it hit me with acute longing, regret.

Maybe the phrase was one of Prospero's lines, although it lacked Shakespeare's measure. Still, it sounded like something Prospero might have said to the audience in his final goodbye. I flipped through the text. The epilogue wasn't marked, but in the second scene of the play, when Prospero told Miranda how his brother had run them out of Milan, Prospero's words were highlighted.

**'Tis time I should inform thee farther. Lend thy hand and  
pluck my magic garment from me. So lie there, my art.**

**Sit down; for thou must now know farther.**

*Thou must now know farther. Understanding prepares us for the future.* If not for the similarity in theme, I would have assumed the highlighted section was the random marking of the copy's previous owner, but Prospero's words, the line from the card... they were connected. Only, I wasn't certain how.

I plugged the phrase from the card into my phone's search engine. A few hundred musings on education and religion popped up. No direct quotations of the line itself. It wasn't a reference to *The Tempest*. As far as I could tell, it wasn't a saying at all. Still, I was certain I'd heard it before.

I tucked the play into my dresser and taped the card to the fridge, hoping the beach scene might jog my memory. The woman's happy face followed me as I sprayed down the countertops. Although her eyes were shaded, they monitored my every move. When I looked up, I expected her expression



to have changed. Of course it never did and after a few glances at her windblown hair, her blank smile, I started to feel like she knew something I didn't.

BY NIGHTFALL, OUR APARTMENT WAS READY FOR THE FESTIVITIES to begin. A handful of our colleagues, Jay's soccer buddies and my college friends arrived early with salads, couscous, chicken and cake.

We settled onto the living room floor, wineglasses at our sides, paper plates nestled into our laps. Everyone was talking animatedly. It was the party I would have preferred, just close friends, people you didn't have to ask yourself how they'd ended up at your house. I sat between Jay and the art teacher. Jay coached soccer at the high school and had become the other eighth-grade history teacher earlier that year when Teacher Anne's maternity leave turned permanent. Before he joined my ranks, I'd seen him from a distance, knew how his muscular calves looked beneath his mesh shorts, how his whistle burst in sharp tweets when he wanted to get the boys' attention. He was good-looking in a preppy way I wasn't normally attracted to, but he had this magnetic energy that made female teachers young and old giggle when he said hello to them. A charisma so powerful the school was desperate to keep him. They offered him the position of eighth-grade American history teacher even though he'd been an economics major in college and had never taught before. I was tasked with getting him up to speed, a job that involved more history lessons than I would have expected, evenings and weekend study sessions where I taught him about the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans, the contentious election of 1800, the duel between Hamilton and Burr. He grinned apishly as I explained to him how candidates used to run on their own and whoever came in second, regardless of party, was awarded the vice presidency. I'd accused him of not listening, and he'd said, *You're so passionate.*

*It's adorable*, and then I'd grinned apishly, too, and soon those grins had led to something more.

I'd assumed it would be a tryst, greeting each other in the halls as Teacher Miranda and Teacher Jay, as though we'd never seen each other naked, until the secrecy felt rote. Turned out Jay was more than athletic legs and an inviting smile. He spoke about soccer like it was art, a metaphor for life. He knew everyone in his—now our—neighborhood by name, helping the aging Mrs. Peters carry her groceries to her third-floor apartment, and walking his friend Trevor's mutt when Trevor couldn't get out of work in time to let her out. He was close with his parents, never losing patience with his mom, telling her he liked the collared shirts she bought him, shirts that gathered dust in his closet, and hanging her bland artwork across his—now our—walls. He was close to his sister, who lived a few blocks away and was currently sitting across from us, flirting with my college friend as she snuck sideways glances at Jay and me, still not quite accustomed to our partnership.

"How'd your last day go?" I asked Jay. I didn't want to talk about school, but I was still learning how to be with Jay in a crowd. We spent so much of our time alone that I had to remind myself I couldn't pounce on him when others were around; I couldn't ask him to divulge his feelings in the way that caused him to blush.

Jay proceeded to describe his last day of class, a well-plotted game of Murder that the students probably enjoyed more than my lesson on Abraham Lincoln. That was the difference between me and Jay. He knew how to win them over. I knew how to teach them something they might not value today, but in a few years would resonate, at least so I hoped. So much of being a teacher rests in that blind hope. Jay reached over to play with one of my curls, and I kissed him on the cheek, testing out what it felt like to display affection in front of friends and colleagues. That kiss was the physical equivalent of changing

your Facebook relationship status, a pronouncement that, while not quite irreversible, was indelible.

By eleven, the randoms started turning up. Friends of friends of friends—Jay greeted them all. He slapped high five to guys in baseball caps and hugged girls in tight, bright tank tops whom I'd never met before. I could imagine the back and forth he had with those tall, muscular guys, details about Saturday morning soccer league and woes of the Phillies' latest loss. I couldn't imagine the conversations Jay had with those girls. I tried not to be too obvious as I watched them talk. Jay's sister caught me staring, an unmistakable smirk on her face.

As more strangers crowded our apartment, the living room became unbearably hot. Someone turned the stereo so loud you couldn't talk, you couldn't think, you could only dance. I stood against the wall with Jay, watching the gaggle of brightly clad girls move effortlessly to the electronic beat. Couples bumped into each other as they danced, sloshing beer onto our hardwood floors. Desire radiated from Jay's body and I wanted to get lost in him, to turn the corner of our living room into our private lair. Jay tapped his foot against the baseboard and asked if I wanted to dance.

We sidled in beside the group of girls, cognizant of their fluidity. I tried to be fluid, too, but dancing always made me overly aware of the orders my brain issued to my body and my legs' inability to enact them. Jay wasn't a good dancer, either, and we laughed at how terribly we moved, inching closer to each other until the beat became ours, until Jay's desires aligned with mine.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Normally, I would have ignored it, but the buzzer to our apartment worked intermittently despite my countless calls to the super to fix it, and I didn't want one of my friends to be trapped outside. When I saw it was Mom, I knew instantly that something was wrong. Mom and I had spoken that morning. She'd given me her rec-

ipe for fresh-squeezed brown derbies, which I hadn't had the heart to tell her would have been wasted on me and my cheap beer-drinking contemporaries. While we often spoke more than once a day, she wouldn't have called during my party unless something had happened.

I angled the phone toward Jay so he could see that it was Mom, and we spoke in gestures. He shrugged his shoulders, asking if everything was okay. I swatted away the worry I felt, motioning that I was slipping outside. I fought the current of people out of the apartment.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I stepped onto the stoop.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your party."

"Is everything okay?" I sat on the top step.

"I figured you'd want to know. I didn't feel right not telling you right away because I thought—"

"Mom, what happened? You're scaring me."

"I just got a call. It's Billy." All the alcohol in my system hit me with the weight of his name. Billy. Uncle Billy. I was suddenly very dizzy. I couldn't recall the last time Mom had mentioned him. I couldn't recall the last time I'd thought of him. I already knew what she was going to say, but I waited for her to tell me.

"He...he passed. This afternoon," she said distractedly, like she'd taken a sedative, and maybe she had. Her voice was unnaturally calm.

An image flashed into my fuzzy brain: Billy sitting behind the wheel of his car after he'd dropped me home for the last time. He'd smiled as he drove off, only his smile was too wide, uneasy. I tried to recall a happier moment, his pleased expression earlier that day when he'd bought me the dog, his face whenever I solved one of his riddles. Instead, I kept seeing that forced smile as he waved goodbye for the last time, how he'd failed to hide his sadness from me.

"Oh, Mom." I didn't know what to say. I couldn't imagine

how she felt. Even though they hadn't spoken in sixteen years, she must have been devastated.

"I should let you get back to your party."

"No, Mom, it's just a party."

"You go have fun. We'll talk soon, all right?"

"Mom," I said before she hung up. "I'm really sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," she said.

I stayed on the stoop, watching her number blink across the screen until it disappeared. It was a sweltering night. Nine years in Philadelphia, and I still wasn't used to the humidity, how it outlasted the sun. I thought back to the last conversation I remembered having about Billy, how Mom had told me she didn't know if they would work it out, and they never did. I must have asked her about Billy after that, but she made it clear that Billy was a ghost, disappearing him from the stories of their childhood, avoiding Temescal Canyon where the three of us used to hike, the scenic beaches in Malibu that had been Billy's favorite. Eventually, I must have stopped asking after him. Billy was dead now, but he'd been gone from us for years. Still, I felt his loss acutely. And I could tell Mom did, too.

The vibrations of Jay's footsteps thundered as he neared the door. I was relieved that he'd come looking for me but wasn't ready to share the moment with him.

"Hey you," he said, offering me that smile that made me dizzy, only I felt the greater dizziness of Mom's words, of thinking about Billy after such a long time. The smile fell from Jay's face. He leaned against the frame like he was posing in an outdoor catalog. "What's wrong?"

"My uncle died."

"Fuck." Jay sat on the step, hugged me toward him. "Should we get rid of everyone?"

"No, I don't want everyone to know. It's just... I haven't seen him in, like, sixteen years. I can't believe he's dead." Even as I said it, it still didn't feel real.

“I can set off the smoke alarm, light a match under the sprinklers. That will get everyone out.”

I forced a laugh. “We don’t have sprinklers.”

“Okay, then, a fire in the trash can? Nothing dangerous.”

My smile grew strained. “Please don’t set our apartment on fire. Really, I just want to not think about it for now.”

Jay didn’t seem convinced, but he lifted me off our stoop and led me upstairs. Before we walked into the apartment, he wrapped his arms around me.

“One word and they’re all gone,” he promised.

But as soon as we were back inside, one of Jay’s friends lured him into a circle with the thick promise of a blunt. The walls had begun to sweat. Our couch and coffee table had been pushed against the wall, enlarging the dance floor. My old roommate spotted me from across the room and dragged me onto the dance floor where bodies coupled, their limbs entwined as they swayed to the music.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Billy, the scavenger hunts he’d crafted in my backyard, the adventures we took together across the parks and beaches of Los Angeles, the presents he bought me abroad—beaded jewelry from South America and electronics from Japan. I wondered what had happened to those gifts, if they were still in my parents’ house, if Mom had thrown them out long ago.

Jay’s arms appeared around my waist, swinging my body almost to the beat. I tried to move with him as one, but I was distracted by Mom’s words—*I’m sorry, too*—how quickly she’d rushed off the phone before revealing the depths of her grief.

And as suddenly as Jay was there, he disappeared again, to the far corner where there was a commotion over something that had broken. My limbs grew heavy as they mimicked the movements of those around me. Jay crouched down to pick up whatever had fallen, cradling it as he carried it toward the bedroom. The song ended and the couples surrounding me danced to the rhythm of drunken conversations as they waited for the

next song to begin. I shut my eyes and saw Billy, his conflicted smile. What was it he called me as a child? “My special girl?” No, “my favorite girl.” *There’s my favorite girl*, he would say before whisking me off on one of his adventures.

The music kicked in. I tried to get swept up in the rhythm of the room, but I was lost in thoughts of Billy, his lessons on geology and biology and evolution disguised in adventure. He’d taught me almost everything I knew about the world, how it had shifted and collided and evolved, how our lives were shaped by the movements of the earth. I stopped moving and opened my eyes. Of course. I didn’t know how I’d missed it. My legs felt like lead, but I forced them to move, jostling between the gyrating couples until I reached the kitchen. The blonde on the greeting card still smiled from the refrigerator, only I now knew as much as she did. *Understanding prepares us for the future*. Those were Billy’s words. It was something he said to me after my first earthquake.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

---

IN THE MORNING, THE REMAINS OF LAST NIGHT'S PARTY LOOKED staged: cups scattered haphazardly across the living room floor; a fedora resting on the couch's arm; the hum of the stereo speakers left on after the music had stopped. It was already hot, the moist air rank with spilled beer and cigarette butts.

"It smells like a frat house in here." Jay coughed harshly.

"I wouldn't know." Although there were several fraternities at Penn, I was more the type to indulge in jugged wine with the other members of the history review, making drinking games out of the presidents and state capitals. *You're such a nerd*, Jay had declared proudly when I'd described my version of college partying.

"Come on, nerd," he flirted. "I'll buy you brunch."

We walked to what had quickly become our regular spot. The tables lining the sidewalk were overcrowded but the dim, cool dining room was mostly unoccupied.

Jay ordered two Bloody Marys. The sight of that red liquid glittering with pepper sent a sharp punch to my gut. Jay gulped his down in a matter of seconds and didn't fight when I pushed my drink toward him. Despite the news of Billy's death and a pounding headache from a night of too much beer and not



enough sleep, I couldn't shake an expectant feeling. It couldn't be a coincidence that Billy sent me something before he died. And where there was one clue from Billy, there were always more. I found the card in my bag and slid it across the table. Jay wiped his hands before carefully removing the card from its envelope.

"I got that yesterday from my uncle," I explained.

"What's it mean?" he asked, reading the inside of the card.

"It's something he said to me after my first earthquake."

That night was one of my first vivid memories. My parents had gone out, and Billy was babysitting. We stayed up late to watch *Return to Oz*. I wasn't allowed to watch the movie, but I didn't tell Billy, not that he'd asked whether shock treatments and a demonic Oz were appropriate for a four-year-old. From the entrance of the menacing score, I knew I was in for a sleepless night. When Billy put me to bed, I didn't tell him to leave a light on, even though the shadows from the floodlights etched the monstrous shapes of the Nome King across my walls. I tossed and turned, and soon the floor began to vibrate. The trophies on my bookshelf rattled. The Nome King had overtaken my room, shifting the walls into stone gargoyles and goblins that wanted to eat me. I screamed. The room didn't stop shaking. I screamed louder. By the time Billy opened the door, the bookshelves had stopped moving but the Nome King's minions remained in the shadows across my walls.

Billy sat on my bed and rubbed my back. *It was only a small earthquake*, he said. He tried to turn on the lights but the power had died. He started to leave the room. I shouted for him to stay. *I'll be right back. I just need to find a flashlight.*

I begged him not to go, and he abandoned the hunt for a flashlight, lying beside me on my narrow twin bed. Each time I drifted to sleep, I felt him slip out of bed, and I pleaded for him to stay. Eventually, he stopped trying to leave and fell asleep beside me.

In the morning, sunlight filled the room and Billy was gone. I searched for evidence of the earthquake. Billy was right. It was a small one. Nothing had been jolted so hard that it had moved or broken.

A sugary scent led me to the kitchen where Billy was pouring batter into a pan while Mom flipped pancakes.

*Come on, Billy said to Mom, that looks exactly like a bird.*

*I'm just saying, don't quit your day job, Mom teased.*

*What, you think you can do better?*

*This isn't a challenge you want to take.*

*Bring it, sis.*

Mom poured batter into the pan, and Billy laughed when he saw her creation.

*What are you guys doing?* I asked, and they turned in unison, smiling.

*Making our favorite girl breakfast,* Billy said as he lifted me into the air and carried me to the table.

*My brave girl. Your first earthquake.* Mom kissed the top of my head and put a plate of pancakes in front of me, the words *I Win* written in batter.

Later that day, Billy knocked on my bedroom door with a riddle.

*I'm a type of lot and also a type of amusement. I'm national and in every neighborhood,* he read as he uncoiled a sheet of paper.

*What?* I asked too quickly.

*I bet you know, if you think really hard.*

Along the drive I tried to get him to tell me the answer.

*Where'd we go for your birthday?* Billy finally said, watching me in the rearview mirror.

*Disneyland.*

*And what is Disneyland? An amusement... It begins with a P. No guess? Parrr—*

*Park,* I shouted.

Billy pulled into the lot at the base of Malibu Bluffs Park

where an envelope was fastened to the park's sign. My name marked its face. There was a riddle inside.

**What's a fruit and also a color?**

*What?* I asked Billy.

*Is it a lemon?*

*No!*

*How about a grape?*

*No!*

*Well, what is it, then?*

*An orange,* I shouted.

A single orange rested on the closest picnic table. Beneath the orange, I found a paring knife and instructions to cut off the rind in large chunks. Billy held my hand as I gripped the knife and together we cut a puzzle into the outside of the orange.

