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[Summer Hours by Amy Mason Doan](#)

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[The Nanny's Secret Baby by Lee Tobin McClain](#)

*Some secrets shine brighter in the sun...*

# Summer Hours

a novel

amy mason doan

*Author of *The Summer List**

Southern California, July  
Early Thursday morning

We're in a rented convertible heading north on Pacific Coast Highway.

It's not yet dawn, so the ocean is only a string of white boat lights floating on darkness. Like a fallen constellation.

It's beautiful, but my passenger can't see it.

And I can't see him. Everything below his forehead is hidden by the gift wedged between our seats.

I didn't expect the box to be quite so big. I'd asked the eBay seller to pack it carefully, and she went to town on the Bubble Wrap. So this was the only way it would fit, the front end lashed to the cup holders with bungee cords to keep it in place.

"Seriously?" he murmured in the driveway before we left San Diego, laughing softly in the way I'd always loved. "Can we even get to the e-brake?"

"It'll be fine!" I assured him.

My words hover in the air over the convertible, zooming north with us: *It'll be fine!*

Not exactly an electrifying motto to launch a road trip. But I'm trying to embrace it.

Wrestling the giant wedding gift into the car last night, I'd said it to myself: *It'll be fine, Becc.*

I'd ticked reassuring items off my mental list:

The sporty red rental car. Hotel reservations for four nights. Big Sur tonight, then San Francisco, then Saturday and Sunday at the wedding venue, a gorgeous place on the beach in Oregon, just past the California border.

We'll have Sleep Number beds, robes, balconies. I found the perfect outfit to wear to the ceremony on the beach Sunday afternoon. The long blue, bias-cut sundress is rolled in tissue paper inside my suitcase, next to my travel steamer.

I brought wrapping paper, scissors, and tape for the present. I agonized over ribbon options, finally settling on something called a Bling Blossom—a \$7.99 silver pouf bigger than a head of lettuce.

There's nothing left to do but drive.

Press my sandal on the slim, racing-style pedal, breathe in the chilly wind off the Pacific, and keep my expectations low.

But when we approach the off-ramp for Orange Park I can't help it. I want more. I want him to speak, to smile at me over our absurdly large present, to at least look out his window as we pass. Anything to prove the words on the green sign still matter.

### Orange Park Road, 1 mile

I want him to show he remembers where we met, and how we used to escape together, years ago, when we were so sure we could steal time before it stole us.

But he faces forward, silent.

And I can't see his eyes when we fly past those familiar gold hills, the sun just beginning to rise behind them.

1

## Welcome to Orange Park

March 20, 1994

*Dear Application Committee,*

*Thank you for considering me for the Francine Alice Haggermaker Scholarship for a University of California Undergraduate Pursuing a Media Career.*

*I have wanted to be a newspaper journalist ever since sixth grade, when I wrote a report about the fearless 1890s reporter Nellie Bly. She said of her legendary investigative work that “energy rightly applied and directed will accomplish anything.” Her words stirred me when I was 11, and they still do.*

*As editor in chief of the Orange Park High Squeeze, I uncovered a \$339 discrepancy in the South Field AstroTurf Fund and wrote a three-part series on snack bar waste. Compared with Bly’s undercover stories for the *New York World* about corruption at*

*Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum or her defiant trip around the world in seventy-two days, these articles may sound small. But Orange Park High has a new Beautification Committee chair who keeps detailed spending records. We started a partnership with a local food pantry, and fruit that would otherwise spoil is now donated over the weekend so that it can feed the homeless.*

*Is the truth ever small? Nellie Bly didn't think so. And neither do I. As Joseph Pulitzer, the owner of Bly's newspaper, said, "Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together!"*

*I know that you have a talented pool of applicants. But my 4.3 GPA, 99th-percentile SAT scores, extracurriculars, 100 percent attendance record, and passion for uncovering the truth show that I am a tireless worker who "applies my energy" every minute.*

*If you select me for this honor, I promise that I will live up to your expectations.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ms. Rebecca Reardon*

June 10, 1994

One week before high school graduation

2:28 p.m.

WHERE I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE | Health and Human Behavior, back  
corner window desk

WHERE I WAS | Health and Human Behavior, back corner window  
desk

My seat overlooked the side parking lot, where I had a prime view of kids sneaking off school grounds. Heading for pools, the beach, blissfully chilly movie theaters.

Discreetly, I reached inside my drenched T-shirt sleeve and tugged up my strapless bathing suit. I'd worn it under my clothes to save time, but it only made me sweatier and reminded me of my failure.

I was supposed to be out there.

The three of us had planned to ditch school together all year. Just once, to prove we had it in us. For months, Eric and Serra and I mapped exit routes and rendezvous points, calling Serra's wood-paneled Pinto station wagon "the getaway car." The Stay

Wag had psoriasis-like patches of oxidation damage on its hood and shuddered if Serra drove over forty.

In our sketches it grew Pegasus wings.

But in April I won the Haggermaker Scholarship. Four years of tuition, housing, and books. Mrs. Haggermaker and her late husband were both Berkeley alums, and he'd made a fortune as a film studio head in the 1950s. So every four years, one lucky student became her six-figure pet.

She'd handed me the heavy bronze plaque herself at the Senior Awards ceremony, up on the auditorium stage. She'd leaned close, all seventy-five-year-old bony corners, and whispered, "I'm sure you'll do me great credit, my dear."

When the paperwork had come, my mom read the morals clause aloud. Stern paragraphs about "due regard to conventions" and "acts reflecting favorably on the Foundation."

"Really," she'd said, smiling over her mug of Sleepy Time tea. "As if they'd ever have to worry about you."

So I couldn't cut.

Not even one afternoon so close to summer, after eighteen years of good behavior. Tutoring and volunteering and racking up a perfect transcript.

I didn't feel perfect. Only stuck.

2:38 p.m.

"Rebecca, could you?" Mrs. Gaukroger held up the VHS tape of *Red Asphalt*, the gruesome drunk-driving movie we'd watched.

I was her girl Friday, trusted to return supplementary multimedia materials to the library. I was not a flight risk.

My flip-flops slapped the green linoleum in the empty hall as I passed the countdown-to-graduation banner, drawn in rainbow bubble letters (7 DAYS LEFT!!), a sign-up for the ten-year reunion committee (*no, thanks*), a poster advertising the bottomless sundae bar at Grad Party.

The door of the teacher's lounge swung open and Mr. Singleton emerged, popping a Coke can.

Coke was Mr. Singleton's thing. He swigged it all through AP Chem, sighing exaggerated *aahs*, and in October he did a whole week of Coke science experiments. He mixed it with Mentos mints, causing a reaction like a geyser, and in a less exciting one he dropped a nail into a beakerful of Coke so we could watch it decay. Once he pretended to sip from it, to a delighted chorus of *eeews*.

He pointed the can at me, stopping an inch from my sternum. "It's the famous scholarship winner! You majoring in chem up at Berserk-ley?"

So he'd read the grad edition of the *Squeeze*. Eric, the only one going to an Ivy, had put that he planned to "ride the rails." His dad was pretty pissed.

"I don't have to declare yet, so—"

"Why aren't you in class? Don't tell me I have to write you up for truancy." He trilled the *r*, drew out the *oooo*. Everything he said had a faint tone of mockery. Even *mole* and *titration*—as if he'd have named them differently. I found him exhausting.

But I smiled. "I'm returning this for Mrs. Gaukroger."

"That's the Girl Scout way." He grinned, passing me with bouncy little steps and pivoting so he was still facing me. I turned, too, like we were dancing a reel. "Be good, now," he said, walking backward.

"Always."

My bantering-with-the-teacher smile collapsed as I dropped the tape on the faculty return cart in the library and checked the big silver-and-white wall clock. It was the centerpiece in a construction-paper design that said:

TIME IS PASSING. WILL YOU?

FOCUS!

The *O* in *focus* was the clock.

2:51. Nine minutes till the bell. Would Mrs. Haggermaker yank my award for a nine-minute transgression? Probably.

*You'll do me great credit, my dear.*

So I waited by a hall window, watching a distant figure cut across the baseball diamond. Loping walk, baggy jeans riding so low they must have been held up by invisible suspenders of cool: Donny Chambliss. He ditched all the time, as casually as if he held a pink dismissal slip for a teeth cleaning.

When Donny reached the old eucalyptus tree where our school grounds became the park, he jumped and hit a branch. Clocking out for the day.

Donny set his own hours, while I waited obediently for a bell to release me.

## 2

### Floating

I was downtown by 3:03. I passed Kemper's Varia-T, where kids were already swarming in for Mountain Dew's and Cheetos. I passed the poster of sundaes in mini plastic baseball caps at Baskin-Robbins, where Serra scooped ice cream. Bernadine's Closet, the "Fine Women's Shoppe." (Spangled, waistless getups, bridge mints, rose hand cream thick as bathroom caulk.) In seventh grade Serra and I invented a game called Least Hideous where we'd evaluate Bernadine's mannequins and pick the outfit we'd wear if forced.

A quick turn past the town square and there was the Stay Wag, right where they'd promised. They'd offered to stay behind with me, but I'd told them to stick with the plan. "Save yourselves, make me proud," I'd said.

I hopped in behind Eric, still in his green-and-white PE uniform. "How'd the escape go?"

He turned around and smiled over his headrest, growling, "We're such rebels." In his normal voice he continued, "Cops on our tail, Becc?"

“You’re safe.”

Serra pulled away from the curb. “I’m disappointed. I didn’t even have to say I was going to the girls’ room. Mr. Reynolds fucking *waved* at me when I left. He was helping someone with the lathe.”

“Mrs. LeBaron was so busy collecting cones from the dribble drill I could’ve done back handsprings across the field and she wouldn’t have noticed.” Eric flipped on the radio. “Not that I can do a back handspring.”

“At least you cut.” I cranked down my window. The air was hot as a blow-dryer but I tilted my head into it, lifting my ponytail to dry the back of my neck. “I’m a tragic case. Every time I thought of you guys swimming I got sweatier.”

Eric shook his overlong black hair so I could see it was dry. “Not so sure about your detective skills there, Becc.”

“You waited?” I said. “I’m touched. So what’d you do instead?”

Serra shuddered. “Eric dragged me to see *The Fly*. I’m traumatized.”

I laughed. “We watched *Red Asphalt*. Much scarier.”

“Do one thing a day that scares you,” Eric said. “Mr. California told me that’s his life motto. Inspiring, huh?”

Serra and I exchanged a quick look in the rearview mirror.

Mr. California was Eric’s mother’s new live-in boyfriend. Six years younger and six shades blonder than her. His real last name was McCallister, and everyone called him Cal.

Mr. California: rich, expert sailor, casual investor in a fleet of tech startups, killer backhand. Possibly/probably the reason for the Logans’ sudden split earlier this year, though Eric had been vague on the exact sequence of events.

Eric spent most of his free time at my house now, so I’d never met Mr. California. But I’d seen him in his convertible from my bedroom window.

Most residents of The Heights, the gated community where Eric lived, chose their Lexuses, Mercedes, and Porsches in dig-

nified black or gray, or practical, heat-deflecting white. Mr. California's car was metallic turquoise blue, jeweled in chrome.

My house sat across the street from The Heights' gate, and from six until eight every morning, as I studied at my desk, a line of commuters descended the hill. Sometimes Mr. California's car appeared at 7:07 and sometimes at 7:58. I didn't catch it every day. But if I spotted that flashy vintage convertible heading toward me, I gave myself a study break so I could watch it. A drop of water sliding down the dry hill. Cool and smooth. I waited until its tanned, blond driver waved and smiled at the security guard—he always did, unlike most of his neighbors—before returning to my books.

It felt like a game, like a good luck start to my day. Nothing more than that.

But I'd never told Eric.

"Isn't he a wise papa?" Eric said. "Darling papa."

"He really said that, something scary every day?" I asked. "So he's jumping out of airplanes or cage fighting or whatever every day?"

"He does that Escape from Alcatraz triathlon," said Eric. "My role model." He punched the radio presets until he got KROQ. "Mr. Jones" was on.

"Not again," Serra moaned.

But I sang along under my breath as we left downtown.

We passed the turnoff for Orchard Hill, where the graceful old homes like Francine Haggermaker's hid behind mature trees. The new palaces, like The Heights, sprawled farther from town each year, secluded behind gates. Their expensive baby trees racing to catch up with the fully grown ones on Orchard Hill.

Orange Park was booming. Families came for our schools and low crime rate and gigantic empty lots. They built his-and-hers master closets bigger than my mom's whole bedroom, and bathrooms with two bidets, and slapped Italian tile on anything that didn't move.

When we were on Bird of Paradise Way, Serra asked, “Need to run in for your stuff?”

“No, I wore my suit.” I gazed out the window to my left, at my dear, hopelessly unfashionable brown ranch house.

As we passed the gate to The Heights, Eric waved out the window at the guard in his little white booth.

Just like Mr. California.

To me, he was only a wave from a car, a drop of blue, a flash of light on white-blond hair. He seemed so sunny, such an unlikely villain.

I guess that only made Eric hate him more.



Serra pulled into the sagging carport of the LaSalle Villas. The apartments formed a rectangle around the mucky outdoor pool, which Serra called “divorcée soup” because most of her neighbors were in various stages of marital splittage.

“Last one in...” Eric slammed his car door and ran to the gate, peeling off his PE shirt. He didn’t wait for Serra’s key. We all knew how to get into the LaSalle Villas pool by reaching over and jiggling the latch. Before the gate clanged shut behind him, Eric hooted and splashed.

I shot off, calling, “Race you.”

Serra yelled, “No fair, track star.” My flip-flops and the gate slowed me down but Serra never stood a chance. I’d just run the 200 in 25.2 at the county meet.

When I got to the courtyard Eric was already underwater, gliding along the white concrete bottom, collecting rings left behind by someone’s kid. Nobody else was there—no divorcée soup today. I stripped to my turquoise suit and jumped into the deep end.

Always, that panic in your confused belly as you fall, before the water catches you. Then sweet quiet.

Eric swam close to me and made a puffin face, his overgrown black hair floating around his head like when he’d touched the Van de Graaff generator on the science center field trip sophomore

year. His long hairy legs kicked away and then Serra's smooth, rounder ones splashed down. She treaded water, like she was riding an invisible bicycle.

I stayed down in the cold and quiet until I couldn't stand it, until the pressure in my lungs got to me and I had to push off for the surface.

"Heaven," called Serra, back floating.

Eric sat in the shallow end, scooping dead bees out of the pool with cupped hands, flinging them to the bushes on jet trails of water.

For a long time the only sounds were Eric's splashes and a radio playing The Cranberries on the second floor.

Then Serra climbed out and dried herself with her T-shirt. "Snack time. Back in a sec."

I tipped off my raft and dipped under the handrail to join Eric on the steps.

"How's home, E?" I examined the inside of the plastic drain: a Band-Aid and more bee carcasses. I never looked at him when I asked about home.

"Dandy."

"Are your parents still using you as message boy?"

He pushed his wet hair off his forehead into a wall of absurd, spiky bangs.

"Can't you talk to them? Explain how it sucks for you?"

He shrugged. "I'm out of there in twelve days."

"Twelve? I thought you weren't leaving till September!"

"I decided to do early-start." He closed his eyes and sank into the pool.

It was Eric's last summer. Our last summer. And now we didn't even have July.

He couldn't wait to take off for Rhode Island, putting ten states between him and his parents, his role as go-between, the bad daytime drama of the past year. All the adult poison within the fancy iron gates of The Heights.

*The Heights*. It even sounded like a soap.

Eric's home made me appreciate mine. It was only me and my mom, and the only passion she indulged was for her latest shipment of seed packets from Gold Thumb Gardening Depot. My mom tended our flowers herself, unlike our neighbors in The Heights, who hired certified landscape engineers to present "design concepts."

Eric burst up, a skinny leviathan with wet hair pasted over his eyebrows.

I ran my hand in the water along the quivering oval shadow of his head. "I'm sorry, E."

"How can you feel sorry for someone who can do an underwater handstand like this? Time me." He shot away from the steps. His size-fourteen feet wiggled above the surface as he balanced on his hands, as confident as a *Cirque du Soleil* artist.

I started doing one-Mississippis in my head and lost count, drifting closer to him.

He fluttered his legs and tipped over, then bobbed up next to me, spitting water and cocking his head to clear his ears. "Well?"

"Fifteen seconds."

"Liar. You didn't time me."

"I'm feeling lazy."

"Too lazy to time me, hanging out with truants. Hardly behavior worthy of the Francine Haggermaker Scholar. Next you'll be injecting H with those guys behind the dumpsters in MacArthur Park."

"That's the plan for tomorrow."

"Sweet. I'll come with you. Blow off my mom's asinine grad barbecue."

"I think we have to make an appearance."

Eric shaped his wet hair into a '50s pompadour and raised his eyebrows like James Dean.

"I love it," I laughed.

"I know I won Best Hair."

Eric had *not* won Orange Park High 1994 Best Hair, Male. He often ran out the door without even pasting his hair down with water, resulting in a bouncing top layer propped up by cowlicks. I wouldn't change it. But I'd tallied Senior Superlative votes for the yearbook, and Best Hair, Male had gone to Chris Pettigrew, a snotty blond golf phenom.

"Don't be too bummed if you don't win." I swam away.

"Those bastards! Who got it?" he called, following me to the deep end.

"Not telling. You'll put gum in his hair."

Eric and I treaded water, facing each other. He batted at a yellow leaf floating between us. I batted it back. We sloshed it back and forth a few times. We figured out how, if you gently pushed the water from a few inches behind it, the leaf rode the waves like a mini surfer.

He swam closer, so close I could see how his long black eye-lashes had clumped into triangles around his brown eyes. "How's Becc?" he asked quietly.

"Happy, now."

"What's that?" Eric touched my shoulder while his other hand carved fast figure eights to keep him afloat. That oddly quiet voice, again.

So serious for Eric.

His fingers rested lightly on my left shoulder, where the ribbon for hanging my bathing-suit top had come out.

"Oh, I keep forgetting to snip those," I said. His fingers stayed put, toying with the wet satin ribbon. "It's for hanging up my suit."

I ran on, panting harder, focusing on a spot two inches above his steady brown eyes. "I hate those suckers. I mean, I guess it's a nice gesture on the part of the apparel industry, but I wish I could tell them, 'Thanks, but no thanks.'"

"You've shown me encyclopedias of girl info," he said softly,

caressing the ribbon. “How else would I learn about the courtesy hanger loops?”

“I’m the sister you never had.”

“A sister. Let me get back to you on that one.” He tugged the ribbon once and stared at me, unsmiling, while our heads bobbed up and down.

My face flushed. At the clang of the gate he removed his hand, slapping something on the water.

“A feast of junk food,” Serra called. She had two more rafts under her arms, towels around her neck like Rocky, a green plastic mixing bowl brimming with snacks.

I swam over to inventory the food, grateful for something to do. Pringles and gummy candy from the Sweet Shed and lemonade Capri Sun bags from the freezer.

Shaky, I punctured the top of a silver bag with a straw and sipped hard. I got a few syrupy pulls, followed by chunks of bland slush. “Capri Suns make me feel like I’m in NASA. Bathroom?” I asked Serra, wrapping myself in a yellow beach towel.

“Door’s unlocked,” she called.

I felt Eric watching me as I fled, leaving wet footprints on the burning concrete.

Serra and her parents had a ground-floor unit set close to the street, so anyone on the sidewalk could see their high, rippled bathroom shower window. They could even make out the brands of shampoo and conditioner. That was about as poor as it got in Orange Park now. Serra’s dad ran the mail room of a tech startup, and her mom worked as a part-time doctor’s office receptionist.

Tyrant, her cat, leapt off the couch when I walked in. He crossed the living room to me, stretching every couple of steps, lordly and unhurried. I bent down to let him see my hand, wagging my fingers under his muzzle before scratching his ears, the way Serra had shown me years before. Serra said cats hate it when you descend on them with no warning, like an alien invader.

Tyrant followed me into Serra's room, winding himself around my legs. I sat on the bed and tucked the white satin ribbon into my bathing suit.

Serra had a picture on her nightstand. It was the same one I had on my dresser, the same one Eric had on his bulletin board. My mom had taken it after the Senior Awards ceremony and made copies for us.

Five-foot-one Serra in the middle, on tiptoe, her arms stretched to our shoulders. Eric and I hunching to even things out, the sun flashing off my glasses and the plaque in my hand. All three of us laughing.

My mom called us the Three Mouseketeers.

The three of us had been best friends for all four years of high school.

Eric spent so much time at my house his sweatshirts ended up in our wash. He and my mom had whole bits they'd do about me, my neatness and coconut addiction and the shredded scrap of pillowcase I'd slept with since I was four.

And now, two weeks before flying away, he was suddenly all eye contact and tender gestures.



When I came out Eric lay on a raft, hands over his stomach. "I really shouldn't have eaten that last rat, Becc," he said, as if everything was the same.

I forced a laugh. "You just wanted to say that." Translation: *Let's go back in time to twenty minutes ago, before you touched my naked shoulder.*

I jumped onto an orange raft. The three of us swam and floated and waited for the next song on the radio. Time fell away in four-minute increments, until the sun dropped below the roofline of Serra's building.

The radio ads came faster. It was almost commute time, and soon we wouldn't have the pool to ourselves.

# 3

## Truants

The next day

WHERE I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE | The grad barbecue at Eric's  
WHERE I WAS | Consorting with the enemy

Eric's mom had gone for an Old West theme, with red-and-white-checked tablecloths and servers in bandanna neckerchiefs. But the faux down-home look had a hundred little flourishes that said *money*.

Warm, lemony finger towels waited by the rib station, and misters released a perfectly calibrated fog, cool enough to shield us from the ninety-eight-degree afternoon but light enough to preserve hairstyles. Silver goody bags held dark chocolate truffles shaped like graduation caps, custom-ordered from a store in Santa Monica. The food was delicious, the tiered backyard beautiful—everything snipped to perfection.

Behind our hostess's back, the sweating waiters tugged at their

hokey red cravats. And if you didn't count Francine Haggermaker (and I didn't), the guests were Mrs. Logan's friends, not ours.

I wanted to jump into the cobalt-tiled pool nobody was using, or teleport up to Eric's room, where he'd fled with Serra ages ago, beckoning me to follow.

Mrs. Haggermaker's gray eyes had been tracking me, so I'd stayed. She sat in state under a mister, in a wicker armchair that seemed somehow more imposing than the others, while I attended her from the ottoman at her knees.

"How do you know the family?" She nodded at Eric's mom.

Mrs. Logan was laughing, surrounded by a visored group from the country club. She was hard to miss, even in a sea of other yoga-and-tennis-toned OC blondes, because she was even taller than me.

Mrs. Haggermaker's expression was inscrutable, but there was a micro pause between *the* and *family*; she knew about the divorce. Possibly the affair. She would still accept Mrs. Logan's invitations—she wouldn't have her booted from the garden club or hospital board; everyone involved was rich enough to ensure this level of gentility—but the minor scandal hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Eric Logan has been one of my best friends since we were fourteen."

"I see."

There was a long silence, so I scrambled for small talk. "That's a pretty pin. Is it a cornflower?"

She touched the stickpin on her chest. "Forget-me-not. My late husband's, from his lodge." She'd also worn the pin, gold topped with a five-petaled blue flower, the night of the awards ceremony. It was the same blue as the ever-present hair ribbon secured around her bun.

"And now you wear it to remember him? That's nice."

Another excruciating lull. Excruciating for me. Mrs. Haggermaker seemed perfectly comfortable.

“My mother’s the gardener in our family,” I said. “I don’t know many flower names. I’ve been meaning to learn.”

Silence.

“I know a few. Flower names. But only because of those plaques they have in the park. I wish they had more plaques in parks.”

She narrowed her eyes.

*Plaques in parks?* If I were her I’d revoke my scholarship on the spot.

“Go mingle, dear.”

Dismissed, I made the rounds, up and down the sloping flagstone paths, while she watched from her dewy lawn chair throne. When Mrs. Logan’s friends introduced themselves, I shook hands with the right amount of pressure and smiled on cue at jokes about the beer kegs waiting for me at Berkeley. The USC and UCLA alums teased me about our Pac-10 football standings. Though I would probably spend those fall Saturday afternoons anywhere but in a stadium, I played along. It was easier.

I knew my part cold. When someone asked what I was going to study and I said I was leaning toward English, I added a line like “just what the world needs, another English major.”

A guy in a Pebble Beach Pro-Am 1992 visor called me on that. He’d also majored in English, he said, “in the dark ages.”

“Don’t be defensive about our major.” He clinked his beer against my lemonade and I felt a surge of kinship. Maybe we’d talk Yeats.

Then he said, “English is an excellent back door to business school. You’ll stand out. Take some econ classes and you’ll be fine.”

I bolted from the visor guy, only to get trapped on the other side of the patio by a tall, ginger-haired hospital administrator, selling me on the benefits of her joint JD/MD—“You only need the *stamina* for it.”

I nodded, smiling, though sweat had pasted my green cot-

ton sundress to my back and the blisters on my heels stung from rubbing against my good sandals.

“Excuse me, I need to use the powder room.” I called it a bathroom at home, but in The Heights I found myself using expressions like *powder room*.

I zigzagged and dodged and smiled without making eye contact and opened the first available door, escaping into the house.

The game room. Electronic blasts, yells, sweat, and beer smells. Doug Tilton and Jack Chang played Sega on the floor, verbally abusing each other and pounding it out through their proxies on the screen. Marcus Lochery watched, stuffing his red face with tortilla chips and shouting instructions. They were neighbor boys in The Heights, but Eric hadn’t hung out with them in years, not since he’d met me and Serra.

“How’s that feel, loser?”

“Puss move.”

I padded to the hall as quietly as I could, but Marcus arched his back over the leather sectional to stare at me upside down. “Miss Scholarship. You got away.”

“Yeah.”

“Your crew left you behind,” he said. “Not cool. I told them when they went upstairs. Santitas?” He rattled his jumbo tortilla chip bag at me.

“No, thanks.”

“No man left behind,” said Jack, his eyes locked on the robots. He punched his black controller maniacally. Louder—“No woman left behind!”

“It’s fine,” I said. “See you, guys.”

“Oh, we will see you,” Marcus singsonged over the battle sounds.

It didn’t even make sense. They were messed up. Medicated to get through the party, with their parents just outside the glass French doors. Drunk or high on their Killer Green Buds. (They’d once snickered about their “KGB training” in front of

me and I'd smiled, pretending I understood, but clueless until Eric explained.)

"Rebecca, play *Cyborg Justice* with us," Marcus yelled.

"No, thanks." Almost at the door.

"Hey, Rebecca," Doug said. "Will you go to all your classes at Berkeley naked? Like that Naked Guy in the paper?"

"See you guys," I said over my shoulder, hurrying into the hall.

"You've gotten hot," Doug said, laughing. "I remember the minute it happened. You had on white shorts and I thought, Eric's skinny brainiac friend has a nice—"

I slammed the door behind me, booking down the sunny hallway, away from the synthetic battle sounds. I slipped into the closest room and shut the door.

"Rebecca! We're just kidding!" Doug. I held my breath until his footsteps went away.

Finally, blessedly alone. I leaned against the door, pressing my forehead to the smooth wood. I'd wait a full minute, and when I was positive the coast was clear I'd sneak upstairs to Eric's room.

I'd do my Francine Haggermaker impression, mimicking the way she twitched the corners of her mouth a few stingy millimeters whenever she called me *my dear*. I'd describe the scene on the patio. How I'd fled from the game room boys as fast as their video game prey.

And the three of us would make the afternoon ours again by laughing at it.

College boys waited: legions of them. If they got red-faced it would be from arguing about Shakespeare, Heidegger. Not *Cyborg Justice*. I was sure of it.

"You hiding, too?"

I whipped around, knocking my elbow against the door. An excruciating, tuning-fork pain shot up my arm.

The puddling velvet drapes were shut so the only light came from the aqua glow of a fish tank.

Mr. California stood near the luminous water, awash in blue light, studying the drink in his hand. The ice made a silvery sound as he circled it around the glass. His voice was low, amused. "Sorry I scared you. Did you hurt yourself?"

"I'm okay."

"Rebecca, right? How is it out there?"

I was surprised that he knew my name. Eric's dad had never bothered to learn it. "It's a wonderful party. Thanks for inviting me."

"Donna does a good job on this stuff." His smile said, *You and I both know I didn't have a hand in the invites or anything else.* He flicked his head up just long enough for me to read sympathy in his eyes. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course." *Please don't ask about my major.*

He stared at his glass, running his index finger around the lip. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Sorry. I hate when people ask that before they say what the favor is. It's like asking someone if they have plans before you admit what god-awful social event you want to drag them to." He drained his drink.

"I hate that, too."

"The favor is, will you check in on Eric for me next year? Make sure he's okay?" He raised an eyebrow, biting a lip. As if bracing for me to say no to this small assignment.

"Of course."

"Do you have email?"

"I get an account from school."

"Good. His mom's worried about him. You hear about kids going off to college and getting depressed, you know. His dad moving out, me in the picture, staying here so often... It's a bit of a mess. Last week he..." He shook his head.

"What did he do?"

“Oh...” He chuckled. “He wrote me a note. A short but extremely heartfelt and...creative note. Let’s put it that way.”

*Oh, E.*

Eric didn’t tell me everything. Mostly, I had to piece things together from jokes and nicknames, the moods he couldn’t entirely hide from me. From the lateness of the hours when he appeared at my door, seeking political asylum with me and my gentle mom, who fussed over him.

But enough had slipped out over the years, and I could see the scenes at Eric’s house playing like a film: the silence between his parents bursting into fights, his father camped out in the pool house with bottles of Belvedere. Then reappearing in the breakfast room behind his paper as if nothing had happened.

I knew it had gone on for ages. Silence, screaming, simmering, truce. And the in-between parts, when all three Logans were just bracing for the next cycle.

Until a few months ago, when Mr. Logan decamped to a penthouse condo in LA and Mr. California moved in. Though the official story was that Donna Logan’s handsome new boyfriend was only “keeping a few things” there after selling his house up the street, because he also owned places in San Francisco and Mexico.

“So will you check in on him for me? I feel...responsible.”

“Sure. We’ll email and talk a lot, Mr. McCal—”

“Call me Cal. Everyone does. Easy to remember, because that’s where you’re going to college, right?”

I smiled at his little Berkeley joke, shocked that he’d taken note of my plans. “Cal. Eric and I will stay in touch as much as we can, from across the country.”

“I’d be grateful. He’s more...breakable than he seems. Don’t you think?” He looked up at me, forehead creased in worry.

I nodded.

*Breakable.* This man the three of us had mocked all year, this walking postcard for California, had expressed perfectly with

a single word what I'd feared watching Eric's bitterness grow. Eric was still only pretending he didn't care about his parents splitting up. But soon he might forget it was an act. You hardened, then you shattered. Like glass.

"Do you live in The Heights?" He waved his drink in the air, indicating the study, the pool, the flown-in palm trees, the chunky security guard who patrolled in a golf cart. He said *The Heights* with the same isn't-it-absurd inflection Eric used when he said *Mr. California*.

"We're just outside, facing the gate."

"That great old rancher? The brown one with the railroad ties?"

"Yeah."

"Then your family was there before they built all this."

"Yes, me and my mom. It's not her favorite topic."

"I'll bet. She must've been furious when it happened, literally outside your door. Did she chain herself to the bulldozers?"

When my mother bought our house, there was nothing on the hill across the street except scrub oaks. I used to play there. Now our place kind of looked like the carriage house for The Heights. An observation I would never share with her.

"She says it's better to accept reality and move on. She gets upset if I call it..." I shook my head. "Never mind."

"What?"

"Oh." I bit back a smile. "I have this secret nickname for The Heights."

"Out with it."

"You won't be insulted?"

"Not a chance."

"The Blights."

He laughed. "You let us off easy."

"Our road used to be called North Way, before the developments. But I guess that wasn't fancy enough, so when they paved it they changed it to Bird of Paradise. I still forget sometimes."

“So you haven’t quite *accepted reality and moved on?*”

I smiled. “I guess not.”

“An idealist, then. A vanishing breed.” He smiled to himself, fidgeting with a blue model car on the desk. It was his car—a 1950s or ’60s convertible with bright chrome flares.

I wondered what he’d say if I told him how I sometimes watched him in the real one. *You sang along to the radio last Tuesday, that song about two lost souls in a fishbowl. You really belted it out. Pounded that dash with every note.*

The urge to say it, to see if he’d laugh, hit so hard it startled me, warming my cheeks. “I should go.”

“Of course. You’ll want to be with your friends.”

He walked me to the door, as if I’d come calling. His left hand floated behind the small of my back, touching only my thin cotton dress. I felt his fingers there somehow, sensed a subtle shift in the inch of air between the fabric and my skin.

When we passed the aquarium, he asked, “You have one?”

“No, but it’s supposed to be good therapy, looking at fish. Not that I mean you need therapy. I just. I read an article about that.” I didn’t need a mirror to know my cheeks were a lost cause now, pink headed for scarlet.

He laughed. “I do like looking at the suckers. They are *excellent* little therapists.”

“Where are they?”

“There are two...see. In that cave?”

He pointed, careful not to touch the glass. He was a lefty. The hairs on his left arm touched the skin of my right arm. He smelled like something clean and sharp and adult. Scotch or shaving cream or whatever rare mixture he used to polish the wood on his boat.

“Oh, yeah.” Two narrow blue fish glowed in the toy cave.

“I think I’m becoming a hobbyist.” He gestured at a small sailboat on the bottom, nestled against a curving plastic land-mass, complete with trees and docks. Elfin red script on the side

of the boat said *Summer Hours*. “Got it from a catalog. It’s not a perfect replica of mine, but close. I picked the island because it’s shaped like Catalina. My happy place.”

“I’ve never gone there. I’ve always wanted to.”

“Of course, it’s closer to Atlantis in this setup.”

I trailed my finger along the Plexiglas protecting the antique wooden table. Its perimeter curved up, in case of spills. Mrs. Logan’s contribution to the hobby, I guessed.

“Have you named them?”

“That’s Jack and that’s Stephen. After these characters—”

“Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin. From Patrick O’Brian, right? I read those last summer.”

He glanced up. His eyes were light blue, bright even against his golden skin.

“That’s right. Didn’t know anyone your age read him.” He smiled, bit his lip, stared down thoughtfully at his fish tank again.

I clenched my hands together, digging my nails into my flesh, to resist clapping them on my cheeks to hide the redness.

“I should find Eric.” I opened the door and stepped into the hall.

“Rebecca?”

I turned, but he was still looking down at the fish tank. “You take care of yourself, too.”

★

I shut Eric’s bedroom door behind me and collapsed on the carpet next to him.

Some guys taped dirty pictures on their ceiling; Eric had plastered his in movie posters. *Out of the Past* and *The Third Man* and *Metropolis*, *Freaks*, and *Nashville*. He’d run out of room on all the vertical surfaces.

Serra rolled to her side on the bed above us. “I saw you playing lady-in-waiting.”

“You should’ve bailed when we did,” Eric said. “They were like those ghosts in *Poltergeist* who fed on Carol Anne’s life force.”

“I may have a few drops of life force left.”

Serra studied me. “You’re sunburned, have you looked?”

“I’m just hot, it must be ninety still. We need music.” I sat up and dragged the red plastic crate from under Eric’s bed.

Music would drown out the party. It was still going strong without us, the clinking glasses and polite adult laughter amplifying as they rose from the yard, pressing into the room. Nobody seemed to have noticed that the guest of honor had gone AWOL.

“My mom knows how to throw an awkward party, huh?” Eric said. Watching me, trying to figure out why I was edgy. “I can’t believe she invited Marcus and those guys. It’s so fake.”

“I can’t believe Mrs. Haggermaker came out of her crypt twice in one month,” said Serra. “She must be so *psyched* about your brilliant future, Becc.”

“She knows Eric’s mom from the gardening club.” Francine Haggermaker was also on the charity board for my mom’s hospital and donated money to the Berkeley art museum and the film preservation society at USC. The woman had her bony fingers everywhere.

“Are you going to have to, like, visit her all the time now?” Serra asked.

“No. Just write her once a year till I graduate. Fill her in on my classes and internships and whatever. Sort of a...scholarly update. I guess it’s customary. My mom already bought me special stationery, it’s so annoying.”

“What does that come to, like thirty-thousand bucks a letter?” Serra said.

A twinge of guilt, because though Serra had a grant from the Latina Artists’ Network, she was taking out a mint in loans. The least I could do was not grumble about my good fortune around her.

I pushed my glasses up my nose and hunted in Eric’s mess of

CDs and tapes for the cassette I wanted: *Upstairs at Eric's*. So ancient we had to tighten the spools with a pencil after every use. I'd bought it at Goodwill for Eric's sixteenth birthday, along with a T-shirt of Alfred Hitchcock's plump, mocking face above a movie clacker. Both were intended as gag gifts, but he'd said they were his two favorite presents that year.

I slid the cassette into the chute, snapped it shut, and pushed the silver play button.

I lay back on the carpet, curled close to the speaker. Eric's long pianist's fingers tapped the top of the boom box from the other side, picking out the background synth. His nail beds were stained bloodred.

"E," I said. "Did you get in a fight with...you-know-who?"  
The fingers stopped dancing. "Who?"

"You know. Your mom's... Cal. Did you leave him a mean letter or something?"

The hand disappeared from view. "You could say that," Eric snorted. "I left a little message on his boat, that's all. A little welcome-to-the-family note. In Krylon Firetruck."

"You didn't."

"What's this?" Serra peered down, delighted.

"Eric vandalized a certain sailboat."

She laughed. "What'd you write, *homewrecker*? No, *devil*? One letter off from his name."

"Give me *some* credit for originality." Eric peeked over at me. "Come on, he deserves it."

It wouldn't take much to show Eric I was on his side. *I know he deserved it, E. What a weirdo. What a jerk.*

*He thinks he's so charming, such a stud.*

"Did my mom say something?" Eric asked.

"Hmm."

"What? Was she grilling you? It's nothing, he already had it cleaned. I'll tell her to stop bugging you—"

"No. He told me. Cal."

I stared at the *Vertigo* poster on the ceiling, where a body spun into an orange-and-white vortex. I closed my eyes but still saw Jimmy Stewart floating in space, nothing to grab onto.

Eric had shown me the film in the walk-in closet he'd transformed into a home theater. He'd set up his TV and VCR in there because it was quiet and dark and had offered double protection from his parents when things got bad.

Not once, in four years, had Eric reached for my hand in that dark closet. Not even last summer, when he'd screened *Truly, Madly, Deeply* and I'd cried at the end, wiping my face on the mountain of throw pillows he'd constructed for us. He'd only nodded in the dim glow of the credits and said quietly, "Right? Just perfect."

"Tell me what you wrote on his boat, E," I said. "He didn't seem mad. Only...worried."

He wouldn't answer.

"I know you can hear me."

Nothing.

"Don't be like this."

He hid from me on the other side of his boom box, behind the low silver wall it made between us. My good, breakable friend.

The man he'd decided was his enemy hid directly below us, in his own bunker, staring at his happy place—a plastic version of Catalina Island.

Maybe he and Eric weren't so different.

But I couldn't explain that to Eric. It was easier for him to direct his anger at Mr. California than at his parents.

And he expected us to hate him, too.

Want to know what happens next?  
Order [Summer Hours by Amy Mason Doan](#),  
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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ROBYN CARR

## The View from Alameda Island

A NOVEL



## CHAPTER ONE

**T**oday was Lauren Delaney's twenty-fourth wedding anniversary and there wouldn't be a twenty-fifth. To many it appeared Lauren had a perfect life but the truth was something she kept to herself. She had just been to see her lawyer and now she needed a little time to think. She headed for one of her favorite places. She needed the solace of a beautiful garden.

Divine Redeemer Catholic Church was an old church that had survived all of the earthquakes since the big one—the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Lauren had only been inside the building a couple of times, but never for mass. Her mother had been Catholic, but she hadn't been active. The church had a beautiful garden where parishioners often walked and there were several benches where you could sit and pray or

meditate. Lauren was on her way home to Mill Valley from her job at Merriweather Foods and she stopped there, something she did frequently. There were no brochures explaining the genesis of the garden or even the fact that the church sat on such a generous plot of land for Northern California, but she'd happened upon an old priest once and he'd told her one of the priests in the early 1900s was a fanatic about growing things. Even though he'd been dead for decades, the church kept the garden going. They even preserved a large garden behind the beautiful flowers for fruits and vegetables, which they donated to food banks or used to feed hungry people in poorer parishes.

Divine Redeemer's parish just outside of Mill Valley, California, didn't have many hungry people. It was an upper-class area. It was where she lived.

She was very well off. Richer than she'd ever imagined by her family's standards, yet her husband ranted about his low pay. He was a prosperous surgeon raking in over a million a year but he didn't have a yacht or a plane, which irked him. He spent a great deal of time managing and complaining about his finances.

She would be leaving him as soon as she could finalize the details. She had spent an hour with her attorney, Erica Slade, today. Erica had asked, "So, is this going to be it, Lauren?"

"The marriage was over many years ago," Lauren said. "All that's left is for me to tell him I'm leaving. I'm getting my ducks in a row."

They would be spending the evening at a charity auction and dinner. For that she was so grateful. There would be no staring at each other over a starched white tablecloth searching for things to say, no watching Brad check his phone and text all through the meal. As he was fond of reminding her, he was an important man. He was in demand. She was nothing.

## THE VIEW FROM ALAMEDA ISLAND

If she ever received a call or text, it was from one of her daughters or her sister. But if they knew she was out, they wouldn't expect a response. Except maybe her eldest daughter, Lacey. She had inherited her father's lack of boundaries and sense of entitlement—it was all about her. Her younger daughter, Cassie, had, perhaps unfortunately, inherited Lauren's cautious and reticent nature. Lauren and Cassie didn't like conflict, didn't step on toes.

“When are you going to stand up for yourself, Lauren?” Brad had been known to say to her. “You're so spineless.” Of course, he meant she should stand up to anyone but him.

Oh, wouldn't Brad be surprised when she finally did. And he'd be angry. She knew people would inevitably ask, *Why now? After twenty-four years?* Because it had been twenty-four *hard* years. It had been hard since the beginning. Not every minute of it, of course. But overall, her marriage to Brad had never been a good situation. She spent the first several years thinking she could somehow make it better, the next several years thinking she probably didn't have it so bad since he was *only* emotionally and verbally abusive, and the last ten years thinking she couldn't wait to escape once her daughters were safely raised. Because, the truth was he was only going to get more cantankerous and abusive with age.

The first time she'd seriously considered leaving him, the girls were small. “I'll get custody,” he said. “I'll fight for it. I'll prove you're unfit. I have the money to do it, you don't.” She'd almost done it when the girls were in junior high. He'd been unfaithful and she was sure it hadn't been the first time he'd strayed, just the first time he'd been caught. She'd taken the girls to her sister's cramped little house where the three of them shared a bedroom and the girls begged to go home. She returned and demanded marriage counseling. He admitted to a meaningless fling or two because his wife, he said, was

not at all enthusiastic about sex anymore. And the counselor cautioned her about throwing away the father of her children, explained that the repercussions could be very long-term. She found another counselor and it happened again—the counselor sympathized with Brad. Only Lauren could see that Brad was a manipulator who could turn on the charm when it suited him.

Rather than trying yet another counselor, Brad took the family on a luxurious vacation to Europe. He pampered the girls and ultimately Lauren gave the marriage yet another chance. Then a couple of years later he gave her chlamydia and blamed her. “Don’t be ridiculous, Lauren. You picked it up somewhere and gave it to me! Don’t even bother to deny it.”

She’d told him she wanted a divorce and he had said, “Fine. You’ll pay the price. I’m not going to make it easy for you.”

Knowing what was at stake, she moved into the guest room instead.

Days became weeks, weeks became months. They went back to marriage counseling. In no time at all Lauren suspected their marriage counselor had an agenda and favored Brad. She helped him make excuses, covered for him, pushed Lauren to admit to her manipulative nature. Lauren suspected him of sleeping with the counselor. He told her she’d become sick with paranoia.

By the time Lacey was in college and Cassie was applying to colleges, Brad was worse than ever. Controlling, domineering, secretive, verbally abusive, argumentative. God, why didn’t he want her to just leave? Clearly, he hated her.

But he told her if she left him he wouldn’t pay college tuition. “No judge can make me. I can be stuck with some alimony but not support payments. And not tuition. When they’re over eighteen they’re on their own. So go then,” he’d said. “You’ll be responsible for cutting them off.”

The last few years had been so lonely. She had spent a lot of time worrying that by staying with a man like Brad she had taught her daughters a dreadful lesson. She'd done her best with them but she couldn't make them un-see how their own mother had lived her life.

She'd taken a few hours from work to meet with the lawyer, laying out plans, creating her list and checking things off. The lawyer had said, "He's had you running scared for years. We have laws in this state. He can't cut you off and freeze you out. I'm not saying it will be easy or painless, but you will not starve and your share of the marital assets will be delivered."

It was time. She was finally ready to go.

Lauren inhaled the smell of spring flowers. This was one of the best times of year in Northern California, the Bay Area and inland, when everything was coming to life. The vineyards were greening up and the fruit trees were blossoming. She loved flowers; her grandmother had been a ferocious gardener, turning her entire yard into a garden. Flowers soothed her. She needed a garden right now.

Lauren heard the squeaking of wheels and looked up to see a man pushing a wheelbarrow along the path. He stopped not too far from her. He had a trowel, shovel and six plants in the wheelbarrow. He gave her a nod, and went about the business of replacing a couple of plants. Then he sat back on his heels, looked at her and smiled. "Better?" he asked.

"Beautiful," she said with a smile.

"Is this your first time in this garden?" he asked.

"No, I've been here a number of times," Lauren said. "Are you the gardener?"

"No," he said with a laugh. "Well, yes, I guess I am if I garden. But I'm just helping out today. I noticed a few things needed to be done..."

“Oh, is this your church?”

“Not this one, a smaller church south of here. I’m afraid I’ve fallen away...”

“And yet you still help out the parish? You’re dedicated.”

“I admire this garden,” he said. He rotated and sat, drawing up his knees. “Why do you come here?”

“I love gardens,” she said. “Flowers in general make me happy.”

“You live in the right part of the country, then. Do you keep a garden?”

“No,” she said, laughing uncomfortably. “My husband has very specific ideas about how the landscaping should look.”

“So he does it?”

*Get dirt under his nails? Hah!* “Not at all. He hires the people who do it and gives them very firm orders. I don’t find our garden nearly as beautiful as this.”

“I guess you have nothing to say about it, then,” he said.

“Not if it’s going to create conflict,” Lauren said. “But it’s kind of a secret hobby of mine to find and visit gardens. Beautiful gardens. My grandmother was a master gardener—both her front and backyard were filled with flowers, fruits and vegetables. She even grew artichokes and asparagus. It was incredible. There was no real design—it was like a glorious jungle.”

“When you were young?”

“And when I was older, too. My children loved it.”

“Did your mother garden?” he asked.

“Very little—she was a hardworking woman. But after my grandparents passed away, she lived in their house and inherited the garden. I’m afraid she let it go.”

“It’s a hereditary thing, don’t you think?” he asked. “Growing up, our whole family worked in the garden. Big garden, too. Necessary garden. My mother canned and we had veg-

etables all winter. Now she freezes more than cans and her kids rob her blind. I think she does it as much for all of us as herself.”

“I would love that so much,” Lauren said. Then she wondered how the residents of Mill Valley would react to seeing her out in the yard in her overalls, hoeing and spreading fresh, stinky fertilizer. It made her laugh to herself.

“Funny?” he asked.

“I work for a food processor. Merriweather. And they don’t let me near the gardens, which are primarily research gardens.”

“So, what do you do?” he asked.

“I cook,” she said. “Product development. Testing and recipes. We test the products regularly and have excellent consumer outreach. We want to show people how to use our products.”

“Are you a nutritionist?” he asked.

“No, but I think I’m becoming one. I studied chemistry. But what I do is not chemistry. In fact, it’s been so long...”

He frowned. “Processed foods. A lot of additives,” he said. “Preservatives.”

“We stand by their safety and it’s a demanding, fast-paced world. People don’t have time to grow their food, store it, make it, serve it.” His cell phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket. “See what I mean?” she said, his phone evidence of the pace of modern life.

But he didn’t even look at it. He switched it off. “What, besides flowers, makes you happy?” he asked.

“I like my job. Most of the time. Really, ninety percent of the time. I work with good people. I love to cook.”

“All these domestic pursuits. You must have a very happy husband.”

She almost said nothing makes Brad happy, but instead she

said, “He cooks, too—and thinks he’s better at it than I am. He’s not, by the way.”

“So if you weren’t a chemist cooking for a food company, what would you be? A caterer?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said. “I think trying to please a client who can afford catering seems too challenging to me. I once thought I wanted to teach home economics but there is no more home ec.”

“Sure there is,” he said, frowning. “Really?”

She shook her head. “A nine or twelve-week course, and it’s not what it once was. We used to learn to sew and bake. Now there’s clothing design as an elective. Some schools offer cooking for students who’d like to be chefs. It’s not the same thing.”

“I guess if you want homemaking tips, there’s the internet,” he said.

“That’s some of what I do,” she said. “Video cooking demonstrations.”

“Is it fun?”

She nodded after thinking about it for a moment.

“Maybe I should do video gardening demos.”

“What makes you happy?” she surprised herself by asking.

“Just about anything,” he said with a laugh. “Digging in the ground. Shooting hoops with my boys when they’re around. Fishing. I love to fish. Quiet. I love quiet. I love art and design. There’s this book—it’s been a long time since I read it—it’s about the psychology of happiness. It’s the results of a study. The premise that initiated the study was what makes one person able to be happy while another person just can’t be happy no matter what. Take two men—one is a survivor of the Holocaust and goes on to live a happy, productive life while the other goes through a divorce and he can hardly get off the couch or drag himself to work for over a decade.

What's the difference between them? How can one person generate happiness for himself while the other can't?"

"Depression?" she asked.

"Not always," he said. "The study pointed out a lot of factors, some we have no control over and some are learned behaviors. Interesting. It's not just a choice but I'm a happy guy." He grinned at her.

She noticed, suddenly, how good-looking this man was. He looked like he was in his forties, a tiny amount of gray threading his dark brown hair at his temples. His eyes were dark blue. His hands were large and clean for a gardener. "Now what makes a volunteer gardener decide to read psychology?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Well, I read a lot. I like to read. I think I got that from my father. I can zone out everything except what's happening in my head. Apparently I go deaf. Or so I've been told. By my wife."

"Hyper focus," she said. "Plus, men don't listen to their wives."

"That's what I hear," he said. "I'm married to an unhappy woman so I found this book that was supposed to explain why some schmucks like me are so easy to make happy and some people just have the hardest damn time."

"How'd you find the book?"

"I like to hang out in bookstores..."

"So do we," she said. "It's one of the few things we both enjoy. Other than that, I don't think my husband and I have much in common."

"That's not a requirement," he said. "I have these friends, Jude and Germain, they are different as night and day." He got to his feet and brushed off the seat of his pants. "They have nothing in common. But they have such a good time

together. They laugh all the time. They have four kids so it's compromise all the time and they make it look so easy."

She frowned. "Which one's the girl? Oh! Maybe they're same sex...?"

"Germain is a woman and Jude's a man," he said, laughing. "I have another set of friends, both men, married to each other. We call them the Bickersons. They argue continuously."

"Thus, answering the question about gender..."

"I have to go," he said. "But... My name is Beau."

"Lauren," she said.

"It was fun talking to you, Lauren. So, when do you think you might need to spend time with the flowers next?"

"Tuesday?" she said, posing it as a question.

He smiled. "Tuesday is good. I hope you enjoy the rest of your week."

"Thanks. Same to you." She walked down the path toward her car in the parking lot. He steered his wheelbarrow down the path toward the garden shed.

Lauren made a U-turn, heading back toward him. "Beau!" she called. He turned to face her. "Um... Let me rethink that. I don't know when I'll be back here but it's not a good idea, you know. We're both married."

"It's just conversation, Lauren," he said.

*He's probably a psychopath, she thought, because he looks so innocent, so decent.* "Yeah, not a good idea," she said, shaking her head. "But I enjoyed talking to you."

"Okay," he said. "I'm sorry, but I understand. Have a great week."

"You, too," she said.

She walked purposefully to her car and she even looked around. He was in the garden shed on the other side of the gardens. She could hear him putting things away. He wasn't

looking to see what she was driving or what her license plate number was. He was a perfectly nice, friendly guy who probably picked up lonely women on a regular basis. Then murdered them and chopped them in little pieces and used them for fertilizer.

She sighed. Sometimes she felt so ridiculous. But she was going to go to the bookstore to look for that book.

Lauren was in a much better mood than usual that evening. In fact, when Brad came home in a state—something about the hospital screwing up his surgery schedule and flipping a couple of his patients without consulting him—she found herself strangely unaffected.

“Are you listening, Lauren?” Brad asked.

“Huh? Oh yes, sorry. Did you get it straightened out?”

“No! I’ll be on the phone tonight. Why do you think I’m so *irritated*? Do you have any idea what my time is worth?”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t...”

“Isn’t it lucky for you that you have a husband who is willing to take care of details like that...”

“Oh,” she said. “Lovely.”

“It might be nice if you said something intelligent for a change.”

“It’s the odd night when you’re not taking calls,” she said.

“Were you hoping for a night off?”

“Obviously! Why do you imagine I brought it up? I’ve told them a thousand times not to get involved with my schedule. They’re going to cause patients unnecessary anxiety, not to mention what they do to me! But they think I’m at their beck and call, that I serve at their pleasure, when I’m the money-making commodity. Even when I very carefully explain exactly how they should manage the schedule, can they figure it out? I’m paying a PA, a very overqualified PA to schedule

for me, my clinics and my surgeries, and the hospital brings in this high school graduate who took a six-week course and gives her authority over *my* schedule...”

Lauren listened absently and fixed him a bourbon, watered, because they had to go to that fund-raiser tonight. She poured herself a glass of burgundy. This was her job, to listen and let him rant, to nod and occasionally say, *That must make you so angry*. While she did that, he paced or sat at the breakfast bar and she unwrapped some cheese and crackers and grapes for him to snack on.

But while all this was going on she was thinking about the man with the easy smile, the tiny bit of gray, the dark blue eyes. And she fantasized how nice it would be to have someone come home and not be a complete asshole.

“We might think about getting ready for the dinner,” she said. “I’d like to look at the auction items.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “I bought a table. We shouldn’t be too late.”

Of course people would expect him to be late, to rush in at the last minute. “I’m ready. Do you need a shower?”

“I’ll be down in five minutes,” he said, leaving and taking his bourbon with him.

“Happy anniversary,” she said to his departing back.

“Hmph,” he said, giving a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nice anniversary,” he grumbled. “My schedule is all fucked up.”

The charity event was for the local Andrew Emerson Foundation supporting underprivileged children. They came to be known as Andy’s kids. Tonight’s event would raise money to provide scholarships for the children of fallen heroes. Professional athletes, businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, hospitals, veterans’ groups and unions from San Francisco and

Oakland supported the charity with fund-raising events such as this dinner and auction. Andy Emerson was a billionaire software developer in San Francisco; he was politically influential and admired by people like Brad. Brad never missed an event and claimed Andy as a friend. Brad was a fixture at the golf tournaments and donated generously. The children of military men and women and first responders disabled or killed in the line of duty could apply for the scholarships generated tonight. To be fair, Lauren had a great deal of respect for the foundation and all that it provided. She also happened to like Andy and Sylvie Emerson, though she was not so presumptuous as to claim them as friends. This event was a very popular, well-organized dinner that would raise tens of thousands of dollars.

Brad and Lauren attended this and many other similar events; Brad's office and clinic staff were invited and he usually paid for a table. This was one of the few times during the year that Lauren visited with Brad's colleagues. And while Brad might be primarily fond of Andy's assets, Lauren thought the seventy-five-year-old Emerson and his wife of almost fifty years, Sylvie, were very nice people. It's not as though Brad and Lauren were invited over to dinner or out for a spin on the yacht—the Emersons were very busy, involved people. However, it was not unusual for Brad to get a call from some member of the Emerson family or a family friend with questions about an upcoming medical procedure or maybe looking for a recommendation of a good doctor.

Just as she was thinking about them, Sylvie Emerson broke away from the men she was chatting with and moved over to Lauren. She gave her one of those cheek presses. "I'm so happy to see you," Sylvie said. "I think it's been a year."

"I saw you at Christmastime in the city," Lauren reminded

her. “You’re looking wonderful, Sylvie. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Thank you. It took a lot of paste and paint. But you’re aglow. How are the girls?”

“Thriving. Lacey is doing her post-grad study at Stanford so we see her fairly often. Cassidy graduates in about six weeks.”

“UC Berkeley, isn’t it?” Sylvie asked. “What’s her field?”

Lauren chuckled. “Pre-law. She’s scored beautifully on the LSAT and is bound for Harvard.”

“Oh my God. Are you thrilled for her?”

“I don’t know yet,” Lauren said. “Don’t you have to be a real tiger to take on law? Cassie seems so gentle-natured to me.”

Sylvie patted her arm. “There is a special place within the legal system for someone like her. I don’t know where, but she’ll find it. And no one chose medicine?”

Lauren shook her head. “I’m a little surprised about that, since I have a science major as well. Though it’s been so long ago now that—”

She was distracted by a man who had been pressing his way through the crowd with two drinks and suddenly stopped. “Lauren?” he said. Then he smiled and those dark blue eyes twinkled. “I’ll be damned.”

“Beau?” she asked. “What in the world are you doing here?”

“Same as you, I suppose,” he said. Then he looked at Sylvie and said, “Hi, I’m Beau Magellan. I just recently ran into Lauren at church.”

Lauren laughed at that. “Not exactly, but close enough. Beau, this is Sylvie Emerson, your hostess tonight.”

“Oh!” he said, sloshing the drinks. “Oh jeez,” he mumbled. Finally, laughing, Lauren took his drinks so he could shake

Sylvie's hand...after wiping his hands on his trousers. "It's a pleasure, Mrs. Emerson. I'm personally indebted to you!"

"How so, Mr. Magellan?"

"My sons have a friend whose dad was killed on the job, Oakland police, and she received a scholarship. Now I'm a big supporter of the cause."

"Magellan," Sylvie said. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"I have no idea," he said, chuckling. "I'm sure our paths wouldn't have crossed. Magellan Design is my company. It's not a big company..."

She snapped her fingers. "You designed a rooftop garden for my friend, Lois Brumfield in Sausalito!"

He beamed. "I did. I'm very proud of that, too—it's incredible."

Sylvie looked at Lauren. "The Brumfields are getting up there... Aren't we all... And they have a single-story home in Sausalito. They didn't have any interest in a two-story anything, their knees are giving out. So they put the garden on the roof! And they have a lift! They sit up there any evening the weather will allow. It's gorgeous! They have gardeners tend their roof!" Sylvie laughed. "They have a patio on the ground floor as well, nice pool and all that. But that rooftop garden is like their secret space. And the house is angled just right so it's private. From there they have an amazing view."

"There's a hot tub," Beau said. "And a few potted trees in just the right places."

"Really, if the Brumfields had more friends, you'd be famous!"

"They have you," Beau said.

"Oh, I've known Lois since I was in college. She's outlasted most of my family!" Then she looked at Lauren. "Church?"

Lauren laughed. She put Beau's drinks on the table she stood beside. "I stopped to see the gardens at Divine Re-

deemer Catholic Church—they're beautiful. And they're right on my way home. Beau was replacing a few plants. I thought he was the groundskeeper." She made a face at him.

"I love the grounds and I've known the priest there for a long time," Beau said. "I gave them an updated design and got them a discount on plants."

"Do you have a card, Mr. Magellan?" Sylvie asked.

"I do," he said. He pulled one out of his inside jacket pocket. "And please, call me Beau."

"Thank you," she said, sliding it into her slender purse. "And of course, I'm Sylvie. Lauren, the weather is getting nice. If I give you a call, will you come to my house, have lunch in my garden? Just you and me?"

"I would love that," she said. "Please do call! I'll bring you a plant!"

"I'll call. Very nice meeting you, Beau. Excuse me please. I have to try to say hello to people."

And that fast she was gone.

Lauren looked at Beau. "What am I going to do with you? Met me at church, did you?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said. "Seeing you here is even more startling."

"We're big supporters," she said. "See that bald guy over there? With Andy? My husband."

"Hm," he said. "He's friends with the host? Andy Emerson?"

"He believes so," she said. "Like I said, big supporter. Do you play golf?"

"I know how," Beau said. "I don't know that you could say I play, in all honesty."

"That's right," she said, laughing. "You read psychology. And fish. And garden." She glanced at the drinks. "Should you get those drinks back to your table?"

“They weren’t dehydrated last time I looked. They’re signing up for auction items.”

“It’s possible we have friends in common,” she said. “My brother-in-law is an Oakland cop. I remember a fatality a couple of years ago.”

“Roger Stanton,” Beau said. “Did you know him?”

She shook her head. “Did you know him?”

“No, but the boys know the kids. You’ll have to ask your brother-in-law...”