*Pretend each of these is a plate.* He held an odd-shaped piece of rind. *Not the type of plate you eat off, but a tectonic plate that makes up the crust of the earth. This is the mantle.* He twirled the peeled orange in his right hand. *The lower mantle. It's made of liquid like this orange.* *Well, will you look at that—* Billy unfurled a piece of paper from the center of the orange. On it, the next clue.

**I'm a female deer and also used to make pie. You might like me best in a form that's playful.**

I followed Billy's eyes to the far end of the picnic area where a container of Play-Doh hid beneath a bench. Together, we lifted the lid to find a list of instructions folded on top of a ball of blue putty.

Step one, roll the Play-Doh into a flat circle.

Step two, wrap it around the orange. The orange became a blue orb.

*This is the upper mantle,* Billy explained.

Step three, wrap the rind around the Play-Doh. The puzzle pieces of rind fit roughly together around the orange.

Billy inched two pieces of rind toward each other. *The plates are in constant motion. They move very, very slowly. We only feel their movement during an earthquake.* The pieces collided and blue Play-Doh oozed between the edges of the rind in a rippled formation. *When the plates converge like this, they form mountains and volcanoes.* He spread the rind apart and the blue beneath stretched. *When plates diverge, they create rifts, which on land make lakes and rivers.* Billy rubbed two pieces of rind against each other until they would no longer move. *The plates' edges are rough, so sometimes they get stuck. These edges are called fault lines. When they lock up like this, they create a tremendous amount of stress.* He kept rubbing them together until one piece slid beneath the other. *With too much stress, they'll slip and that's one way we get an earthquake.*

The fourth and final step instructed us to hike to the highest point we could find. I followed Billy up a steep incline. At the peak, we could see Pepperdine University across the Pacific Coast Highway. I gazed down the barrel of Billy's finger as he outlined the Pepperdine Block, how over time it had moved upward and west of the land where we stood.

*Is this where the earthquake happened?* I asked.

*Along the same fault line.*

*So an earthquake could happen right here?* I braced myself for the shaking to begin. Billy laughed.

*You might feel an aftershock in the next few days. If you do, just remember it won't be as violent as the earthquake last night.* Billy held my shoulders, looking me in the eye. *We can't stop earthquakes from happening, but you don't have to be afraid. After every earthquake, scientists like me review the damage and we use that to make our buildings and bridges stronger, so there's less damage in the future.*

*So we need earthquakes?* I asked.

*You could think of it that way. We need earthquakes to learn. Under-*

*standing prepares us for the future. Remember that. It's the only way to make us safer.*

"I remember all week I was hoping for an aftershock, but I didn't feel any," I said to Jay. "That's how Billy was. He made everything an adventure."

Jay handed the card back to me. "I don't get it. Why remind you of that now that he's dead?" Jay wiped the corners of his mouth and glanced at my barely touched food. He pointed to my eggs, and I nodded, trading my mostly full plate for his empty one.

"It's another one of his adventures." I reached into my bag and pulled out the copy of *The Tempest*, opening to Act 1, Scene 2, where Prospero told Miranda the story of his past. I ran my index finger beneath the highlighted line. *Sit down; for thou must now know farther.* "This is the only section that's highlighted." I explained Prospero's story to Jay, how his cruel brother, Antonio, had betrayed him, overtaking Prospero's kingdom while Prospero was absorbed in his magical studies. With the help of the king, Antonio had banished Prospero and young Miranda to sea.

"You were named after Shakespeare?" Jay asked.

"You didn't know that?"

"*The Tempest* isn't exactly in my wheelhouse." He flipped through the play like it was a guidebook to me. "So what's your uncle want you to know now?"

"He had a huge fight with my mom when I was twelve. She did something to him, or at least he thought she did. I'm not sure. I think he's using Prospero to tell me what happened."

"Miranda," he said carefully, "it can be really confusing when someone close to you dies."

"What are you saying?" I wished those words hadn't come out so defensive.

"Do you think possibly you're trying to give your uncle's death meaning?" Jay reached over and stroked my cheek. His expression was close-lipped, full of pity.

“I know my uncle,” I said assuredly. Did I really, though? I hadn’t seen him in sixteen years. I knew nothing of his life after us, whether he’d had a family of his own, if he continued to live in Pasadena. Still, the card he’d sent, *The Tempest*... I knew he was leading me somewhere.

The waitress brought over the check and Jay unearthed enough crumpled bills from his pocket to cover the bill.

Outside, the humidity assaulted us. We stood in the doorway, allowing our eyes to adjust to the blinding afternoon.

“What did your mom and uncle fight about?” Jay asked.

“My uncle missed my birthday party, but it was more than that. I just don’t know what.”

“Your mom never told you what happened?”

“Billy became something we didn’t talk about. It was like he never existed.”

“That’s sad.”

“It’s just the way it was.” Every family has its unspoken stories. Billy was ours. It didn’t matter whether or not it was sad.

“Did you tell your mom about the card?” I didn’t like the condescension in Jay’s tone.

“It’ll just upset her,” I said.

“You should tell her,” he insisted.

“Please don’t tell me how to handle my own mother,” I snapped. “You’ve only met her once.”

During my parents’ most recent visit to Philadelphia, the four of us had gone to dinner. Over small plates, Jay had talked to Dad about baseball and Mom about the gigs her all-girl rock band had had on South Street in the ’70s. After dinner, as we’d strolled down the cobblestone streets of Old City, Mom belted the closest thing her band had had to a hit, a rare performance emboldened by the two neat bourbons she’d ordered to impress Jay. Her voice was phlegmy from the liquor but still silky enough to send chills down my arms. We—and other passersby—stopped to applaud her. Jay had thought this was Mom, an impulsive

woman who drank whiskey and sang whenever she felt like it, but this wasn't Mom. This was only a role she played because she knew it would make Jay like her.

Jay kicked at the sidewalk, obviously upset over what I'd said. "I didn't mean that."

He pulled me to him, and I hugged him back, trying to ignore the gnawing disappointment that we wouldn't continue to fight.

I started to follow Jay back to our block, but I wasn't ready to return to our smelly, filthy apartment. I told Jay I was going for a walk, and he pretended not to be hurt that I wanted to be alone.

At Walnut, I turned toward the river. The moist, hot air provoked beads of sweat that ran down my thighs and collected behind my knees. From the steps at the Great Plaza, I watched joggers and rollerbladers race down the path that followed the Delaware River. I found my phone in my purse and searched "Billy Silver, Los Angeles, seismologist, obituary." I couldn't think of anything else to include about him. It was enough for the *Los Feliz Ledger*, which had published a brief obituary for Billy that morning. It described the loss of Billy Silver, LA native, seismologist and earthquake chaser, owner of neighborhood staple Prospero Books. The obituary included a somber quote from the store's manager, who vowed to keep Billy's legacy alive through the bookstore and a listing of the funeral, set for Tuesday afternoon at Forrest Lawn.

Prospero Books. I should have made the connection the second I realized the copy of *The Tempest* was from Billy. Of course any reference to the play was also a reference to Billy's bookstore, where books were prized above dukedom, where he'd taken me countless afternoons as a child and told me to pick a book, any book. Somehow, the copy of *The Tempest* Billy had sent had to do with his bookshop.

I took *The Tempest* out of my bag and reread the story Pros-

pero told Miranda. Prospero needed Miranda to know how his brother had betrayed them in order for her to understand why he'd created the storm that stranded Antonio on the island. It'd been years since Billy sent me one of his riddles, yet I could still read his coded messages. *Thou must now know farther*, Prospero's words. *Understanding prepares us for the future*, Billy's. Like Prospero, Billy wanted to tell me of his betrayal, the event that had exiled him from our family. And also like Prospero, Billy had planned his return, wielding not spells and incantations but the magic of his clues, of the adventures he'd plotted for me in my youth. I wasn't a child anymore. Still, I could feel the rush of Billy, the exhilaration of the first riddle, how it always led to another clue. This time was different, though, the excitement bittersweet. This was the last time Billy would reach out to me. My last chance to discover the story Mom would never tell, the truth of what had driven them apart.

MY SCHEDULE WAS WIDE OPEN FOR THE NEXT TWO AND A HALF months, so I booked a flight for Monday, home in time to make Billy's funeral. I had to go. Not just because I wanted to find the next clue. It was the right thing to do. I'd loved him as a child. I would go to his funeral. I would honor what we once were to each other.

Jay lay across our bed, watching as I packed the bulk of my summer clothes.

"Do you have to bring so much?"

I zipped my suitcase and hopped onto the bed beside him. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were going to miss me."

"Of course I'm going to miss you." He rolled me over and lay on top of me, his face so close to mine I could see stubble erupting along his jawbone.

"It'll just be a couple of days." I hadn't bought a return ticket, but I hadn't spent more than five consecutive days in LA since I'd left for college. If I was right and Billy had left me another



clue, it wouldn't take more than a few days to uncover the secrets he wanted to tell me.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come to the funeral with you?"

"You've got camp next week."

"It's only soccer."

"Only soccer? Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend?" I was still getting used to the way that word felt in my mouth.

He ran his hand through my hair in the way I didn't like, unfurling my curls. "You don't have to go alone."

"It's just a few days," I said, shaking my hair free of his touch.

Jay insisted on driving me to the airport even though he had to get a zip car and it would have been cheaper to call a cab. He pulled up to the terminal and walked around to the trunk to get my bag.

"Call me when you land?" He placed my rolling suitcase on the curb. I expected him to tell me to hurry back, but he said, "Take the time you need. You'll regret it if you rush back and aren't there for your family."

"Who knew you were such a sentimentalist?" Jay turned away, clearly hurt. I was tempted to tease him again for being too sensitive. Instead, I kissed him intently, giving him something else to return to in the days we were apart.

ON THE FLIGHT ACROSS COUNTRY, I TRIED TO DECIDE WHAT I should tell Mom about *The Tempest* and the clue Billy had sent. When I'd told her I was coming home for the funeral, she'd asked, *Why would you want to go to that?* with such disbelief, such utter bafflement, I didn't know how to respond.

*You aren't planning to go to Billy's funeral?* I asked her.

*Why would I be?*

Because he's your only brother, I thought. *I'll go alone, then,* I said.

*Whatever*, she said with the cool indifference of one of my students.

How was I supposed to tell her that Billy had reached out to me when she hadn't even forgiven him enough to honor his death, to memorialize the closeness they once had? And what was worse, whatever he wanted to tell me was something Mom didn't want me to know. I just hoped I'd know what to say to her when I saw her in person.

Dad was waiting at baggage claim with a printed sign that read Teacher Miranda. It was what all the teachers in my Quaker school were called. Teacher Anne. Teacher Tom. Teacher Jay. Jay. I texted to tell him I had landed. He blew me an emoji kiss. While I hated how easy and generic emojis were, I liked that Jay was willing to be corny on my account.

Dad was a reluctant hugger. I knew not to take it personally. Mom was the only person he was comfortable offering physical affection to. I would find them slow dancing in the kitchen as Mom sang an old folk song, or him absentmindedly rubbing her feet as they watched a Nora Ephron movie. To most people, he offered his hand. At least he hugged me, even if there always was that stilted discomfort.

"Where's Mom?" I asked as Dad released me from the sideways embrace. Every time I came home, Dad's hair had grown more salt than pepper, his olive skin more leathered, his blue eyes grayer. It made me want to clutch his hand and beg him to stop getting old.

"She went to bed early. Said she'll see you in the morning." Mom never missed an opportunity to meet me at the airport. She always pushed her way through the crowd of limo drivers and multigenerational families waiting in baggage claim, so her face was the first I saw.

"How's she doing?"

Dad took my bag and wheeled it toward the exit. "You know

your mom. She's putting on a brave face, but this is hard on her, harder than she would have guessed."

Outside the arrivals terminal, the air was thick with exhaust and cigarette smoke. Cars lunged at each other as they tried to weave in and out of rings of unmoving traffic. Only a few palm trees in the distance hinted that we were in Los Angeles, not some neglected airport of the developing world.

Dad pulled out of short-term parking into the outer circle of traffic. "How'd Stanton's words go over this year?"

I ended every school year the same way, on Lincoln's death-bed. Moments after the president died, his friend and secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, commemorated the loss, *Now he belongs to the ages*. Or was it, *Now he belongs to the angels*? I'd pose to my students. While Lincoln's doctor had heard Stanton say "ages," the secretary at the scene had heard "angels." So which quote was right—did Stanton fate Lincoln to history or the afterlife? The students would evaluate each option, debating Stanton's true words. In the end, it was a trick question.

"Stanton's words remain an enigma," I said to Dad. *We have to allow for competing experiences of historical events*, I told my students. *Then we can decide how to interpret the past, what makes sense to us today*. "I think a few of them understood. I hope so, anyway."

"You can only do your best. It's up to them to commit to caring about the past." Dad's car screeched to a halt as the Fly-away bus darted in front of us.

"Do you remember when Billy showed up that time, in the middle of the night?"

"Of course." Dad's attention was focused on the bus, squeezing into an impossibly small space between two cars ahead.

"I'm sure Mom must have told me, but I can't remember what they fought about."

"I don't know." Dad honked at an SUV that crossed in front of us. "Come on!"

"You don't know what happened?"

“All I know is Billy showed up drunk and told your mom he never wanted to talk to her again.” He wove around traffic, onto Sepulveda where the road opened up. “Then he bought you that stupid dog.”

“Billy wasn’t drunk.” I thought back to his flushed face, his glassy eyes. “Was he?”

Dad turned onto Ocean Park Boulevard where the air grew cooler and saltier as we neared the ocean. I rolled down the window and inhaled deeply. Every time I returned to LA, the city felt a little more my parents’ home, somewhere I’d been an extended visitor, never a resident. I couldn’t tell Mom this. She was waiting for the time when, like her, I would move back to Southern California, but it was never going to happen. I didn’t want to teach the children of movie stars and musicians. Directors. TV executives. I didn’t want to teach American history in a state that hadn’t been part of the union until the Compromise of 1850. I wasn’t an Angelino, a Californian at heart. The salt in my nostrils was the closest I came to feeling homesick.

“Look,” Dad said when we were stopped at a light. “I don’t want to ruin your memory of Billy. There were sides of him you were too young to see.”

“What do you mean ‘sides?’”

“Nothing. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t do that. What sides?”

Dad turned off Ocean Park into our neighborhood. I took in the familiar scene of our quiet street, knowing the colors of all the houses we passed, even if they all appeared charcoal in the evening’s pale light. Los Angeles never got dark, no matter how late at night, not completely.

“I get that Billy’s death is bringing up a lot of questions. I just don’t feel comfortable speaking on behalf of your mother.”

“I’m not asking you to speak for her.”

“It’s her past,” he said.

“It’s our past,” I corrected. Pebbles crackled under the tires

as Dad pulled into the driveway. The house was dark, save the porch light, moths swarming in its glow.

“It’s up to your mom what she wants to tell you.” He hopped out of the car to fetch my bag from the trunk. I watched him in the rearview mirror until the lid of the trunk turned the mirror black and I couldn’t see him anymore. Just before it did, I saw an expression sweep across his face, something I hadn’t seen before, something that looked a lot like fear.

Want to know what happens next?

Order [\*The Bookshop of Yesterdays\* by Amy Meyerson](#),  
available now wherever books are sold!

Copyright © 2018 by Amy Meyerson



HARLEQUIN®

INTRIGUE

B.J. DANIELS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**STEEL RESOLVE**

## *Chapter One*

The moment Fiona found the letter in the bottom of Chase's sock drawer, she knew it was bad news. Fear squeezed the breath from her as her heart beat so hard against her rib cage that she thought she would pass out. Grabbing the bureau for support, she told herself it might not be what she thought it was.

But the envelope was a pale lavender, and the handwriting was distinctly female. Worse, Chase had kept the letter a secret. Why else would it be hidden under his socks? He hadn't wanted her to see it because it was from that other woman.

Now she wished she hadn't been snooping around. She'd let herself into his house with the extra key she'd had made. She'd felt him pulling away from her the past few weeks. Having been here so many times before, she was determined that this one wasn't going to break her heart. Nor was she going to let another woman take him from her. That's why she had to find out why he hadn't called, why he wasn't returning her messages, why he was avoiding her.