“Oh, Chip knew him. Even though it’s a big department, they’re all friends. It was heartbreaking. I’m so glad his daughter is a recipient.” She nodded toward the drinks. “You should probably get those drinks back to your wife...”

He shook his head. “She’s not here tonight. I brought my boys, my brother and sister-in-law and a friend.”

“But not your wife?” she asked.

“Pamela finds this sort of thing boring and the friend I brought is a guy. But I don’t find things like this boring. So tell me, what are you doing Tuesday?”

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to check on the plants, maybe hoe around a little bit. H-O-E,” he specified, making her laugh. “I’m going to put some bunny deterrent around. See how things are doing. I like the plants to get a strong hold before summer. Do you think you’ll want to be uplifted by flowers?”

“You’re coming on to a married woman,” she said.

“I apologize! I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I’ll get out of your space,” he said, picking up the drinks.

“I might check out the plants,” she said. “Now that I’m pretty sure you’re not a stalker or serial killer.”

“Oh Jesus, do I give off that vibe?” he asked, sloshing the drinks over his hands again. “I’m going to have to work on my delivery!”

“You sure don’t give off the waiter vibe,” she said, lifting a napkin from the table to assist him.

Just then, Brad was at her side. “We’re down in front, Lauren. Don’t make me come looking for you.”

“I know. Brad, this is Beau Magellan, a landscape designer. A friend of Sylvie’s.”

Brad’s black eyebrows shot up. “Oh? Maybe we’ll have you take a look at ours.” He put out a hand to shake, once he heard there was an Emerson connection, but Beau’s hands were full of drinks. They were wet besides.

“Oh. Sorry,” Beau said, lifting his handfuls clumsily.

“Okay,” Brad said with a laugh. “Another time. I’ll save you a seat,” he said to Lauren.

“Sure. Be right there.” She looked back at Beau, a mischievous smile playing at her lips.

“You’re a liar, Lauren,” Beau said.

“I’m sorry.” She laughed. “It was irresistible. I hope we run into each other again, Beau. Now if there’s anything left in those glasses, get them to your table.”

## CHAPTER TWO

**L**auren knew she'd be going to the church gardens on Tuesday after work even though she thought it could be foolhardy. Becoming attracted to a man was not a part of her plan. In fact, it could be a major inconvenience. But she liked him. She liked that he read a lot and wanted to talk about what he'd read. She enjoyed how flustered he was meeting Sylvie. She adored the way he sloshed the drinks he carried. And it moved her that he was there to support a scholarship recipient who'd lost her father.

Of course he was there. She saw his back moving through the plants and shrubs. He was pulling off dead leaves and dried flowers. And putting them in his pocket!

She noticed there were some things on the bench—the one she had occupied the last time. A bag containing something

and two Starbucks cups. It made her smile. He shouldn't have known that Starbucks would make her happy.

She cleared her throat. He turned toward her with a smile, shoving a handful of dead leaves and buds in his pocket.

"Hi," he said. "I brought you a mocha with whipped cream."

*Perfect! Of course.* "That's very thoughtful," she said, just standing there, feeling awkward.

"And something else," he said, lifting the bag.

"Oh, why did you do that? You shouldn't be giving me things. You should sit and relax and enjoy the flowers. And you were tidying up."

"I'm always grooming plants. Maybe it's a nervous habit." He pulled a handful of dried leaves and small sticks from his pocket, dumping them in the trash can. He handed her the bag. Inside was a book. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

"This is great!" she said. "I actually went looking for this book! But I didn't ask for it, just looked in the psychology section."

"I had to find it at the used bookstore..."

"Did it change your life?"

"No, but it was enlightening."

She sat down on the bench, looking through the book. He handed her a coffee and stood at the other end of the bench. "I guess it didn't make your wife any happier," she said.

"No," he answered with a laugh. "She has always wanted something more. Something else. Listen, full disclosure, my wife and I are separated. We've been living apart for six months. We're getting divorced."

"Ah," Lauren said. "And you're getting back in the game."

He looked stricken. "No! I mean, that has nothing to do with you! I'm not looking for anything. You're a complete

surprise. I might've done this even if—" He shook his head, looking embarrassed. "You just seem like a very nice person, that's all. And you complimented my flowers. This divorce—it's long overdue. It's not our first separation. And no, I haven't been known to mess around on the side. I have a couple of sons. Stepsons, actually. I wanted to keep their lives stable for as long as possible. They're seventeen and twenty. I think they understand we should be divorced and that I'll always have a home for them. If they don't know they can count on me by now, they never will. I'm not going anywhere."

"And their mother?" she asked.

"She loves them, of course," he said. "Maybe because they're boys, they're closer to me. Or maybe it's because their mother is hard to please."

"Oh God," she said. "It is not a good thing that we have this in common."

"You're separated?"

"Not yet," she said, hesitantly. "I have a difficult situation. I'm not ready to talk about it. But can you tell me about yours? Unless it's too..." She shrugged.

He settled in, sitting on the bench with his coffee. "Okay, I'll give you the short version. I've been married twelve years. We lived together first. The boys were four and seven when we met. They have two different fathers. Disinterested fathers. Pamela wasn't married to either of them. They hardly came around and when they did, they took only their son, not his brother. That just didn't make any sense to me. They're adults. Don't they realize little boys would be upset by that? Feel left out? Have self-confidence issues? So if I knew one or the other was coming to get his son I tried to have something planned for the one left behind. It didn't take much—just a little extra time to throw the ball around or play a video game. Just attention, that's all."

“That’s so...*nice*,” she said.

“No it’s not,” he said, almost irritably. “It’s what an adult should do. It just makes sense. Doesn’t it?”

“What did their mother say? About one son being left behind?”

“She was in conflict with their fathers over lots of things, so it was one more thing. But that didn’t matter to me. Mike and Drew were little kids. They had enough trouble, you know? The school was saying Drew had learning disabilities and they tried to pin ADHD on Mike because he was restless. He was restless because he was a boy with a lot of energy who was kind of bored with school. Pamela would get mad, which didn’t seem to resolve anything so I started going to some of these meetings at the school with her and we worked out programs for them. Pretty soon I was going to the meetings alone.” He stopped and ran a hand around the back of his neck. “On our good days, she was very grateful I was willing to take them on. On our bad days she accused me of thinking I was their father and she reminded me I had no authority.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said.

“Drew graduates with honors in a few weeks,” he said with a smile. “So much for his learning disability. Mike’s in college with a nice GPA. He’s got a great girlfriend, plays baseball, has lots of friends. Wants to be an architect,” he added with a proud but shy smile.

“When did you know?” she asked. He gave her a perplexed look. “When did you know the marriage wouldn’t last?”

“Almost right away,” he said. “Within a couple of years. But I wasn’t giving up. The guys... They might have two different fathers but they were going to have one stepfather. We did fine. We managed. I might still be managing but Pamela wanted to leave and I didn’t put up a fight. At all.”

He laughed uncomfortably. “Then she wanted to come back and I said, no.”

“I guess you’re done,” Lauren said.

“My mother says I’m a peacekeeper. She didn’t consider it a compliment.”

“Shame on her,” Lauren said. “We could use a little more compromise and cooperation in this world!”

“Spoken like a true peacekeeper,” he said. “As military ordinance, a Peacekeeper is a land-based ICBM. A nuclear missile. Maybe all those people who take us for granted should look out.”

“Indeed,” she said, smiling in spite of herself.

Then they both burst into laughter.

“How long have you been friends with Sylvie Emerson?” Beau asked.

“I’m not so sure we’re really friends,” she said. “We know each other because of our husbands. I’m sure we like each other. We run into each other at fund-raisers and social events. We’re friendly, that’s all. My husband served on the foundation board of directors for a few years and got cozy with a lot of Andy’s friends. It’s not that he’s passionate about the cause. He’s passionate about being connected and about Andy’s billions and influence, though what he hopes to do with either is beyond me. That’s why I run into Sylvie a lot—Brad hangs close. He would deny that, by the way. I’ll be surprised if she calls me for that lunch date—she’s very busy. But let me tell you something. What I know of the Emersons is they’re both sincerely good, generous people. Sylvie has mentioned that of all the work their foundation is able to do, she’s partial to the scholarship fund. She and her husband might not have identical priorities, I’m not well acquainted with Andy, but Sylvie has told me more than once—we have to feed and

educate the next generation, that's the only way we leave the world better than we found it."

"I wonder if they even realize how great a gift that is—giving an education. I don't know about you, but my family wasn't exactly fixed to send me to college."

"Nor was mine," she said. "I grew up poor."

"What's poor?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I have a younger sister, Beth. Three years younger. When she was a baby our father went out for the proverbial pack of cigarettes and never came home. My mom worked two jobs the whole time we were growing up. My grandparents were alive and lived nearby, thank God. They helped. They watched us so she could work and probably chipped in when rent was late or the car broke down."

He smiled. "I have a large extended family. The six of us—my mom, dad, brother, two sisters and I lived in an old garage my parents converted into a small house. My mom still lives in that house, but I don't know how long that's going to last—she's getting a little feeble. My dad was a janitor, my mom served lunch at the junior high and cleaned houses. We got jobs as soon as we were old enough. But my folks, under-educated themselves, pushed us to get decent grades even though they couldn't help us with homework. We did our best. We might've been competing with the cousins a little bit."

"Nothing like a little healthy competition," she said. "Did you know you were poor?"

"Sure, to some extent. But we had a big family on that land. A couple of aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins. Sometimes it got crowded. But if the heat went out in winter there were plenty of people to keep warm with. Heat in summer—no relief." He drank a little of his coffee. "We didn't have any extras, but it wasn't a bad way to grow up."

Thing about it was we might've been poor but we were never poor alone."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"You can always ask, Lauren..."

"How do you think your life's going to change, getting divorced? Does this begin a whole new adventure of some kind?"

"Adventure?" he asked. "God no. My life doesn't have to change. I love my life today. I have work that makes people happy, good friends, amazing family. I have enough predictability every day so that it's not very often that something throws me off balance. I sleep well. My blood pressure is good. I don't know if I could have a better life. I just don't want it to change *back*."

She was quiet for a long moment. Finally she said, "Life must have been difficult... Before..."

"That's a hard question," he said. "Difficult? There were days I thought it was hard. Unbearable, really. But those days passed. What didn't pass was irritation. Unbalance. Never knowing what would be coming at you today. But ask anyone—you're not allowed to bail out because your wife has mood swings. Or because she yelled and now and then threw a glass at me. Hey, she missed, and cleaned up the shattered glass. But she wasn't a drunk, she never came at me with a knife, didn't sleep around...not counting those separations, when the excuse was that we were separated. According to the rule book, if you're able to work it out..." He shrugged. "So I stopped asking myself if I could live like this because I *could*, but that was the problem. I started asking myself if I *wanted* to live my life like that. And the answer was no. Fortunately for me, Pamela needed a little time to think again, to determine what she wanted from life. She needed another separation.

Our fourth in a thirteen-year relationship. It was the perfect time for me to say, me, too.” He chuckled. “Her separation was very short after hearing that. Mine was not. I decided I was happier on my own. I think I could be a happy old bachelor.” He grinned. “I wouldn’t have a boring or lonely day in my life. I think the boys might look in on me sometimes, make sure I haven’t broken a hip.”

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Forty-five,” he said.

She snorted. “I don’t think you have to worry about that broken hip for a while yet.”

“I’m just saying, my life right now is fine. More fine than it was wondering which Pamela was coming home to dinner. But being sick of living with a volatile, angry, unpredictable person is not moral grounds for divorce. For better or worse, right?”

Lauren identified with so much of what he said but her first thought was, it’s so much easier for men. They’re not expected to have to put up with moody, angry women but women are supposed to put up with difficult men. She really wanted to let loose and complain about what it was like to live with a controlling, angry man. A man who could keep an argument going for *days*. A man who cut the line of people waiting to purchase movie tickets, loudly accused maître d’s of losing the reservation he never made, shortchanged maintenance workers on their bills because he assumed they wouldn’t dare come after him because they were undocumented or spoke poor English. Once while they were vacationing in Turks and Caicos he found some lounge chairs by the pool that were desirable, but they had towels on them—someone had already claimed them. There were a couple of pool toys as well, indicating they belonged to children. He threw the towels and toys on the ground beside the chairs, claimed the chairs for

himself and his family and when a young man with two small children appeared five minutes later, he briskly told him, “You can’t save chairs with towels. You have to be using them.”

Brad was a bully who thought he was better than everyone else.

But Lauren didn’t say anything to Beau. Unless people really knew Brad, they would never understand. So she changed the subject and asked Beau to tell her about rooftop gardens.

“My specialty,” he said happily.

After an hour of pleasant conversation she decided she’d better leave. He asked if he’d be seeing her the following Tuesday and she said, “Very doubtful. This isn’t a good idea.”

He chuckled softly. “Oh. I wouldn’t want to put you in an uncomfortable position,” he said. “You didn’t say it but I already know. You’re in the same spot as me. Maybe not identical, but close enough. I sympathize. And if you want someone to talk to you know how to find me.”

She nodded sadly. Of course he didn’t know how to find her. And she didn’t tell him.

Beth Shaughnessy was spending her Sunday cleaning up the remnants of the party she and her husband Chip had thrown the night before. Chip had a new smoker and had treated many of their friends to a barbecue. While she had made good progress in the kitchen and great room, the patio and grill were still a disaster. Chip, whose given name was Michael, pleaded a slight hangover and promised to get out there with the boys to clean up after they watched a little of the US Open on the big screen in his den. The last time she looked in on them, Chip was flipping between basketball and golf and women’s beach volleyball.

When Beth’s sister, Lauren, had called earlier and asked if she could get away for lunch, Beth had said she had chores.

Lauren said she'd go to the gym for a while then head over to Beth's. She needed to talk.

When Lauren most needed Beth and the phone wasn't good enough, Beth suspected marital angst. When you were married to Brad Delaney, *angst* was the kindest word one could apply. It took several deep breaths for Beth to remind herself to be careful what she said. The only serious and alienating fight the sisters had ever had was over Beth's low opinion of Brad and her sister's marriage. Well, sort of. It was more Beth's strong opinion that Lauren should get out, no matter what it took. Yet Lauren had stayed on. And on. And on.

Beth had been only twenty when Lauren and Brad were engaged to be married. At first she thought Brad handsome and sexy, but soon her impression of him changed. She heard and saw things that just weren't right. More than once, she'd heard Brad call Lauren an idiot. She saw him squeeze her hand so tightly it caused Lauren to wince and pull away. She wasn't sure exactly what was wrong but she knew it wasn't right. Even at her tender, inexperienced age Beth had said, "Lauren, what are you doing?"

"I'm marrying a handsome and successful doctor!" Lauren had said, beaming with joy. Lauren was seeing all those things they'd never had growing up—financial security, a beautiful and spacious home, cars that didn't break down, dining out, vacations... But behind the brightness of her eyes, something else lurked. And of course they hadn't even gotten through the wedding without tears of anguish and serious doubts. As anyone close to the couple could see, Brad, ten years older than Lauren, was temperamental, self-centered, grumpy and an egomaniac. He had a widowed mother, Adele, who was just an older version of her son. Adele was a controlling and temperamental sourpuss who had very firm ideas about what exactly was good enough for her entitled only child. Ex-

cept Adele didn't know how to be charming. While Lauren and Beth had grown up in relative poverty with their single mother, Honey Verona, Brad had grown up well-to-do.

Right before the wedding Honey said, "Lauren, don't do it. You must see he won't even try to make you happy."

"But everything is planned and his mother paid for it all!" Lauren protested.

"It doesn't matter," Honey said. "You can walk away. Let them sue us."

Lauren almost didn't marry him. It was a last-minute melodramatic moment when she said, "I can't. I'm just not sure." Beth almost threw a party. But then she and the other bridesmaids were banished from the room while Brad's mother took over, having a heart-to-heart with Lauren. Dame Delaney was a force to be reckoned with...

And the wedding proceeded.

Beth and Lauren were nothing alike and yet they were vital to each other. Beth was a professional photographer. She did a lot of weddings, anniversaries, parties, even funerals. She also shot bridges, fields, wildlife, flowers, children, elderly people, beaches, sunsets... Beth was an artist. But she photographed a lot of people and she had learned to recognize who they were in their eyes, their expressions, their body language, their smiles or frowns. She could read people.

She had read Brad right. He was an asshole.

Lauren was more scientific. More pragmatic. A plotter and planner.

Beth had been married to Chip for sixteen years. They weren't able to produce children on their own so they had adopted a couple. Ravon was thirteen; they'd had him since he was four. Stefano was nine; they'd had him since he was two. Both came through the foster care system. Chip was a cop and big-time sports enthusiast, particularly golf. He

taught the boys to play and the three of them were doing something that involved a ball every free second. Beth lived in a kind of rough-and-tumble house with a husband in a high-risk profession; she was always fighting that testosterone poisoning that created messes wherever it passed.

But Beth was not wired to take the kind of shit Lauren put up with. She rode the men in her family hard, insisting they pitch in and help, demanding courteous behavior. And she was just a little thing. A little thing who could haul forty pounds of camera equipment everywhere she went. Ravon was already taller than her, but that hadn't made her meek at all. She could bring all three men in her house to their knees with one killer stare.

Lauren showed up looking sleek and rich in her workout clothes, her thick chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail. Lauren didn't ever seem to sweat, either. She sat at Beth's breakfast bar with a bottle of water while Beth dried the last of the serving platters. "How was your party?" Lauren asked.

"Loud," Beth said. "Bunch of cops and their spouses and kids. All the usual suspects. They stayed too late and disturbed the neighbors. It was great, in other words."

"We went to a cocktail party for a retiring doctor. I overheard Brad tell a couple of men he had to take the management of the finances away from me before I ran us into the poorhouse. Now he lets me keep track of my little paycheck while he manages the rest." She sighed. "I don't recall ever being in charge of the finances."

"I was just about to ask when you were in charge of the money..." Beth wasn't surprised by this mean little dig from her brother-in-law. "If he poked at me like that, he'd pull back a bloody stump," Beth said.

"He doesn't realize this, but he doesn't have much longer as my jailer. I just don't want to stress Cassie. I've put up with

him for twenty-four years, I can put up with him a few more weeks. Get Cassie out of college.”

The sound from the den erupted in a roar—someone made a basket, goal, or hole in one and Beth’s men yelled. “I wouldn’t have been married to him long enough to get my babies out of nappies, much less college,” Beth said.

“They can’t hear us, can they?” Lauren asked.

“They couldn’t hear us if we were talking right into their dense male faces,” Beth said.

“I put a deposit on a rental property that will be available July 1. I’m going to talk to the girls and move out. I’ve scheduled my vacation for after Cassie graduates and the first week of July. I suppose it will be sweltering.”

Beth’s mouth hung open for a moment. “This isn’t the first time you’ve said this,” Beth said.

“It’s the first time I’ve rented something,” Lauren said. “I’ve been to the lawyer, planned this out carefully. Listen, I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with me and my rotten marriage, my vacillating, my lack of courage and my mean husband. I’m a load and I know it. And now I need a favor.”

“You know you’re welcome here,” Beth said.

“That’s not what I need. I’m going to pack up some boxes and suitcases. I also have to buy a few things—new linens, some new kitchenware, that sort of thing. I need a place to store it. Someplace no one will notice.”

“The guest room,” Beth said. “We’ll close the door. Can I say one small thing? Can I say, please God, please really do it this time! There’s still time for you to have a life.”

“I’m going to do it,” Lauren said.

Beth gave a heavy sigh. In spite of all the bad things, Brad and Lauren had also been generous. He’d loaned them twenty-five thousand dollars to try in-vitro fertilization; he’d loaned them another twenty-five grand to build onto their

house to make room for the boys. He and Lauren stepped up when Beth and Chip needed an expensive tutor for Stefano because he had a learning disability. Of course, Beth had long suspected Brad liked giving people loans they would take a long time to repay because it gave him power over them.

“Honey would be ecstatic,” Lauren said. And immediately her eyes filled with tears.

They’d lost their mother two years ago. She’d been killed in a car accident; a truck driver had a medical episode, lost control of his huge truck and struck three vehicles, killing three people. Honey had never known what hit her—her death was instant, thank God.

“I miss her so much,” Beth said. “It’s just the two of us. I’m there for you. You’re there for me—let’s remember that. You’ve been to this lawyer how many times?” Beth asked.

“Leaving a man like Brad takes very careful planning,” Lauren said.

“Are you afraid of him?”

“Of course. Not afraid he’ll physically hurt me. He never does that...”

“A pinch here, a squeeze there...” Beth said, inexplicably rewashing a perfectly clean serving tray.

“He calls it affection gone a bit rambunctious,” Lauren said.

“Because he’s a liar. An experienced gaslighter.”

Lauren sucked in her breath.

“All right, all right,” Beth said. “I’ll try to say nothing and just hope for the best.”

“Once Cassie has graduated, there’s really nothing more to hold me back.”

Beth looked into her sister’s beautiful lavender eyes. Lauren looked like pure perfection. She was elegant, smart, nurturing, compassionate, talented in so many ways, yet somehow held captive by an arrogant asshole. But she wouldn’t call him

that. Putting Lauren on the defensive might prevent her from freeing herself. Why her brilliant, loving, educated sister had chosen Brad eluded her. Why she stayed with him had confused her even more.

She had been young. She'd had stars and Wolf appliances in her eyes.

"Okay, tell me what you rented," Beth said.

"It's small and quaint, a Victorian, on a street that almost looks like the Seven Sisters in San Francisco," she said, keeping her voice down. "Three bedrooms and a loft, a long porch and deep yard on a lovely old street in Alameda. The owner lived a long and happy life there, building a lovely garden. There are big, healthy trees. Her son is keeping the house as a rental so it's being remodeled—new flooring, patching, texturing and painting the walls, new kitchen and bathroom cabinets, new appliances. I'm signing a one-year lease with an option to have first right of refusal if he decides to sell. He let me have some input on the materials... Or, let's say, I told him I did videos for Merriweather and he assumed I was a great homemaker..."

"You are," Beth confirmed.

As Lauren described the house, she became animated and Beth had hope for the first time in a long time. Only her rich sister would call a Victorian on the island of Alameda "quaint." It was probably a million-dollar property.

They talked about the house, the fact that Lauren could get back and forth to work more easily, that she'd have a say in how the yard looked, that it would be homey and all hers. She would have room for the girls when they visited. She hoped they would but it wouldn't surprise her to find they preferred their rooms at her current house. "The most important thing is that they know both their mother and father love them," Lauren said. And then she shuddered.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Beth said.

“I know,” Lauren said in a shaky breath. “I plan to have a big celebration for Cassie’s graduation. Once we’ve all come down from that, I’m going to help Cassie move to Boston. Then I’ll talk to the girls. One at a time. Then I’m going to tell Brad. I would tell Brad first but once I do, I have to leave. If things don’t fall into place like I plan—if one of the girls tells him before I can, or something—I might have to impose on you. I can’t really stay there after I make my intentions clear. Because...”

“Because he will be horrible,” Beth said, finishing for her.

They had done this before. But, in the end, Lauren had always stayed. Beth knew about everything—the suspected affairs, the STD, the separate bedrooms. No matter how bad things got, Lauren always tried to make the best of it for the sake of her daughters.

“I’ll help you in any way you ask,” Beth said. “What makes you think you’ll really go through with it this time?”

“If I don’t, I might as well resign myself to living out my life with a mean, cantankerous old man who thinks he’s smarter than God.”

“Pretty soon, that will be the only option,” Beth said.

Lauren ignored her or at least pretended to. “So, we’ll celebrate Cassie’s graduation and when my rental is available I’ll tell them. Cassie will be in Boston for the next three years at least. Lacey has her apartment in Menlo Park. Once I’ve dealt with them, I’ll face Brad.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do that alone...”

“I’ve worked this out with the lawyer,” Lauren said. “She has an investigator who is willing to stand by.” Then Lauren shuddered again.

Beth hoped her sister would finally do it. Beth was terrified her sister would finally do it. This could get ugly.

Another loud cheer erupted from the den.

Beth and Lauren talked for a while longer. Every once in a while Beth would glance through the glass patio doors to the chaos outside—wet towels on the ground, various men's shoes, the greasy grill, plastic glasses, trash cans that were used for refuse, not all of which hit the mark. Lauren's surroundings would never be in such disarray. Brad would have a fit.

Beth's marriage wasn't perfect. There is stress in the lives of a cop's family; there is challenge in all relationships. She and Chip had money issues, kid problems—both of her sons were multiracial and hitting that puberty stage. Sometimes it seemed like a constant struggle. But they were happy.

But Lauren was married to an impossible jerk. Sad to say, but that trumped everything. How do you resolve yourself to life with a guy like that? No, he didn't beat her but he did twist an arm here, squeeze too hard there. No, he didn't get drunk every week. He'd had at least a couple of flings, but he was so repentant he even bought jewelry and took the whole family on trips so amazing the girls hoped he'd have another one. He treated people badly, told lies, believed he deserved slightly more consideration and a slightly bigger cut than anyone else, bullied his wife, put her down. And...he thought he was always right, no matter what. How do you explain that to your children?

When Lauren left Beth wandered into the den. Oh God, she should never have allowed them to put furniture in here. Chip was stretched out on the couch, Ravon's legs were hanging off the end of the loveseat. Stefano was lying on the floor with his feet up on the coffee table. It looked like a frat house. Morty, their old chocolate Lab, had his head resting on Stefano's belly. She was going to have to spray the room down with Febreze.

Something happened on the TV and all of a sudden everyone moved and cheered.

“Hey,” she said. “Why does this den smell like the inside of a tennis shoe?”

“This is not a den,” Chip said indignantly. “This is a man cave!”

“I beg your pardon,” Beth said. “It’s pretty gamey in here. Isn’t it a little early in the year for the Open? Isn’t that a June event?”

“This is an old one,” Chip said. “Ten years old. It’s a replay.”

She was completely stunned for a second. “You have *got* to be kidding me! My backyard looks like a war zone and you’re in here smelling up the place and watching a ten-year-old sporting event? Come on—get out there and clean up from last night before the sun starts to go down! I mean it!”

The boys dragged themselves to their feet, moaning and groaning, their lazy Sunday afternoon ruined. Chip got up, stretched and dropped an arm around her shoulders. “Thanks, babe. I needed a little nap.”

“Hmph,” she said.

“I heard Lauren’s voice.”

“Yeah, she was here.”

“She having problems?” he asked. “With Brad?”

“Why would you ask that?” Beth asked.

“Because you’re all prickly.”

“Do we have a perfect marriage?” she asked, looking up at him. Beth was five foot three and Chip was a towering six foot three.

He grinned. “I doubt it. But close. Because your wish is my command.”

“Yeah, right. After four hours in front of a ten-year-old golf tournament.”

THE VIEW FROM ALAMEDA ISLAND

“But see how much nicer I am now?” he asked. He kissed her forehead. “You can’t do anything about Lauren and Brad.”

“Promise not to say a word. She’s focused on Cassie’s graduation for right now.”

“Beth, she’s never going to do anything, you know that.”

But Beth was thinking, this time she might. And although it made her feel sad and guilty, she desperately hoped her sister would really leave Brad.

## CHAPTER THREE

**B**eau carried a forty-pound bag of fertilizer on each shoulder as he walked along the trail of patio stones that led to the vegetable garden. There he found Tim working on building a nice large pile of weeds. “I thought I might find you here,” Beau said. “I brought you a present.” He dropped one bag on the ground and lowered the other. “What are you up to?”

“Just hoeing around,” the priest said.

“You’re hilarious.”

“I know. I haven’t seen you in a couple of weeks,” Tim said. Then he stepped over his plants and gave Beau a firm handshake that brought them shoulder to shoulder. “How’s life?”

“Manageable, but busy,” Beau said, returning the man hug. Tim and Beau had known each other since they were

about ten. To say they took different paths in life would be an understatement.

“But is life any good?” Tim pushed.

“Lots of it is,” Beau said. “Work is excellent. I’m almost too busy. Things are quiet at home. I watch sports all night.”

“I guess the divorce is proceeding,” Tim said.

He shrugged. “It’s a little stalled. Pamela wanted to try counseling. I thought it was a waste of time that also cost money. But then Michael asked me why I wouldn’t give it a shot.” He looked down, shaking his head. “I don’t know why Michael gets himself into this—he’s twenty, a sophomore, has a steady relationship...”

“He’s trying to put his life together—the life he wants to have. He doesn’t want the one you and Pamela have. He wants to know how that works.” Tim sank to one knee and stabbed the bag of fertilizer, ripping it open, releasing the rank smell.

“You almost sound like you know anything at all about marriage, *Father*,” Beau said.

“I’m well trained,” Tim shot back.

“Michael just needs to pay attention to the women he lets into his life, make sure there aren’t any red flags. Maybe he should be in counseling. Just for his future.”

“Not a bad idea,” the priest agreed. “Have you told him the truth, Beau? That you stayed for them?”

“I might’ve suggested that,” Beau said, sticking a shovel in the fertilizer and scooping out a big load, sprinkling it down the rows. “I told the counselor I’m there in body only. I don’t want to fix it. I want to end it. Our mission in counseling should be to help Pamela let go. So she sobbed for an hour, babbling excuses and trying to explain her change of heart. And there was begging. My head hurt for two days. It’s torture.”

“Stop going,” Tim said. He sat back on his heels. “Seri-

ously, stop going. You are the worst victim sometimes. You can't do this for her. It was her choice, you gave her many last chances. She needs counseling but not marriage counseling."

"Well damn," Beau said. "What about the sanctity of marriage and all that?"

"Everything has an expiration date, my brother," Tim replied. "Really, I'm in the wrong order. I should be with the Jesuits. I'm living in this century. I can't tell perfectly miserable people trapped in abusive and unholy relationships to stick it out just because the church prefers it that way and we promised to turn the other cheek and all that. I wouldn't have lasted a year with Pamela."

Beau grinned. "If the diocese ever finds out about you, you're history."

"Eh," he grunted. He stood and started spreading the fertilizer with his hoe. "How about Drew?"

"Drew's good. Graduating in a couple of weeks. I'm having a party for him—mostly his friends and my family. Will you come?"

"Of course, as long as no one dies or gets married."

"Pamela is trying to get involved, combining families, throw in an ex who may or may not show up. I'm expecting Drew will get a card with some money in it from his dad—anywhere from twenty to a hundred, depending on his guilt. It's so awkward, my family and I'm sure her family know the circumstances but we have to make nice, act like we're at least getting along, look as if we're not getting divorced. I talked to Drew about all the subterfuge and he said, 'No biggie. Let her do it. Then we're done until I get married, which I promise you will be many years from now. Between now and then, I'm probably not going to make her unhappy.' You gotta love that kid. Everything rolls off his back."

“Or it seems to,” Tim said. “Keep an eye on that. Still waters...”