They'd had fun the night they were together. She'd felt as if they had something special, although she

knew the next morning that he was feeling guilty. He'd said he didn't want to lead her on. He'd told her that there was some woman back home he was still in love with. He'd said their night together was a mistake. But he was wrong, and she was determined to convince him of it.

What made it so hard was that Chase was a genuinely nice guy. You didn't let a man like that get away. The other woman had. Fiona wasn't going to make that mistake even though he'd been trying to push her away since that night. But he had no idea how determined she could be, determined enough for both of them that this wasn't over by a long shot.

It wasn't the first time she'd let herself into his apartment when he was at work. The other time, he'd caught her and she'd had to make up some story about the building manager letting her in so she could look for her lost earring.

She'd snooped around his house the first night they'd met—the same night she'd found his extra apartment key and had taken it to have her own key made in case she ever needed to come back when Chase wasn't home.

The letter hadn't been in his sock drawer that time.

That meant he'd received it since then. Hadn't she known he was hiding something from her? Why else would he put this letter in a drawer instead of leaving it out along with the bills he'd casually dropped on the table by the front door?

Because the letter was important to him, which meant that she had no choice but to read it.



Her heart compressed into a hard knot as she carefully lifted out the envelope. The handwriting made her pulse begin to roar in her ears. The woman's handwriting was very neat, very precise. She hated her immediately. The return address confirmed it. The letter was from the woman back in Montana that Chase had told her he was still in love with.

Mary Cardwell Savage, the woman who'd broken Chase's heart and one of the reasons that the cowboy had ended up in Arizona. Her friend Patty told her all about him. Chase worked for her husband, Rick. That's how she and Chase had met, at a party at their house.

What struck her now was the date on the postmark. Her vision blurred for a moment. *Two weeks ago?* Anger flared inside her again. That was right after their night together. About the same time that he'd gotten busy and didn't have time, he said, to date or even talk. What had this woman said in her letter? Whatever it was, Fiona knew it was the cause of the problem with her and Chase.

Her fingers trembled as she carefully opened the envelope flap and slipped out the folded sheet of pale lavender paper. The color alone made her sick to her stomach. She sniffed it, half expecting to smell the woman's perfume.

There was only a faint scent, just enough to be disturbing. She listened for a moment, afraid Chase might come home early and catch her again. He'd been angry the last time. He would be even more furious if he caught her reading the letter he'd obviously hidden from her.

Unfolding the sheet of paper she tried to brace herself. She felt as if her entire future hung on what was inside this envelope.

Her throat closed as she read the words, devouring them as quickly as her gaze could take them in. After only a few sentences, she let her gaze drop to the bottom line, her heart dropping with it: *I'll always love you, Mary.*

This was the woman Chase said he was still in love with. She'd broken up with him and now she wanted him back? Who did this Mary Savage of Big Sky, Montana, think she was? Fury churned inside Fiona as she quickly read all the way through the letter, the words breaking her heart and filling her with an all-consuming rage.

Mary Savage had apparently pretended that she was only writing to Chase to let him know that some friend of his mother's had dropped by with a package for him. If he confirmed his address, she'd be happy to send the package if he was interested.

But after that, the letter had gotten personal. Fiona stared at the words, fury warring with heartbreaking pain. The package was clearly only a ruse for the rest of the letter, which was a sickening attempt to lure him back. This woman was still in love with Chase. It made her sick to read the words that were such an obvious effort to remind him of their love, first love, and all that included. This woman had history with Chase. She missed him and regretted the way they'd left things. The woman had even included her phone number. In case he'd forgotten it?

*Had Chase called her?* The thought sent a wave

of nausea through her, followed quickly by growing vehemence. She couldn't believe this. *This woman was not taking Chase away from her!* She wouldn't allow it. She and Chase had only gotten started, but Fiona knew that he was perfect for her and she for him. If anyone could help him get over this other woman, it was her. Chase was hers now. She would just have to make him see that.

Fiona tried to calm herself. The worst thing she could do was to confront Chase and demand to know why he had kept this from her. She didn't need him to remind her that they didn't have "that kind" of relationship as he had the other times. Not to mention how strained things had been between them lately. She'd felt him pulling away and had called and stopped by at every opportunity, afraid she was losing him.

And now she knew why. If the woman had been in Arizona, she would have gone to her house and—Deep breaths, she told herself. She had to calm down. She had to remember what had happened the last time. She'd almost ended up in jail.

Taking deep breaths, she reminded herself that this woman was no threat. Mary Cardwell Savage wasn't in Arizona. She lived in Montana, hundreds of miles away.

But that argument did nothing to relieve her wrath or her growing apprehension. Chase hadn't just kept the letter. He'd *hidden* it. His little *secret*. And worse, he was avoiding her, trying to give her the brush-off. She felt herself hyperventilating.

She knew she had to stop this. She thought of

how good things had been between her and Chase that first night. The cowboy was so incredibly sexy, and he'd remarked how lovely she looked in her tailored suit and heels. He'd complimented her long blond hair as he unpinned it and let it fall around her shoulders. When he'd looked into her green eyes, she hadn't needed him to tell her that he loved her. She had seen it.

The memory made her smile. And he'd enjoyed what she had waiting for him underneath that suit—just as she knew he would. They'd both been a little drunk that night. She'd had to make all the moves, but she hadn't minded.

Not that she would ever admit it to him, but she'd set her sights on him the moment she'd seen him at the party. There was something about him that had drawn her. A vulnerability she recognized. He'd been hurt before. So had she, too many times to count. She'd told herself that the handsome cowboy didn't know just how perfect he was, perfect for her.

Fiona hadn't exactly thrown herself at him. She'd just been determined to make him forget that other woman by making herself indispensable. She'd brought over dinner the next night. He'd been too polite to turn her away. She'd come up with things they could do together: baseball games, picnics, movies. But the harder she'd tried, the more he'd made excuses for why he couldn't go with her.

She stared down at the letter still in her hands, wanting to rip it to shreds, to tear this woman's eyes out, to—

Suddenly she froze. Was that the door of the apart-

ment opening? It was. Just as she'd feared, Chase had come home early.

At the sound of the door closing and locking, she hurriedly refolded the letter, slipped it back into the envelope and shoved it under his socks. She was trapped. There was no way to get out of the apartment without him seeing her. He was going to be upset with her. But the one thing she couldn't let Chase know was that she'd found and read the letter. She couldn't give him an excuse to break things off indefinitely, even though she knew he'd been trying to do just that for the past couple of weeks—ever since he'd gotten that letter.

She hurried to the bedroom door, but hesitated. Maybe she should get naked and let him find her lying on his bed. She wasn't sure she could pull that off right now. Standing there, she tried to swallow back the anger, the hurt, the fear. She couldn't let him know what she was feeling—let alone how desperate she felt. But as she heard him coming up the stairs, she had a terrifying thought.

What if she'd put the letter back in the drawer wrong? Had she seen the woman's handwriting on the envelope? Wasn't that why she'd felt such a jolt? Or was it just seeing the pale lavender paper of the envelope in his sock drawer that had made her realize what it was?

She couldn't remember.

But would Chase remember how he'd left it and know that she'd seen it? Know that if she'd found it, she would read it?

She glanced back and saw that she hadn't closed

the top dresser drawer all the way. Hurrying back over to it, she shut the drawer as quietly as possible and was about to turn when she heard him in the doorway.

“Fiona? What the hell?” He looked startled at first when he saw her, and then shock quickly turned to anger.

She could see that she’d scared him. He’d scared her too. Her heart was a drum in her chest. She was clearly rattled. She could feel the fine mist of perspiration on her upper lip. With one look, he would know something was wrong.

But how could she not be upset? The man she’d planned to marry had kept a letter from his ex a secret from her. Worse, the woman he’d been pining over when Fiona had met him was still in love with him—and now he knew it. Hiding the letter proved that he was at least thinking about Mary Cardwell Savage.

“What are you doing here?” Chase demanded, glancing around as if the answer was in the room. “How the hell did you get in *this* time?”

She tried to cover, letting out an embarrassed laugh. “You startled me. I was looking for my favorite lipstick. I thought I might have left it here.”

He shook his head, raking a hand through his hair. “You have to stop this. I told you last time. Fiona—” His blue gaze swept past her to light on the chest of drawers.

Any question as to how he felt about the letter was quickly answered by his protective glance toward the top bureau drawer and the letter from his first love,

the young woman who'd broken his tender heart, the woman he was still in love with.

Her own heart broke, shattering like a glass thrown against a wall. She wanted to kill Mary Cardwell Savage.

"Your lipstick?" He shook his head. "Again, how did you get in here?"

"You forgot to lock your door. I came by hoping to catch your building manager so he could let me in again—"

"Fiona, stop lying. I talked to him after the last time. He didn't let you in." The big cowboy held out his hand. "Give it to me."

She pretended not to know what he was talking about, blinking her big green eyes at him in the best innocent look she could muster. She couldn't lose this man. She wouldn't. She did the only thing she could. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the key. "I can explain."

"No need," he said as he took the key.

She felt real tears of remorse fill her eyes. But she saw that he was no longer affected by her tears. She stepped to him to put her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Maybe if she could draw him toward the bed...

"Fiona, stop." He grabbed her wrists and pulled them from around his neck. "*Stop!*"

She stared at him, feeling the happy life she'd planned crumbling under her feet.

He groaned and shook his head. "You need to leave."

"Sure," she said and, trying to get control of her

emotions, started to step past him. “Just let me look in one more place for my lipstick. I know I had it—”

“No,” he said, blocking her way. “Your lipstick isn’t here and we both know it. Just like your phone wasn’t here the last time you stopped by. This has to stop. I don’t want to see you again.”

“You don’t mean that.” Her voice broke. “Is this about the letter from that bitch who dumped you?”

His gaze shot to the bureau again. She watched his expression change from frustrated to furious. “You’ve been going through my things?”

“I told you, I was looking for my lipstick. I’m sorry I found the letter. You hadn’t called, and I thought maybe it was because of the letter.”

He sighed, and when he spoke it was as if he was talking to a small unruly child. “Fiona, I told you from the first night we met that I wasn’t ready for another relationship. You caught me at a weak moment, otherwise nothing would have happened between the two of us. I’d had too much to drink, and my boss’s wife insisted that I let you drive me back to my apartment.” He groaned. “I’m not trying to make excuses for what happened. We are both adults. But I was honest with you.” He looked pained, his blue eyes dark. “I’m sorry if you thought that that night was more than it was. But now you have to leave and not come back.”

“We can’t be over! You have to give me another chance.” She’d heard the words before from other men, more times than she wanted to remember. “I’m sorry. I was wrong to come here when you weren’t home. I won’t do anything like this again. I promise.”



“Stop!” he snapped. “You’re not listening. Look,” he said, lowering his voice. “You might as well know that I’m leaving at the end of the week. My job here is over.”

“*Leaving?*” This couldn’t be happening. “Where are you going?” she cried, and felt her eyes widen in alarm. “You’re going back to Montana. *Back to her.* Mary Cardwell Savage.” She spit out the words as if they were stones that had been lodged in her throat.

He shook his head. “I told you the night we met that there was no chance of me falling for another woman because I was still in love with someone else.”

She sneered at him. “She broke your heart. She’ll do it again. Don’t let her. She’s nobody.” She took a step toward him. “I can make you happy if you’ll just give me a chance.”

“Fiona, please go before either of us says something we’ll regret,” Chase said in a tone she’d never heard from him before. He was shutting her out. For good.

If he would only let her kiss him... She reached for him, thinking she could make him remember what they had together, but he pushed her back.

“Don’t.” He was shaking his head, looking at her as if horrified by her. There was anguish in his gaze. But there was also pity and disgust. That too she’d seen before. She felt a dark shell close around her heart.

“You’ll be sorry,” she said, feeling crushed but at the same time infused with a cold, murderous fury.

“I should have never have let this happen,” Chase was saying. “This is all my fault. I’m so sorry.”

Oh, he didn’t know sorry, but he would soon enough. He would rue this day. And if he thought he’d seen the last of her, he was in for a surprise. That Montana hayseed would have Chase over her dead body.

## *Chapter Two*

“I feel terrible that I didn’t warn you about Fiona,” his boss said on Chase’s last day of work. Rick had insisted on buying him a beer after quitting time.

Now in the cool dark of the bar, Chase looked at the man and said, “So she’s done this before?”

Rick sighed. “She gets attached if a man pays any attention to her in the least and can’t let go, but don’t worry, she’ll meet some other guy and get crazy over him. It’s a pattern with her. She and my wife went to high school together. Patty feels sorry for her and keeps hoping she’ll meet someone and settle down.”

Chase shook his head, remembering his first impression of the woman. Fiona had seemed so together, so...normal. She sold real estate, dressed like a polished professional and acted like one. She’d come up to him at a barbecue at Rick’s house. Chase hadn’t wanted to go, but his boss had insisted, saying it would do him good to get out more.

He’d just lost his mother. His mother, Muriel, had been sick for some time. It was one of the reasons he’d come to Arizona in the first place. The other was that he knew he could find work here as a car-

penter. Muriel had made him promise that when she died, he would take her ashes back to Montana. He'd been with her at the end, hoping that she would finally tell him the one thing she'd kept from him all these years. But she hadn't. She'd taken her secret to the grave and left him with more questions than answers—and an urn full of her ashes.

“You need to get out occasionally,” Rick had said when Chase left work to go pick up the urn from the mortuary. It was in a velvet bag. He'd stuffed it behind the seat of his pickup on the way to the barbecue.

“All you do is work, then hide out in your apartment not to be seen again until you do the same thing the next day,” Rick had argued. “You might just have fun and I cook damned good barbecue. Come on, it's just a few friends.”

He'd gone, planning not to stay longer than it took to drink a couple of beers and have some barbecued ribs. He'd been on his second beer when he'd seen her. Fiona stood out among the working-class men and women at the party because she'd come straight from her job at a local real estate company.

She wore high heels that made her long legs look even longer. Her curvaceous body was molded into a dark suit with a white blouse and gold jewelry. Her long blond hair was pulled up, accentuating her tanned throat against the white of her blouse.

He'd become intensely aware of how long it had been since he'd felt anything but anguish over his breakup with Mary and his mother's sickness, and the secret that she'd taken with her.

“Fiona Barkley,” she’d said, extending her hand. Her hand had been cool and dry, her grip strong. “Chase Steele.”

She’d chuckled, her green eyes sparking with humor. “For real? A cowboy named Chase Steele?”

“My father was an extra in a bunch of Western movies,” he lied since he had no idea who his father had been.

She cocked a brow at him. “Really?”

He shook his head. “I grew up on a ranch in Montana.” He shrugged. “Cowboying is in my blood.”

Fiona had taken his almost empty beer can from him and handed him her untouched drink. “Try that. I can tell that you need it.” The drink had been strong and buzzed through his bloodstream.

Normally she wasn’t the type of woman he gravitated toward. But she was so different from Mary, and it had been so long since he’d even thought about another woman. The party atmosphere, the urn behind his pickup seat and the drinks Fiona kept plying him with added to his what-the-hell attitude that night.

“How long have you two been dating?” Rick asked now in the cool dark of the bar.

“We never dated. I told her that first night that I was in love with someone else. But I made the mistake of sleeping with her. Sleeping with anyone given the way I feel about the woman back home was a mistake.”

“So you told Fiona there was another woman.” His boss groaned. “That explains a lot. Fiona now sees it as a competition between her and the other woman.

She won't give up. She hates losing. It's what makes her such a great Realtor."

"Well, it's all moot now since I'm leaving for Montana."

Rick didn't look convinced that it would be that easy. "Does she know?"

He nodded.

"Well, hopefully you'll get out of town without any trouble."

"Thanks a lot."

"Sorry, but according to Patty, when Fiona feels the man pulling away... Well, it makes her a little... crazy."

Chase shook his head. "This just keeps getting better and better." He picked up his beer, drained it and got to his feet. "I'm going home to pack. The sooner I get out of town the better."