“We spend a lot of time together,” Beau said. “Just me and Drew these days. I think Drew has forgotten we have Michael’s graduation in a year...”

“Things will be better by then. What did you tell the counselor?”

“I told her we’ve been separated four times, Pamela has had other relationships during the separations and when we’re together she’s almost always unhappy and we argue too much. She pokes at me until I poke back, so sometimes I leave the house or go in the garage or detail the truck. I told her I don’t want to do that anymore. And of course she asked if we fixed our relationship so it wasn’t like that, was I in? And I said, I’m sorry, not anymore.” He dug out a shovelful of fertilizer. “I’d like to move on so my friends and family aren’t constantly forced to ask me where we are now.”

Tim stopped moving his hoe. “I’m sorry, Beau,” he said.

“Aw, not you, Tim. I don’t see enough of you for you to get on my nerves. That’s a problem, by the way. I’d like to see enough of you for you to get on my nerves.”

Tim grinned. “Basketball game Thursday night.”

“Can I bring a ringer?”

“Absolutely. I haven’t seen Drew in months.”

“I’m in pretty good shape,” Beau said. “You should pray.”

“I’ll think about it, Beauregard,” he said.

When Beau was a kid, a relatively poor kid, Tim’s well-off family moved into town. Tim’s dad was a lawyer. Beau never went to school hungry but there were lots of times he wanted more to eat than there was and he was impressed by the bounty of Tim’s table. Beau had two sisters and a brother, Tim had two brothers and a sister. Tim lived in a five-bedroom house on a big lot with a brick circular drive-

way. Tim's mom played a lot of tennis at their club and had a cleaning lady. But, despite the differences, the boys became friends and stayed friends all the way through school.

Beau's parents were amazed and impressed that he got himself through college in five years with no help from them. Tim, on the other hand, went to Notre Dame. He'd never admitted it to anyone but he'd always aspired to the priesthood. He was spiritual and wanted to help people. Notre Dame honed that aspiration into reality.

Tim's parents were appalled. Tim, being so damn smart, would have made a good lawyer in his father's firm, but that didn't interest him. He studied theology and counseling. And his mother lamented that he wouldn't be a father. "But yes, I will," he answered with a smile.

As it was, Beau became a landscape architect, marrying his love of design with his love of growing things. And Tim, after being away for many years, had finally come home to a parish in California not so far from where he grew up. And he was reunited with his closest friends.

When Tim came back it was to find his best friend struggling with a failing marriage. And while Beau was so happy to have Tim close by, he found the good father at odds with his assignment in his new parish. Tim wanted to help the needy, the hungry, the disenfranchised of the world and here in Mill Valley he was tending the wounds of people with plenty of money and access to everything they might ever need by way of health care, private education and luxuries. True, the well-to-do were not without problems, but Beau knew Tim longed for grittier work. He felt he wasn't as useful as he could be.

They talked for a while about the vegetable garden and fruit trees, laughed a little bit about how Tim's boss, the bishop, just wanted him to get people back into church. "He

wants the confessional bubbling 24/7 and while there are plenty of Catholics in the parish, they're more like you," Tim said. "Not too worried about having a priest guide them and intercede with Christ for them. And most gave up on church doctrine a long time ago."

"Your ego must be bruised," Beau said with a laugh.

"I'm bored," Tim admitted. "There isn't enough challenge."

"It's a rich parish. Surely you can find something to do with the money!"

"This isn't my dream job, Beau. In fact, sometimes I question my calling. Or better to say, sometimes I ask myself if I've done all I can do in this—"

Someone was walking through the garden and the men turned to see a lovely woman standing not far from them.

"I'll be damned," Beau said. "Lauren!" And he smiled, thrilled to see her.

Lauren left work a little early. It was a beautiful spring day and she wanted to stop at Divine Redeemer and see how far along the gardens had come. It wasn't Tuesday, she told herself. There was no harm in it. But inside she knew she wanted to see him. Just to hear him talk about the gardens. Or his boys. She wondered how his life was going. Maybe he would talk a little about his divorce. If she felt comfortable and even a little secure, she'd ask him how they broke it to the kids. Cassie's graduation was a mere week away. After that event and the celebration, when things had calmed, Lauren was going to stir it all up by telling her daughters her plans.

She was terrified.

The garden was looking so beautiful. In this part of the world, the humid spring brought everything to life in such a

rainbow of colors. She sighed deeply. It made her feel calmer just looking at it.

Then she heard the laughter of men. She rounded the corner and there stood Beau and another man. Dear God, they were both hunks. Tall, broad-shouldered, lean. Beau had thick brown hair and the other man, straw-colored. Both had strong, tan arms; both held gardening tools—a hoe and a shovel. She just filled her eyes with them. Must be Beau’s assistant or one of the church maintenance men.

“Lauren!” Beau said, and there was no mistaking the delight in his voice. Her heart soared and she smiled back.

“I never expected to run into you here,” she said. “I wanted to check out the garden. I haven’t been back here in weeks.”

“Lauren, this is my friend, Father Tim. Tim, this is Lauren. We met here one afternoon. I was replacing a few plants and she was enjoying the garden. Then we ran into each other again at a fund-raiser.”

“Nice to meet you,” the priest said. Oh, he was much too handsome to be a priest. She immediately decided a bunch of women probably sought his counsel. Regularly.

“Nice to meet you, too. It’s all looking beautiful. You must have dozens if not hundreds of people spending time here.”

He shrugged. “When there are daytime functions at the church. Sundays, lots of people wander through. A few people come just to see the gardens. Surprisingly few, considering how beautiful it is.” He gazed around thoughtfully, leaning on his hoe. “We need a fountain. Maybe I’ll suggest it to the board. That’ll give them something to discuss for a year and a half.” He chuckled.

“I guess you like to get personally involved,” she said.

“On a day like today, when I have no appointments, it’s a good excuse. You must live around here.”

“Mill Valley. I work in Oakland so this is on my way

home. I discovered this garden a long time ago. My grandmother was a master gardener. She's gone now and so is the garden, I'm afraid."

"How have you been?" Beau asked.

"Well. And you?"

"Great. I have a kid about to graduate high school. My youngest."

She loved the way he talked about his stepsons as if they were his very own. "And I have one graduating college in two weeks. My baby."

"You must have been seven," Father Tim said with a laugh.

"Very nearly," she said. "I was quite young when I married and had children. And here they are—grown. My nest has been empty for a while now but with Cassie's graduation coming up I don't see them coming home except for visits." She took a breath. "It's bittersweet."

"I'm finding it only bitter," Beau said with a laugh. "Drew has no interest in leaving me anytime soon. He's going to UC Berkeley and it's close. Close enough to commute."

"He'll change his mind in short order," Tim said. "Once he sees all the good times on the campus, he'll get interested in leaving home."

Beau thought about this for a moment. "I'm not sure I take comfort in that idea. Trading one set of problems for another."

"You wanted to be alone, remember." Tim laughed.

"Show me what you've got going on here," Lauren asked of the men.

They gave her a nice little tour, introducing her to the lettuces, cabbages, root vegetables, tomatoes and potatoes. Melon and squash vines were growing, flowers appearing where there would be fruit. Cucumber, beans and zucchini vines were snaking all over. Beau had a pumpkin patch started

and Tim showed her the ancient apple trees that surrounded the church.

“Impressive,” she said. “The bounty. You guys do good work.”

“I’m only part-time,” Tim said.

“So am I. I didn’t plant the vegetables,” Beau said. “I tried to give them a design that would maximize their space.”

“You have quite a kale farm going there,” she said.

“You know what I heard about kale? That if you chop it and add coconut milk it’s much easier to scrape into the trash.”

She laughed but then she said, “I have some good recipes for kale. Kale and quinoa.”

“Mm. Sounds delicious,” Beau said, making a face.

The three of them talked about vegetables and flowers for about fifteen minutes while Tim and Beau spread fertilizer. Lauren, wearing a skirt and low pumps, couldn’t get into the dirt, though she wished she could join them. She did bend over and pull a weed here and there.

She looked at her watch. “I’d better head home. I was going to stop at the store and I always get sidetracked...”

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Beau said.

“It was nice meeting you, Father,” she said.

“I hope to see you again, Lauren.”

Beau kicked the dirt off his shoes before starting down the walk. At first he had his hands in his pockets but within only a few steps, his right hand rested at the small of her back. It felt so protective somehow, as though keeping a light hand on her to be ready if she stumbled or tripped or was suddenly in the path of a speeding train. Brad always gripped her elbow. A bit too tightly. Not escorting her but steering her.

“I’m glad I happened to be here when you stopped by, though I know it was probably the last thing you expected,” he said.

“It was, but I’m glad, too. I know it’s meaningless but just knowing you’re going through something similar... Really, I planned to wait for a time when I felt secure and comfortable to ask you...”

He stopped walking and looked into her eyes. His were dark, smoky blue and heavily lashed. She smiled. She had extra lashes applied so she wouldn’t need too much mascara but this guy who liked to dig in the dirt had all the lashes in the world.

“I hope I don’t make you feel insecure or uncomfortable. What are you going through that’s similar? You can ask me anything. I’m pretty much an open book.”

She took a deep breath. “How did you tell your boys you were getting a divorce?”

He put a comforting hand on her upper arm. “Our situations are probably different. Pamela told them she was moving out. She needed a breather, she said. She might be filing for divorce, she said, but she hoped a little separation would help. Then I had to tell them I wasn’t willing to try again. But I also told them I wasn’t going anywhere, that they were my boys and I loved them.”

“And that was enough?”

“I thought so at the time. We’ll see.”

“I have to tell my daughters,” Lauren said. “They love their father. They tiptoe around him, but I know they care about him.”

“Good that they care,” he said. “That’s a good thing. I’m sure he’s a great father.”

“No... I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “But that’s all too complicated. I just want to know how to tell them.”

“Lauren, they probably already know. They live with you. Once you know how you feel and what you want, you have to be clear and honest. Don’t expect them to be supportive.

Aw hell, what do I know? I'm no expert. Our attempts at marriage counseling have been pretty dismal."

"Ours, too!" she said. "Brad walks in the door with a mission to win over the counselor! Within ten minutes she's thinking...it's almost always a woman...she's thinking the poor man has a nagging, half-crazy gold digger trying to bleed him dry of all his hard-earned money!"

All Beau could say was, "Gold digger?"

"Brad's older than I am," she explained. "He was a surgeon when we married. He's very successful. His family was rich. As I mentioned, mine was not."

"But you're a chemist. A working chemist," he said. "You're obviously not laying on the daybed watching your soaps and having your nails done."

She hid her hands. He smiled and pulled them out. They were lovely, manicured nails, soft hands, but not because she was self-indulgent. She took care of herself. "I do my own most of the time. I get an occasional manicure but I just can't sit still for it."

"It's not a crime to be able to afford something like this. Pamela gets completely redone every six weeks. Maybe we have more in common than I thought," he said. "Is your husband a little overpowering?"

She nodded.

He chuckled. "If you knew Pamela..."

"Overpowering?"

"She makes the rules," he said. "Every couple of years she gets restless. Has he left you?"

"Never," she said. "Not physically. He's a very difficult, high-strung man. He knows everything. He has a bit of a temper."

Beau's face darkened with a low crimson brewing under his tan. "He hits you?"

She shook her head, shame preventing her from talking about what he did. What he did was so subtle. He hurt her in small ways that no one would ever notice. He had to have control. He was in total control all the time and if anyone got in his way or argued with him, he would fight back until he exhausted his opponent and they gave up or gave in. He belittled her. He loved reminding her she came from nothing. "I really should go," she said a little nervously. She wasn't afraid of being caught talking to a gardener in broad daylight at a church. She was nervous about exposing herself too much. If people knew how much she'd put up with, how could they respect her? She no longer respected herself.

"Wait," he said. "Lauren, who do you have to talk to?"

"I have family. My sister. I have friends. They're not all close but there are a couple I can confide in," she said. "There's Ruby. She was my supervisor at work but she's fifteen years older than I am and she's retired now and yet we've been close for a long time. It's just that..." Ruby's husband had been ill.

"I know marriage counseling hasn't worked out. Mine hasn't, either. Maybe she's like your husband, put the two of us in a room and Pamela has to win. She'll do anything to win. But maybe you should think about your own counselor. Just for you. Someone to help you get through the rough patches."

She had done that once, on the sly, a secret counselor. Maybe she should revisit that idea. "Do you have your own counselor?" she asked.

"I don't," he said. "It's been suggested and I might go that way yet. Right now, things are manageable. Not fun but manageable."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said.

"Listen..." He paused and glanced away. "I'd like to see you again. Is that possible?"

“Probably not. A complication right now...”

“I’m not suggesting anything illicit, but if you want someone to talk to... I know I wouldn’t mind having someone to talk to.”

“I can’t depend on a man right now, not even for talking.”

“I wouldn’t want that, either,” he said. He pulled out a card. “That’s my cell number. If you want a cup of coffee. Or if you’re sitting on a park bench worrying about things...”

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s doubtful I’ll call.”

“I understand,” he said. “It’s an offer.”

“But you’re a busy guy and I’m a virtual stranger.”

“Doesn’t really feel that way,” he said. “Here we are, two people going through divorces with grown kids to deal with and... You know. It just happened that way. Neither one of us ran an ad or signed up for online dating.”

“I appreciate the offer,” she said, smiling.

“We’ll run into each other again,” he said. “Meanwhile, hang in there.”

Father Tim was leaning on his hoe, waiting for Beau in a stance that looked like the old farmer stance, except that Tim was anything but an old farmer. Plus he was grinning mischievously, ready to give Beau the business. “Your friend Lauren is very attractive.”

“Stop looking. You’re supposed to be a priest,” Beau said, lifting his shovel.

“A priest, not a corpse,” he said with a laugh. “Did you notice her eyes are violet?”

“Must be contacts,” Beau said. “No one actually comes with eyes that color.”

“If they’re born from a god and a high priestess.”

“Spread the manure on the ground, Father.”

He had noticed everything about her. He loved the sound

of her voice, her easy laughter, her rich and soft brown hair that fell to her shoulders. It was the color of mahogany. He loved her sass when he ran into her at the fund-raiser and noticed that when the subject turned to her husband, her marriage, it sucked the confidence right out of her. She had that lean and strong look, like a thoroughbred. She was tall and she had kind of big feet, but tall women had to have a sturdy base or they'd blow over in the wind. And that thought made him smile secretly.

"You're seeing her?"

"No. She's going through a divorce. Or will be soon. No, I haven't been seeing her. It's like she said, we met accidentally a couple of times, that's all."

"How do you know about the divorce?"

Beau leaned on his shovel. "I told her I was separated. The next time we met she said she'd be in the same spot before long. So here we are, strangers with grown kids, getting divorced..."

"What are her issues?" Tim asked.

"I have no idea, Tim. We're not close friends."

"But you want to be," Tim said, then wisely shut his mouth and turned back to spreading fertilizer.

It was true. He wanted to be. "That was the last thing I was looking for," Beau said. "Pamela kind of cures you of women. She doesn't look like the kind of woman who'd make you want to jump off a very tall building, does she? But she's—"

"Pamela needs help, Beau. She'll never get it, but she's so temperamental and narcissistic, she's not going to function well in a relationship. Medication and counseling could help her but she's probably not open to that idea."

"I don't know if it's even been suggested," Beau said. "The mood swings almost killed me. And trying to make herself happy with things—outrageously expensive shoes or purses.

And a better man. She always says she'd left the relationship before the man but I don't think so... Then when the grass isn't really greener, she comes home."

Of course Beau had told Tim all this before. Tim had been back four years now, came home to find his closest friend mired in a mess of a marriage with a selfish and manipulative woman.

"But I'll be forever grateful to Pamela for giving me a chance with those boys," Beau said. "They're good boys. When it's the three of us, when we go camping or fishing or hiking, we have a good time. One who thinks too much and one who lets everything go."

"Don't get yourself in a complicated situation with a beautiful woman who's trying to leave her husband," Tim said.

"Don't sin?" Beau asked.

"That's probably asking a bit much," Tim said with a laugh. "It's just that there's an intensity about Lauren..."

"Well, what would you expect? She's obviously pretty worried about what's coming. She asked me how I told the boys. She has to tell her daughters."

"I know you want to help her," Tim said. "I'd just like you to remember, Pamela needed support when you met her. She'd just come out of a bad relationship and found you to help her pick up the pieces."

"Hey, I don't know this woman, okay? But she doesn't seem like a Pamela! Manure on the plants, Father."

"All right. Don't get testy."

"I'm not," Beau said, digging a shovelful of fertilizer out of the split bag.

But he was. He was annoyed because Tim could be absolutely right. When he met beautiful, sexy Pamela, he didn't see a selfish, impatient, hard-to-please woman with a short attention span. Oh no—he saw a vulnerable and sweet

young woman saddled with two hard-to-manage little boys, a woman so grateful to have a good, steady man in her life, a man interested in the parent-teacher conferences. It was a couple of years before he met the other Pamela. Oh, he'd seen hints of her here and there, but they were so fleeting he convinced himself that everyone has their bad days.

Lauren, at first glance, seemed like a good woman with a strong moral compass. She couldn't meet him even just to have someone to talk to if it could become a distraction, a complication. She wanted to be sure her daughters were informed in the best way of what was coming. She didn't trash the husband she was leaving, yet it was clear in her eyes and what little she said, she was in a bad situation. When he asked if he hit her, she rubbed her upper arms and said, "No." She was beautiful. Sweet and sensitive.

And in two years they could be at each other's throats. She could be railing at him about how dull he was, how uninteresting, how inattentive. He didn't dance. He had quiet friends. He didn't want to party. She could be explaining how her life had become unfulfilling, how her needs were not being met...

...how her sex life needed to be recharged.

"There were red flags with Pamela," Tim said. "You told me all about them, how obvious they were, how you convinced yourself you were overreacting because most of the time things were good. And besides, no one's perfect. You admit you have failings. In fact, you're a little too eager to admit your—"

Beau stopped shoveling and stared at his friend. "Stop reading my mind."

"Sorry," Tim said. "I wasn't sure I was."

"You do it all the time and it pisses me off."

"I said I was sorry. So, we can count on you for basketball Thursday night?"

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Father?” a female voice said from the walk. “I’m sorry to interrupt you. I was just wondering...”

“Angela! How wonderful to see you! What brings you to my neighborhood?”

“A fool’s errand, I think. It’s still so early in the spring, but my shelves are bare of the fresh stuff and my clientele could use some greens. It was just a gamble, that you might have some lettuce that came in early.”

“Beau, meet my friend Angela,” Tim said. “She operates a food bank in Oakland. It’s where a lot of our fresh stuff from the garden ends up.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Beau said. He couldn’t help but notice how Tim’s eyes lit up. He also noticed how beautiful the Latina woman was, black hair in a single braid down her back. Beau guessed she was about thirty. Her eyes danced as she was focused more on Tim than Beau. She wore tight jeans with rips in the knees, hoodie tied around her waist. She was lovely. And Tim’s entire mood changed.

“We don’t have anything yet but I’m friendly with the produce manager at the big Safeway. One of my parishioners. Let’s go see if he’s clearing out produce. I bet we’ll get something, no matter what his stock looks like. Let’s go in your car, then you can drop me back here.”

“I knew you’d help if you could,” she said, smiling so beautifully.

“Let’s go then,” he said. He took her elbow to guide her, walked her away from the garden. He leaned down to talk with her and they laughed together.

Tim never looked back at Beau.

“Interesting,” Beau said. Then he proceeded to spread fertilizer.

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# LORI FOSTER

## Sisters of Summer's End

A NOVEL

"Brimming with heart, heat and humor."

—JILL SHALVIS, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR,  
ON WORTH THE WAIT



## CHAPTER ONE

After dropping her son off at school, Joy Lee returned to Cooper's Charm, the RV resort where she worked and lived. It was backtracking since she had an appointment near the school later this morning, but it wouldn't do to show up a half hour early.

Actually, nothing in the small town of Woodbine, Ohio, was too far away. In fifteen minutes she could drive to the school, the park, the grocery...or visit the new owner of the drive-in, who she'd be meeting today.

Hopefully Mr. Nakirk would continue to work with her. As the recreation director of the park, she and the past owner had put together various events with a lot of success. Halloween was coming up and she didn't want to have to completely restructure a tried-and-true camper favorite.

Coming through the grand entry of the resort, Joy couldn't

help but admire the beauty of it. She'd been seeing the same gorgeous scenery for six years now, yet it never failed to soothe her.

She'd found peace here, a kind of peace she hadn't known existed. Now she couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Large trees, currently wearing their fall colors, lined the property and served to add privacy to the costlier campsites.

A wooden walk bridge divided a pond from the large lake. Wooden cabins were scattered about, with plenty of lots for RVs and level, grassy areas for campers who preferred a tent. Even the playgrounds were well maintained, colorful and attractive.

Deciding a cup of coffee wouldn't hurt, Joy headed for Summer's End, the camp store. Maris Kennedy, a woman close to her own age, always had coffee ready. She also worked nonstop and treated everyone like a friend.

When Joy came into the camp store, Maris was busy wiping down the tops of the dining booths. She glanced up and said, "Hey."

In so many ways, Joy admired Maris. For one thing, the woman never seemed to tire. She opened early, kept it open late and rarely slowed down throughout the day. During the busiest season, Maris employed part-time help, but she handled the bulk of the responsibility herself.

Maris apparently preferred it that way.

Another admirable thing? Maris *always* managed to look fantastic with her dark blond hair in a high ponytail and a shirt at least a size too large over her jeans.

Unfair, but Maris was so incredibly nice, and she took such great care of all the employees, Joy forgave her the perfection. "Good morning."

"Is it?" Maris turned her gaze to the window. "Ah, sunshine. Better than rain and clouds, right? Coffee?"

Joy hated to pull her away from her task. “Yes, but I could—”

“I’ll get it.” Toting her little carrier of cleaning supplies, Maris headed to the kitchen. Joy heard her wash her hands, and then a moment later she reappeared with two cups. “I just made a fresh pot.”

Of course she had. Smiling, Joy shook her head.

The café in Summer’s End offered a menu of sandwiches, soups and daily specials. Positioned on the walls behind the seating area, packed shelves held basic grocery necessities and emergency items, as well as things like pool floats, sunscreen and fishing tackle. Campers didn’t have to leave the park once they arrived, and if they didn’t want to make use of the grills, Maris always had something to eat.

Joy took a sip of the coffee, fixed just the way she liked it, and sighed.

Instead of moving on to another chore, Maris stood there with her own coffee. “I’m wondering something.”

“Oh?” She and Maris were friendly; Maris was too nice for anyone *not* to be friendly with her. But Joy wouldn’t say they were close.

Sadly, it had become Joy’s habit to keep some measure of distance from everyone.

“How the hell do you always look so put together?”

Surprised by the question, Joy looked down at her cotton skirt and button-up sweater. “It’s a casual skirt.” At least five years old, like the majority of her wardrobe. She’d updated only a few pieces since moving to the park.

“Yeah, but everything you wear looks like it came from a fashion magazine. Always, no matter what, you’re styled head to toe. There are days I can barely get my hair into a ponytail, and yet you never have a wrinkle.”

Feeling suddenly self-conscious, as well as amused by the irony, Joy laughed.

“Why’s that funny?” Maris asked, looking genuinely curious.

It wasn’t like Maris to linger, so Joy hastily explained, “I was literally just thinking how great you always look. Especially your ponytail! No matter what’s going on, you...glow.”

“Me?” Maris snorted. “*Glow?*”

Even more embarrassed and feeling completely out of her element, Joy continued. “You don’t need makeup or anything. You always look fresh, even when you’ve been working all day. There’s an energy about you.” A wholesomeness that few other women could pull off. It was probably attitude as much as appearance that was responsible for that vibe. Maris personified friendliness, but she owned the space around her in a way Joy could never manage. “Believe me, the natural look works for you.”

When Maris laughed, it made her even prettier, but before Joy could say so, she asked, “So what are you up to today?”

Hmm. Had Maris just deflected? Maybe she was as uncomfortable with compliments as Joy. “Meeting the new owner of the drive-in.”

“That’s right. I heard it changed hands.”

“Very recently,” Joy confirmed.

“Heard the new guy was a gorgeous hunk, too.”

“You...what?” Joy sputtered. *A gorgeous hunk?* Definitely not what she’d hoped for, although it absolutely wouldn’t matter. A man’s appeal meant nothing to her—and good thing, since the guys at the park were all very handsome in varying ways. “Who told you that?”

“I’m like a bartender, you know?” Maris bobbed her eyebrows. “Everyone talks to me. You should try it sometime.”

Generally the small town shared everything about every-

thing. If a squirrel dropped a nut, someone announced it and the gossip spread like wildfire—though Joy was usually the last to hear it since she didn't cultivate those close relationships. Maybe she *should* chat with Maris more, if for no other reason than to keep up on current affairs in Woodbine. "I don't know about the hunk part since I haven't met him yet, but it's not an issue. My only interest is—"

"In recreation for the park, I know." Maris rolled her eyes in a playful way. "But there are all kinds of recreation, and I'm thinking you should try the kind that involves a man."

A nervous laugh trickled out. Since when was Maris Kennedy interested in her lack of a love life? Joy's next thought was whether or not the lack was that obvious.

Did she seem...lonely? Or, oh God, *needy*?

No, Maris more than anyone else at the park understood that a woman didn't need a man to complete her. Joy's life was already full, thank you very much.

To keep things friendly, Joy said with a smile, "Jack gets all my free time. I don't even know when I'd fit in a date." Just to clarify, she added, "Not that anyone is asking."

"Hello," Maris said. "You realize you have a big old blinking *not available* sign on you, right? Guys would—" she pinched the air "—if you'd give them just a teeny tiny bit of encouragement."

"But I don't want to encourage anyone. I mean, not for that reason."

"Why not? Jack's in school now, so don't tell me you can't eke out an hour or two."

"Hmm. Well, I guess technically I could..." Joy sat at the counter and finished with, "But I won't."

"Spoilsport." Maris joined her, taking the stool to her left.

Well, that was new. Sure, Maris conversed with Joy, but usually while she worked. She didn't sit down and join her.

She didn't focus on her.

Unsure what was going on, Joy said, "I don't mean to hold you up..."

"Already got through my routine, so I was ready for a break."

Curious, she asked, "What type of routine?"

"Coffee first—that's as much for me as it is for anyone who might drop in. Then I turn on the oven so I can make cookies from the dough I prepared the night before."

"Wow."

"I dust again, make sure all the chrome shines. Face up the shelves so they look orderly." Maris looked around her store with obvious pride. "There's always food stuff to prep, too. Soup to get in the pot, tea to make. Oh, and I have to put money back in the cash register. I like to take inventory each evening before I head home, so I know what I need to replace the next day. That means sometimes I have to restock the hot dogs or condiments."

Joy shook her head. "I have no idea how you do it all."

"Listen to who's talking, Super Mom."

"I'm not—"

"Yup, you are. I see plenty of moms here at the park, but you make it look effortless."

"Oh. Well, thank you." What else did someone say in this situation? Joy had no idea. Before moving to Woodbine, she hadn't had any friends like Maris. Her social group had been superficial, not down-to-earth. They talked about the latest high-end fashions and the next important social function. None of her so-called friends would have ever owned a wonderful little camp store like Summer's End—and none of them would have ever ended up as a single mom. Losing them hadn't been a hardship.

Other things had been hard. So very, very hard.

Like finding herself alone.

Over the years she'd adjusted, but now she shied away from getting too personal with anyone. Life felt safer that way.

"So." As if she'd been privy to her innermost thoughts, Maris gave her a direct smile—one filled with warmth and sincerity. "I'm just saying if you ever want to go out, or even if you just want some time to yourself, let me know. I'd be happy to help."

Touched by the offer, Joy laid a hand to her heart. After all her effort to keep real friendship at bay, Maris still reached out to her. It meant a lot and made Joy rethink some of her choices.

Honestly, since turning thirty, it had played on her mind, anyway. Perhaps she should begin to open up a little.

Jack certainly had. Then again, her son was one of the most personable, engaging, adorable people...and maybe she was just a tiny bit influenced by the incredible love she had for him.

Jack liked Maris a lot, and vice versa.

That didn't explain why Maris was suddenly so keen on Joy dating. "So...what's going on?"

Maris lifted her brows. "What do you mean?"

Ha! That innocent look didn't cut it. "You're up to something. We've known each other five years now and you've never asked me about dating."

"Sure I did. You just didn't answer much, so I let it go."

Ouch. That could be true.

"Gawd, don't look guilty," Maris said. "Here's the thing. You were quiet, I was swamped, so we let it go, right? But know what? I'm thirty-one now. Freaking *thirty-one*."

"Oh my God," Joy said, amazed that their thoughts seemed to be on the same track. "I'm thirty now, so I know exactly what you mean."

"Yesterday," Maris said, "this lady came in with three kids, one of them a newborn. She and her husband were frazzled

and happy, and they said it was their first vacation after buying their house. Guess how old that woman was.”

Joy said, “Um...thirty-ish?”

“Twenty-nine. Two years *younger* than me.”

“Younger than us,” Joy corrected.

“Right, but you have a kid. A *great* kid.” Maris propped her head on her hand. “My point is, I can’t do the whole family and home thing—but you can. Heck, you’re already half-way there.”

*Family?* Joy almost choked, since her family didn’t want anything to do with her. She knew that wasn’t what Maris meant, though. “You can’t do it...why?”

“It’s not my thing.” Maris shrugged that off with haste. “You’re great at being a mom. Heck, you’re great at everything you do. So the least *I* can do is lend a hand, and maybe give you a push.”

After all that, Maris smiled, as if she’d explained everything to her satisfaction and Joy should be jumping on board.

When Joy just blinked at her, Maris said, “Consider this your push.”

It was almost laughable, but also very sweet. Joy said with feeling, “Thank you so much. Even though I don’t have any hot prospects, I appreciate the offer.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?”

Joy had no real idea, but she nodded, anyway. “The same from me. If I can do anything for you, please just let me know.”

“Great. Know what you can do? After you meet with the new owner, let me know if he’s as gorgeous as everyone says he is. I’m dying of curiosity.”

“Right, okay. Sure.” Wondering if she’d misread this entire conversation, Joy offered, “If you want, I could mention you to him...?”

Maris blinked at her, then laughed. "We're talking about *you*, not me, but thanks." She nodded at the coffee. "Good?"

After another, more cautious sip, Joy sighed. "Mmm. Of course. You make the best coffee."

"True story." Maris suddenly sniffed the air. "Be right back."

*So much for Maris's break.* "Whatever that is smells delicious." Through the last five years, Joy had taught herself to cook by trial and error, but she didn't come close to Maris's skill in the kitchen. From full-blown formal dinners to the soup of the day, Maris worked magic.

Less than a minute later, Maris returned with a plateful of warm chocolate chip cookies. "Fresh from the oven. Want one?"

"I wish I could, but if I don't get going, I'll be late." Joy prided herself on her professionalism. Showing up tardy for an appointment was unthinkable.

"We stay too damn busy, don't we? We should carve out more time to visit." Maris wrapped two in a napkin. "For the road, then."

Joy's mouth already watered. "They won't last five minutes. Thank you." Smiling, she stood and slipped her purse strap over her shoulder. Hesitating, she said, "This was nice. Us talking more, I mean."

"Right?" Moving the cookies under a covered dome, Maris remarked, "We need to do it more often."

Surprised by the idea, Joy nodded. "That would be terrific."

She loved her role of recreation director at the park, and she appreciated all the wonderful people. She thought she did a good job—and yet, she'd never truly fit in. This morning, for a few minutes, Maris had been much more like a friend than an acquaintance. She didn't know if it was seeing the

other couple with the three kids, or because Maris was suddenly more aware of her age.

Whatever the reason, Joy liked it. She liked it a lot.

Twenty minutes later, cold and miserable, Joy peeked in the small door window of the concession stand at the drive-in.

How had things changed so quickly?

The meager overhang barely shielded her from the pounding rain of the pop-up storm. Not that it mattered since she was already soaked to the skin.

*If you could see me now, Maris...*

There wasn't anything fashionable about her drowned-rat appearance. Joy couldn't remember a time when she'd been more of a wreck.

Freak rainstorms could do that to people.

Instead of knocking, she peeked inside again. People didn't usually catch her off guard like this, but for once, she felt totally flummoxed.

Royce Nakirk was everything Maris said he'd be—and more.

He stood over six feet tall, his body very...*fit*, and his dark hair reflected the blue of the concession lights.

Didn't matter. Men, attractive men in their prime, held no significance to her.

She was a mother.

A dedicated employee.

A once-burned, never-again divorcée.

My, oh my, the gossips hadn't exaggerated.

Joy wanted elderly Mr. Ostenbery back. She could deal with him. She could charm and bargain and coerce him without noticing his thighs. Or his shoulders.

Or his...butt.

All she'd ever noticed on Ostenbery was the impressive size of his nose and his genuine smile and kindness.

But this new owner was a different animal. Denim companies should pay him to wear their jeans. The way his T-shirt fit his body—snug in the shoulders, loose over a flat midsection—caused her ovaries to twitch. Until this moment, she'd forgotten she had ovaries.

*Mother.*

*Employee.*

*Divorcée.*

The mantra marched through her brain without much effect. She wondered what Maris would say when she told her about this.

*Would she tell her?*

Yes. It might be fun to share her shock. No doubt Maris would have some witty comment to contribute.

With his back to her, the owner squatted to rinse a cloth in a bucket of soapy water.

Biting her lip, Joy let her gaze track over him.

*Stop it*, she silently demanded, and she wasn't sure if she spoke to herself or the new, much too young and attractive owner.

When he turned, she saw his intent concentration as he scrubbed at a corner of the counter.

Joy almost envied the counter. How long had it been since she'd garnered that much concentration from anyone? Five years? Closer to six?

Scowling, he glanced at the clock, a jolting reminder that she was already fifteen minutes late.

Joy shoved wet hair away from her face and straightened her sodden clothes. No chance now for a good first impression. If the day hadn't dawned with sunshine and clear skies, she wouldn't have left her umbrella behind. The weather had held

long enough for her to almost arrive at the drive-in—and *then* the black clouds had rolled in, tumbling one over the other as if racing for a finish line. A deluge split the skies, flooding a crossroad so she'd had to drive around, making her late.

The irony, of course, was that she could have walked through the woods and arrived at the drive-in within five minutes. Driving meant going around the long way, but she'd considered walking too informal. Her skirt and cute flats, which Maris had admired earlier, wouldn't have survived the woods.

Now it didn't matter, since the look was ruined, anyway.

Before she made things worse, Joy stepped to the side of the little window and gave a brisk knock.

It opened exactly two heartbeats later, making her think Mr. Nakirk must have reached it in one long stride.

Dark eyes went over her in a nanosecond and his frown deepened. He rubbed his mouth—then his gaze pinned her. “Joy Lee?”

Rain blew against her back but she barely felt it as she tried to summon professional confidence. If looking at him through a window had been disturbing, it was nothing compared to seeing him face-to-face.

He waited.

“Yes.” Fashioning her frozen lips into a smile, she lifted her chin. “I'm sorry I'm late.” Good. That sounded formal and sincere. She cleared her throat. “A road was closed and I had to take a detour.” Pretty sure her lips were still smiling, but she turned it up a bit, anyway.

He looked at her mouth and nodded. “Come in.” Belatedly, he stepped back, making room for her. “Wait on the mat. The floor can be slippery when wet. I'll get you a towel.”

“Thank you.” So he wouldn't belabor her tardiness? She appreciated his restraint.

After watching him disappear into a room behind the concession stand, Joy glanced around the interior. She couldn't help noticing that the counter was spotless. The glass fronts of the candy cases sparkled, and even the black-and-white tiled floor shone. Admiring the fresh new appearance, she looked up...and found the same old stained ceiling tiles there.

"Next on the list," he said as he walked back in, startling her. He had an orange striped beach towel in one hand, a utility towel in the other. He stepped into her spreading puddle.

This close, he was taller than she'd realized. At five-nine, few men made her feel small but she had to tip her head back to meet Royce's inscrutable gaze. *And...*her thoughts fled once again. "Pardon?"

His mouth twitched. "I haven't heard that expression since my grandmother passed a decade ago."

*Ohhh, he mentioned his grandmother.* How sweet was that?

No, wait. Joy prided herself on her professionalism, on making a good appearance.

She did not lose her poise over a man's butt or his mention of a grandmother.

But his eyes...they were incredibly dark, framed by short, dense, ebony lashes. In a less welcoming face, she'd have labeled his eyes sinister, but the only thing deadly about this man was his bold appeal.

"Pardon," he said, as if explaining. "It's something Nana used to say. Most people aren't that polite anymore."

He called his grandmother Nana—and why would that make him more appealing?

Joy cleared her throat. "I see." Ah, yes, way to bowl him over with scintillating conversation.

He pointed up. "I meant the ceiling. I'll be replacing the tiles when I can, probably sometime over the winter so it's

done before the next season.” He held the beach towel out to her.

Making sure not to touch him, she accepted it, and noticed that his hands were large, his wrists thick, his forearms sprinkled with dark hair.

*What is wrong with you? So the man has hands. Most men do.* It was no reason for her temperature to spike.

She could probably blame her new distraction on Maris. If she hadn’t steered the conversation toward hooking up, maybe Joy wouldn’t be thinking about it now.

While she patted at her face, trying to look delicate instead of desperate, he dropped the utility towel into the puddle and moved it around with his foot.

Rain continued to drip from her hair, her clothes, even the tip of her nose. Her brain scrambled for conversation, a way to ease the awkward moment.

His nearness made that impossible.

“Well.” Joy plucked at her clinging sweater. Maybe if she didn’t look at him, it’d be easier for her brain to function. “I hope you’ve been properly welcomed to Woodbine.”

“I’ve only met a few people.”

*Enough to make an impact,* she thought.

“Mostly I’ve been stuck in here all week, trying to get it spick-and-span before movie night on Friday.”

“Mr. Ostenbery was a wonderful person, but not a stickler for organization.”

“Or cleanliness,” he said with a smile.

For a second, Joy stared, caught in that smile, before regaining her wits. “You’ve done a great job. Everything shines.”

The drive-in ran on Friday and Saturday nights, from March until the end of October, but Mr. Ostenbery had often hosted other events during off-hours. Joy hoped to continue that practice, and maybe even add to it.

Suddenly Royce flagged a hand toward her face. “You’re washing away. Did you want to use the restroom? I can put on coffee while you do that.”

She looked at the towel where she’d patted her face and saw it smudged with makeup. Oh good Lord. Cold and embarrassment nearly took out her knees. “Yes, if you don’t mind.”

“In fact—” He ducked back behind the counter, snagged a folded T-shirt from a stack, and offered it to her. “You look... chilled.”

Apparently being faced with a sodden woman in ruined makeup didn’t faze him. She accepted the navy blue shirt with the drive-in’s logo on the front. “You want me to change?”

“I want you to be comfortable. Doesn’t seem possible while you’re shivering.” He pushed aside the half door that allowed her behind the concession stand. “This way.”

As they walked, Joy gave herself a pep talk. Never mind that she hadn’t had sex for nearly six years. Forget that he was a specimen with a capital S, for *Sexy*. Disregard that she was sometimes lonely.

She would cease daydreaming about his jeans, and that fine backside in his jeans, and she wouldn’t notice anything else about his body. Or his face. Or even that deep voice.

She would concentrate only on the purpose of this meeting.

“Right here,” he said, pushing open yet another door to show her the most sanitary business restroom she had ever seen. The white porcelain toilet and sink shone, as did the floor and wall tiles. “There’s a dryer around the corner if you need it. For your skirt, I mean.”

That surprised her enough that she almost slipped on her own trail of water. “You have a dryer here?”

“I brought in a small stack unit for convenience. The mop head and cleaning towels get laundered regularly.”

The positives were adding up. Joy mentally tallied them: butt. Nana. Neat freak.

Oh, and those sinfully dark eyes.

*Poise*, she reminded herself. *Professionalism*. “I’ll only be a minute.”

Accepting that, he turned away. “I’ll go get the coffee started.”

*And...* She watched him walk away, already forgetting her lecture.

When he glanced back to say, “Take your time,” she knew that he knew she’d been staring.

Mortified, Joy quickly closed the door, muttering to herself about decorum. One glance in the mirror and her heart almost gave out.

Her pathetic attempts at smiling couldn’t have had any impact at all, not when mascara created comical black stripes down her cheeks. Add her long, light brown hair plastered to her skull, throat and chest, and she was hideous.

The worst, though, was her sweater.

Opaque, yes, but through the soft material her chilled nipples seemed to beg for attention. *Look at me, look at me*.

She couldn’t really blame them, not with a man like that standing around as if such a thing happened every day. She’d certainly never seen anyone like him before. Even in a Photo-shopped magazine ad, the men weren’t so...perfectly *manly*.

It was indecent.

Her nipples were indecent.

Her standing in front of a mirror carrying on a private, one-sided discussion about her nipples was indecent.

In an attempt to recover, her lungs grabbed a deep breath. *Being a good mother is your number one focus. Period. You don’t care about attracting men.*

No, she didn't. So what did it matter if she looked like a murdered body washed up on the shore? It didn't.

As of right now, her hormones were going back in hibernation.

And yet, she frantically scrubbed her face and fretted over her hair.

Royce poured himself a cup of coffee and tried to quit glancing at the clock. *What was she doing in there?*

Changing her shirt and removing the tracks from her face shouldn't have taken twenty minutes. He rubbed the back of his neck and tried not to think about her tall, trim body in wet clothes, but yeah, he may as well tell himself to stop breathing. Pretty sure that image would stick with him for a while.

Funny thing, how a woman nearly drowned in rain and ruined makeup could still look so classy. She had a calm deportment that defied circumstances.

Gifting her with the shirt had been an act of self-preservation, to make it easier for him to refocus on the important stuff.

Not that breasts weren't important. They just weren't important right now.

For several reasons, this meeting had to be his priority. One, he'd just taken over the run-down drive-in and, for some ridiculous reason, he wanted to hear her opinion on his improvements. Two, he needed to first be accepted to the small, intimate town. Working with her would be a start. Three... damn, he'd forgotten three the second he'd opened that door.

He couldn't tell the true color of her hair, not with the wet hanks clinging to her face, but there was no mistaking the green of her eyes. Not just green, but a light green with shades of amber, all ringed in blue.

Pretty eyes. Startled eyes. Joy Lee had stared at him as if he'd somehow surprised her.

She'd sure as hell surprised him.

From everything Ostenbery had told him, he'd expected a polite but formal businesswoman. Maybe she was...usually.

But not today.

Not with the way she'd looked at him.

Damned if he hadn't looked back.

A foolish move since he had zip for free time. Only a month remained of the season for the drive-in, but he planned to make the most of it, to send it off with a bang so that when he reopened in the spring, the locals would remember. Plus he had some ideas for off-season activities, if he could get Joy Lee on board.

First, she'd have to emerge from the bathroom.

He drank more coffee, stewing over the impressions Ostenbery had given. Though the retiree hadn't mentioned Joy's age, his descriptions of her had led Royce to expect someone older. Someone not so attractive.

Someone austere and aloof.

Instead, Joy Lee had openly gazed at him while her face and throat flushed pink.

*Focus*, he told himself. After far too long taking care of others, this was his turn and he wouldn't get derailed by wet clothes clinging to a sweet body, or bold, mesmerizing eyes.

With that in mind, Royce strode to the door and called back, "You okay in there?"

Her head poked out, not from the bathroom but from his utility room. "Yes, sorry. You said I could use the dryer, so..." She smoothed back a long hank of still-damp hair.

Royce realized he was doing it again, allowing his brain to go down paths it shouldn't. At least this time he had good reason for staring.

She stood there in the logo T-shirt, knotted at the side so it'd fit her waist, with the beach towel tied like a toga skirt around her. The colors clashed, but that was the least of the fashion disasters.

Yet somehow, on her, the hodgepodge outfit looked like a trendy statement.

When she laced her fingers together and smiled, he felt it like a kick. Luckily, a kick was just what he needed to get back on track.

Royce cleared his throat. "I pulled some chairs up to the counter for us." The building had a small break room, but it felt too isolated for this meeting.

He gestured for her to precede him, then wished he hadn't as she moved past, slim legs parting the overlap of the towel, giving him a glimpse of calf and thigh.

*Calf and thigh?* he repeated to his libido. This wasn't the 1700s. A man could see legs—gorgeous legs, not-so-gorgeous legs, young legs and old legs, plus a whole lot more—any damn time he wanted. Just because they were *her* legs didn't make them special.

Sure, the past year had been...rough. No sex, no dating. Nothing but all-consuming responsibility, focused around sickness, culminating in the inevitable end of life.

But legs?

Royce followed her, doing his utmost to keep his gaze on the back of her head and not anywhere else.

Being here in Woodbine, rebuilding the drive-in to what it could be, was *his* turn and he wouldn't let pretty green eyes and shapely legs muddle his plans.

Keeping that in mind, Royce got down to the task of building a business relationship, and absolutely, one hundred percent, nothing else.

As Royce parked at the entrance to the RV park three days later, he paused just to enjoy the view. Fall painted the landscape a breathtaking pallet of hues, from bright orange honey locusts, red maples and the purple sweetgum trees, to the softer yellow of aspen trees. The pale blue skies, interrupted by only a few fluffy clouds, met the darker surface of the rippling lake.

As a kid, every tree was a challenge to climb. Now, as an adult, he took in the colors and understood how others would see them—and why his mother had been so single-minded in her pursuit to catch the image.

Dispelling the pang of that memory, he inhaled the crisp scent in the air and glanced around at the plentiful fall flowers.

Without meaning to, he searched the various people moseying around the grounds. Most of them were likely campers, but the second he saw the slender woman, a long, patterned skirt drifting around her legs as she walked, he knew it was Joy.

He'd done his utmost not to dwell on her, but still a tension fell over him that had nothing to do with stress and everything to do with awareness. A gentle breeze teased her long, fawn-colored hair and she looked like a woman with a purpose, striding toward the back of the grounds where she disappeared into a building.

Would he run into her? Would he get close enough to see those remarkable eyes again? It seemed likely, and damned if he didn't hope he would.

*Goals*, Royce reminded himself, starting down the slanted drive from the extra parking area to the park itself. He was here for an appointment with Cooper Cochran, the park owner, not to indulge a juvenile infatuation.

A few campfires burned outside RVs and tents, the wood smoke scenting the air. People waved to him as he passed, friendly in the extreme. The play areas were still and empty, but Cooper had explained that with school back in session,

weekdays were naturally quieter now. Weekends, though, the park would fill, especially toward the end of the month when Joy helped facilitate a site-by-site Halloween event. Guests decorated their campers, kids wore costumes, people handed out candy and the lodge hosted a “friendly” haunted house, appropriate for kids of all ages.

The evening would end at the drive-in with campers getting discounted tickets and a free bag of popcorn. According to Joy, that got the kids settled before dark, when mishaps could happen if they were still out going door-to-door for candy.

His visit to the park today was just to get to know another businessman, since he and Cooper were neighbors of sorts, with the drive-in just through the woods that bordered the property. If it weren't for the tall trees, campers would be able to catch a free movie every weekend, minus sound.

Suddenly Joy came around the corner only a few yards away from him. She had her arms loaded down with more boxes, a large scarecrow under one arm and her sunglasses were slipping.

Royce stepped into her path. “Joy.”

She stopped so abruptly the uppermost box toppled, spilling fall decorations around her feet. Glasses askew, she blinked at him. “Royce.”

“Here.” He reached for the remaining load she still held, setting everything aside while squatting down to collect the things she'd dropped. “Sorry if I startled you.”

“You didn't,” she said a little breathlessly. Pushing her glasses atop her head, she looked him over in that same intent way she had at their first meeting.

“Just throwing things at me, huh?” Trying to ignore the charge of her nearness, Royce replaced everything as neatly as he could, although he had no idea how she'd gotten it all in the boxes in the first place.

Her lips parted. Soft lips. Naked lips.

He was thinking things he shouldn't when she suddenly rushed into explanations.

"I'm running late and I'm afraid my mind was elsewhere..." She trailed off and then knelt, too, quickly rearranging things. "What are you doing here?"

She smelled nice, Royce thought, her scent subtle but sexy. Stirring. Maybe it was the October sunshine on her skin, or the warmth of her hair. He breathed her in before explaining, "I'm meeting Coop in the camp store. I'm a little early yet. Let me help you carry this stuff."

As they both reached for the same box, their hands bumped.

She jerked back to her feet. "Oh no." A nervous laugh. "That's okay. Really."

*Why* she was nervous Royce couldn't guess. He watched her, trying to figure her out—trying to figure himself out, too. He had no business lingering here, deliberately running into her and then prolonging his time with her.

Yet there was a pull, opposite of what he told himself he should be doing. Business, that was number one. Building a relationship in the community. Establishing himself and, therefore, the drive-in needed to be his goal.

So why was it so hard to look away from her? Seeing the flush on her face, he had to assume she felt it, too.

Like him, did she find it equally alarming and exhilarating?

Without taking his gaze off her, he slowly stood with two boxes in his hands as a natural barrier so he didn't do something really dumb. Like step up against her.

Breaking the spell, Royce asked, "Where to?"

After a deep inhalation, she forced a bright smile and snagged up the scarecrow. "This way."

Following her through the grounds, Royce continued to admire...well, the area, sure. It really was a well-laid-out,

nicely tended park. But he also admired Joy. The sway of her hips. The flow of her hair. How everyone greeted her with smiles.

That is, everyone except the guy who pulled up on a golf cart, a toolbox beside him on the seat. Shoving sunglasses to the top of head, he frowned at Joy. "Hon, I told you I'd get this stuff for you. Don't you need to go?"

Royce remembered her saying she was running late. He waited, unsure who the young man might be, but assumed he worked for the park.

"I'm leaving as soon as I drop this stuff off at the lodge." She gestured back to him. "Royce is helping."

The man eyed him. "Royce, as in the new owner of the drive-in?"

"One and the same." Juggling the boxes in one arm, Royce reached out a hand. "Royce Nakirk. Nice to meet you."

"Daron Hardy, handyman extraordinaire, or so I'm told." He accepted the handshake. "You going to do a horror night for Halloween? Something really scary that'd make a sexy lady friend want to cuddle?"

Royce glanced at Joy.

She gasped, then quickly denied, "Not me!" as if that idea were the most absurd thing she'd ever heard.

Daron grinned. "Could be you, hon. You fit the bill." To Royce, he said, "Sadly, Joy gives me the cold shoulder. To hear her tell it, there's only one guy in her life."

Well, shit. Royce automatically looked at her hands, though he already knew she didn't wear a ring. Not married...but that didn't guarantee she wasn't involved in some other way.

Not liking that idea at all, he gave his attention to Daron. "We'll have a double dose of kid-friendly flicks that night, but leading up to it we're playing movies that'd probably work for

you.” He mentioned the latest blood-and-gore movie that’d hit the big screen.

“I’ll take what I can get.” Back to Joy, Daron asked, “So you’ll be there Halloween weekend for the kids’ flick, right? If Jack can stay awake long enough?”

Jack? Royce watched her get more flustered. “Yes, we’re planning to attend that weekend, along with many of the families from the park.” She adjusted her purse strap. “Speaking of Jack, maybe I’ll need your help, after all, or I really might be late.” She strode around to the back of the golf cart. “Drop this stuff off for me, okay?”

“Sure thing.”

Royce watched the younger man, and realized he had no real interest in Joy. He was friendly in a flirting way, but he wasn’t at all serious about it.

Already walking away, Joy said over her shoulder, “Royce, thank you for your help. Just give the boxes to Daron. He’ll take care of it.” She practically jogged away, her skirt dancing around her calves as she headed toward a parking area.

Daron cleared his throat in an exaggerated way, drawing Royce’s attention. “Seriously, dude, you’re wasting your time.”

“How’s that?” Pretending he hadn’t just been watching her, Royce unloaded the boxes onto the rear-facing seat, then secured the scarecrow there.

“Joy doesn’t date. Her whole focus is on Jack.”

“And Jack is...?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

Judging by Daron’s wide grin, he wasn’t fooled. “Her five-year-old son. Cute kid. A little shy.”

Royce forgot that he wasn’t interested in a relationship. He wasn’t even interested in dating. He felt like he’d just taken one in the gut. “She’s a mother?”

“Head to toe.”

“But...single?” His brain stuck on that fact, regardless of how Royce tried to block it.

“Always has been, far as I know.”

Royce looked back and saw her driving out of the park in a small yellow Ford hatchback. It took a strong woman to raise a kid alone. He knew that firsthand.

“Again, fair warning,” Daron said. “Joy assigns all men to the ‘casual friendship’ zone. In all the time she’s been here, plenty have tried to get past it with no luck.”

Royce shot him a look. “You?”

Laughing, Daron tugged off his hat to run a hand through messy brown hair, then jammed it back on his head. “Not me, no. I could say I don’t play where I work, but truth is, she’s a mom through and through. She’s also a really nice person, a hell of a hard worker and she’s never given me a single hint of interest. Fact, most times she treats me like a bigger version of Jack.”

Huh. From what Royce could tell, Daron was a midtwenties, fit, decent-looking *man*—but Joy saw him as a kid? Fascinating.

She sure as hell hadn’t looked at *him* that way. Royce was rusty, no doubt about it, but he figured he could still pick up on sexual tension. “So she’s going somewhere to get her son?”

“Kindergarten. If you’re into lost causes, she’ll be back in half an hour.”

He wouldn’t mind seeing her again, but it wasn’t the reason for his visit. “Actually, I’m meeting with Coop, and now *I’m* late.” But only by two minutes. “Hope I’ll see you Halloween night, if not before.”

## CHAPTER TWO

It was cowardly, Joy knew, but she didn't trust this new version of herself. So instead of heading directly back to the park, she took Jack to a restaurant for fried chicken and biscuits.

Even though he was thin, Jack was a bottomless pit and he finished off two legs and a biscuit while Joy nibbled on a wing.

Her thoughts refused to veer long from Royce.

Now that he knew she was a mother, what would he think?

It didn't matter, but still...

"What's wrong, Mom?"

Joy gazed at her son's big brown eyes and smiled. "Nothing. I just have a busy day yet ahead."

Warily, he eyed her around a third piece of chicken. "Will I get to play?"

Unable to resist, Joy stroked his fair hair. "We play every night, don't we?"

"Could I play longer?"

Oh, that wheedling tone. Jack was at the age where he negotiated everything. She loved each new facet of his growth, watching him expand his horizons. He was still shy, but kindergarten had helped him to make friends. And thank God for that because while the summer had provided constant entertainment, the park would now be incredibly quiet until spring. If it weren't for school, he'd spend all his days without peers.

For the thousandth time, Joy questioned her decision in moving to the Cooper's Charm resort. At the time, she'd been desperate for work that would accommodate a baby and allow her to be both caregiver and breadwinner.

Because there was no one else.

Cooper Cochran hadn't owned the park long when she'd shown up largely pregnant with a nonexistent résumé and promises that she'd be perfect for the job, vowing that she'd work harder than anyone else possibly could. At that time, promises and determination were all she had to offer. She'd felt so fragile, so utterly alone, that when he hired her, she'd broken down into tears.

Badly needing a positive focus, and grateful for his confidence, she'd thrown herself into the job, going above and beyond the requirements, and in that process, she'd found a new love: organizing recreational activities for kids and adults alike. Jack had grown up with the other employees as family—more so than her real family would ever be. She, however, still kept others at a distance.

Trust, once broken, instilled a very real fear.

"Tell you what," Joy said, leaning an elbow on the table and smiling at him. "We'll grab an ice cream at the camp store first, then play for an hour if you promise to help me with some of my work afterward." On her strict budget, ice creams were a treat, but she needed to see Maris, anyway. Jack didn't know that, and she'd found he was really great at sort-

ing craft items, as long as she gave very clear instructions. He liked helping out, plus it kept him busy—and close.

“Deal!”

The way Jack’s face lit up had Joy grinning, too. With their frugal lifestyle, it wasn’t often he got to eat out and have ice cream. She’d grown up the opposite, indulged to a ridiculous degree. Rarely were there meals at home, and if she’d chosen a diet of jelly beans and milk shakes, no one would have denied her.

Only in hindsight had Joy realized it was lack of interest, not an excess of love, that had motivated her parents. The hard truth was forced on her at twenty-four, and in some ways, it felt like her life truly began after that moment.

Now, without her family’s influence, she lived on a shoe-string budget—and it didn’t matter. Her life couldn’t be happier. She had Jack, so she had everything she really needed. She’d give her son the more important things in life, like her attention, guidance, protection and supervision. And yes, unconditional love.

And if occasionally, when in her bed alone, she felt an undefined yearning...well, that didn’t matter, either. She wouldn’t let it.

Cupping her son’s face, Joy put a smooch on his forehead. “You are the most perfect little boy I could ever imagine.”

“Mom,” he complained, wiggling away as his dark eyes quickly scanned the room, ensuring no one had witnessed her affection. He didn’t mind hugs, cuddles and kisses, but only when they were alone.

Hiding her smile, Joy cleared away their mess, and within minutes they were headed back to the park. Of course, with Jack buckled up in the back seat with a picture book, her thoughts returned to Royce.

The morning after their first meeting, she’d given her re-

port to Maris, who'd been suitably interested and impressed. But as far as Joy knew, Maris hadn't met him in person yet—unless the introductions had happened earlier today, after Joy left for the school.

Would Maris be as impressed with his looks as Joy had been?

Somehow Joy doubted Maris would lie awake at night thinking about him. And for sure, Maris wouldn't have let his presence at the park chase her away.

Or more accurately, Joy had let her attraction for him get in the way of her responsibilities.

Since she'd be seeing him more all through October, she had to figure out how to keep her physical reactions to him in check.

*Or you could just grab one more indulgence?*

*Oh no. Definitely no.* Royce hadn't shown any particular interest, and when would it be possible, anyway? Ruthlessly, Joy snuffed that idea.

But after she parked and she and Jack headed for Summer's End, she spotted Cooper Cochran standing near the scuba shack, at the edge of the boat ramp. Two others stood to his left on the shore, their wet suits rolled down to their waists.

One of them was Baxter, the scuba instructor. Joy had seen him and his very fine physique a great many times. She took in the sight of him the same way she admired art—with an eye of appreciation, but nothing more. *He* didn't keep her awake at night.

However, the other man was... Royce.

Seeing him like that, chest bare, dark hair slicked back, sun glinting off his wide shoulders, caused a very different sort of appreciation. Her heart raced, her stomach seemed to take flight and she couldn't breathe.

She forgot her resolve. She forgot everything.

Good God, she felt...*alive*.



“Well?” Coop asked him.

Now that they’d peeled down the wet suits, Royce felt goose bumps assault his torso. “Other than freezing my balls off, it was awesome. I haven’t done this since college. I’d love to visit again, longer next time.” He’d forgotten how good it felt to just relax. After the endless obligation, he’d been elbow-deep in the effort to restart his life. Fun and recreation hadn’t factored in.

It still couldn’t, not in any significant way. But the occasional swim? Losing his worries while exploring the bottom of the lake—a lake that had once been a quarry so it still offered a unique underwater landscape? That he could manage.

“You’re a natural.” Baxter set his gear aside, tossed Royce a towel and used one himself. “The water is colder now than in the summer, but clearer, too, since we don’t have any swimmers churning it up.”

It wasn’t the water that bothered Royce. The wet suit had insulated him from that. But the chilly October air? An altogether different matter. The fins made it tough to walk, so going into the shack to change wouldn’t have made sense. If he did this again—and he hoped to—he’d be better prepared for exiting the lake.

Coop took Royce’s mask and tank. “The season ends for guests after Halloween, but Baxter still dives as long as there isn’t ice.”

While briskly drying, Baxter shrugged. “Some men jog. I dive.”

Royce looked out over the rippling surface of the lake. A bird skimmed low, squawking, and in the distance a large, silver fish jumped. Something about the combo of sun and water and sand filled him with peace. “If you don’t mind, I’ll join you a few more times before winter lands.”

"I'd be glad for the company," Baxter said.

"Thanks." As Royce turned, he roughly ran the towel over his head. The sun warmed his shoulders, but the sharp breeze cut over him.

The park was a thing of beauty this time of year. He gazed around the empty beach and foamy shoreline—then paused when he noticed Joy some distance to his left, standing by the entrance to the camp store, a small boy holding her hand.

She seemed surprised to see him, almost frozen...and then he remembered he was shirtless. Joy wasn't staring at his face.

Her gaze was on his body.

The sight of her chased away much of his chill. In fact, as he watched her, he forgot about everything, including the two men standing with him.

"You've met Joy, right?"

Drawing his gaze from her, Royce glanced at Coop. It wouldn't do to give the wrong impression. "Yeah, she came by the drive-in the other day." He snagged his T-shirt from the picnic table and pulled it on. The wet suit, rolled down to his hips, would have to stay in place for now. All he wore under it was his boxers, but he sat to remove the fins.

When he glanced up again, he saw Joy and the boy darting into the store.

It had been a hell of a long time since he enjoyed a woman's attention. Too damn long. Yet he couldn't deny what he felt: pleasure that she looked at him, pride that she appeared to like what she saw and, worse, an almost instinctive urge to reciprocate her interest.

"That's Jack."