"I wish I could talk you out of leaving," Rick said. "You're one of the best finish carpenters I've had in a long time. I hope you're not leaving because of Fiona. Seriously, she'll latch on to someone else. I wouldn't worry about it. It's just Fiona being Fiona. Unless you're going back to this woman you're in love with?"

He laughed. "If only it were that easy. She's the one who broke it off with me." He liked Rick. But the man hadn't warned him about Fiona, and if Rick mentioned to Patty who mentioned to Fiona... He knew he was being overly cautious. Fiona wouldn't follow him all the way to Montana. She had a job, a condo, a life here. But still, he found himself saying,

“Not sure what I’m doing. Might stop off in Colorado for a while.”

“Well, good luck. And again, sorry about Fiona.”

As he left the bar, he thought about Mary and the letter he’d hidden in his sock drawer with her phone number. He’d thought about calling her to let her know he was headed home. He was also curious about the package she’d said a friend of his mother had left for him.

Since getting the letter, he’d thought about calling dozens of times. But what he had to say, he couldn’t in a phone call. He had to see Mary. Now that he was leaving, he couldn’t wait to hit the road.

MARY CARDWELL SAVAGE reined in her horse to look out at the canyon below her. The Gallatin River wound through rugged cliffs and stands of pines, the water running clear over the colored rocks as pale green aspen leaves winked from the shore. Beyond the river and the trees, she could make out the resort town that had sprouted up across the canyon. She breathed in the cool air rich with the scent of pine and the crisp cool air rising off the water.

Big Sky, Montana, had changed so much in her lifetime and even more in her mother’s. Dana Cardwell Savage had seen the real changes after the ski resort had been built at the foot of Lone Peak. Big Sky had gone from a ranching community to a resort area, and finally to a town with a whole lot of housing developments and businesses rising to the community’s growing needs.

The growth had meant more work for her father,

Marshal Hud Savage. He'd been threatening to retire since he said he no longer recognized the canyon community anymore. More deputies had to be hired each year because the area was experiencing more crime.

Just the thought of the newest deputy who'd been hired made her smile a little. Dillon Ramsey was the kind of man a woman noticed—even one who had given her heart away when she was fifteen and had never gotten it back.

Dillon, with his dark wavy hair and midnight black eyes, had asked her out, and she'd said she'd think about it. If her best friend Kara had been around, she would have thought Mary had lost her mind. Anyone who saw Dillon knew two things about him. He was a hunk, and he was dangerous to the local female population.

Since telling him she'd think about it, she had been mentally kicking herself. Had she really been sitting around waiting to hear from Chase? What was wrong with her? It had been weeks. When she'd broken it off and sent him packing, she hadn't been sitting around moping over him. Not really. She'd been busy starting a career, making a life for herself. So what had made her write that stupid letter?

Wasn't it obvious that if he'd gotten her letter, he should have called by now? Since the letter hadn't come back, she had to assume that it had arrived just fine. The fact that he hadn't called or written her back meant that he wasn't interested. He also must not be interested in the package his mother's friend had left for him either. It was high time to for-



get about that cowboy, and why not do it with Dillon Ramsey?

Because she couldn't quit thinking about Chase and hadn't been able to since she'd first laid eyes on him when they were both fifteen. They'd been inseparable all through high school and college. Four years ago he'd told her he was going to have to leave. They'd both been twenty-four, too young to settle down, according to her father and Chase had agreed. He needed to go find himself since not knowing who his father was still haunted him.

It had broken her heart when he'd left her—and Montana. She'd dated little after he left town. Mostly because she'd found herself comparing the men she had dated to Chase. At least with Dillon, she sensed a wild, dangerousness in him that appealed to her right now.

Her father hadn't liked hearing that Dillon had asked her out. "I wish you'd reconsider," he'd said when she'd stopped by Cardwell Ranch where she'd grown up. She'd bought her own place in Meadow Village closer to the center of town, and made the first floor into her office. On the third floor was her apartment where she lived. The second floor had been made into one-bedroom apartments that she rented.

But she still spent a lot of time on the ranch because that's where her heart was—her family, her horses and her love for the land. She hadn't even gone far away to college—just forty miles to Montana State University in Bozeman. She couldn't be far from Cardwell Ranch and couldn't imagine that

she ever would. She was her mother's daughter, she thought. Cardwell Ranch was her legacy.

Dana Cardwell had fought for this ranch years ago when her brothers and sister had wanted to sell it and split the money after their mother died. Dana couldn't bear to part with the family ranch. Fortunately, her grandmother, Mary Cardwell, had left Dana the ranch in her last will, knowing Dana would keep the place in the family always.

Ranching had been in her grandmother's blood, the woman Mary had been named after. Just as it was in Dana's and now Mary's. Chase hadn't understood why she couldn't walk away from this legacy that the women in her family had fought so hard for.

But while her mother was a hands-on ranch woman, Mary liked working behind the scenes. She'd taken over the accounting part of running the ranch so her mother could enjoy what she loved—being on the back of a horse.

“What is wrong with Dillon Ramsey?” Dana Cardwell Savage had asked her husband after Mary had told them that the deputy had asked her out.

“He's new and, if you must know, there's something troublesome about him that I haven't been able to put my finger on yet,” Hud had said.

Mary had laughed. She knew exactly what bothered her father about Dillon—the same thing that attracted her to the young cocky deputy. If she couldn't have Chase, then why not take a walk on the wild side for once?

She had just finished unsaddling her horse and was headed for the main house when her cell phone

rang, startling her. Her pulse jumped. She dug the phone out and looked at the screen, her heart in her throat. It was a long-distance number and not one she recognized. Chase?

Sure took him long enough to finally call, she thought, and instantly found herself making excuses for him. Maybe he was working away from cell phone coverage. It happened all the time in Montana. Why not in Arizona? Or maybe her letter had to chase him down, and he'd just now gotten it and called the moment he read it.

It rang a second time. She swallowed the lump in her throat. She couldn't believe how nervous she was. Silly goose, she thought. It's probably not Chase at all but some telemarketer calling to try to sell her something.

She answered on the third ring. "Hello?" Her voice cracked.

Silence, then a female voice. "Mary Cardwell Savage?" The voice was hard and crisp like a fall apple, the words bitten off.

"Yes?" she asked, disappointed. She'd gotten her hopes up that it was Chase, with whatever excuse he had for not calling sooner. It wouldn't matter as long as he'd called to say that he felt the same way she did and always had. But she'd been right. It was just some telemarketer. "I'm sorry, but whatever you're selling, I'm not inter—"

"I read your letter you sent Chase."

Her breath caught as her heart missed a beat. She told herself that she'd heard wrong. "I beg your pardon?"

“Leave my fiancé alone. Don’t write him. Don’t call him. Just leave him the hell alone.”

She tried to swallow around the bitter taste in her mouth. “Who is this?” Her voice sounded breathy with fear.

“The woman who’s going to marry Chase Steele. If you ever contact him again—”

Mary disconnected, her fingers trembling as she dropped the phone into her jacket pocket as if it had scorched her skin. The woman’s harsh low voice was still in her ears, furious and threatening. Whoever she was, she’d read the letter. No wonder Chase hadn’t written or called. But why hadn’t he? Had he shown the letter to his fiancée? Torn it up? Kept it so she found it? Did it matter? His fiancée had read the letter and was furious, and Mary couldn’t blame her.

She buried her face in her hands. Chase had gone off to find himself. Apparently he’d succeeded in finding a fiancée as well. Tears burned her eyes. Chase was engaged and getting married. Could she be a bigger fool? Chase had moved on, and he hadn’t even had the guts to call and tell her.

Angrily, Mary wiped at her tears as she recalled the woman’s words and the anger she’d heard in them. She shuddered, regretting more than ever that stupid letter she’d written. The heat of humiliation and mortification burned her cheeks. If only she hadn’t poured her heart out to him. If only she had just written him about the package and left it at that. If only...

Unfortunately, she’d been feeling nostalgic the night she wrote that letter. Her mare was about to

give birth so she was staying the night at the ranch in her old room. She'd come in from the barn late that night, and had seen the package she'd promised to let Chase know about. Not far into the letter, she'd become sad and regretful. Filled with memories of the two of them growing up together on the ranch from the age of fifteen, she'd decide to call him only to find that his number was no longer in service. Then she'd tried to find him on social media. No luck. It was as if he'd dropped off the face of the earth. Had something happened to him?

Worried, she'd gone online and found an address for him but no phone number. In retrospect, she should never have written the letter—not in the mood she'd been in. What she hated most since he hadn't answered her letter or called, was that she had written how much she missed him and how she'd never gotten over him and how she regretted their breakup.

She'd stuffed the letter into the envelope addressed to him and, wiping her tears, had left it on her desk in her old room at the ranch as she climbed into bed. The next morning before daylight her mother had called up to her room to say that the mare had gone into labor. Forgetting all about the letter, she'd been so excited about the new foal that she'd put everything else out of her mind. By the time she remembered the letter, it was gone. Her aunt Stacy had seen it, put a stamp on the envelope and mailed it for her.

At first, Mary had been in a panic, expecting Chase to call as soon as he received the letter. She'd played the conversation in her head every way she

thought possible, all but one of them humiliating. As days passed, she'd still held out hope. Now after more than two weeks and that horrible phone call, she knew it was really over and she had to accept it.

Still her heart ached. Chase had been her first love. Did anyone ever get over their first love? He had obviously moved on. Mary took another deep breath and tried to put it out of her mind. She loved summer here in the canyon. The temperature was perfect—never too cold or too hot. A warm breeze swayed the pine boughs and keeled over the tall grass in the pasture nearby. Closer a horse whinnied from the corral next to the barn as a hawk made a slow lazy circle in the clear blue overhead.

Days like this she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. She took another deep breath. She needed to get back to her office. She had work to do. Along with doing the ranch books for Cardwell Ranch, she had taken on work from other ranches in the canyon and built a lucrative business.

She would get over Chase or die trying, she told herself. As she straightened her back, her tears dried, and she walked toward her SUV. She'd give Deputy Dillon Ramsey a call. It was time she moved on. Like falling off a horse, she was ready to saddle up again. Forgetting Chase wouldn't be easy, but if anyone could help the process, she figured Dillon Ramsey was the man to do it.

## *Chapter Three*

Chase was carrying the last of his things out to his pickup when he saw Fiona drive up. He swore under his breath. He'd hoped to leave without a scene. Actually, he'd been surprised that she hadn't come by sooner. As she was friends with Rick's wife, Patty, Chase was pretty sure she had intel into how the packing and leaving had been going.

He braced himself as he walked to his pickup and put the final box into the back. He heard Fiona get out of her car and walk toward him. He figured it could go several ways. She would try seduction or tears or raging fury, or a combination of all three.

Hands deep in the pockets of her jacket as she approached, she gave him a shy smile. It was that smile that had appealed to him that first night. He'd been vulnerable, and he suspected she'd known it. Did she think that smile would work again?

He felt guilty for even thinking that she was so calculating and yet he'd seen the way she'd worked him. "Fiona, I don't want any trouble."

"Trouble?" She chuckled. "I heard you were moving out today. I only wanted to come say goodbye."

Chase wished that was the extent of it, but he'd come to know her better than that. "I think we covered goodbye the last time we saw each other."

She ignored that. "I know you're still angry with me—"

"Fiona—"

Tears welled in her green eyes as if she could call them up at a moment's notice. "Chase, at least give me a hug goodbye. Please." Before he could move, she closed the distance between them. As she did, her hands came out of her jacket pockets. The blade of the knife in her right hand caught the light as she started to put her arms around his neck.

As he jerked back, he grabbed her wrist. "What the—" He cursed as he tightened his grip on her wrist holding the knife. She was stronger than she looked. She struggled to stab him as she screamed obscenities at him.

The look in her eyes was almost more frightening than the knife clutched in her fist. He twisted her wrist until she cried out and dropped the weapon. The moment it hit the ground, he let go of her, realizing he was hurting her.

She dived for the knife, but he kicked it away, chasing after it before she could pick it up again. She leaped at him, pounding on his back as she tried to drag him to the ground.

He threw her off. She stumbled and fell to the grass and began to cry hysterically. He stared down at her. Had she really tried to kill him?

"Don't! Don't kill me!" she screamed, raising her hands as if she thought he was going to stab her. He'd



forgotten that he'd picked up the knife, but he wasn't threatening her with it.

He didn't understand what was going on until he realized they were no longer alone. Fiona had an audience. Some of the apartment tenants had come out. One of them, an elderly woman, was fumbling with her phone as if to call the cops.

"Everything is all right," he quickly told the woman.

The older woman looked from Fiona to him and back. Her gaze caught on the knife he was holding at his side.

"There is no reason to call the police," Chase said calmly as he walked to the trash cans lined up along the street, opened one and dropped the knife into the bottom.

"That's my best knife!" Fiona yelled. "You owe me for that."

He saw that the tenant was now staring at Fiona, who was brushing off her jeans as she got to her feet.

"What are you staring at, you old crone? Go back inside before I take that phone away from you and stick it up your—"

"Fiona," Chase said as the woman hurriedly turned and rushed back inside. He shook his head as he gave Fiona a wide berth as he headed toward his apartment to lock up. "Go home before the police come."

"She won't call. She knows I'll come back here if she does."

He hoped Fiona was right about the woman not making the call. Otherwise, he'd be held up making

a statement to the police—that's if he didn't end up behind bars. He didn't doubt that Fiona would lie through her teeth about the incident.

"She won't make you happy," Fiona screamed after him as he opened the door to his apartment, keeping an eye on her the whole time. The last thing he wanted was her getting inside. If she didn't have another weapon, he had no doubt she'd find one.

Stopping in the doorway, he looked back at her. Her makeup had run along with her nose. She hadn't bothered to wipe either. She looked small, and for a moment his heart went out to her. What had happened to that professional, together woman he'd met at the party?

"You need to get help, Fi."

She scoffed at that. "You're the one who needs help, Chase."

He stepped inside, closed and locked the door, before sliding the dead bolt. Who's to say she didn't have a half dozen spare keys made. She'd lied about the building manager opening the door for her. She'd lied about a lot of things. He had no idea who Fiona Barkley was. But soon she would be nothing more than a bad memory, he told himself as he finished checking to make sure he hadn't left anything. When he looked out, he saw her drive away.

Only then did he pick up his duffel bag, lock the apartment door behind him and head for his truck, anxious to get on the road to Montana. But as he neared his pickup, he saw what Fiona had left him. On the driver's-side window scrawled crudely in lip-stick were the words *You'll regret it.*

That was certainly true. He regretted it already. He wondered what would happen to her and feared for the next man who caught her eye. Maybe the next man would handle it better, he told himself.

Tossing his duffel bag onto the passenger seat, he pulled an old rag from under the seat and wiped off what he could of the lipstick. Then, climbing into this truck, he pointed it toward Montana and Mary, putting Fiona out of his mind.

THERE WERE DAYS when Dana felt all sixty-two of her years. Often when she looked at her twenty-eight-year-old daughter, Mary, she wondered where the years had gone. She felt as if she'd merely blinked and her baby girl had grown into a woman.

Being her first and only daughter, Mary had a special place in her heart. So when Mary hurt, Dana did too. Ever since Chase and Mary had broken up and he'd left town, her daughter had been heartsick, and Dana had had no idea how to help her.

She knew that kind of pain. Hud had broken her heart years ago when they'd disagreed and he'd taken off. But he'd come back, and their love had overcome all the obstacles that had been thrown at them since. She'd hoped that Mary throwing herself into her accounting business would help. But as successful as Mary now was with her business, the building she'd bought, the apartments she'd remodeled and rented, there was a hole in her life—and her heart. A mother could see it.

“Sis, have you heard a word I’ve said?”

Dana looked from the window where she'd been

watching Mary unsaddling her horse to where her brother sat at the kitchen table across from her. “Sorry. Did you just say *cattle thieves*?”

Jordan shook his head at her and smiled. There’d been a time when she and her brother had been at odds over the ranch. Fortunately, those days were long behind them. He’d often said that the smartest thing he’d ever done was to come back here, make peace and help Dana run Cardwell Ranch. She couldn’t agree more.