Hearing the fondness in those two words, Royce turned to Coop. "Her son?"

"Good kid," Baxter said as he stripped off his suit without

a care. Of course he'd thought ahead and worn compression shorts underneath. "Friendly but shy with strangers."

"Joy's protective of him." Coop moved around to the other side of the table. "We all are."

A warning? Royce wasn't sure how to take that.

While he was trying to decide on a reply, Coop said, "No one's around. You're good to go."

Royce realized that Coop had his back to him while he kept watch for anyone who might come along. Joy and her son were nowhere to be seen.

"Might take me a minute. I'm not as practiced as Baxter." He struggled out of the wet suit and quickly drew on his jeans. As he zipped up, he said, "Thanks." The T-shirt stuck to damp places on his body, so he shoved his arms into his flannel shirt before sitting down to pull on his socks and shoes.

Was it his imagination or had the temp dropped ten degrees?

Baxter clapped him on the shoulder. "Have Maris pour you a cup of coffee and I'll store the gear."

Not wanting to start off on the wrong foot, Royce shook his head. "I'll help."

Baxter offered a friendly smile. "Not this time."

"For today only," Coop explained, "you're a guest." He indicated the open door of the camp store that Joy and Jack had entered. "Next time you can learn the ropes."

"Ask Maris to pour me one, too," Baxter said, already striding off with the tanks and fins. "I'll join you in a few."

Royce looked at Summer's End. Sunshine bathed the entry, shielding the doorway like a yellow curtain so that he couldn't see anyone inside. The faint strains of country music drifted out, along with the low drone of conversation. And, damn it, he couldn't deny the jolt of...excitement? Anticipation?

He wanted to see Joy again.

With another absent, “Thanks,” for the men, he started forward.

The unwelcome, heated interest intensified as he neared. Everything else faded away; he no longer heard the squawking of gulls, the constant washing on the shoreline or the rustling of drying leaves in the trees. The closer he got, the deeper he breathed and the warmer he felt.

And then he heard her voice.

“What do you mean?” A nervous denial. “I wasn’t staring.”

“Give it up,” another woman said. “You were eyeballing the new guy big-time. Your face is still hot, too.” He heard a laugh that was both soft and husky. “It’s not a crime to admire a nice bod, you know.”

Flattered, Royce looked down at himself and gave a mental shrug. Yes, he’d stayed fit, mostly through strenuous physical labor. As a mobile sawmiller, he’d been able to tailor his hours to make a living wage while also meeting his other obligations.

Joy’s pause sounded loud in Royce’s ears.

Yes, he’d picked up on her scrutiny, but it had been so long since he’d done the whole man/woman thing, he liked having her awareness verified by someone else.

Suddenly Joy groaned. “All right, so I stared.” In a lower voice, she added, “I thought he’d be gone by now, so I hadn’t expected to see him, and then he came out of the lake half-naked...”

“And lookin’ fine,” the other woman said with humorous admiration. “I’m glad to know you still have a pulse. And before you get offended—”

“I wouldn’t,” Joy said, her tone tinged with self-directed disgust. “I know I come off as cold.”

“Not cold at all. You’re one of the nicest, most considerate people I know. But around men, you’re always disinterested.

Maybe even oblivious. God knows plenty of campers have tried to get your attention.”

Joy dismissed that. “Not seriously.”

“Come on.” The other woman guffawed. “I get that your big focus is on Jack, and he’s a sweetheart because of it. But every single guy—and some of the not-so-single guys—do their best to get your attention, and they all fail.” Her voice went lower, soft with understanding. “I’ve been trying to tell you, Joy. You’re allowed to have some fun, too.”

Stopped just outside the doorway, Royce paused. So he was expected to be fun? Hell, fun had been absent for so long he wasn’t sure he’d recognize it anymore. But now, finally, he was close to having a new life.

This was no time to lose sight of his end game.

“I know what you’ve been telling me,” Joy said. “And I’ve explained that I can’t get involved. Between my job and being a single mom, I have zilch for free time.”

“I’m not saying you have to get involved. Offer him a night. An afternoon. Hell, I’ll watch Jack for you right now and you could—”

Joy laughed while shushing the other woman at the same time. “You don’t even know if he’d be willing.”

The woman gave a soft snort. “Oh, he’d be willing. Men are *always* willing.”

Not necessarily true, Royce knew. He had a stretch of celibacy to prove it. But was he ready now? He couldn’t deny the way his cock jumped at the idea, though as a grown man, he made decisions with his brain. Still, other parts of his body rallied persuasions, ganging up against better sense and—

“Who are you?”

He’d been so enthralled by the women’s conversation Royce hadn’t noticed the little fair-haired boy approaching until he spoke.

Silence swelled around him until it picked up a pulse beat. Or maybe that was his own guilty conscience now drumming in his head. Listening in equaled eavesdropping...and he only just realized he was doing it.

In his defense, he'd been so surprised that he hadn't even thought about it. Instinct alone had kept him standing there, taking it all in.

Avoiding looking toward Joy, Royce turned his attention down to the kid. Chocolate ice cream dripped over the small pale hand gripping a cone. It also smudged the boy's mouth, and even the tip of his button nose.

Grinning, he held out his hand. "I'm Royce Nakirk, a neighbor of sorts since I own the drive-in."

Big brown eyes rounded comically wide as they stared at Royce's hand. Though he felt the women watching, no one said a word. Finally Jack shoved the cone into his left hand and held out his very sticky right hand. "I'm Jack Lee."

Royce took one step in the door, snagged a few napkins from the first booth and then knelt down. "Nice to meet you, Jack." He took the boy's hand—melted ice cream and all—and gave it two careful pumps. That done, he asked, "Mind if I mop up a bit?"

Narrow shoulders rolled in a shrug...and Jack thrust his face up for Royce to clean.

Nonplussed, Royce's grin widened more. He'd meant to tend his own hand, but he wasn't a novice at this sort of thing—although his experience wasn't with kids.

He carefully wiped the boy's mouth and chin.

Suddenly Joy was there, protectively close to her son as she took over, efficiently swabbing his face and hands.

Jack was quick to say, "I'm not done yet." Then to Royce, "She usually cleans me up when I'm done." And back to his mother, with firm insistence, "I'm *not* done, Mom, okay?"

Fighting a laugh, Royce said, "I'm sure your mother will understand that I interrupted things." He looked up at Joy, saw something like panic in her eyes and smiled. *Yes*, he wanted to say. *I heard every word.*

But that would only get him in deeper, and he figured he was already mired ass-deep in feelings he didn't recognize.

"See, Mom," Jack said. "I saw him standin' there and that's why I'm not done." Again to Royce, "Ain't that right?"

The kid was a charmer with his blatant honesty. Royce gave a solemn nod. "Exactly right."

"*Isn't*, not *ain't*." Joy's face softened. "And I'm not rushing you, but if you want time to swing we need to get going soon."

Royce, *still* on one knee, watched Jack jam as much of the cone in his mouth as he could, determined to get every bite.

Instead of getting annoyed as ice cream dripped down his shirt, Joy stroked the boy's hair. "Jack," she said softly. "You'll have Mr. Nakirk thinking you're without any manners at all."

That tone reeked of affection, as did the gentle touch, and it took Royce a moment to refocus.

Coming back to his feet, he looked past Joy—a necessary break from her impact—and asked the woman behind the counter, "Do you have coffee?"

"Do I have coffee," she scoffed. "Only the best coffee in town. Grab a seat and I'll bring you a cup."

"Thank you. One for Baxter, as well, please. He'll be joining me shortly." This woman he could deal with. She was pretty in a more practical way, with dark blond hair held back in a bouncy ponytail, and brown eyes that weren't at all as innocent as Jack's, yet held an all-business mien when she met his gaze.

As Royce moved around Joy, Jack fell into step behind him. Mouth full, he asked, "Do you get to watch movies every night? Do you pick the movies? Do you have a favorite?"

Because her son followed him, Joy did, as well...though she held back a few steps.

"At the drive-in, you mean?" Royce chose a booth in the middle of the store. "Since I run it, I'm usually working when they play. And we only have movies on the weekend, though I wouldn't mind changing that a little, maybe in the future. I pick them, but I base it on what's popular because it's not about what I want to see, right? It's what will bring in an audience."

Jack took all that in, chewed it over in his head and nodded. "I'd like to own a drive-in." Taking the position across from Royce, he balanced his knees on the seat and his elbows on the tabletop. "When my windows are open, I can hear the movies. Sometimes moaning, sometimes screaming."

Lifting his brows, Royce wondered exactly which movies the boy had heard. A horror flick...or something else? "Is that right?"

He nodded and grinned. "Since I can't see it, I make up my own movies to go with the moans."

Royce choked. "Fascinating."

"Jack." Joy tried to interject while still not getting too close. "Mr. Nakirk is expecting a guest. Let's move to another booth."

"Not a guest," the kid argued. "Just Baxter, and he likes me, too."

Too? The boy didn't lack for self-confidence, something Royce considered a good thing. "I'm pretty sure everyone around here likes you," Royce said.

"Of course we do." The other woman reappeared with two cups of coffee, a coffeepot, creamer and sugar on a tray. "What's not to like, right?"

"Agreed." Royce waited until she'd set everything down, making sure it was all out of Jack's way. "I'm Royce—"

"Nakirk, new owner of the drive-in." She winked. "Listen-

ing in goes both ways.” After drying her hands on an apron skirt, she held one out. “Maris Kennedy. I run Summer’s End.”

Her hand was warm, small but strong. “It’s nice to meet you.” As they each pulled away, he looked around. “Seems you have quite the business going here.”

Maris took it upon herself to nudge Jack over so she could sit beside him. “I have all the staples campers might need, basic food stuff, camping items and even a few things for the lake. Plus I run the café. With the end of the season, I won’t prepare daily specials anymore, but if you’re ever in a pinch, let me know. I often throw together lunch or dinner for everyone who works here.”

That didn’t include Royce, since he wasn’t a camp worker. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“No imposition. Coop supplies me with what I need to keep the coffee going for employees—or friends.” Maris smiled at him, putting emphasis on how she said *friends*...as if she expected him to be more?

When her gaze slanted to Joy, he caught her meaning. The lady was a matchmaker, and oddly enough, Royce didn’t mind.

Now that Maris sat, only Joy remained standing—and it felt awkward. “Thank you,” Royce said. “I appreciate the warm welcome.” So far, everyone at Cooper’s Charm had proven to be friendly and easy to like.

Standing, Royce turned to Joy. “Why don’t you sit with us?” *Next to me*. He gestured at the booth seat.

Their gazes held a moment before she forced a smile.

Royce knew she would refuse. Maybe, like him, she was wary of the attraction. He couldn’t blame her. At least on his end, it felt out of place and somewhat disconcerting.

“Jack and I should get going.”

Accepting that, Royce retreated back to his seat.

“But I’d rather talk to Mr. Nakirk,” Jack announced.

The way both Maris and Joy stared at the boy, this must be an unusual request.

“We’re going to the playground to swing,” Joy reminded him.

Jack grabbed more napkins now that he’d finished his ice cream. They quickly shredded against his sticky little hands. “We can swing anytime.”

Without planning it, Royce heard himself say, “You can visit with me anytime, too. I’ll be back to the park off and on, and I don’t live that far away.”

“I can?” Jack bounced. “Can I see how the popcorn machine works?”

“Jack,” Joy said firmly, her tone a mix of reprimand and exasperation. “It’s definitely rude to invite yourself over.”

Maris chuckled.

Royce wondered what Joy objected to most, her impetuous son or the idea of visiting him without the excuse of business.

Or maybe she didn’t like for her son to get too close to men. He gave that brief thought, but given how Coop and Baxter reacted, Jack didn’t lack for male figures in his life.

It would be different, though, for a man who wasn’t a co-worker. The other men in the park would be a constant in Jack’s life.

But a man interested in *her*? That would be a risk for a dedicated mom.

Hoping he didn’t overstep, Royce offered, “I’d be happy to show him around. Maybe that’d be a good field trip for his class?”

Jack cheered, almost toppling the pot of coffee. Royce caught it. “Careful.”

Abashed, Jack bit his lip. “Sorry.”

“I like your enthusiasm, but we don’t want anyone to get

burned, right?" He glanced up at Joy—and caught her staring, her expression almost dazed.

Had she expected him to snap at Jack? Hell, he liked kids being kids. That's how it should be.

Whatever Joy had been thinking, she shook it off. "Jack, we really do need to go."

"You're the only one who doesn't have brown eyes, Mom. Did you know that? But Mr. Nakirk's eyes are really dark." He leaned over the tabletop, this time with more caution, to closely study Royce. "They're maybe even black."

Grinning at the near nose-to-nose scrutiny, Maris patted Jack's back and left the booth. "I have to get back to work." With a touch to Joy's shoulder, she whispered, "Sit, drink the coffee. I'll bring Baxter another," before she walked away.

It occurred to Royce that he was enjoying himself. *Again.* Joy's son was pure entertainment with his frank, inquisitive manner. He was so close now Royce felt his breath.

"Jack," she said again, sliding into the booth. "That's enough."

To let Joy know she shouldn't fret so much, Royce flashed her a smile, then took Jack by the chin and did his own scrutiny.

"Your eyes are pretty dark, too. But you're right. They're not as dark as mine." He turned Jack's face this way and that to study him. "I got my grandmother's eyes. Looks like you got your mother's...ears."

Mouth dropping open, Jack clapped both hands on his ears to feel them, then scrambled over to examine his mother's. Despite his sticky fingers being in her hair, Joy laughed, and that made Jack suspicious.

He shot Royce a look. "You serious?" Again, he felt his ears. "Cross my heart."

Baxter stepped through the open front door, spotted Royce

with Joy and hesitated. Instead of joining them, he went to the counter to speak with Maris.

Damn. Was everyone at the park trying to push them together?

Joy turned to follow his gaze, spotted Baxter and apologized. "I'm sorry. We've interrupted your—"

"My what?" Royce sat back, wanting her to stay a little longer. "My visit was to get to know everyone, and I did." He smiled at Jack. "Including this character."

Frowning slightly, Jack still felt his ears.

Joy let out a slow breath. "I saw you in the water with Baxter."

Hoping she wouldn't be embarrassed, he nodded. "I know."

"Were you cold?" Jack asked. "Mom said I can't swim because it's too cold."

"Your mom is right. Even I won't go in too many more times."

Jack fidgeted. "If you can't swim, do you think you'd want to swing?"

Immediately, Joy was on her feet again. "He has a meeting with Baxter, sweetie. Come on. Time for us to go."

Well, damn. Now that Jack had mentioned it, Royce kind of wanted to swing. He definitely wanted to visit more with Joy. And he hated seeing the disappointment in Jack's eyes.

He got to his feet, saying, "Next time, okay?"

"You mean it?" Jack scrambled out. "You might be too big for the slide. Mom says she is."

Joy rolled her eyes and laughed.

Leaning in, Jack said, sotto voce, "I think she'd fit, but she's chicken."

"Challenged by my own son?" She tickled his ribs. "I'll show you who's chicken!"

Jack squealed with laughter, and that brought Baxter from the counter. “I hope I didn’t break up your visit?”

“Jack and I are off for the swings.” She clasped her son’s hand, silencing his arguments with a firm, “We’ve lingered too long already, especially since I still have a lot to get done.”

“Anything I can help with?” Royce offered, before he could think it over.

Taken by surprise, she shook her head. “Camp stuff. But thank you.”

Inspiration struck, and Royce again knelt down. “Jack, it was nice meeting you.”

“I don’t want to go yet.”

His mouth twitched. It was nice to be liked. “Your mom is the boss, though.”

“I guess.”

“But I was wondering, since you seem like an expert on swings, maybe you could give me some pointers on the old playground equipment at the drive-in. What do you think?”

“Pointers?”

“On what needs to be replaced, what I should add, what rambunctious little boys like most. That sort of thing.”

His whole face lit up and he turned to Joy in a rush. “Can I, Mom? Can I?”

Flushed—likely because she saw through his ploy—Joy waffled. “Um...”

“I’d enjoy seeing you both.” Royce felt it necessary to offer that dose of honesty. Yes, he wanted to see her. Against all logic and in direct opposition to his plans, he wanted that a lot. But he’d also like to visit more with Jack.

For whatever reason, the boy had taken to him.

To let her off the hook for now, Royce said, “Not tonight. Seems we’re all busy. But maybe over the weekend? That is, if your mom has the time?”

Baxter contributed to the cause, saying, "Good idea. Jack is the foremost swing set expert in town."

"I... Okay." Taking two steps back, Joy nodded. "I don't have my calendar with me, so I can't check my schedule—"

"No problem." From behind the counter, Maris said, "I can give him your number. And, Royce, you could leave yours. That way one of you—" she lifted her brows at Royce "—can check in with the other to see what works."

"Fine by me." Royce saw Joy's expression and knew she wasn't quite as eager as Maris. It didn't insult him. Given what he'd heard, this was a big step for her.

And he respected that Jack was her number one priority.

"Well, then." With that vague response and a harried expression directed at Maris, Joy turned to go, prodding a reluctant Jack to follow.

The boy waved and said, "I'll see ya, Mr. Nakirk."

Once they were gone, Maris shook her head. "He never got past Mr."

"I noticed." Baxter sipped his coffee. "Took Joy a month to let Jack call me by name, and only after she knew for sure I had nothing but friendship in mind for her."

"You," Maris said to Royce, striding toward the booth with a plate of cookies, "are different."

"Am I?" Just that morning, Royce would have said he wasn't. The idea of inserting himself into a woman's life, into her son's life, would have been roundly rejected.

But now... Well, now he felt an invisible pull, a need to know her better, to befriend Jack. The things he'd heard, the way he felt when she was near, how much he enjoyed talking with her, even just watching her...it wouldn't go away.

Royce wasn't one to fight a losing battle, and that's what it would be if he tried to resist her. Add in Jack, and he knew he had to pursue things, at least to see where it took him.

He had a better understanding than some exactly how it would be for a single mother, and for a lone boy. Maybe Jack reminded him of himself—though Royce was pretty sure he hadn't been as cute and precocious at that age. Whatever the reasons, he already looked forward to seeing Joy again.

When Maris offered a cookie, he gladly took one. "Will you tell me more about Joy? Jack, too?"

"I'll tell you anything she wouldn't mind you knowing."

Royce laughed at that diplomatic reply. "Spoken like a true friend."

"I'm working on it." Propping a hip against a booth top, Maris shrugged. "Given how I pushed her today..." She grinned, clearly unconcerned. "I might be back at square one, but Joy is the forgiving sort, and she deserves a night off, so here's her number." She took a slip of paper from her apron pocket, then held it out of reach. "Just be sure you don't abuse it."

"I get it." Royce gave her a level look. "I wouldn't pressure her if she's not interested." Besides, he wasn't sure he wanted to move too fast, anyway. He wasn't one hundred percent sure of anything—except that he did want to see her.

"She's interested," Maris assured him. "I could tell. She's just out of practice."

That made two of them, then...yet some things a man never forgot. "Thanks." Royce tucked the paper into his back pocket.

Satisfied, Maris asked, "You guys need anything else?"

Baxter shook his head. "Ridley and I are heading out for dinner tonight."

"And I need to get going soon."

"Then I better get to my chores. Put the plate and cups on the counter when you finish, and give a yell if you need me."

Once Maris disappeared into the back room, Baxter shook

his head. "If you think Joy works hard, she's got nothing on Maris."

Royce knew Coop and Baxter were both married, but he wasn't sure about Maris. "Don't misunderstand—I'm not personally interested—but she's single? Maris, I mean?" He looked around the store again. "She runs this alone?"

"Sunup to sundown, yeah." Baxter finished off his coffee. "Now that we're heading into the off-season, she'll do any repairs and upkeep that's needed."

"I thought that was Daron's job."

"Ha! Yeah, it is, but those two butt heads a lot. It's pretty damned amusing actually. He'll do what he can to help, but he flirts with her the whole time so Maris will do what she can to keep him away. If you're around enough, you'll see what I mean."

That gave Royce another idea. He was good with his hands, and he wouldn't mind pitching in around the park. For one thing, it'd give him an excuse to be around more, which meant he'd have opportunities to see Joy. Plus it'd help shore up his standing in the community, since the entire town seemed curtained around the resort. But mostly, he'd enjoy repaying Maris's kindness.

Things were coming together nicely. Not quite as he'd expected, but each day his optimism grew.

Smiling, Maris locked up behind everyone and began her evening routine that included starting the dishwasher, a thorough cleaning of the seating area and switching out the entry rug, which had collected dirt from shoes during the day.

She lived for her routines, morning and night. They reminded her that she alone guided her future, and because of that, she'd never again have reason for shame.

Growing up, there'd been no order to anything, no planning, no...pride.

Maris had plans. As soon as she'd gained her independence, she'd set up goals and never, not once, had she veered from them.

Tonight, though, she smiled because of Joy.

How had she known Joy so long and yet never known certain things about her—like her sense of humor, her modesty over her appearance...and her willingness to expand their friendship?

Maybe, like Maris, age had inspired that last part.

Damn it, her routines were starting to feel tired, but today, chatting with Joy had renewed her.

No, she couldn't get involved with anyone—that'd definitely put a kink in her goals. But Joy? There was absolutely no reason for Joy to avoid dating, and every reason for her to finally have some fun.

Maris planned to encourage her in every way she could, and she'd start with Royce.

## CHAPTER THREE

Hours later, Joy peeked in on Jack and saw he was finally asleep. Meeting Royce had gotten him so hyped that she'd had a difficult time getting him to wind down.

It wasn't like her son to get so familiar so quickly. He was generally a shy boy, at least until he knew someone well. Before kindergarten, he'd often hidden behind her when they met new people. Yes, he'd come out of his shell some since the interactions at school, but not like he had today.

She thought of how Royce had knelt down to talk to him, how earnest Jack had been in meeting him almost eye to eye. And *how* Royce had spoken, not like he humored a little kid, but in a more respectful way.

He'd won her son over with very little effort.

Resting a hand over her heart, Joy stood in the doorway, looking at Jack's small body curled under his favorite Ninja Turtle blanket. The few toys he owned were scattered about.

Luckily, Jack didn't ask for a lot, because she didn't have much to spend on indulgences.

However, she'd given him everything she knew he needed, including love, security, affection, guidance and boundaries.

But had she cheated him out of a father figure? Had she let her own insecurity about involvement negatively affect her son?

Jack had always chased after Coop, Baxter and Daron, but she'd been careful not to let him get too close. She'd feared for his disappointment.

And her own.

The ringing of her cell phone in the other room startled her. No one called her after nine p.m.

Leaving the door open a tiny bit, as was her habit, she hurried down the hall and to the small living room. There on the desk, her phone buzzed.

For only a heartbeat, she warred with herself before snatching it up and saying a soft, "Hello?"

"Joy? It's Royce. Am I calling too late?"

She eased out the desk chair and sank into it. "No." Dumb. *Say something else.* "I was just about to shower." *No. Not that.* Catching her breath, she rushed on, explaining, "I mean, Jack is asleep now, so—"

"I understand."

He'd sounded amused...and now he was silent.

She briefly closed her eyes. Damn it, she was an intelligent adult, a divorced woman, a single mother. She could carry on a coherent conversation. "How was your day?" *Gawd, so bland and clichéd.*

"Good. Yours?"

"Jack was excited. He enjoyed meeting you." That, at least, was sincere.

"I enjoyed meeting him, too. He's a smart kid. Cute."

Smiling, Joy said, "Once we got home, he stayed in front of the mirror for ten minutes studying his ears. Then he tried drawing them a dozen times. He's not yet satisfied that he's got it right."

Royce laughed. "Does he have any features that resemble family members?" He paused, then asked lightly, "His dad, maybe?"

Shadows filled their apartment over the rec center. Only the glow from her laptop screen and a small light over the stove lit the interior. Floodlights from outside, stationed around the park, filtered in through the windows.

Joy always made their home dim and quiet in the evening when it was time for Jack to sleep. Her chair squeaked as she sat back and curled her feet beneath her. "Actually, he does look a little like his father, at least from what I can remember. I haven't seen Vaughn since...well, six months before Jack was born actually."

Silence stretched out. "He knew you were pregnant?"

"He'd already talked of divorce. Finding out I was pregnant only shored up his arguments to leave."

Royce gave a low curse. "I didn't realize. I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"You didn't. It's fine." What wasn't fine was her talking about her ex to a...what? Prospective date? Joy shook her head, hating how pathetic that seemed. "I should apologize for saying so much. It's just that Jack rarely asks about his father. I'd prefer that you not mention it when he's around."

"No problem." After a second or two, Royce asked, "You're divorced now?"

"Yes. We were already having issues—" what an understatement "—when I found out I was pregnant. Vaughn walked out the day I told him, and I haven't seen him since the divorce became final shortly after that."

“How old were you?”

If Royce had sounded too sympathetic, it would have bothered her, but he seemed only politely curious. “I was a very immature, very dependent twenty-four.” That made her laugh a little. She knew a lot of people, Daron among them, who’d been far more mature at a much younger age. “Nothing makes you grow up like becoming responsible for someone else.”

“A hard truth.”

He sounded like he understood something about that. “Have you ever been married?”

“No.” Then he asked, “How long were you with him?”

Had he just changed the subject to get it off him? Joy considered pressing him—did he disapprove of marriage, or had some woman broken his heart? There were so many things she wanted to know about Royce, but this was nice, just talking to him, and she didn’t want to chase him off. Chatting on the phone instead of looking at him made it easier for her.

Oh, she had a vivid image of him in her head, but her imagination didn’t quite replicate his potent impact on her senses.

“Vaughn and I were together for a year. My parents detested him. Actually, *detest* might not be a strong enough word.”

“I suppose that made you want him more?”

Why was she telling him all this? She never discussed Vaughn with anyone. Not since the last big blowup with her parents.

Not since they’d disowned her.

She put her head back and closed her eyes. “Like I said, I was immature.”

“It’s human nature. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

Too late for that. Following his lead on topic changes, she prompted, “Did you want to get together this weekend? Jack’s talked about it a lot.”

“That’s part of why I called.”

Did she hear a hesitation? Would he back out now? Jack would be crushed. She never should have—

“I was thinking maybe I could take you both to lunch Saturday. Afterward we could stop at the drive-in so I could show Jack around. That’d still give me time to get you both home and get back before sunset when I need to prep for the showing.”

Like a teenager being asked out on her first date, Joy felt exhilarated, excited—and so disappointed that she had to refuse. “That sounds wonderful, Royce, but until the season officially ends, I do activities from afternoon to evening here with the campers. This Saturday we have fall crafts.”

Without missing a beat, he asked, “Sunday works better for me, anyway, since the drive-in is closed that day. What do you think?”

She bit her lip to suppress the smile, then cleared her throat. “Sunday we’re free.” Perfect. She sounded calm and mature and not like a woman whose toes had just curled in anticipation. “It’s a school night so I’d have to be back early.”

“Done.” She heard his smile, too, when he asked, “Any chance I can get in on that afternoon craft action?”

Laughing, Joy hugged herself and savored the new freedom of flirting. “Oh, I think that can be arranged.”

“Perfect.” His voice went a little deeper. “Fair warning, though. If at all possible, and with due respect to your son, I plan to steal a kiss before I go.”

More than her toes curled over that statement. “Oh, um...”

“Good night, Joy.”

“Looking for someone?”

Startled, Joy ducked her head to hide her guilty face. “Hmm?” She *had* been watching the door, wondering if Royce

would really show, and when. She hadn't even heard Maris come in from the back entrance.

Maris openly laughed at her in that easy, friendly way she had. "I'm on to you now. That particular expression has something to do with Royce, doesn't it? Is he coming by today?"

Straightening, Joy stared at her in wonder. How could Maris read the situation so easily? Joy had known her for a while now, and never before had she read her mind.

Of course, never before had Joy been infatuated with a man. Plus Maris was usually too busy working to waste time wondering about anyone else.

In the past week, something had shifted in their friendship. Whatever it was, Joy enjoyed it.

"I was only putting out craft supplies." She gestured at the bins on the round table filled with glue and markers and yarn. "Just that. Nothing telling or obvious. So how did you know?"

Setting aside a tray filled with cookies, Maris crossed her arms and leaned on the wall. "I'm a woman. You're a woman. That gives us some common ground." She shrugged. "Call it female intuition."

"But we're nothing alike."

At that, Maris's brows rose up. "You don't think so?"

Hoping Maris didn't take that as an insult, Joy glanced around to ensure they weren't overheard. Luckily none of the kids had shown up yet. Jack sat alone coloring at a smaller table toward the back, and everything was ready for afternoon crafts.

Drawing a breath, Joy stepped closer to Maris. "I didn't mean that how it sounded."

"It's all right. I get it. You're always polished, while I'm something of a mess and it doesn't bother me."

"We already discussed this. You're beautiful."

"And you're generous with compliments, but come on."

Maris nodded at Joy's long skirt and ballet flats. "I can't even remember the last time I dressed up."

Joy stared at her, surprised yet again. "That's not at all what I meant. My wardrobe is just what I have left from... Never mind." Once, long ago, she'd thought clothes mattered. Now, she wore what she had because investing in the newest fashions wasn't feasible. Was it the same for Maris? Somehow she didn't think so. "It's just... I admire you, you know."

Maris snorted. "I can't imagine why."

"Are you serious? I have a hundred reasons!" And Joy didn't mind listing them for her. "You're so confident and self-assured. You always know what you're doing and why. You accomplish more in a day than most people do in a week. You're completely self-reliant. Plus my compliments were honest, not generous. You look *amazing* in jeans—and no makeup. That's just unfair, because you're right, makeup is a pain. If I had your flawless skin or dark eyelashes, I wouldn't wear it, either."

Maris blinked at that outpouring of compliments. "Thank you. I admire you, too." With a laugh, she wrinkled her nose. "Though I have to say, this conversation is a little embarrassing."

Right. People didn't walk around detailing attributes. They met, became friends, and it was all more natural.

Twisting her mouth, Joy pointed out, "That's another way we're different, I guess. I'm...awkward." That wasn't precisely the right word, so she shook her head and tried again. "Awkward on the inside, I mean. I tell myself to be confident, but you just *are*. You always seem to know the right thing to say or do to put other people at ease. You're so together and take-charge, but also comfortable and friendly."

Maris took her hands. Joy realized that Maris's were work-

worn, her fingers a little roughened from all the dishwashing and cooking she did.

“I think we’re both misunderstanding. I’ve never seen you look or act awkward. What I meant is that the flattery embarrasses me because I’m not used to getting compliments like that. Compliments that matter.”

Joy searched her face and saw the truth. “You mean, compliments for something other than looks?”

Maris nodded. “It shows what a nice person you are that you see beyond the surface. Especially since my look is usually some shade of permanent determination and stubborn will.”