“We lost another three head. Hud blames paleo diets,” Jordan said, and picked up one of the chocolate chip cookies Dana had baked that morning.

“How many does this make?” she asked.

“There’s at least a dozen gone,” her brother said.

She looked to her husband who sat at the head of the table and had also been watching Mary out the window. Hud reached for another cookie. He came home every day for lunch and had for years. Today she’d made sandwiches and baked his favorite cookies.

“They’re hitting at night, opening a gate, cutting out only a few at a time and herding them to the road where they have a truck waiting,” the marshal said. “They never hit in the same part of any ranch twice, so unless we can predict where they’re going to show up next... We aren’t the only ones who’ve had losses.”

“We could hire men to ride the fences at night,” Jordan said.

“I’ll put a deputy or two on the back roads for a couple of nights and see what we come up with,”

Hud said and, pushing away his plate and getting to his feet, shot Dana a questioning look.

Jordan, apparently recognizing the gesture, also got to his feet and excused himself. As he left, Hud said, "I know something is bothering you, and it isn't rustlers."

She smiled up at him. He knew her so well, her lover, her husband, her best friend. "It's Mary. Stacy told me earlier that she mailed a letter from Mary to Chase a few weeks ago. Mary hasn't heard back."

Hud groaned. "You have any idea what was in the letter?"

"No, but since she's been moping around I'd say she is still obviously in love with him." She shrugged. "I don't think she's ever gotten over him."

Her husband shook his head. "Why didn't we have all boys?"

"Our sons will fall in love one day and will probably have their heartbreaks as well." She had the feeling that Hud hadn't heard the latest. "She's going out with Deputy Dillon Ramsey tonight."

Hud swore and raked a hand through his graying hair. "I shouldn't have mentioned that there was something about him that made me nervous."

She laughed. "If you're that worried about him, then why don't you talk to her?"

Her husband shot her a look that said he knew their stubborn daughter only too well. "Tell her not to do something and damned if she isn't even more bound and determined to do it."

Like he had to tell her that. Mary was just like

her mother and grandmother. "It's just a date," Dana said, hoping there wasn't anything to worry about.

Hud grumbled under his breath as he reached for his Stetson. "I have to get back to work." His look softened. "You think she's all right?"

Dana wished she knew. "She will be, given time. I think she needs to get some closure from Chase. His not answering her letter could be what she needed to move on."

"I hope not with Dillon Ramsey."

"Seriously, what is it about him that worries you?" Dana asked.

He frowned. "I can't put my finger on it. I hired him as a favor to his uncle down in Wyoming. Dillon's cocky and opinionated."

Dana laughed. "I used to know a deputy like that."

Hud grinned. "Point taken. He's also still green."

"I don't think that's the part that caught Mary's attention."

Her husband groaned. "I'd like to see her with someone with both feet firmly planted on the ground."

"You mean someone who isn't in law enforcement. Chase Steele wasn't."

"I liked him well enough," Hud said grudgingly. "But he hadn't sowed his wild oats yet. They were both too young, and he needed to get out of here and get some maturity under his belt, so to speak."

"She wanted him to stay and fight for her. Sound familiar?"

Hud's smile was sad. "Sometimes a man has to go out into the world, grow up, figure some things

out.” He reached for her hand. “That’s what I did when I left. It made me realize what I wanted. You.”

She stepped into his arms, leaning into his strength, thankful for the years they’d had together raising a family on this ranch. “Mary’s strong.”

“Like her mother.”

“She’ll be all right,” Dana said, hoping it was true.

CHASE WAS DETERMINED to drive as far as he could the first day, needing to put miles behind him. He thought of Fiona and felt sick to his stomach. He kept going over it in his head, trying to understand if he’d done anything to lead her on beyond that one night. He was clear with her that he was not in the market for anything serious. His biggest mistake though was allowing himself a moment of weakness when he’d let himself be seduced.

But before that he’d explained to her that he was in love with someone else. She said she didn’t care. That she wasn’t looking for a relationship. She’d said that she needed him that night because she’d had a bad day.

Had he really fallen for that? He had. And when she became obsessed, he’d been shocked and felt sorry for her. Maybe he shouldn’t have.

He felt awful, and not even the miles he put behind him made him feel better. He wished he’d never left Montana, but at the time, leaving seemed the only thing to do. He’d worked his way south, taking carpenter jobs, having no idea where he was headed.

When he’d gotten the call from his mother to say she was dying and that she’d needed to see him, he’d

quit his job, packed up and headed for Quartzsite, Arizona, in hopes that his mother would finally give him the name.

Chase had never known who his father was. It was a secret his mother refused to reveal for reasons of her own. Once in Arizona, though, he'd realized that she planned to take that secret to her grave. On her death bed, she'd begged him to do one thing for her. Would he take her ashes back to Montana and scatter them in the Gallatin Canyon near Big Sky?

"That's where I met your father," she said, her voice weak. "He was the love of my life."

She hadn't given him a name, but at least he knew now that the man had lived in Big Sky at the time of Chase's conception. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

HE WAS IN the middle of nowhere just outside of Searchlight, Nevada, when smoke began to boil out from under the pickup's hood. He started to pull over when the engine made a loud sound and stopped dead. As he rolled to stop, his first thought was: could Fiona have done something to his pickup before he left?

Anger filled him to overflowing. But it was another emotion that scared him. He had a sudden awful feeling that something terrible was going to happen to Mary if he didn't get to Montana. Soon. The feeling was so strong that he thought about leaving his pickup beside the road and thumbing a ride the rest of the way.

Chase tried to tamp down the feeling, telling him-



self that it was because of Fiona and what she'd done before he'd left when she'd tried to kill him, not to mention what she'd done to his pickup. The engine was shot. He'd have to get a new one and that was going to take a while.

That bad feeling though wouldn't go away. After he called for a tow truck, he dialed the Jensen Ranch, the closest ranch to Mary's. He figured if anyone would know how Mary was doing, it would be Beth Anne Jensen. She answered on the third ring. "It's Chase." He heard the immediate change in her voice and realized she was probably the wrong person to call, but it was too late. Beth Anne had liked him a little too much when he'd worked for her family and it had caused a problem between him and Mary.

"Hey Chase. Are you back in town?"

"No, I was just calling to check on Mary. I was worried about her. I figured you'd know how she's doing. Is everything all right with her?"

Beth Anne's tone changed from sugar to vinegar. "As far as I know everything is just great with her. Is that all you wanted to know?"

This was definitely a mistake. "How are you?"

"I opened my own flower shop. I've been dating a rodeo cowboy. I'm just fine, as if you care." She sighed. "So if you're still hung up on Mary, why haven't you come back?"

Stubbornness. Stupidity. Pride. A combination of all three. "I just had a sudden bad feeling that she might be in trouble."

Beth Anne laughed. "Could be, now that you men-

tion it. My brother saw her earlier out with some young deputy. Apparently, she's dating him."

"Sounds like she's doing fine then. Thanks. You take care." He swore as he disconnected and put his worry about Mary out of his mind. She should be plenty safe dating a deputy, right? He gave his front tire a kick, then paced as he waited for the tow truck.

IT HAD TAKEN hours before the tow truck had arrived. By then the auto shop was closed. He'd registered at a motel, taken a hot shower and sprawled on the bed, furious with Fiona, but even more so with himself.

He'd known he had a serious problem when he'd seen the smoke roiling out from under the hood. When the engine seized up, he'd known it was blown before he'd climbed out and lifted the hood.

At first, he couldn't understand what had happened. The pickup wasn't brand-new, but it had been in good shape. The first thing he'd checked was the oil. That's when he'd smelled it. Bleach.

The realization had come in a flash. He'd thrown a container of bleach away in his garbage just that morning, along with some other household cleaners that he didn't want to carry all the way back to Montana. He'd seen the bleach bottle when he'd tossed Fiona's knife into one of the trash cans at the curb.

Now, lying on the bed in the motel, Chase swore. He'd left Fiona out there alone with his pickup. He'd thought the only mischief she'd gotten up to was writing on his pickup window with lipstick. He'd underestimated her, and now it was going to cost him dearly.

He'd have to have a new engine put in the truck, and that was going to take both money and time.

THREE DAYS LATER, while waiting in Henderson, Nevada for his new engine to be installed, he called Rick.

“Hey, Chase, great to hear from you. How far did you make it? I thought you might have decided to drive straight through all night.”

“I broke down near Searchlight.”

“Really? Is it serious?”

“I’m afraid so. The engine blew. I suspect Fiona put bleach in the oil.”

Rick let out a curse. “That would seize up the engine.”

“That’s exactly what it did.”

“Oh, man I am so sorry. Listen, I am beginning to feel like this is all my fault. Is there anything I can do? Where are you now? I could drive up there, maybe bring one of the big trailers. We could haul your pickup back down here. I know a mechanic—”

“I appreciate it, but I’m getting it fixed here in Henderson. That’s not why I called.”

“It’s funny you should call,” Rick said. “I was about to call you, but I kept putting it off hoping to have better news.”

His heart began to pound. “What’s wrong?”

His former boss let out a dry chuckle. “We’re still friends, right?”

“Right. I forgave you for Fiona if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You might change your mind after you hear what

I have to tell you,” Rick said. “I didn’t want you to hear this on the news.” He felt his stomach drop as he waited for the bad news. “Fiona apparently hasn’t been at work since before you left. Patty went over to her place. Her car was gone and there was no sign of her. But she’d called Patty the night you left from a bar and was pretty wasted and incoherent. When Patty wasn’t able to reach her in the days that followed, she finally went over to her condo. It appeared she hadn’t been back for a few days.” Chase swore. She wouldn’t hurt herself, would she? She’d said he would regret it. He felt a sliver of fear race up his spine. As delusional as the woman was—

Rick cleared his voice. “This morning a fisherman found her car in the Colorado River.”

His breath caught in his throat. “Is she...?”

“They’re dragging the river for her body, but it’s hard to say how far her body might have gone downstream. The river was running pretty high after the big thunderstorm they had up in the mountains a few days ago.”

Chase raked a hand through his hair as he paced the floor of his motel room as he’d been doing for days now. “She threatened to do all kinds of things, but I never thought she’d do something like this.”

“Before you jump to conclusions, the police think it could have been an accident. Fiona was caught on video leaving the club that night and appeared to be quite inebriated,” Rick said. “Look, this isn’t your fault. I debated even telling you. Fiona was irrational. My wife said she’s feared that the woman’s been headed for a violent end for a long time, you know?”

He nodded to himself as he stopped to look out the motel room window at the heat waves rising off desert floor and yearned for Montana. “Still I hate to think she might have done this on purpose because of me.”

“She wasn’t right in the head. Anyway, it was probably an accident. I’m sorry to call with this kind of news, but I thought you’d want to know. Once your pickup’s fixed you’ll be heading out and putting all of this behind you. Still thinking about going to Colorado? You know I’d love to have you back.”

No reason not to tell him now. “I’m headed home as soon as the pickup’s fixed, but thanks again for the offer.”

“Home to Montana? You really never got over this woman, huh.”

“No, I never did.” He realized that when he thought of home, it was Mary he thought of. Her and the Gallatin Canyon. “It’s where I grew up. Where I first fell in love.”

“Well, I wish you luck. I hope it goes well.”

“Thanks. If you hear anything else about Fiona—”

“I’ll keep it to myself.”

“No, call me. I really didn’t know the woman. But I care about what happened to her.” He thought of the first night he’d seen her, all dressed up in that dark suit and looking so strong and capable. And the other times when she’d stopped by his apartment looking as if she’d just come home from spring break and acting the part. “It was like she was always changing before my eyes. I never knew who she was. I’m not sure she did.”

He and Rick said goodbye again. Disconnecting, he pocketed his phone. He couldn't help wondering about Fiona's last moments underwater inside her car. Did she know how to swim? He had no idea. Was it too deep for her to reach the surface? Or had she been swept away?

Chase felt sad, but he knew there was no way he could have helped her. She wanted a man committed to her, and she deserved it. But as he'd told her that first night, he wasn't that man.

If only he had known how broken and damaged she was. He would have given her a wide berth. He should have anyway, and now he blamed himself for his moment of weakness. That night he'd needed someone, but that someone had been Mary, not a woman he didn't know. Not Fiona.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry." He hoped that maybe now Fiona would finally be at peace.

Looking toward the wide-open horizon, he turned his thoughts to Mary. He couldn't wait to look into her beautiful blue eyes and tell her that he'd never stopped loving her. That thought made him even more anxious. He couldn't wait to get home.

DILLON WALKED HER to her door and waited while Mary pulled out her keys.

"I had a wonderful time," he said as he leaned casually against the side of her building as if waiting to see if she was going to invite him up. Clouds scudded past the full moon to disappear over the mountaintops surrounding the canyon. The cool night air

smelled of pine and clear blue trout stream water. This part of Montana was a little bit of Heaven, her mother was fond of saying. Mary agreed.

She'd left a light on in her apartment on the top floor. It glowed a warm inviting golden hue.

"I had fun too," she said, and considered asking him up to see the view from what she jokingly called her penthouse. The balcony off the back would be especially nice tonight. But her tongue seemed tied, and suddenly she felt tired and close to tears.

"I should go," Dillon said, his gaze locking with hers. He seemed about to take a step back, but changed his mind and leaned toward her. His hand cupped her jaw as he kissed her. Chastely at first, then with more ardor, gently drawing her to him. The kiss took her by surprise. Their first date he hadn't even tried.

His tongue probed her mouth for a moment before he ended the kiss as abruptly as it had begun. Stepping back, he seemed to study her in the moonlight for a moment before he said, "I really do have to go. Maybe we could do something this weekend if you aren't busy?"

She nodded dumbly. She and Dillon were close to the same age, both adults. She'd expected him to kiss her on their first date. So her surprise tonight had nothing to do with him kissing her, she thought as she entered her building, locking the door behind her and hurrying up to her apartment.

It had everything to do with the kiss.

Mary unlocked her apartment door with trembling fingers, stepped in and locked it behind her.

She leaned against the door, hot tears filling her eyes as she told herself she shouldn't be disappointed. But she was.

The kiss had been fine, as far as kisses went. But even when Dillon had deepened the kiss, she had felt nothing but emptiness. The memory made her feel sick. Would she always compare every kiss with Chase's? Would every man she met come up lacking?

She didn't bother to turn on a lamp as she tossed her purse down and headed toward her bedroom, furious with herself. And even more furious with Chase. He'd left her and Montana as if what they had together meant nothing to him. Clearly it didn't. That's why he'd gotten engaged and wasn't man enough to call her himself and tell her.

Still mentally kicking herself for writing that letter to him, she changed into her favorite T-shirt and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Her image in the mirror startled her. She was no longer that young girl that Chase had fallen in love with. She was a woman in her own right. She dried her tears, the crying replaced with angry determination. If that was the way Chase wanted to be, then it was fine with her.

Her cell phone rang, startling her. She hurried to it, and for just a moment she thought it was going to be Chase. Her heart had soared, then come crashing down. Chase had moved on. When was she going to accept that?

"I couldn't quit thinking about you after I left," Dillon said. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to the movies tomorrow night?"



She didn't hesitate. "I'd love to." Maybe she just hadn't been ready for his kiss. Maybe next time...

"Great," Dillon said. "I'll pick you up at 5:30 if that's all right. We can grab something to eat before we go to the theater."

"Sounds perfect." If Chase could see her now, she thought as she hung up. Dillon was handsome, but less rugged looking than Chase. Taller though by a good inch or two, and he wanted to go out with her.

She disconnected, determined to put Chase Steele behind her. He had moved on and now she was too. Next time, she would invite Dillon up to her apartment. But even as she thought it, she imagined Chase and the woman he was engaged to. While she was busy comparing every man she met to him, he'd found someone and fallen in love. It made her question if what she and Chase once had was really that unique and special. Just because it had been for her...

Mary willed herself not to think about him. She touched her tongue to her lower lip. Dillon had made her laugh, and he'd certainly been attentive. While the kiss hadn't spurred a reaction in her, she was willing to give it another chance.

Her father didn't trust the man, so didn't that mean that there was more to Dillon than met the eye? Chase had always been a little wild growing up. Her father had been worried about her relationship with him. Maybe there was some wildness in Dillon that would make him more interesting.

As she fell asleep though, her thoughts returned to Chase until her heart was aching and tears were leaking onto her pillow.

Want to know what happens next?  
Order [\*Steel Resolve\* by B.J. Daniels](#),  
available now wherever books are sold!

Copyright © 2019 by Barbara Heinlein

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# JOANN ROSS

## Summer on Mirror Lake

A  
HONEYMOON HARBOR  
NOVEL

BONUS  
STORY  
INCLUDED!

## CHAPTER ONE

*New York*

THE HEART ATTACK hit like a sledgehammer. As Gabriel Michael Mannion carried the casket of his closest friend down the aisle of St. Matthew's Episcopal Cathedral, his heart pounded against his chest, sweat beaded up on his forehead and at the back of his neck, and nausea caused his gut to clench and his head to spin. It took all his steely determination not to pass out.

Which he would not do. Not with Carter Kensington's grieving wife number four—wearing a black dress that probably cost more than Gabe's first car, and a pair of five-inch stiletto heels, suggesting that she was feeling a great deal steadier on her feet than he was at the moment—following behind with her three-year-old son. Gabe suspected that the blue coat the boy wore, which brought to mind the iconic photo of John Kennedy Jr. saluting his father's casket, was not a coincidence.

And he couldn't forget wives two and three seated in the pews, each with one of Carter's four children. Wife number one, Carter's college sweetheart and the mother of his eldest daughter, had chosen to remain in Santa Barbara. The daughter, Gabe remembered, was taking a gap year in Paris. All on Carter's dime, which he'd bitched about to Gabe nonstop while tossing back manhattans at the Campbell Bar in Grand Central Station like they'd time traveled back to the 1950s *Mad Men* days. Finally, sufficiently fortified, he'd taken the Metro-North home

to spend a suburban weekend with his former swimsuit model wife and toddler son in their pricey home nestled into one of the country's wealthiest communities.

Despite having come from "old money," as he'd always point out sometime before Gabe would put him onto the train, and despite a trust fund that would have allowed a normal guy to live a comfortable life, Carter had been an indefatigable force of nature. He'd worked hard, played hard and had, like a comet flaring out, died young. In the bed of one of a string of mistresses, a detail that hadn't made it into his *New York Times* obituary.

Although Carter Kensington had readily acknowledged his many flaws, he'd been a boss, mentor and friend to Gabe. With the ink from his Columbia Business School MBA diploma still wet, Gabe had followed the yellow brick road to Wall Street when, on his first day of interviews, Carter had taken him under his wing.

"You've got the Midas touch, son," Carter had told him as he'd handed out a bonus in the high six figures at the end of Gabe's first year. Which was more zeroes than Gabe had ever seen written out on a check. Despite his small-town Pacific Northwest roots, he'd proven a natural at trading, and reveled in the take-no-prisoners, roller coaster 24/7 lifestyle.

Though he had to wonder, what good had the one-point-eight billion dollars Carter had taken home last year from Harborstone Advisors Group done for him in the end?

Dealing with more pressing issues at the moment, Gabe avoided that question. As he'd been doing for months.

*You can do this*, he instructed himself. *You will not drop a twenty-thousand-dollar casket*. Although his vision was blurred by vertigo and the sweat dripping into his eyes, his mind created a slow-motion video of the

casket bouncing on the stone floor, breaking open, allowing Carter, dressed in his favorite James Bond Brioni suit and handmade Brunello Cucinelli shoes, to fall out and roll down the aisle of the Gothic stone church while the choir belted out “Nearer, My God, to Thee.”

The church had eight steps leading down to the sidewalk. Although they were wide and not all that steep, standing at the top of them was like looking down into the Grand Canyon. Unfortunately, he and Douglas Fairfield, the managing company’s sixty-year-old managing partner, were the first to tackle them.

*You can do this.*

As little black dots swam in front of his eyes like a cloud of gnats, Gabe grasped the brass side rail even tighter and lifted his end to help keep the casket level and prevent the body sliding downward and upsetting the balance even more. The six pallbearers managed to get Carter onto the sidewalk and into the waiting white hearse. Then in a group, they moved to the side, allowing Carter’s parents, wife and son to make their way to their limo. It was only while Gabe was walking toward the car designated by the funeral home for the pallbearers that he felt himself folding to the ground like a cheap suit.

Then everything went black.

HE CAME TO in the back of an ambulance, siren wailing, while an EMT stuck an aspirin beneath his tongue, took his vital signs and assured him that he’d be okay.

“Nobody’s ever died in my ambulance,” she said.

“That’s good to hear. So, I don’t need to go to the hospital.” Trading didn’t stop just because one billionaire died. It kept ticking along, and every minute Gabe wasn’t working was another opportunity missed and money lost, not just for him, but for the firm.

“There’s always a first time,” the woman said, her musical Jamaican accent at odds with her stern tone. “You don’t get to choose a plan B. Once you hit that pavement, you handed the reins over to me.”

“You don’t understand. I have things I have to do.”

“Yeah, I get a lot of guys who tell me that.” She strapped an oxygen mask over his face, effectively shutting him up. “But here’s the thing. In this case, you’ll be glad that I’m the decider.”

That said, she went back to monitoring his vital signs while the guy sitting next to the driver was letting the hospital know their ETA.

AN HOUR LATER, on what was turning out to be one of the most screwed-up days of his life, Gabe was lying behind a curtain, listening to what sounded like chaos in the ER. He was thinking that the hum, buzz, chatter and fast-talking reminded him of his summer internship days on the trading floor, when a different doctor from the one who’d examined him on arrival pulled back the white curtain and entered the cubicle.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Mannion,” he said. “I’m Doctor David Kaplan and I have good news for you.” He came to the side of the gurney and took Gabe’s pulse. “Unless you get hit by an ambulance leaving the hospital, you’re not going to die anytime soon.”

“That’s encouraging.” What he guessed was an attempt at medical humor from a kid who looked as if he’d just graduated medical school had Gabe feeling a million years old. Which, given that Wall Street years were a lot like dog years, maybe he was. “So, my heart’s okay?”

“It’s still pumping. It wasn’t a heart attack.”

“Then what was it?”

“An anxiety attack. Or another term might be a panic attack.”

“No. Way.” You didn’t survive in his business by being the kind of wuss who panicked.

Doogie Howser gave him a long look that suggested he’d heard that denial before. “The EMT said you’re a trader.”

“At Harborstone Advisors Group. It’s a hedge fund,” Gabe tacked on, realizing the name probably didn’t mean anything to anyone outside the investment world.

He was wrong. The doctor whistled under his breath as he made a note on the chart attached to the clipboard he was carrying. “Small pond, big fish.”

Which was exactly how Carter had described it the morning Gabe had interviewed.

“My brother worked there for a time,” the doctor said. “It didn’t suit him. Elliott missed the floor, which surprised me, because whenever I see trading floors on the news, they look a lot like what I’ve always imagined Bedlam to be.”

“Says the doctor who chose to work in an emergency department,” Gabe said dryly.

“Believe it or not, I’ve always found a well-run ED to be poetry in motion,” Kaplan responded. “But we all respond to different stressors. The same way patients view ERs differently than medical staff working in them, Harborstone didn’t match up well with Elliott’s risk DNA. Also, my brother had lost all sense of any life outside The Street. Which is how I recognize the same signs in you.”

That pissed Gabe off. “You don’t know me.”

“I know that your blood pressure is higher than it should be.”

“Like you said, we all have our stressors.”

“True, and landing in an emergency room could cause



anyone's blood pressure to spike. White-coat hypertension is a well-documented condition. However, the other pallbearers told the ambulance crew that you were already having symptoms of an attack before landing here. They first noticed them midway down the aisle when you got out of step."

"I did not." Gabe was sure of that. He thought.

The doctor's only response was a shrug. "Your cholesterol is also in the high range. I'm guessing from living on takeout."

Gabe couldn't deny that. "Contrary to what people might believe, my business doesn't allow for three-hour, three-martini lunches."

"Mine neither. Which is too bad. Not that I'm in favor of the three-martini lunches, but despite this being a hospital, the cafeteria food here is largely made up of carbs, sugars and fats, and Americans all need to take more time to eat.

"The French and the Italians have the right idea. They're not grabbing a bagel and coffee from a food truck, then gulping it down while checking their email. They walk to a café, drink coffee from a cup that isn't cardboard, and spend time talking with a friend. They're careful about what they eat, they walk more and believe in a slower pace of life with more time off. Which is why they live longer."

"Maybe it just seems longer," Gabe shot back.

Kaplan's half smile was more a smirk, suggesting that this was not the first time he'd heard this argument. "Six months after returning to the trading floor, my brother moved his family to Grenoble. He teaches skiing at a small resort at Les Deux Alpes during the winter and spring. Although the glacier there allows year-round skiing, he takes his entire summer off, then gives fall tours

of the area before returning to skiing. From what I saw while visiting this past Christmas, his family is happier than they've ever been. And it didn't take a doctor to see how much healthier he is."

"I'm happy for your brother. But I'm not into skiing." He hadn't taken the time to go to any mountains since college.

"Neither am I, but that wasn't my point. An anxiety attack won't kill you, Mr. Mannion. But it should be seen as a flashing yellow warning light. When you're anxious, your body reacts in ways that put extra strain on your heart that could lead to eventual heart disease."

"Thanks for the PSA." Gabe looked down at his wrist to where his Rolex Submariner should be and found it missing.

"It's in the bag with your other things," the doctor said before he could ask. "Along with your cell phone, which I suspect you could use a break from."

"I need to get back to work."

"And I need to do my job. Which is to prescribe regular exercise, a better diet and a proper amount of quality sleep."

"I get all I need," Gabe said. Okay, so maybe he worked a hundred-plus-hour week, and maybe he was so jazzed when he got back to his apartment he'd need a couple or three drinks to chill enough to sleep, but that was the life he'd chosen.

"Given that you work at Harborstone, I seriously doubt that," the doctor said, writing something else on Gabe's chart. "And when was the last time you connected with your family and friends?"

"My family's across the country in Washington State." All except for his quarterback brother, who also lived in Manhattan. Burke, being far more social than Gabe

himself was, had insisted on monthly catch-up dinners during his football off-season.

“Last I heard, planes flew west across the Hudson. When was the last time you hung out with friends outside work?”

“Earlier today.”

“But the guest of honor at that party wasn’t there. Because he happened to be dead.”

“You know what, Doc?”

“What?”

“You’ve got one helluva smart-ass bedside manner.”

“Thank you. It took several years to hone it. Your friend, and I assume he was a close one for you to be a pallbearer, died, according to what one of the other pallbearers at the scene told the EMT, at the age of forty-six. Given that the life expectancy of a male with his birth year is sixty-seven-point-four years, it suggests that while working on Wall Street may make you a very wealthy man, the lifestyle can kill you before you have time to enjoy it.”

“Carter Kensington’s life was excessive,” Gabe argued. “Mine isn’t.”

“Being a workaholic is excessive in its own way,” Kaplan said.

The damn guy just wouldn’t let up. “You do realize that arguing my lifestyle probably isn’t good for my blood pressure.”

“Yet you feel the need to defend it,” the doctor said mildly.

“To a guy who probably works the same hours.”

“My work’s not nine-to-five. But I’m going out tonight with my wife to watch our daughter’s ballet recital. She’s excited because her tutu has sequins and she gets to wear a sparkly tiara. Which she’s going to wear afterward,

when we go out for pizza. Because that's her favorite thing. Even if she does insist on pineapple on it. I blame that slight flaw in judgment on her mother.

"You're obviously an intelligent man, Mr. Mannion. Perhaps you ought to consider using some of your brainpower to come up with a way to achieve a better work-life balance. Before I see one of your friends having worried about dropping your casket thirteen years from now."

"Ouch. Mic drop."

Kaplan's lips quirked, giving Gabe the impression that the sadistic son of a bitch was actually enjoying this. "You're free to leave," he said. "But, seriously, you don't have to turn into a ski instructor. Why don't you try figuring out something that gives you pleasure, and make time for it? While you still have that option. Because I'd rather not see you back in my emergency room anytime soon."

With that he was gone.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Honeymoon Harbor, Washington*

“OKAY,” CHELSEA PRESCOTT SAID. “We have the summer reading challenge, art lessons with Michael Mannion, the trip out to Blue House Farm so kids can actually see where their food comes from, a tour of Herons Landing B&B from Seth Harper and Brianna Mannion, who’ll point out all the renovations and tell the story of the Whistler mural, which the reading adventurers will have already learned about beforehand during the trip to the historical museum.

“What else can we come up with for the summer?” she asked her staff, which consisted of one other librarian, Farrah Shalhoub, who’d recently moved there from Spokane; two paid assistants; five volunteers; and the sixty something former librarian, Lillian Henderson, who, despite having retired, still checked in at least once a week to make sure the place hadn’t fallen apart without her.

“This is beginning to sound more like a summer camp than a library,” grumbled Janet Mayburn, one of the volunteers.

“We’re in the business of opening minds,” Chelsea said patiently. She’d been hearing those objections from Janet since she’d first begun planning the library’s summer event calendar in January. She’d continued to bite her tongue, because the truth was that funds were low and she couldn’t afford to offend anyone willing to work for free. “Books take readers on adventures to different places and times, but we’re still talking about our very

short Pacific Northwest summers, and although it may be hard for us to believe, there are a lot of kids who don't want to spend those sunny days *inside* the library."

"Those are the ones we especially want to reach," said Dottie Anderson, half owner of The Dancing Deer dress shop and a volunteer.

"Because reading is fundamental," said Doris, her twin and business partner.

"Exactly!" Chelsea was tempted to kiss them both. "Those who don't think of a library as a place to find adventure are the ones who'll get the most out of the program. Because once we get them inside the doors, we can hook them on reading."

"What about the liability issues?" Janet pressed.

"That's covered. Although Quinn Mannion is no longer a practicing attorney, he's still licensed, so he wrote a permission form for parents to sign. I also talked to the mayor, and he assured me that we're covered under the county insurance."

"People can still sue."

"Any idiot can sue for any reason," Lillian Henderson jumped in with a sigh of the impatience Chelsea herself was trying to hide. "That's what insurance is for."

Although the retired librarian had made her library a safe place for Chelsea during some very difficult childhood years, she'd also run a tight ship. No one had ever argued with her when she was behind the checkout desk. Apparently, Janet wasn't prepared to start now. She merely crossed her arms and shook her head. But, Chelsea noted, she didn't get up and march out in a huff.

"So," she forged on, "any other ideas?"

"How about a tour of Mannion's microbrewery?" asked Lily Carpenter, Chelsea's friend and fourth vol-

unteer, who was director of marketing and promotion at Clearwater Community College.

“Great. Let’s teach the kids to drink,” Janet muttered.

“It could be a special event for the older kids,” said Susan Long, who taught chemistry at the high school. “The same way going out to Blue House Farm can teach kids where their food comes from, learning about brewing can show them that by knowing chemistry, you can turn grains, hops, water and yeast into one of the world’s oldest beverages. It makes science more relevant to everyday life.”

“Also, the first evidence of beer production dates back to Egypt and Mesopotamia in the fifth millennium BC,” said Farrah, who had received a bachelor’s degree in Middle East studies at Pomona College in California before earning her MLS degree at the University of Washington. “So, there’s an opportunity to throw some ancient history into the mix.”

“I like that idea.” With the exception of Janet, Chelsea loved her team. “I’ll ask Quinn if he’d be willing to do that.”

“He’s already giving tours to guests staying at his sister’s bed-and-breakfast,” Mrs. Henderson pointed out. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to do the same for us.”

“Okay. Any more ideas?”

While her library admittedly wasn’t the largest on the peninsula, Mrs. Henderson had left her some very big shoes to fill, and not only did Chelsea not intend to let the former librarian—and the town—down, she also wanted to make it the best small-town library in the state.

“You’re already talking about a lot of activities,” Janet pointed out. “And there aren’t that many of us.”