“It’s a good look,” Joy promised her with a laugh. *Much better than deep-rooted insecurity*. Honestly, Maris looked like the woman Joy wanted to be.

Maris grinned. “You’re those things, too.”

“I want that to be true, for myself and Jack.” It was important for Jack to know she’d always take care of him. Her confidence was as much for him as for herself. She did what she could to ensure he’d never have the same worries she’d had. “I work at it, but it seems so effortless for you.”

Laughing, Maris reached for a cookie. “I’ve been working for as long as I can remember. The day I turned eighteen, finding a job was my top priority. By now it’s second nature for me—still difficult, but part of my life.”

Shame hit Joy, thick enough to make her throat tight. She didn’t know what type of childhood Maris had, but it was surely different from her own. Joy knew she’d been given far more advantages than most, so what right did she have to complain? “I’m sorry.”

A smile teased over Maris’s mouth. “Don’t be. I’ve enjoyed talking to you. We need to do this more often.”

When? They both stayed busy, but Joy vowed she’d make time—if Maris could. “I’d like that.”

"Maybe we should start our own little club where we drink coffee, eat cookies and praise each other."

Oddly enough, that sounded like a very good time. "Count me in."

"But someone also has to share fun stories that involve a hunk. Since I'm out—" she tapped Joy's shoulder "—you're it."

It? Wondering what that meant, Joy asked, "Why are you out?"

"I don't date," Maris stated. "Never have."

"You say that like it's part of your religion or something." Joy crossed her arms. "Why can't you date?"

Maris choked on a laugh, quickly covered her mouth and shook her head. "It's not that I can't, it's that I don't."

True. Joy couldn't recall a time where Maris did anything other than...work. "Okay, but *why*?"

"Let's just say I have other priorities. Financial security tops the list. Independence is right behind it."

Joy couldn't help but wonder about Maris's background—and why those two things were so important. "Doesn't everyone want to be secure?"

"Sure, I guess. But since I've personally felt the bite of dependence, I'll do what I can to never end up there again." She pointed her half-eaten cookie at Joy. "And no, I'm not talking about any of that right now, so stop deferring. You're it and that's that."

Giving up, Joy said, "Fine," and then she felt a small thrill when she thought of Royce. "What do I have to do?"

"Something..." Maris gave it thought, then grinned. "Something *scintillating*."

"Um...okay. Define that."

Maris rolled a shoulder. "If Royce shows up, steal a kiss." She quickly clarified, "Not a peck. Those don't count. Make it something substantial, something with *tongues*."

At that, Joy outright laughed. Royce had said he wouldn't leave without kissing, so... "I might be able to make that happen."

"Perfect." Maris nodded toward the door and whispered, "Make it hot and wild, and then you can tell me all about it. I'll get some vicarious thrills, since I'm not getting anything else." As she backed up, she thrust a fist in the air and said, "To the Summer's End club!" then turned and ducked through the back door again, no doubt returning to the camp store.

Everyone working at the park would be happy to lend her a hand now and then, but Maris delegated only the most in-substantial tasks to others. Anything of importance she handled herself.

When it came to her livelihood, Maris considered nearly everything important.

Laughing, Joy glanced to the entrance and found Royce walking in with Daron. Jack spotted him right off and with a happy cheer he raced over. Daron said something, ruffled Jack's hair and left again.

Probably chasing Maris, if Joy had to guess. Why Maris didn't orchestrate her own wild night, she didn't know. It seemed obvious to her that Daron was anxious, willing and able.

With a hand to her son's back, Royce crossed the room. His dark gaze moved over her, lingering a heartbeat on her fitted sweater before meeting her eyes. "Hey."

She'd taken extra care today with her appearance, wearing a little more mascara, choosing clothes that flattered her figure. She'd wanted him to notice—and he did. "You made it."

Those dark eyes zeroed in on her mouth. "Daron walked me in." He glanced around. "He said you live here, too?"

"Upstairs," Jack said. "We have to go outside to get in. Wanna see?"

Unprepared to take Royce through her meager home, Joy stalled.

"Someday soon," Royce said, saving her from having to come up with an excuse. "Right now your mom is busy, so I figured we'd lend her a hand."

"She doesn't need help. Mom's organized." He looked up at her. "Aren't you, Mom? Everyone says so."

Joy laughed. "I try." She smoothed down Jack's hair. In many ways it reminded her of Daron's. His hair, too, was often unruly. "Why don't you get your picture to show Mr. Nakirk and I'll make coffee for the parents."

As Jack ran off, Royce walked with her to the nook designated as a kitchen area. "Do a lot of adults accompany the kids?"

"More so toward evening, but I always try to be prepared with coffee, regular for afternoons, decaf later on. The kids get juice, and Maris brought over cookies." She went about coffee prep while Jack skidded to a halt with his picture in his hands.

"Let's see." Royce knelt down, took the artwork when Jack shyly offered it, then he fell silent. Joy was just starting to worry when he said, "Wow."

"You like it?" Jack anxiously shifted from one foot to the other. "It's not done yet."

"I... Of course I like it." More silence as he studied the picture.

Curious, Joy set aside foam cups and came to look over Royce's shoulder.

Jack had drawn the big screen of the drive-in, a row of cars and a large man—hands on hips—smiling widely.

"It's terrific, Jack." Joy nudged Royce. "Don't you think so?"

"I think it's better than terrific." He lowered the picture. "How old are you again?"

One hand lifted, fingers spread. "Five, but I'll be six soon."

Royce shook his head in wonder. "This is phenomenal for a kid your age. You've got perspective in here, and the dimensions are good. And I knew it was me." He lowered the paper. "It is me, right?"

Jack nodded, then he, too, looked at the picture. "What's perspect...?"

"Perspective. It means you've shown things in a way that I feel like I'm standing right here, behind the row of cars."

"But you're there." Jack pointed to the figure in the drawing.

"Right. You drew me there, but if someone else was looking on..." He gave up and glanced at Joy. "How do you explain perspective to a kid?"

Joy knelt down beside him. "It's like looking at a photograph. Everything is where it should be and it's all sized right for positioning."

Pursing his mouth, Jack studied the picture once more. "It's not a photograph."

"It's better." Royce dropped to his behind and crossed his ankles, holding the paper against his knees. "Do you think I could keep it?"

A smile beamed across Jack's face. "Sure."

"Will you sign it for me?" Royce glanced back to Joy. "Can he sign his name?"

She nodded. Jack was smart, but more than that, he received loads of attention from her. All that one-on-one helped him to grasp things more quickly. "Jack, try to put it smaller in the bottom corner, okay?" She touched the paper. "Down here."

"Okay." He turned and ran off again.

Royce faced her. "Do you realize how talented he is?"

"He's my son. I think he's brilliant at everything."

Amused, Royce reached out and touched her hair, drifting

his fingers from her ear down to the ends that lay against her back. For only a moment, his hand rested there, warm and firm against her, before he withdrew. "That might be, but he's also artistic with natural skill. Few kids would have included that many details, or been able to add depth."

She leaned in, liking this nearness to him. He smelled really nice, sort of dark and spicy, and she could feel the warmth of his body.

So that Jack wouldn't hear, she whispered, "He drew you a little short and thick."

Royce laughed. "He's five." Standing again, he caught her elbow and helped her up, and then didn't let her go. A glance at Jack showed him hunched over the paper, his lip caught in his teeth as he painstakingly added his name.

When his gaze came back to her, Joy's heart tripped.

Royce looked at her mouth. "Have you thought about it?"

"What?" she asked, knowing exactly what he meant.

"Me, kissing you." He drew closer and his hand slid to her back, his fingers dancing little circles over her spine. "Not here. Not now. But at some point before the afternoon ends, I'll have your mouth."

Her breath thickened and a sweet ache pooled low in her stomach. Such a tease. Well, two could play that game.

She put a hand on his biceps and lowered her voice. "I have." Her attention now snagged on *his* mouth. "A lot. So you should know my expectations are high."

"Good." Coming closer still, he breathed near her ear, "Always demand the best, Joy. Even from me."

Sensation washed over her—and then he stepped away, turning as Jack came up to them.

"All set?"

Paying no attention to adult antics, Jack held up the picture. "I messed up the J."

Royce examined it critically. “You know what? I think that gives it character. I wouldn’t change a thing.” To Joy, he asked, “Is there someplace safe I can put this until I’m ready to go?”

Still a little breathless, Joy indicated the corkboard where a lot of artwork got shared. “You could pin it there.”

He looked down at Jack. “What do you think?”

Jack tried to look humble. “If you want to.”

They went over to the board together. Royce bent his head to listen as Jack talked. Two males, one under four feet tall, his body narrow, his movements frenetic, and the other more than six feet of calm, carved strength.

It was a dangerous thing, seeing them together, liking how they looked as they interacted. It’d be so easy to get caught up in the emotions of seeing her son so happy, knowing he enjoyed the attention and praise.

It was dangerous for Jack. Dangerous for her.

Her instinct, always, was to protect Jack from possible hurt and disappointment.

And yes, she wanted to protect herself, as well.

They had a good life right now, and it unnerved her to think of rocking the boat, changing the dynamic of the peaceful, contented existence she’d so carefully created. Yet Jack deserved more.

She did, too.

A kiss, the wild night Maris encouraged or more... Joy didn’t know yet, but for now, she was open to all possibilities.

Royce stood back, talking to a man who’d brought three kids—a daughter and two sons—to take part in the fun. Seven other kids were there, too, creating a small, boisterous crowd. Most were rowdier than Jack, definitely louder, but Joy handled them with the skill of a veteran grade school teacher.

The noise level alone was enough to make his brain vibrate, yet she took it in stride.

She praised some crazy-looking results, because most of these kids didn't have Jack's artistic bent. She gave directions on others, and assisted with some. Things that should have looked like miniature scarecrows turned out to be the stuff of nightmares.

Even sitting among other kids, Jack managed to be by himself. When it came to art, he was too contained, not at all the animated kid at the camp store the other day. Did Joy notice it, the way he created his own little world? Royce would have loved to see him run around the table once, knock over the glue or shout for attention. Instead, he kept his head down and worked.

Crazy, but at only five, the kid had an artist's soul. Every ounce of concentration was on his task.

Maybe someday he'd show Jack his mother's work. Royce inhaled a deep breath, let it out slowly and accepted that he wasn't ready for that yet. But soon.

At two p.m., Joy wrapped up the activities, promising the kids she had more fun lined up for them after dinner. Parents began to filter in to collect their children, scary scarecrows, falls wreaths and all. Jack looked up, saw things were ending and went back to work with renewed purpose.

Excusing himself from the camper, Royce strolled over to Jack. Around them, chaos ensued...but Jack either didn't notice, or he didn't care. His scarecrow, made from a toilet paper roller, *looked* like a damned scarecrow.

To the side of him, he'd also created a fall wreath. Both were colorful, neat and meticulously assembled.

Royce eyed the small chair, decided it wouldn't hold him and instead leaned over with one hand flat on the table. "Jack."

Brown eyes flashed up. "I'm almost done."

“I wasn’t rushing you, but will it bother you for me to watch?”

“I don’t care.” He was already back to work, gluing a few more pieces of straw around the scarecrow’s neck. When he finished, he held it up and scowled. “I got stuff crooked.”

“It’s a scarecrow. Things are supposed to be crooked.” The kid took himself far too seriously. “And actually, it’s pretty amazing. See the mouth? You drew on stitches.”

“It looks like the one Mom put up there.” He pointed to the front of the room where Halloween decorations clustered around the art supplies. Sure enough, a small, smiling scarecrow sat with fake, light-up jack-o’-lanterns.

“But most kids wouldn’t have noticed that.” On his fall wreath, he’d not only made some lopsided leaves to go on it, but he’d drawn the veins in the leaves. His eye for detail went well beyond his age, even beyond the average adult’s comprehension of art.

“When can we come to the drive-in?” With the scarecrow finished, Jack half crawled up into his seat and tilted toward Royce. “Could we go tonight? Will you play a movie for me? Can I get popcorn?”

Now here was the lively kid he remembered. “Pretty sure your mom wasn’t planning any outings tonight.” From what he understood of her schedule, they’d overlap; she’d still be working with kids when he’d be at the drive-in, starting the first movie.

“I’ll ask her.”

“She’s been working, right? How about we help her clean up instead, and then when she’s ready to visit, she’ll let us both know.”

It took some doing, but Royce convinced Jack to pitch in. Joy finished saying goodbye to all the guests, reminding them

of the next activity planned, and after getting the last kid out, she closed the door. Her gaze sought Royce.

He liked the flush on her cheeks and the anticipation in her eyes. If ever a woman deserved to be thoroughly kissed, she did. Royce banked his smile and asked, "What can I do to help?"

She looked around. "If you don't mind, you could gather up the foam cups and put them in the trash."

"Sure thing."

Going to Jack's seat, she picked up his fall wreath. "Jack, this is wonderful."

Jack shook his head at Royce. "She always says that."

"She's your mom and she loves you. But I don't always say it, right? Heck, I barely know you, and I also think it's terrific."

Laughing, Jack began gathering up crayons.

Joy bent to kiss his cheek. "Thank you for helping, honey." She collected scattered paper scraps and headed to the kitchen.

The quiet, empty kitchen.

While doing his own share of picking up, Royce watched Jack. He was busy sorting crayons by colors, putting them in individual bins. It amused him, because the boy was *such* a little artist, right down to the need for color coordination.

Knowing he wouldn't get a better chance, Royce casually joined Joy in the kitchen. She had her back to him as she emptied the coffee grounds from the maker and rinsed it all in the sink.

After putting his own handful of trash in the bin, Royce came up behind her and nuzzled against her ear. She went perfectly still, her hands remaining in the sink.

With one hand, he moved her hair away from her neck, then brushed his lips over the sensitive skin there. "Jack is busy sorting, so we probably have one minute...and I don't want

to waste it.” He grazed his teeth over the soft skin along the column of her throat, followed by his tongue.

She melted back into him. “Royce.”

Damn, that was a turn-on. He’d missed hearing a woman whisper his name so softly.

He had a few things to discuss with her, parameters that they needed to establish, but first...

When he reached around to gently clasp her chin, she hurriedly dried her hands and turned toward him. Her attention skipped to the door, and when she didn’t see Jack, she met his gaze. Voice low and cautious, she said, “He switches gears pretty quickly so we should probably—”

Royce kissed her midsentence. No way in hell would he miss this scant opportunity.

Her lips softened, fitting to his. Keeping things slow and easy, the way a first kiss should be, he tilted his head and traced her bottom lip with his tongue, lightly kissed her upper lip, the corner of her mouth.

God, she tasted good, smelled good—all soft and womanly—and he had to concentrate to keep from moving too fast. More than anything, he wanted to crush her close, take her mouth with his tongue and press his hips to hers so he could feel every inch of her.

Instead, he forced his hands to stay on neutral ground and reminded himself that her son was nearby.

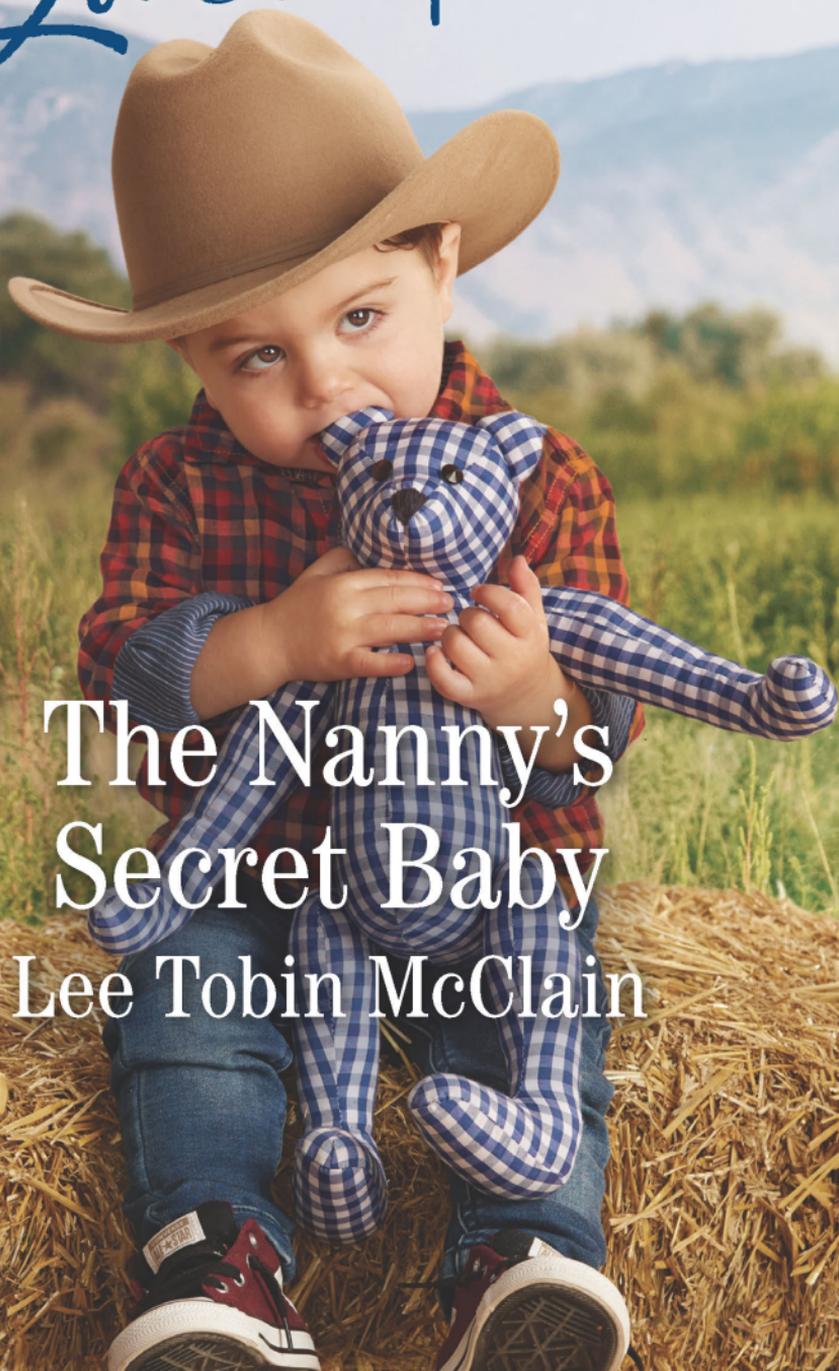
Joy wasn’t quite as restrained. Hands fisting in the material of his shirt, she pulled him closer until her breasts met his chest.

With a low sound of hunger, she opened her lips and deepened the kiss—exactly the way he’d wanted to.

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The Nanny's  
Secret Baby

Lee Tobin McClain

## Chapter One



Jack DeMoise watched his eighteen-month-old son bang a block against the doctor's desk drawer.

"He's going to need as much attention and support as you can give him," Dr. Rutherford said. "We're learning more and more about this condition. His best odds would be to get a TSS—therapeutic support staff—team on board right away. Hope your wife is organized!"

Jack drew in a breath and let it out slowly before meeting the other man's eyes. "There's no reason you should remember this from the intake papers, but I'm a widower."

The doctor's face fell, just a little. Most people wouldn't even have noticed, but Jack was accustomed to reading emotions carefully, from small tells. It had been a crucial skill with his wife. "Do you work full-time yourself?" the doctor asked.

Jack nodded. "My job can be flexible, though." *Except when it isn't.* "I'm a small-town veterinarian. I've had several good babysitters, but I'm not sure any of them are up to..." He reached down and squeezed his

son's shoulder. "To helping me manage Sammy's care the right way."

The doctor frowned. "You need someone experienced with kids, someone who connects well with him. Ideally, a person with special-needs experience, though that's not a requirement. A full-time nanny would be ideal."

And where was he supposed to find such a person in his small Colorado town?

The doctor stood and smiled down at Sammy. "Cute little guy. You can see the people in the front office to schedule his next appointment."

As the doctor left the exam room, Sammy lifted his arms, and Jack knelt to pick him up and held him close.

Autism.

The diagnosis didn't shock him—he'd had suspicions—but the reality of figuring out a coping strategy was hitting him hard.

Two hours later, back at their new home at Redemption Ranch, Jack had just gotten Sammy down for a nap when the sound of a loud, mufflerless car broke the mountain silence. He hurried to close Sammy's window, glanced back at the crib to make sure his son was still sleeping and then looked outside.

From this angle, all he could see was a tangle of red curls emerging from a rusty subcompact.

Arianna. He'd heard she was in town.

He took another deep breath before double-timing it down the steps to anticipate his former sister-in-law's loud knock on the door. Once Sammy was asleep, you didn't want to repeat the complicated process that had made it happen.

He opened the door just as Arianna was lifting her

hand to knock. Under her other arm, she held a giant painting, done in her trademark primitive style.

“When I heard you’d moved, I wanted to bring a housewarming gift,” she said. “And a treat for Sammy. Sorry I didn’t call first. Is this a bad time?”

“I just got him down,” Jack said. He half felt like closing the door in Arianna’s face, but he couldn’t. She was his son’s aunt after all, even if her chronic disorganization and flamboyance had driven his wife crazy, causing some disturbing family fights. Arianna was way out of his comfort zone. “Come on in,” he said. “What are you doing in Colorado?”

She waved a hand. “I’m in town visiting family. Thinking about moving back to the area. Penny had mentioned she might do some art therapy with the vets, so I came up to try to sell myself.”

“Out of a job again?” he asked as he carried the canvas she’d brought to the middle of the living room. “Pretty,” he added, gesturing at the wild yellow painting.

“Jack!” She blew out a sigh he could hear from behind him and then flopped down onto the couch. “Yeah. I’m out of a job. How’d you know?”

He shrugged and sat on the big chair catty-corner to the couch. “Just a guess.” He let his head rest against the back of the chair.

“You look awful,” she said with her usual blunt honesty. “What’s going on?”

He looked at her sideways without lifting his head. “Sammy and I visited the doctor today,” he said.

She sat up straighter. “Bad news?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t know.” He kicked off his shoes and put his feet up on the ottoman. “We got a diagnosis I was hoping we wouldn’t get.”

“Oh no!” The panic in her voice was real. “Is he going to be okay? What’s wrong?”

Her concern brought him upright, and he leaned forward, waving a hand to calm her. “He’s fine, he’s going to be just fine. It’s not some horrible disease.”

“Tell me!”

“It’s autism.”

She sucked in a breath, looked up at the ceiling. He thought she was looking in the direction of Sammy’s room. Maybe even praying—she was a fairly new Christian, from what his wife had said only weeks before she’d died.

But when Arianna looked back at him, he realized her eyes were glittering with tears she was trying not to let fall.

“Hey,” he said, moved by her concern. Everyone in town liked him and Sammy just fine, but there was nobody who felt the intensity of this diagnosis like he did. Or so he’d thought. “He’ll be okay. It’s just... I have to figure out how to cope, make some new plans.”

“I’m sure.” She drew in a couple of deep breaths and looked out the window. He wondered if the view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains would calm her, like it did him.

“He’ll be okay,” he repeated. “There’s so much help available these days.”

“You don’t sound that surprised.” She studied him, head cocked to one side, eyes confused.

“I... No.” He looked at her. “I kind of knew.”

She frowned. “I *should* have guessed. I’ve done art therapy with kids who had the condition a fair amount, and now that you mention it...he does seem kinda like those kids. Although he’s his own sweet, wonderful

self,” she added fiercely. “If he’s going to grow up a little different from neurotypical kids, that’s okay. I’ll still love him just as much.”

“I will, too,” Jack said mildly, surprised at her vehemence. But on the few occasions she’d spent time with him and Sammy, she’d been an enthusiastic aunt. More enthusiastic about Sammy, when it came to it, than her sister, Chloe, his wife, had been. “The problem is that I have to hire a nanny, and there aren’t many candidates in Esperanza Springs.”

“I could do it,” she said.

Jack stared at her. “You?” He couldn’t keep the surprise and doubt out of his voice.

“Just until you find somebody permanent,” she amended quickly. “I mean, no way could I do that long term, of course, but I’d like to help if you’re in a spot.”

“Wow, thanks, Arianna, but...” He trailed off.

How to tell Arianna that she looked too much like her sister? That she was too disorganized? That her liveliness and fun were a direct contrast to his own staid, boring life...and that they disturbed him?

She leaned forward, one eyebrow raised, a long leg crossed over the other. “What, Jack? Go ahead, say it.”

“It’s just... I guess I was thinking of a Mary Poppins type,” he said, trying to make a joke of it. “You know, laced up and experienced and efficient.”

“Sure. You’re right, of course.” She sighed and stood up. “I’m nobody’s idea of a good employee apparently. But I’m here to help if you need me.”

He felt like a heel as he followed her to the door, unable to keep his eyes off her chaotic, shining curls. “I appreciate your coming by and bringing the gift,” he said, although truthfully, he had no idea where he’d put

the giant sunflower. It didn't exactly match the couch. "Stop back and see Sammy anytime."

That comment made her whole form brighten, and she turned to him. "Thanks, I will. I miss seeing the little guy. I need a Sammy hug."

It occurred to him to wonder why she needed a hug, but that wasn't his business. He opened the door for her and held it while she walked out, the scent of musky roses tickling his nose.

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to get involved with a woman like Arianna, colorful and warm and relaxed. But he always stifled the notion. He realized, almost instantly, that it shouldn't and wouldn't happen.

Love and marriage weren't about fun; they were about sacrifice and responsibility and hard work.

And getting drawn to Arianna made his face heat and his stomach churn with guilt, because of Chloe and all her suspicions. She'd died fourteen months ago, but her angry accusations still rang in his ears.

Anyway, and fortunately, no woman like Arianna would be attracted to a methodical, scientific nerd like him.

One minute later, his business phone buzzed, and five minutes after that, he was trying to figure out how to get someone to come watch Sammy while he drove to one of the neighboring ranches to help with a cow that was suffering from a dangerous case of bloat.

He'd moved from town up to Redemption Ranch because he'd seen how happy the wide-open spaces made Sammy. Made him, too, really. The fact that he believed in the ranch's mission as a haven for struggling veterans and senior dogs was a factor, too. Living here, he could

serve as the ranch's on-site veterinarian, which was a needed role and one he relished.

On the downside, moving up here meant he was thirty minutes away from his normal babysitters, and they had both just refused to come at this short notice. He hated to impose by asking Penny, the ranch owner, or Willie, a Vietnam veteran and permanent resident of the ranch.

*You could just ask Arianna.*

The thought came to him, and before he could second-guess himself, he was out the door. Arianna was walking back toward her car from Penny's house. "She's not home," she called in explanation.

"Could you stay a couple of hours with Sammy now?" he asked, holding up his phone. "Vet emergency."

Her face lit up like he'd offered her the world. "Of course! I'd love to!"

He beckoned her in and showed her the laminated instruction sheets he'd made for Sammy's care. A little ridiculous, but Sammy was particular.

Now Jack knew at least a part of the reason why.

A smile tugged at the corner of Arianna's mouth. "It'll all be okay, Jack, really," she said. "I know Sammy, and I've worked with autistic kids before. Go help your... steer or whatever. We'll be fine."

Three hours later, Arianna patted Sammy's back as he bounced a bedraggled blue-and-white-checked bear. Whew. She'd finally found the toy he needed, and for the moment, he was content.

*She*, on the other hand, was anything but. Getting to take care of Sammy was sweet torture. She loved him with all her being, and Chloe had never let her be alone with him. She leaned forward and kissed the sweaty top

of his head as he pushed his stuffed bear back and forth, humming tunelessly.

He glanced back at her as if slightly surprised but didn't reject the contact. Good. She knew that some kids on the spectrum resisted physical touch, but Sammy didn't seem to be in that category.

She looked around the living room, noting the bare walls, the end tables devoid of decoration, the shortage of pillows on the couch. Of course, Jack had just moved in. He hadn't had time to add the small touches that made a house a home.

Would he ever? Was he the kind of man who could do that, could be both mom and dad?

Oh, how she'd like to stay nearby and care for Sammy. But the job situation in the small ranching town of Esperanza Springs was bleak. At most, she might be able to cobble together some part-time gigs, but to support herself...not likely.

She'd find work aplenty in a bigger city, where her education would be valued and her references—which were actually stellar—could help her to get a job.

But she liked Esperanza Springs, had spent a lot of time here as a kid and young adult. Now, with her parents living in Europe and her sister gone, Sammy, plus the aunt and uncle she was staying with, were the only family she had.

And she was the only one who knew the truth about him.

The sound of a vehicle pulling in outside, the slam of a car door, made her jerk to attention. Was Jack back already?

Sammy held his bear to his chest and stared impassively at the door.

It opened.

It was Jack. And his handsome face went from gladness to amazed frustration as he looked around the living room.

Arianna looked around, too, wondering what his expression meant. As she took in the overturned basket of toys, the three sippy cups she'd tried until she'd found the one Sammy would accept, the box of diapers she'd brought down from Sammy's room and not found time to take back up, she realized what was bothering him.

"I meant to clean up," she said. Why was she so messy? When was she ever going to get organized? Chloe, thin and disciplined and neat, would never have let her house get into such disarray.

Of course, Chloe would never have let her care for Sammy at all.

"It's okay." He walked over to Sammy. He knelt beside the boy, picked him up and swung him high.

Sammy struggled to get down, and Jack let him. Then he sat and rubbed circles on his back.

Sammy went back to his bear, gently bouncing it.

"Up, down. Up, down." Arianna said the words in rhythm with the bear's bounces and watched Sammy for any recognition of the words.

"He doesn't talk," Jack said, his voice bleak. "I've done some reading, listened to some podcasts on autism. I guess that's part of it."

"It's probably a delay, right? Not a life sentence."

"I hope."

"When he heard your car, he sat there looking at the door until you came in. And when he wanted water instead of juice, he, um, *persisted* until I understood.

That's all communication." If Jack got discouraged, gave up on Sammy, she couldn't handle it.

"Thanks, Arianna." He gave her a brief, haggard smile. "And thanks for staying with him on no notice. It was kind of you." He gave the messy room another glance.

*Oh brother.* "Let me go clean up the kitchen," she said. "You stay here with Sammy."

"No, it's fine." Jack stood and followed her. "He plays well by himself."

She hurried in and knelt by the overturned trash can, stuffing garbage back into the container. When she looked up, Jack had stopped at the doorway, looking stunned.

"I'll clean it up!" She grabbed paper towels to wipe up the floor where the garbage had spilled, then rinsed her hands and started putting away beverage containers.

"Arianna." His hand on her shoulder felt big and warm and gentle. She sucked in a breath and went still.

He pulled his hand away. "It's okay. I can do this."

"No." She spun back toward the cracker-scattered counter to hide her discomfort, started brushing crackers and crumbs into the sink. "I made the mess. It's only fair I clean it up. See, especially for kids with disabilities, low blood sugar is the enemy. But you have all these special requirements—" she gestured toward the laminated sheets "—so it took a little longer."