“I’ve got that covered,” Chelsea said. “Kids need to demonstrate a sense of responsibility and community

service to college admission officers, so I gave a talk about summer volunteerism at the high school last month, which resulted in more applications for volunteer interns than we can possibly use. I'll be choosing three or four this week. They'll be great at helping us herd kids. Farrah and I are going to take turns leading the adventures and Mrs. Henderson has agreed to return on those days to help hold down the fort. The volunteers will continue to work on their rotating schedule."

Janet folded her arms across her chest, but didn't object to what Chelsea had personally thought was a brilliant idea.

"I'm already working on the marketing and promotion," Lily said. "Adding the brewery will be a big deal, especially since we already have a course on craft brewing at the college. Quinn's spoken to the classes and he's both informative and entertaining."

"There's also the fact that he's not hard to look at," Doris said.

"The man definitely inherited those Mannion Black Irish looks," her sister agreed.

"Terrific," Chelsea said, bringing the meeting back to order as all the women's eyes, even Janet's, went a bit dreamy. "We've just about got this all nailed down. So, why don't we all think about it a bit longer—"

"Put our thinking caps on," Mrs. Henderson broke in with a decisive nod.

"Exactly." How Chelsea loved this woman who, along with giving her a safe harbor when she'd so needed it, had provided a focus that had saved her from sinking in the turbulent tides her life had once had. "That's exactly what we should do. We're all intelligent women, and with the program lasting six weeks, we certainly have more opportunities for engagement." She closed her planner.



“Let’s ponder the possibilities over the weekend, and meet back here at five on Tuesday.”

Monday was one of two days the library was closed to give everyone on her small staff time off. Although when she’d been growing up the library had been closed Sundays and Mondays, Chelsea had found that Mondays and Thursdays were the slowest days. Also, Honeymoon Harbor was a working-class town, and many people couldn’t get to the library during the weekdays. Opening at noon on Sundays brought in a lot of people after church and, now with more restaurants in town, brunch. In addition, the library hours on Wednesdays and Fridays extended to eight o’clock to allow patrons to visit after work hours.

Mrs. Henderson lingered behind. “You’re doing a dandy job. I was proud of getting funding for the bookmobile to reach people who couldn’t easily come into town on a regular basis. But your summer reading adventurers will go down in the annals of Salish County as the same type of library milestone. Along with the coffee shop.”

It was more like a large coffee wagon, located in a room that had only ever been used for storage. After Chelsea had presented the idea to keep the library as an important gathering space in the community, the town council had provided the funds to hire restoration and remodeling contractor Seth Harper to open up the room enough to put in some couches and easy chairs for patrons to sit and read.

Fortunately, the guys at Cops and Coffee had signed a two-year contract to supply the self-service machine. While it didn’t offer the same array of choices as the actual store—their magnificent espresso machine had been special ordered from Italy—there were enough choices, including tea and hot chocolate, which had proved enor-

mously popular during the winter and brought people back to the library.

As a bonus, the bright blue-and-white wagon could be wheeled to special events in the building, such as author readings and lectures; and they'd even presented travel videos, featuring a different location every month. So far, she'd been able to find local residents who'd returned from vacations with videos to share. Restaurateur Luca Salvadori had shown his own home photos and videos, answered questions and told colorful anecdotes about life in Italy. Luca had been born and raised in Honeymoon Harbor, but had moved with his family to Rome when he was in high school so his mother could care for her aging mother-in-law. Last year he'd come home and reestablished the family restaurant the town had sorely missed.

"Thank you." Her mentor's words meant a great deal to Chelsea. "Of course, if I screw up the reading adventurers program, it could end up an entirely different milestone." And the city council might fire her.

"You won't." They walked down a sunshine-yellow hallway lined with library-themed posters. "You have mettle, Chelsea Prescott." The first poster visitors saw when they entered the double doors read *Welcome! This is YOUR library! A Place to Discover. Read. Learn. Explore. Have Fun. Connect. Succeed!*

Mrs. Henderson pointed to the poster. "That was always my mantra. In the early days, I had it written on an old-fashioned blackboard."

"I know. I remember it well." Chelsea smiled. "Then you upgraded to brightly colored markers on a whiteboard. I hope you don't mind that I had Michael Mannon design the poster to replace that."

"You have to keep up with the times. As I did when I replaced that messy chalkboard. Also, having a graphic

from an artist of Michael's caliber and fame is a true coup for the library."

"We do get the visitors who've come to town specifically to shop at his gallery." She'd been considering asking him if he'd be willing to give the library licensing rights to sell prints of the poster online. She was certain other libraries would prove a lucrative market, thus raising additional, always-needed funds.

"I do appreciate you keeping my words."

"I certainly couldn't have improved them." Hadn't the library under this woman's tenure been all those things to her?

"I noticed you also used them on the website design."

"I loved the previous header with the photo of the library and harbor behind it, but I thought putting up a mission statement in its place might draw more people in. I did keep the photo in the right margin where visitors can see it."

"I wasn't criticizing, dear," Mrs. Henderson assured her. "Speaking of the website, have you thought about adding an introductory computer class to the evening learning curriculum sessions? I remember when we first were able to get an internet connection. No one, including me, had any idea how to use it to our best advantage. It was definitely a self-taught, learn-as-you-go experience."

"There are still people who aren't computer literate," Chelsea said. "I doubt a week goes by that either Farrah or I don't help someone fill out a résumé and search for a job online. And then there's the rush of college applications and instructions on essay writing. Many of Honeymoon Harbor's students are the first in their family to go to college and it can be overwhelming."

"As it was before the computer. Though that's exactly the type of thing I had in mind. Also, I've bought items

from local craftspeople who could reach more potential customers with websites. But I suspect many don't have the skills or the money to pay to have one set up, the way Doris and Dottie did when they opened up *The Dancing Deer*."

"Lily updated ours," Chelsea said. "Not only is she a whiz at marketing, she has mad website design skills. I'll ask if she'd be willing to teach a couple sessions. One for older kids, and another for the adults."

Mrs. Henderson nodded her steel-gray head, her hair flowing down her back in wild waves. No short, "age appropriate" hair for her. "That's a very good idea."

"It was yours."

"I know." Her smile took years from her face. "At my age, I don't have time to bother with bad ones."

They said goodbye and Mrs. Henderson left the library, walking with purpose down the front steps. Although Lillian remained hale, hearty and active, Chelsea always held her breath, waiting for a fall. There was a ramp next to the steps, but the elderly librarian refused to use it.

Chelsea waited until she'd reached the sidewalk, gotten into her Prius and driven off, before making one last check of the building. In a reading alcove off the children's section, she found two girls sitting on the chintz-covered love seat—as they'd been most afternoons after school for the past week, reminding her of a time when this very library had been her home away from home. Back when that dark, suffocating cloud had lowered over the pretty Prescott family Cape Cod home.

Chelsea mentally shook off the pain that still hurt all these years later, and brought out her friendly librarian smile. "Hello, girls," she said.

The eyes of the older girl, who Chelsea guessed to be

twelve or so years old, were guarded. “Hi.” Her tone was flat. Disinterested.

“Hi!” the younger one, who looked about five years old, said. Her grin was as wide as a slice of summer melon. “I’m Hailey and this is my big sister, Hannah. We’re reading about dragons.”

“What fun. I like dragons.”

“Me, too.” Wheat-blond curls bobbed as she enthusiastically nodded her head. “They have fire coming out of their snouts.” Her brow wrinkled, much as Mrs. Henderson’s had. “But they only scorch and eat bad people.”

“Then the three of us are safe.”

“We are! That’s why I don’t have nightmares about them.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Hannah gave me my own guardian dragon.” Hailey reached into a Disney princess book bag and pulled out a fluffy green stuffed animal. “This is Daisy. My other one is invisible to everyone but me.”

“That’s very special. And I like this one.” It was well-worn and missing a leg.

“Me, too. My invisible dragon is always with me, like a guardian angel. It burns away any monsters that might try to sneak up on me in the dark.”

Chelsea glanced at the older sister, whose return look, like her earlier one, managed to be expressionless and stony at the same time.

“You’re lucky to have such a good big sister.” Chelsea remembered all too well how it had felt to be a big sister. From the time her parents had brought Annabelle home from Honeymoon Harbor General Hospital, she’d felt as if her heart had grown three—no, make that *four*—sizes the instant those big blue eyes had looked up into hers. And when the tiny hand had grabbed on to her finger,

she'd known they would be bonded for life. What she'd had no way of knowing was how short her younger sister's life would be.

"I know." Hailey looked up at her sister. "Hannah's always taken care of me. Everywhere we've moved."

That explained why Chelsea didn't recognize them. Apparently they were new to Honeymoon Harbor.

"Would you like to take that book with you?" she asked. "So you can finish it at home?"

"Yes!"

"We don't have a library card." Hannah's statement was edged with a challenge.

"That's not a problem," Chelsea said blithely. "All you need is a parent, or guardian, to sign the application form for you, and you can have your own cards. Meanwhile, I trust you. And when you return it, I'll have other dragon books waiting for you."

"That would be awesome." Little hands with sparkly nail polish crossed over Hailey's heart. "Wouldn't it, Hannah?"

"Yeah." The older sister seemed less than pleased. Or, perhaps, she was merely guarded with strangers. Which was a good thing these days. Even in this small peninsula town.

Getting the message that the library was about to close, Hannah put the book into her own bag and stood up. "Come on, Hailey. We've got to go."

"Okay." The little hand took hold of the larger one. "Thank you, library lady," she said.

"You're welcome," Chelsea responded. "Could I call your mother for you?"

"She's working," Hannah said, a bit too quickly, Chelsea thought. There was definitely something going on here.

"Is your dad at home?"

“I have a key.” Hannah pulled it out of her pocket. “We’ll be okay. Like my sister said, I can take care of her.”

“I’m sure you can. But it’s raining.”

“It’s *always* raining.” A pointed chin thrust up. “We don’t melt.”

“That’s good to know. Because it would definitely be a disadvantage to living here in the Pacific Northwest,” Chelsea said mildly. “Though you can’t beat our summers. Nevertheless, why don’t I drive you home?”

“We’re not supposed to get into cars with strangers,” Hailey said. “Because of the traffic.”

“Traffickers,” Hannah corrected.

Chelsea was relieved someone had taught the girls—who appeared to be on their own in the afternoons—child safety. “You’ve been in my library all week. Have I acted as if I’m a child trafficker?”

“I guess not.”

“Would it help if I had the police chief come by to vouch for me?”

“No!” Both sisters nearly shouted in unison.

Hannah placed a hand on Hailey’s head. Whether the gesture was meant to calm or warn, Chelsea couldn’t say. Perhaps both. “That’s okay,” the older girl said. “I guess they wouldn’t let you be a librarian if you were a criminal.”

“There’s a very extensive background check,” Chelsea assured her, making a note to check with Aiden Mannion about what he might know about these girls’ parents. “I was even fingerprinted.”

Hannah bit her lip, considering. Then glanced out the windows at the summer rain that had, in the short time they’d been talking, gone from a gentle mist, to a drizzle, to a driving rain blowing in over the mountains. “Okay,” she said. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Chelsea said easily, even as her instincts continued to tell her that something was off. Why would two young children be so reluctant to have anything to do with the police? Now she was even more determined to ask Aiden about the family. She wasn’t certain how much information the law allowed him to share, but if it could help keep a child safe, she had to try.

Hannah was quiet on the way to the address she’d given Chelsea, while Hailey continued to chatter away, her rapid-fire conversation jumping from dragons to wizards to a book about a giraffe who couldn’t dance. “He had crooked knees and skinny legs, and when he tried to join the jungle dance, the other animals teased him,” she said, her small face furrowed in a sad frown.

“Bullied,” Hannah murmured.

Hailey continued undeterred. “So, he felt so sad. Because he really was a very bad dancer. He felt sad and alone.”

Chelsea picked up on one of her favorite children’s stories. Dottie Anderson, who’d organized the Saturday children’s reading group, had read it aloud just last week. “But then while he was walking home, the giraffe looked up at the moon and while he was thinking how beautiful it was, a cricket suddenly appeared and told him how everyone is special in their own way.”

“Yes!” Hailey said. “And when you’re different, you don’t need to feel bad or lonely because all you need is your own special song. So when the giraffe heard the moon playing a tune just for him—”

“His hooves started shuffling,” Chelsea supplied.

“They did! And he swung his long legs around everywhere! When all the other animals saw him, they declared him the best dancer ever!”



“Like bullies are ever going to do that,” Hannah scoffed.

“But they did,” her sister insisted.

“Maybe in the story. But the giraffe still never gave the cricket any credit for helping him out,” Hannah pointed out.

Chelsea glanced up into the rearview mirror, watching Hailey bite her bottom lip as she considered that idea. “Maybe the cricket is like the giraffe’s older sister, who always takes care of him. And always tells the giraffe that he doesn’t need thanks because he’s just doing what big sisters are supposed to do.”

Glancing again in the rearview mirror, Chelsea watched Hannah’s eyes—which had, during their short time together, been only expressionless or hard—soften. “Maybe so, sprout,” she agreed softly, reaching over to take her sister’s hand in hers.

Dammit. There was a story there. Chelsea felt it. And not just because she’d been an older sister herself. But because she’d been about Hannah’s age when her once perfect family had cracked apart. She knew all too well the need to make things better. Even when it was proved fruitless.

They’d reached the house, a Craftsman bungalow in a neighborhood that had once been mill company housing. But gentrification had brought change and now any of the small houses that had been renovated and given a modern interior floor plan could bring in several times over the original cost. It wasn’t easy growing grass near salt water, and whoever lived in this home had apparently thrown in the towel. Where there would have been a lawn, or wildflower garden as many homeowners created instead, fir cones and needles were scattered over dirt studded with weeds.

Paint that appeared to have once been sky blue was peeling and a white shutter was hanging crookedly on its hinges. While the bungalow could have been darling, with its front porch and low gabled roof, it was just sad. Chelsea was reluctant to drop the girls off here all alone. Or, she thought, worriedly, perhaps not alone at all. Perhaps the reason for spending so much time at the library was because it was a refuge from being here.

“When does your mother get home from work?” she asked, turning toward the back seat.

“Anytime now.” Hannah’s hand was squeezing Hailey’s smaller one so tightly her knuckles had whitened. Was she reminding her sister to remain quiet? Growing more and more concerned, Chelsea hoped Aiden would give her more information.

“That’s good to hear,” she said in a voice that even to her own ears sounded falsely perky and wouldn’t fool the older girl for a minute. “I’ll just wait here until you get inside.”

“Bye, library lady,” Hailey said.

After returning the cheerful goodbye, which suggested there wasn’t anyone inside she was afraid of, Chelsea watched the two of them cross the broken pavement of the front walk up to the columned porch and, after Hannah had unlocked the door, disappear inside.

Then she pulled away from the curb, dialed Aiden and headed to the police station.

## *CHAPTER THREE*

HOME, AS SOMEONE had once said, was a shifting landscape. Although many things in Honeymoon Harbor had changed during the years since Gabe had left Washington—including, he'd noted as he'd driven off the ferry landing, an influx of new businesses and tourists crowding the sidewalks and slowing traffic down with their motor homes—it wasn't, and never would be, like New York. Hell, it wasn't even like Tacoma. Or Olympia.

Which was why, even two weeks into Gabe's self-enforced sabbatical, he was already bored out of his freaking mind. How many miles could he run every morning? Not anywhere near what he'd been able to as a distance runner on UW's track team. Proving, dammit, the smart-ass ER doctor's diagnosis. He'd let himself get out of shape.

Which, hell, was fixable. He'd already come up with a goal metric, which he'd programmed into the schedule on the new smart watch that had replaced the Rolex. He'd also programmed it to report his heart rate, which was currently pathetic. Maybe he'd never been the ultimate jock his quarterback brother, Burke, had been, but he sure as hell hadn't had the heart rate of a couch potato.

The first three nights home, he'd enjoyed having dinner with his parents, grandparents, sister and brothers. His mother had always equated food with love, and who was he to discourage her? But it soon became obvious that they all had their own lives and couldn't spend their days and evenings entertaining him. Which, he supposed,

was some sort of karmic payback for all the years he'd stayed away and the events he'd missed, like his sister Brianna's engagement party.

When he'd first heard his brother Quinn had walked away from his Seattle law firm to brew beer, Gabe'd thought he was crazy. But he was impressed with the way his brother had reclaimed the old preprohibition business.

"You do realize that you're driving customers away," Quinn said as Gabe entered into his second week.

"Me?" Gabe looked up from tracing lines in the condensation on the side of his chilled pilsner glass of Good Vibrations, his brother's new summer release. A not too sweet, light pilsner brewed with local fresh raspberries that blended well with its wheat malt, it was a ruby-colored pour that was pretty enough to almost be considered a girlie drink. But Quinn had captured summer in a bottle as perfectly as he'd always done everything else.

He glanced around, noticing for the first time that Quinn's restaurant wasn't as crowded as it had been when he'd first arrived. "It probably emptied out because we're between lunch and dinner."

"It's five thirty. And while I realize that after all those years living in Manhattan you're undoubtedly accustomed to dining at a big-city fashionable hour, Honeymoon Harbor tends to roll up the sidewalks after ten o'clock. Which means we should be starting to fill up with people getting off work."

"So what does that have to do with me?"

"The edgy vibe radiating off you is scaring people away," Jarle Biorstad, who'd appeared from the kitchen with Gabe's order of BBQ ribs, said in a deep, rumbling foghorn voice. After years of cooking for fishermen out of Dutch Harbor, Alaska, the Norwegian who claimed to have gotten tired of freezing his ass off during winter

crabbing season had ended up in Honeymoon Harbor cooking for Quinn.

Personally, Gabe thought the red-bearded giant with a full sleeve tattoo of a butcher's chart of a cow was a lot scarier than he'd ever be, but he was also smart enough not to suggest that to a guy who made Sasquatch look like a preschooler. According to Quinn, Seth Harper had had to take out four rows of bricks in the doorway leading to the kitchen to prevent the six-foot-seven cook from banging his head.

"I'm not edgy." Edgy was too close to anxiety. Which, as something he'd already been through, he wasn't in any hurry to revisit. Thus this trip back to the peninsula. "Just bored."

"Antsy," Quinn diagnosed.

Gabe couldn't disagree. Apparently adrenaline was as addictive as caffeine or booze and he was definitely suffering from withdrawal. "My plan is to take the entire summer off."

Technically, three months and two weeks, given that he'd left New York a week after Carter's May Day funeral. With Harborstone already reeling from the death of one of the establishing partners, his announcement that he was claiming all the vacation time he'd never taken hadn't been met with enthusiasm in the boardroom. Fortunately, he'd made enough profits for the company over the years that no one was willing to complain and risk him jumping to another firm.

He'd arranged to have Phil Gregg, a longtime friend who'd entered the firm the same week he had, keep an eye on his portfolios. They weren't as close as he and Carter had been, and Phil hadn't risen through the ranks as fast, only because he'd married shortly after he'd gotten his MBA, already had one son, and a daughter on the

way. Unlike Carter, and definitely unlike all the younger guys at the firm, he'd sacrificed promotions and bonuses in order to achieve normalcy in his personal life. Fortunately, since the accounts were all long-term investments, he usually only adjusted them, if necessary, every quarter.

"Good for you. Did this plan come with any ideas on how to spend all those days of leisure?" his older brother asked.

"The idea was to wing it." Gabe shrugged. "Maybe I'll go fishing."

"You've always hated fishing."

True. "Okay, sailing. Seth has a boat. So does Aiden. I could borrow one of theirs."

"Or you could build one," Quinn suggested as he drew a pint of his award-winning Captain Jack Sparrow from one of the taps and took it to a man wearing black fishing boots who'd just arrived and taken a seat at the end of the bar. The fact that Quinn had known exactly what the fisherman wanted reminded Gabe of how no one had ever had to ask Carter Kensington what he'd wanted to drink. Even wild, reckless habits could apparently become routine. Like drinking. Smoking. Drugs. Or apparently, in his case, making money.

"You enjoyed building boats before you headed off to the big city to make your fortune," Quinn reminded him.

Again true. When he'd been a kid, Gabe had spent nearly every free minute hanging around the town's internationally known boat school. By the time he was in the seventh grade, he'd been allowed to sweep up after the builders after school and in the summer. Over the years, he'd gained more experience and responsibility, even, while in high school, making a kayak and a skiff he'd sold to help pay for college.

He'd occasionally thought of those days on the rare occasion Carter would convince him to travel down to Newport for one of the New York Yacht Club regattas. Where the gleaming world-class yachts were a far cry from the boats that sailed Honeymoon Harbor waters.

"Why would I make a boat?"

"Because you'd enjoy it, it'd get you out of my pub, and because our mother would quit worrying about you."

That got Gabe's attention. "She is not."

"Is, too," Quinn uncharacteristically snapped back. Terrific, Gabe thought. Now they'd reverted to grade-school behavior. "She worries about all of us. Just in case you might think you were special. Or that she loves you more."

Gabe put down a rib long enough to salute his brother with his middle finger.

"You could make a Viking boat," Jarle said.

"You're suggesting I make a longship large enough for a crew of a hundred oarsmen, then go raiding off the coast?"

"No." Jarle folded his arms over the front of a T-shirt reading *That's too much bacon... Said no person ever*. "I'm suggesting you make a replica. And not one of those cutesy miniature ones old guys make that fit in a bottle, but one you could actually sail."

"You built that sloop for Seth," Quinn reminded him.

"True. But that's nothing like what you're talking about. It's a totally different process. I made the sloop stitch-and-glue, starting with the frame, the way American boats are made. The way I learned all those years working at the school. The Viking faerings were clinker-built, with the planks overlapping to form a hull." Apparently it worked for them since Scandinavians continued to build their rowboats the same traditional way.

“How about we make a deal?” Quinn suggested. “I won’t talk brewspeak to you when we’re discussing beers, and you’ll talk about boats in a way normal people can understand.”

“Okay.” Gabe took a long drink of the summer beer. Damn, his brother was good. “Long story short, because a faering doesn’t need a frame, it’s lighter, thereby riding higher in the water, which let the Vikings go faster and travel down more shallow rivers for their raiding.”

“Would’ve also helped them escape other guys who went after them trying to get their stuff back,” Jarle suggested.

“Probably so. Your people weren’t exactly an Amish community.”

“We were fierce, that’s for damn sure,” Jarle agreed, squaring broad shoulders with obvious pride.

“So, why don’t you build one?” Quinn pressed.

“Even if I wanted to, which I haven’t said I do, it’d be a push to get a decent-size one done in three months.” Which was his deadline. By then he’d be rested, at his fighting weight and ready to get back into the fray.

“Because your summer schedule is so booked.”

Gabe gave him a hard stare. “You’re pushing me.”

“Just saying,” Quinn said mildly. That was a funny thing about the eldest Mannion. Gabe couldn’t remember his older brother ever yelling, or even raising his voice. Yet, somehow, just like his dad, who was the quieter of his parents, he always got his way, always made things happen.

“You must’ve been one hell of a lawyer,” he muttered. Then tore another strip off a rib.

“No point in doing something if you don’t do it well.” Quinn dunked a glass into the sudsy water of the bar sink,



rinsed it and dried it with a towel before putting it back on a shelf beneath the bar.

“This is a challenge, isn’t it?” Gabe shot him a hard look. “The same way you double-dog dared me to go down that zip line when I was seven.”

“That was Aiden who dared you,” Quinn corrected easily as he washed another glass.

“Yeah. But I still remember your silence speaking louder than our bad-boy brother’s taunts.” Who, after following his own winding road, was now Honeymoon Harbor’s police chief. *Go figure*. There’d been a time Gabe guessed even those oddsmakers in Las Vegas wouldn’t have taken that bet.

“You could name her *Freya*.” Jarle jumped back into the conversation.

“Why?”

“Because Freya’s the Norse goddess of love. Also sex, beauty, gold, war and death.”

“The death part isn’t exactly encouraging if you’re taking it out on the Sound,” Gabe pointed out.

“Just ignore the war and death part and concentrate on the love part,” the Norwegian cook advised. “That’s what I’d name a boat, if I had one.”

“Until hooking up with Ashley Winters, Jarle fell in love at least once a week,” Quinn said dryly. “Fortunately, it was always from afar, so I never had to fire him.”

“What can I say? Our Norse blood makes us a passionate people.”

“I thought Scandinavians were cool and distant,” Gabe said.

“That’s the Swedes,” Jarle scoffed. “We Norwegians are more extroverted, laid-back and a helluva lot better at outdoor sports than other Scandinavians. Plus, we’re better looking...”

“There’s an old joke about an American and a Norwegian who meet while sitting next to each other at an Oslo bar,” he continued. “‘Are you Swedish?’ the American asks. ‘No,’ says the Norwegian. ‘I’m Norwegian. But I’ve been sick.’”

“I’d be careful telling that joke around here,” Gabe suggested as Jarle roared with laughter at his own joke. Descendants of the Swedish loggers who’d helped settle Honeymoon Harbor still made up a good share of the population.

Jarle shrugged shoulders as wide as Paul Bunyan’s ax handle. “Our countries have had a long and complex relationship. But, despite our differences, we’ve always thought of ourselves as brothers. And like brothers, we make fun of each other. The same way you Mannions do.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Quinn said as the door opened and a family who apparently wasn’t put off by Gabe’s vibe sat down at a table overlooking the water. “Just think about the boat,” he advised.

His brother hadn’t been kidding about the dinner rush. As the place began to fill up, and Quinn got busy mixing drinks, drawing and pouring beers, and waiting on tables when orders started to stack up, Gabe threw some bills on the bar and left.

THE HONEYMOON HARBOR police station was located across from the ferry landing and next to Cops and Coffee, which had been established by three detectives who’d retired from the Seattle police force. Not quite ready to take up fishing, they’d settled into small-town life, and given that the entire state of Washington seemed to run on coffee, they fit right in, catering to the caffeinated population. Playing on a cop stereotype, they also made the best doughnuts on the peninsula.

“I have your book,” Chelsea greeted Donna Ormsbee, the manager and daytime 911 operator. She reached into her bag and pulled out a paperback featuring a woman standing in the middle of burning rubble. In contrast to her unrelentingly cheerful attitude, Donna always was first in line to put a hold on the latest apocalyptic novel.

“You didn’t have to deliver it,” the older woman said as she clutched the book to her chest. For as long as Chelsea could remember, Donna had dressed for the seasons. Today’s blue shirt featured a summery beach scene with sugary white sand nothing like the Pacific Northwest’s kelp- and driftwood-strewn beaches.

“I was dropping by anyway.” She glanced past Donna’s desk toward the glass door leading to Aiden Mannion’s office. He was talking on the phone, but when he spotted her, he held up a finger, letting her know he’d be only a moment.

When he stood up, Chelsea allowed herself a moment of enjoyment at the way the dark blue shirt hugged a torso that she could remember being ripped, back when most of the kids at Honeymoon High spent the summer hanging out at Mirror Lake. Although his fiancée, Jolene Wells, was the lucky woman who got to touch, Chelsea figured that there was no harm in looking.

“Right after you called me, I made a call to the state patrol,” he told her as he came out of his office, which was barely larger than her own at the library. Honeymoon Harbor didn’t have that much serious crime, and those who committed it usually ended up in the county jail. “The kids went into foster care four years ago after their parents’ SUV went off a coastal cliff. According to the officer who was first on the scene, the parents, who weren’t wearing seat belts, were thrown out as their vehicle hit the rocks on the way down.”

“Meaning they probably died,” Chelsea said.

“The car landed upside down, and somehow, the older girl, who was eight at the time, got her younger sister out of the car seat and carried her away from the scene just before the vehicle caught fire.”

“That’s horrendous.” Chelsea’s eyes teared up at the thought.

“According to the older girl—”

“Hannah,” Chelsea murmured, remembering how protective she’d been of her younger sister. No way could she have imagined this scenario.

“Yeah.” He glanced down at his notes. “Hannah. She told the first officer who showed up at the scene that her parents had been fighting, which distracted them from seeing a deer run into the road. We found the doe’s body on the other side of the road. I’m guessing that the girls’ father instinctively swerved to avoid it—”

“And the car went off over the cliff.”

“That’s what the detectives deduced from the skid marks. The car was pretty much burned down to the wheels, so there wasn’t any way to tell if anything had been defective, but the older girl told the police on the scene that her parents had begun drinking heavily in the weeks leading up to the accident, which was corroborated by the coroner’s report putting both parents’ alcohol blood level above the legal limit. There were also reports of an altercation between the girls’ father and another soccer dad during a kids’ game at the coast the day of the accident. Which could well have led to an argument on the drive home.”

“Poor things.” Once again Chelsea felt a personal connection with the two young girls who’d made her library a sanctuary. Just as she once had. And, she considered, if she were to be perfectly honest with herself, she probably still did. Everyone had a place where they fit. Where

they felt that internal sense of belonging. The library had always been hers.

“Long story short, with no family to claim them, they landed in the system. I was talking with their caseworker when you got here. She told me they’ve been hard to place.”

“That surprises me. They seem very well behaved and it’s more than apparent that Hannah would do anything to protect her little sister, Hailey.”

“That’s part of the problem,” Aiden said. “Most of the families who take kids in are already on tight budgets. Even with the monthly payments from social services, two kids cost a lot more out of pocket than one. But the last time they tried to separate them, the younger one ran away.”

“To be with her sister.”

“Bingo. Making matters worse is that the older one—”

“Hannah,” Chelsea reminded him.

“Yeah. Hannah warned the caseworker that if they don’t keep them together, they’ll just take off.”

“She’s not possibly old enough to manage on her own, let alone with Hailey to take care of.”

“Mrs. Collins, head of Salish County Social Services, knows that. As does her caseworker. And they both know that Hannah knows it, too. But no one’s willing to take the risk.”

“Thus the traffickers,” Chelsea murmured.

“Traffickers?”

“When I offered to drive them home, Hailey said they weren’t allowed to take rides from strangers because of the traffickers. The house didn’t look all that well kept. And no one was home.”

“Mrs. Hayes, their foster mom, often has to work overtime to make ends meet. It’s my guess that taking in the

kids helps with her budget, but from the inspection reports, the kids aren't in any danger."

"Just ignored."

He shrugged. "Probably. But they aren't the only latch-key kids in town. And their situation still sounds better than some of the kids I see when I go out on domestic violence calls."

Honeymoon Harbor was a beautiful town that at first glance seemed as if it could be a setting for a Pacific Northwest reboot of *Mayberry R.F.D.* But beneath its appealing quaint Victorian appearance and public spirit, it couldn't escape the problems shared by any town or city.

Chelsea thanked Aiden for taking the time to check the girls' history and left the office, wondering what to do next. While she didn't want to interfere with anyone else's lives, neither did she want to risk those two girls being so alone. Because she knew all too well how it felt, coming home to an empty house. Then later, as things spiraled more and more downhill, coming home to find her mother passed out on the couch.

"You're a librarian." She gave herself a pep talk as she drove to her apartment housed in a former 1880s lumber baron's Victorian mansion. Although it involved climbing three flights of stairs, her room gave her a wonderful bird's-eye view of the boat basin, where the boats that weren't out enjoying the perfect Pacific Northwest summer day bobbed peacefully on the water. There was also a row of houseboats that had been docked there since long before she was born.

Smoke drifted in on the salt-tinged air, suggesting that someone was grilling meat and making her wish that she'd stopped for something at the market deli section. She'd been so busy planning the Summer Readers' Adventure, she was down to Rice Krispies and some ber-

ries from Blue House Farm she'd bought at the farmers' market. Deciding that she wasn't hungry enough to drive back downtown to the market or one of the restaurants, she opted for the cereal, which she ate while Googling, hoping to find some way to legally help the girls without getting on the wrong side of social services.

Something she'd spent much of her childhood and teenage years trying to avoid.

Want to know what happens next?  
Order [\*Summer on Mirror Lake\* by JoAnn Ross](#),  
available now wherever books are sold!

Copyright © 2019 by JoAnn Ross