"There's leftover chicken and rice in the fridge. You could have served him that."

"I didn't see it." But another, more practical person—like Chloe—would have looked harder.

"Look," he said, "I appreciate what you've done, more than you know. But right now, I'll be fine."

You didn't have to be a genius to read the subtext. *I want to be alone with my son.*

"Of course." She sidled past him out to the living room and found her purse. She knelt down by Sammy, swallowing hard. "Good to hang with you, little man," she whispered.

Then she went to the door, where Jack stood, no doubt impatient for her to go. "See ya," she said, aiming for breezy.

He tilted his head to one side. "You okay?"

She nodded quickly, forced a smile.

"Thanks again. Stay in touch."

*Stay in touch.* The same thing you'd say to a friend you encountered after some time away, a friend you really didn't much want to see again.

Her throat tightened, and she coughed harshly as she hurried to her car. She didn't deserve to cry.

Didn't deserve a job. Didn't deserve to spend time with Sammy. Didn't deserve any kind of warmth from her former brother-in-law, Jack.

She drove carefully down to the ranch's entrance, glanced back to make sure she was out of sight of Jack's new house, and then pulled off the road.

She drew deep breaths, trying to get calm, but it was impossible.

She'd just spent time—botched her time, really—with precious Sammy.

Her adopted nephew.

And, unknown to anyone on this earth but her and Sammy's adoption agency, her own biological son.

## Chapter Two



The next Thursday, Jack walked out onto his porch with nanny candidate number four, Sammy in his arms. His son's wails died to a hiccup.

"Aw, he's such a cute peanut," the nineteen-year-old said, flicking a long lime-green fingernail under Sammy's chin, which made him cry again. "Just give me a call about when to start, okay?"

"Um, Mandy," Jack said to her retreating back. "I don't think this is going to work out."

She turned back in the process of extracting a cigarette from her purse. "What do you mean?"

"Sammy didn't seem to connect with you," he said. In the course of four nanny interviews, he'd learned to be blunt.

The teenager gave him a disbelieving stare. "He's *autistic*," she said, enunciating the word as if Jack were hard of hearing. "He's not *gonna* connect with people."

"Thanks for your time," he said, "but I won't be hiring you."

She lit her cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew out a

lungful of smoke. “What a waste coming up here. I *told* my mom I didn’t like babysitting.”

Jack blew out a breath as he watched her drive off and then sank down into one of the rockers on the porch, Sammy in his lap. “We dodged a bullet,” he informed his son.

Sammy looked at him solemnly but made no answering sounds, and worry bloomed anew in Jack’s chest. They needed to get started with treatment, but how could he find the time to interview nannies *and* therapeutic support staffers? He’d already maxed out Mrs. Jennings, his main caregiver in Esperanza Springs; although she’d assured him before that she’d be glad to continue babysitting Sammy after he moved, she’d quickly discovered she didn’t like driving ten miles on mountain roads to get here. And Penny had been sweet, taking care of Sammy twice, but he couldn’t continue asking that of the owner of Redemption Ranch.

From the newly renovated activities center, the sound of laughter made him turn his head. Four men emerged, one of them Carson Blair, his pastor, and another a veteran Jack knew a little. The other two were new to the ranch.

At their center was Arianna.

Before he knew it, he was on his feet, walking over.

“Everything okay here?” he asked. When the conversation abruptly died, he realized he must have sounded harsh.

Carson lifted an eyebrow. “We’re fine over here, Jack. Something up with you?”

*I don’t like seeing Arianna surrounded by men, and I don’t know why.* “No, everything’s fine,” he said.

Arianna seemed oblivious to any undercurrents. “Oh,

hey,” she said to Jack. “What’s up with the little man?” She held out her arms for Sammy, and Jack was about to tell her not to bother, Sammy was upset. But his son considered her offer and then lifted his arms for her to pluck him from his father’s hold.

Immediately, Sammy quieted down. Arianna nuzzled her cheek against his, looking blissful.

Gabe Smith, the veteran Jack had met a few times, greeted him with a friendly handshake. “Hey, Doc, I hate to ask it of you, but could you take a look at Rufus?” He gestured to the porch of the activities center, where a large gray-muzzled dog sprawled. “He’s got a raw spot on his leg.”

“Sure. I’ll get my bag.” *And pull myself together.*

He had no right to care what his sister-in-law—former sister-in-law—was up to. He had to focus on getting help for Sammy. Another nanny candidate was arriving soon, hopefully better than the last.

He brought out his bag, glanced over to make sure Sammy was still content with Arianna, and then joined Gabe on the porch. Examining Rufus would ground him. Dogs were so straightforward compared to people, and Rufus was a steady, respectable senior dog.

“Where’s Bruiser?” he asked, and as if in answer, an elderly Chihuahua rushed out onto the porch, yipping. He postured stiff-legged in front of Rufus, teeth bared, growling at Jack.

“Hey, whoa, little buddy. I’m not gonna hurt your friend.” He moved closer, sideways, not making eye contact, so as not to threaten the pint-size protector.

“Bruiser!” Gabe scolded. “Quit that.” He picked up the little dog and sat down on the porch step, holding him.

Jack examined the hot spot Gabe was worried about

and bandaged it. “We don’t want it to get infected. If he can just go a couple of days without licking it, it’ll heal.”

“Does he *have* to wear a collar of shame?” Gabe asked. “He hates it.”

“I might have one of the new soft kind in the truck. It’ll be more comfortable for him.” He rubbed Rufus’s big head and ears, and the dog lolled onto his back, panting.

Jack massaged the dog, enjoying the cool mountain breeze on his face. Despite his problems, he had a good life. New friends like Gabe, old friends like Penny, a healthy son, work he loved. And an environment where God’s grandeur was continually on display.

When Arianna approached, Sammy in her arms, he was surprised to see the warm expression on her face.

He gave her a smile in return, and their eyes linked and stayed for a second longer than was polite. Heat washed over him.

A black PT Cruiser chugged up the road then, breaking the mood. It stopped in front of his place, and a woman stepped out. She looked to be a few years older than Jack and was dressed in black slacks and an old-fashioned white blouse. Her hair was caught back in a tight bun. She marched up to his front door and knocked.

“Uh-oh,” he said. “Looks like Sammy and I have an appointment. Gabe, I’ll dig out one of those collars for Rufus and bring it over later. You going to be home?” He waved a hand toward Gabe’s cabin a short distance down the ranch’s main road.

“Sure thing, we’ll be around all day.”

The nanny pounded on his door again and then returned to her car with visible exasperation. She got in and leaned on the horn.

A drop of rain fell, then another. The clouds that had been coming in clustered over them.

The prospective nanny got out of her car, snapped open a black umbrella and marched toward the cabin's porch again.

"You said you wanted Mary Poppins," Arianna murmured, a smile tugging at her mouth.

"So I did," he said with a sigh.

None of this was going to be as easy as he'd hoped.

"Thanks for letting me stay with you, Aunt Justine," Arianna said the next morning as she dodged stacks of magazines and newspapers to get their breakfast dishes to the kitchen sink.

"You're as welcome as can be," her aunt said. "I just wish the place were in better shape for visitors." She looked toward the hallway that led back to the bedrooms. "He won't let me throw anything away, and his stuff is filling up the whole house."

"I know how hard you try." Arianna submerged the dishes in soapy water and started to scrub. "I'm either going to find a job and a place to stay within the week, or I'll have to move back to Chicago."

"Don't do that!" Aunt Justine sounded horrified. "You should have settled down here like your sister did, not in that soulless city, when your parents moved overseas. I never could figure out why you chose to live there. I thought you loved it here, especially when you spent that one whole summer here during college."

Arianna rinsed the dishes and dunked a couple of dirty pans from the counter into the soapy water. It was good that Aunt Justine had never figured out the reason for Arianna's abrupt departure. Almost no one had

known about the mistakes that had led to a surprise pregnancy. That was what had allowed Chloe to adopt Arianna's baby with no one the wiser.

Including Jack. Arianna sighed. She'd been adamantly opposed to Chloe keeping the truth from her husband. But Chloe had been as embarrassed about her infertility as Arianna was about her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Somehow, adopting her sister's baby, and having people know it, made everything worse for Chloe.

And given how sensitive Chloe was, Arianna had given in. It was what she'd been raised to do. *Take care of your sister. She's not strong like you. Don't upset her.*

She pushed thoughts of her younger days out of her mind and asked Aunt Justine about her vegetable garden and the cat that had shown up on the doorstep yesterday. They had a nice chat while Arianna finished the washing up.

"There. That's better, at least." Arianna surveyed the empty sink and two feet of clear counter space with satisfaction. "Now, I'm going to go out and sell myself as an art therapist."

"Thank you for cleaning up, hon. I'll keep praying for a wonderful job for you."

Arianna strolled through the town of Esperanza Springs, inhaling the fresh scents of pine and sage that blew down from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, watching a black-and-white magpie land on someone's fence post to scold the pedestrians walking by. From the Mountain High Bakery, the cinnamon scent was so powerful that Arianna was sorely tempted to pop in for a scone, even though she'd just had breakfast. But she didn't need to outgrow her summer clothes, so she walked resolutely past the bakery. She waved at the

woman washing the windows of La Boca Feliz Mexican restaurant, and peeked in the hardware store window, then focused on her destination: the children's summer program housed in a local church. She was hoping they'd jump at the chance to have a real art therapist visit with the kids each week for the rest of the summer.

It had been a long shot, and she'd known it, but she was still disappointed at the firm no she got. Disappointed enough that she stopped in the town park to look out at the mountains, breathe in the fresh air and regroup.

She hadn't expected to land in a bed of roses when she'd come back to Esperanza Springs. She'd known the market for art therapists would be tiny; this town was about the basics, not the luxuries, and art therapy was considered a luxury by most of the folks around here.

The exception was up at Redemption Ranch. Penny and her staff were forward thinking; they knew that it took various types of therapy to reach veterans, to help them work through PTSD and other mental health issues related to their wartime service.

Maybe she could talk Penny into giving her more work than just the single class per week that she'd offered. And maybe one of the cabins was empty. If she could live rent-free...

It was another long shot, but at least it was worth trying. For the chance to live near her son, it was definitely worth a try. None of her attempts to put the past behind her and get on with her life had worked, so she hoped being near Sammy would help to settle her soul. That was the real reason she'd come back to Colorado.

Although, if Jack found out the truth, he'd be furious.

Understandably so. She and Chloe should never have kept something so important from him.

What if he got angry enough to keep her away from Sammy? Could he do that? Would he?

And what about Sammy, when he got old enough to wonder about his adoption and his birth parents?

She shook her head to try to shake off the circling thoughts and tuned back in to the world around her.

“That poor little thing,” a woman was saying. She was on a bench behind Arianna, facing the playground. “They have no idea where he came from.”

Idly, Arianna turned to see who the ladies were talking about.

And then she sucked in a breath. There was Sammy on the playground, just a few feet away from the women, toddling from the slide to the climbing structure, where a set of chimes was available for the kids to bang on.

“Turns out he has autism,” the same woman said to a younger mom seated beside her, who was nursing a baby. “And now that I think about it, look how he just stands there banging on one thing over and over. I should have guessed.”

“What’s Dr. Jack gonna do? He’s a widower, right?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not as young as I used to be. And I didn’t bargain for babysitting an autistic kid.”

Arianna didn’t know how she got to Sammy, but she found herself beside him, facing the two women on the bench. “Look,” she said to the white-haired one, who’d been talking, “he’s a child first. And he might not like to have his condition broadcast to everyone in the park.”

“Who are *you*?” the white-haired woman asked.

That made Arianna pause, because she couldn't tell the whole truth, obviously. "I'm his aunt."

The woman pursed her lips. "I wasn't expecting to be eavesdropped on and criticized when I took this job," she said. "I've been planning to tell Dr. Jack I'm through. Maybe I'll just do it today. I don't need this."

Arianna studied her and saw tears behind the angry expression. "Look, maybe I spoke too harshly. I just feel like a child's medical condition is private."

"No, you're right, I'm a terrible babysitter." She sighed and held out a hand toward Sammy, who looked at her and then turned back to the chimes. "I talk too much, don't I, sugar? And you don't talk at all."

The other woman finished nursing her baby, packed up and hurried away with her little one.

"I shouldn't have said anything, maybe," Arianna said to Sammy's babysitter. "I just... Well, I was thinking, it's not other people's business what condition little Sammy has. Strangers, I mean. Like her." She gestured toward the rapidly departing young mother.

"I suppose," the woman said. "But honestly, I have to talk to someone. I can't deal with all the things this child is going to need. Dr. Jack is lovely, but he brought up supervising therapists and having people come to the home to work with him each day... I didn't sign up for that. I'm retired. We didn't even *have* autism when I was growing up."

Well, they'd had it, they just hadn't diagnosed it, but whatever. "I'm sure it can all be worked out. Jack and Sammy really need the help."

"I'm overwhelmed," the woman admitted. "I'm also a grandma, and I'm not sure whether my grandkids should be around him. Oh, not that he'll hurt them or anything,

but they might be too rough or tease him. It's just all so complicated."

"I'm sure Jack will help," she said soothingly, watching Sammy. Did he really act autistic? Was he banging for an unusually long time on those chimes?

Maybe he was exhibiting musical talent. How could you even tell the difference?

Just then Sammy saw them watching and toddled over, arms extended toward Arianna.

"See, and he never comes to me. And he doesn't speak. He's a difficult child to work with."

Arianna picked Sammy up and held him loosely against her. "Do you have one of his toys?"

The woman fumbled through her bag, but she was obviously more intent on venting her feelings as she absentmindedly handed Arianna a cloth block that jingled when shaken. "I don't think he likes me," she said.

"He might just not be very expressive," Arianna said, feeling defensive for Sammy. "Kids with autism don't always smile a lot." How had this turned into a coaching session for a woman more than twice her age?

And what if the coaching didn't work and the woman decided to quit?

"To think, I'm sitting here in the park and getting in trouble for a chat I have with an acquaintance." The woman waved off in the direction of the woman who'd left with her baby. "You know what? I've had enough. You're his aunt, you say?"

Arianna nodded. She was getting a very bad feeling.

"He obviously knows and likes you. Better than he likes me." The woman stood and plunked the diaper bag into Arianna's lap. "Here," she said. "You take care of

him. His father will be here in half an hour. Tell him he can mail me my last paycheck.”

“But...but...”

It was no use. The woman left, and there was Arianna, literally left holding the bag.

The bag, and her secret son.

## Chapter Three



Jack's last Saturday appointment was with a longtime patient: Mr. McCrady's Irish setter, Cider. He ran his fingers over the dog's hunched haunches and manipulated her legs, noticing when the stoic creature gave a little flinch. "Her arthritis is bothering her more?"

"Hers and mine, both." Mr. McCrady's forehead wrinkled as he stroked his dog's ears. "She has trouble getting out of her bed some mornings. Can we get her on pain meds?"

"Absolutely." Jack finished the exam and then scratched Cider's chest, glad to note that her plume of a tail wagged. "There are risks to her kidneys that come with that type of medication, so we'll want to keep up with her bloodwork. But I think she's earned some pain relief."

"That she has," Mr. McCrady said. "She's been my best friend since my wife died. I don't know what I'd do without her."

The dog panted, seeming to smile up at her owner. Her white face and warm brown eyes communicated pure, uncomplicated love. Jack had really come to ap-

preciate senior dogs since he'd been working at Redemption Ranch.

He got Mr. McCrady and Cider set with a prescription and an appointment for a follow-up visit and then stepped into his office to check messages.

He skimmed past seven he could handle later, and then his fingers froze.

Why was Arianna messaging him?

Problem with your sitter. I have Sammy and he's fine. Come to my aunt's house, 30 Maple Ave. ASAP

A problem with his sitter? He scrolled on through but didn't see a message from Mrs. Jennings.

"Gotta run," he said to his receptionist, who was gathering up her things. "There's an issue with Sammy. Can you and Thomas close up?"

"Sure thing, Doc. Hope everything's okay."

Jack drove the four blocks to Maple Avenue without his usual pauses to enjoy the town's Saturday bustle and then hurried up the front sidewalk to Arianna's aunt's house. He'd been here a couple of times in the early days of his marriage, but Chloe hadn't gotten along with her aunt and uncle—hadn't gotten along with a lot of people, including Arianna—so he didn't know them well.

When he rang the doorbell, Arianna's aunt Justine answered. "Hey, Dr. Jack, you sure you want to come into the craziness?"

"I got a message that my son's here," he said.

"In the kitchen." She gestured behind her. "Come on in."

Jack's eyes widened at the stacks of magazines and

newspapers that allowed only a narrow path through the hallway.

“I don’t want any more people in here!” came a bellow from the other end of the house.

“It’s just Dr. Jack,” Aunt Justine yelled back. “He’s here to get his baby.”

“Well, send him on his way.”

She gave Jack an apologetic shrug. “Go on in and see Arianna and Sammy. He—” she gestured in the direction from which her husband’s shout had come “—he’s embarrassed about how the house looks. I just have to calm him down.” Justine turned and hurried toward the back of the house.

Jack picked his way through the mess, his uneasiness growing.

When he got to the kitchen, his focus immediately went to Sammy. His son sat straight-legged on a clean blanket next to Arianna, who was talking at a computer screen.

Sammy held a wooden spoon and was tapping it against a plastic bowl with intense concentration.

“I have experience with teenagers, yes,” Arianna was saying to the screen. Her wild curls were pulled back into a neat bun, and her peach-colored shirt was more tailored and buttoned-up than what she usually wore.

She also had a streak of what looked like blueberry jam across her cheek that matched the streaks on Sammy’s shirt. Oops.

“I’m staying with relatives in Esperanza Springs right now,” she said, apparently in answer to an interview question. “But I’m able to relocate for the right job.”

She was doing a Skype interview and, for whatever reason, she was also taking care of his son.

And she was thinking about relocating? Jack's chest tightened.

But he didn't have time to wonder what *that* was about. "Come here, buddy," he said quietly, holding out his hands to pick up Sammy. The steady banging noise his son was making couldn't help Arianna's cause.

Sammy noticed him for the first time and pumped his little arms. Jack's heart lifted, and he swung Sammy up.

But not before Sammy's flailing feet made a stack of plastic containers clatter to the ground. The noise startled Sammy, and he began to cry.

Jack glanced at Arianna in time to see her slight cringe. The person doing the interview, blurry on the screen, frowned.

"I can send you reference letters or give you phone numbers," Arianna said over the din.

She turned up the sound and Jack heard the fatal words: "We'll be in touch."

He carried Sammy out of the room, waved to Justine, who stood at the end of a hallway arguing with her husband, and went out the front door. He started toward his truck, then paused. He needed to get Sammy home, but first, he'd better wait and find out from Arianna what was going on. And apologize for disrupting her job interview.

Putting Sammy down on his blanket, he showed him a smooth stick. True to form, Sammy found it fascinating and began to bang it on the ground.

It wasn't three minutes before Arianna came out. "Hey," she said when she saw him.

"How'd your job interview go?" he asked. "I'm sorry for all the noise."

She shrugged. "What will be will be," she said. "I

was just hoping... It's my only semilocal opportunity." Her words were casual, but her eyes were upset. She was fingering her necklace, and Jack saw that it was a cross.

Yeah, he'd heard she'd come to the faith in a big way.

"So what happened with Sammy?"

She sighed. "It's my fault."

"What's your fault?" Arianna meant well, but chaos followed her wherever she went. Chloe had always said as much.

"The sitter was talking about his autism in the park, where everyone could hear," she said. "I sort of got upset and told her she shouldn't share his diagnosis—which wasn't my business, and I'm sorry—and she ended up dumping him and all his stuff on me."

"She was talking about his diagnosis? At the park?"

"She didn't mean any harm. I think she was just trying to figure out how to cope."

That sounded like Mrs. Jennings.

Sammy looked up, and Jack sat down to be closer, rubbing his son's back. How was he going to do right by Sammy? The child needed careful, consistent care, and he'd known for a while that Mrs. Jennings couldn't fit the bill, even before they'd gotten the diagnosis. But now, his interviews with so-called serious sitters weren't going any better. He'd even tried Skyping with a couple of women from out of state, but he'd not gotten a warm feeling from any of them.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. Right now, he felt like just a struggling dad and was glad to have a relative to vent to, someone who seemed to care about Sammy almost as much as he did.

She tilted her head to one side. "This could be a God thing."

“What do you mean?”

“I need a job,” she said slowly. “And you need a nanny.”

He saw where she was going and let his eyes close. “Look, Arianna, I don’t want to hurt your feelings. But I just don’t think—”

“*Don’t* think, then,” she said.

“But I’m responsible for—”

“Don’t think—pray.” She stood smoothly, leaned down and ran a finger across Sammy’s shoulders—which he normally hated, but accepted from Arianna with just an upward glance—and then walked toward her car.

“Arianna...”

“Don’t answer now. Pray about it,” she called over her shoulder. “See you at church tomorrow.”

The next morning, Arianna thought about how much she loved art. One reason was the way it distracted you from your problems. It had distracted little Suzy Li from missing her mom, right here in the second-grade Sunday school class, and it had distracted Arianna from thinking about her own ridiculous offer to Jack DeMoise the day before.

“I’m sorry Suzy got a little paint on her shirt,” she said to Mrs. Li as Suzy tugged her mom’s hand, pulling her over to look at the picture she’d painted, now drying on a clothesline with the rest of the primary kids’ paintings.

“I’m just thrilled she made it through the whole class,” Mrs. Li said in between hugging Suzy and admiring her picture. “It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten to stay for a whole church service. What a big girl you were, Suzy!”

“I missed you, Mommy.” Suzy wrapped her arms around her mother. “But Miss Arianna said I was brave.”

Mrs. Li smiled at Arianna. *Thank you*, she mouthed.

Arianna was glad she’d helped, but she felt a pang; she couldn’t deny it. It was fun and rewarding to get her kid fix through helping with Sunday school, but in the end, those precious little ones wanted their own mommies. In the end, Arianna went home alone.

Fortunately, there was no time to dwell on what she didn’t have. Sunny and Skye, the pastor’s twins, needed their hands washed before heading out with their mom, who introduced herself as Lily. “Don’t worry about it,” Lily said as Arianna tried to scrub off the paint that had inexplicably splattered both twins’ arms. “As long as they’re happy, it’s fine.”

“That’s what I said.” Kayla, the main teacher of the primary-age kids and the mother of one of them, Leo, came over, and she and Lily hugged. “Kids are supposed to get messy and have fun.”

Yeah, they were right about kids, Arianna thought, but what about her? When was she going to grow up and stop getting messy? She wet a paper towel and used it to wipe the biggest smudge from her cheek. The green streak in her hair was probably there to stay, at least until she could get back to her temporary home and shower.

“Hey, Dr. D,” Kayla said and went to the door to greet Jack, who was leaning in with Sammy parked on his hip. Arianna sucked in a breath. He was good-looking to begin with, but when he smiled, he was breathtaking.

Finn Gallagher, Kayla’s husband, showed up and sidled past Jack into the classroom. He reached out to Kayla and gently rubbed her shoulders, his eyes crinkling. She

smiled up at him, love and happiness written all over her face.

Arianna's chest tugged. What would it be like to have someone touch you as if you were infinitely precious? Someone with whom to share your deepest thoughts, your hopes and dreams, your secrets?

But she couldn't tell anyone her deepest secrets, not and have them look at her the way Finn looked at Kayla. An out-of-wedlock pregnancy wasn't that uncommon, and there were plenty of people who took it in stride, raised the child and got on with their lives. Arianna wished she was that person, but she wasn't. Not given her family and the way she was raised.

As a result, she'd given away her child...and lied about it.

Jack was still standing at the half door. "Are you coming to the church lunch?" he asked her abruptly.

She hesitated. The church had a lunch after services every Sunday, for members and anyone in the community who needed a free meal or fellowship. She should go, since she was trying to make some kind of a life here. "Um, I guess."

"Good. I'll see you there." And he was off.

What did *that* mean? That he wanted to see her, have lunch with her, hang out, accept her offer of helping with Sammy? Or that he wanted to let her down easy?

She blew out a sigh as she wiped down the tables where the kids had been painting. Thanks to an abundance of newspapers, cleanup wasn't that difficult, but she found herself lingering, carefully putting things away in a most uncharacteristic way.

She knew why she was stalling: she didn't want to go

to the lunch and face Jack. Not after she'd made such a ridiculous offer.

Why had she suggested—again—that she could serve as Sammy's nanny when Jack clearly didn't want her to? Had she turned into one of those desperate women who couldn't take no for an answer?

Jack was kind and he would be nice about it, but rejection was rejection. She wasn't looking forward to it.

But, oh, for the chance to take care of her son, even briefly! To get to know him, to help him, to watch him grow.

*No*, said the stern voice in her head. She didn't deserve it, and it wasn't for her.

She was tempted to just skip the lunch and go home, avoiding Jack altogether, except she didn't have a home, not really. Aunt Justine and Uncle Steve had been kind to take her in, and hospitable, but trying to make space for another person in their crowded home was putting a strain on their relationship. She could see it. The more hours she could stay away the better.

Which pointed to her other problem: she needed to make new living arrangements. It was just that she didn't know whether to make them here or somewhere else.

Meanwhile, she'd get her aunt and uncle take-out meals from the church lunch, she decided. It was so hard to cook anything in their kitchen, piled high with appliance boxes and recycling and newspapers. It wasn't much, but a good meal from the church would be a small token of her gratitude to them.

Penny caught up with her and walked alongside. "You doing okay? You look a little blue."

She couldn't tell Penny the big reason, of course. "Just thinking about my living situation," she said as they

walked into the fellowship hall, where the meal was already being served. "I'm wearing out my welcome at my aunt and uncle's place, but I'm on a tight budget until I find more work."

"Hmm, that's tough." And then Penny snapped her fingers and stared at her. "You know what? The pastor was right. With God all things are possible."

"Oh, I know that's true—"

Penny interrupted her. "No, seriously. I just got a brainstorm."

"What's that?"

"I've got a mother-in-law apartment upstairs at my house on the ranch, and I've been meaning to clean it out and fix it up forever. You're energetic and artsy. How would you like to stay there for the next few weeks? Rent-free, if you'll clean it and fix it up nice, so I can rent it out at the end of the summer."

Arianna's jaw dropped. "That would be so perfect!"

And then the other ramifications of Penny's offer rushed into her mind.

She could live so close to Sammy. Across the lawn, basically.

But how would Jack feel about that? Would she appear to be stalking him?

Penny was studying her face and no doubt saw her mixed feelings. "You think about it," she said. "There's no need to decide today."

"Thank you." Arianna gripped Penny's hand, her eyes filling with tears. "That's such a kind, kind offer. I just... have to figure a few things out, but I'm incredibly grateful to you for suggesting it."

"I'd be getting as much out of it as you are," Penny

said. “Now, you’d better go grab a bite to eat while they’re still serving.”

Arianna did just that, accepting a generous portion of enchiladas, rice and beans. She sat down next to an older woman who introduced herself as Florence, and they chatted a little while Arianna ate.

The fellowship hall was just a big tile-floored room with a stage at one end and a kitchen at the other. Long tables covered with cheerful red-checked tablecloths and lined by metal folding chairs filled one half of the room. Only about half the seats were full now; Arianna had lingered in the kids’ room long enough that people were finishing up and heading home.

All of a sudden, Florence’s eyes sharpened. “Would you look at that,” she said, nodding toward a woman who was settling her two children at the other end of the table. “Pregnant with kid number three and not a husband in sight.”

Arianna registered the disapproval and was aware that she would have faced the same if she’d kept Sammy. But she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the woman, smiling and tickling her toddler while a slightly older child clung to her leg.

It would have been so wonderful to keep Sammy. And while she knew there had been many blessings in his adoption placement—not least his responsible, loving father, who was seated with Sammy at the far end of the room, where it was quieter—she couldn’t help but wish she’d found a way to keep her baby, to raise him herself.

Then she wouldn’t be caught in this web of lies, trying to decide whether it would be possible to live next door to her son without revealing her true relationship to him.

She barely realized she was staring dreamily into

space until Florence waved a hand in front of her face. "I think Dr. Jack is trying to get your attention," she said, her eyes alight with curiosity. "You'd better go talk to him."

Arianna snapped to awareness, looked in Jack's direction and saw that he was indeed beckoning to her.

Quickly, she finished her last bites of rice and beans. "It was nice talking to you," she said to her extremely observant neighbor. She took both their dishes to the washing area and then headed over to Jack, mixed gladness and dread in her heart.

Any day she could see Sammy was a good day. But she was pretty sure Jack was about to turn down her nanny offer. And then she'd have to tell Penny she couldn't take the apartment, and leave.

The thought of being away from her son after spending precious time with him made her chest ache, and she blinked away unexpected tears as she approached Jack and Sammy.

Sammy didn't look up at her. He was holding up one finger near his own face, moving it back and forth.

Jack caught his hand. "Say hi, Sammy! Here's Aunt Arianna."

Sammy tugged his hands away and continued to move his finger in front of his face.

"Sammy, come on."

Sammy turned slightly away from his father and re-focused on his fingers.

"It's okay," Arianna said, because she could see the beginnings of a meltdown. "He doesn't need to greet me. What's up?"

"Look," he said, "I've been thinking about what you

said.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable.

Sammy’s hands moved faster, and he started humming a wordless tune. It was almost as if he could sense the tension between Arianna and Jack.

“It’s okay, Jack,” she said. “I get it. My being your nanny was a crazy idea.” Crazy, but oh, so appealing. She ached to pick Sammy up and hold him, to know that she could spend more time with him, help him learn, get him support for his special needs.

But it wasn’t her right.

“Actually,” he said, “that’s what I wanted to talk about. It does seem sort of crazy, but...I think I’d like to offer you the job.”

She stared at him, her eyes filling. “Oh, Jack,” she said, her voice coming out in a whisper. Had he really just said she could have the job?

Behind her, the rumble and snap of tables being folded and chairs being stacked, the cheerful conversation of parishioners and community people, faded to an indistinguishable murmur.

She was going to be able to be with her son. Every day. She reached out and stroked Sammy’s soft hair, and even though he ignored her touch, her heart nearly melted with the joy of being close to him.

Jack’s brow wrinkled. “On a trial basis,” he said. “Just for the rest of the summer, say.”

Of course. She pulled her hand away from Sammy and drew in a deep breath. She needed to calm down and take things one step at a time. Yes, leaving him at the end of the summer would break her heart ten times more. But even a few weeks with her son was more time than she deserved.

“Would you like to go get a cup of coffee?” he asked. “Nail down the details? I think Penny would be willing to take Sammy for an hour or two.”

Arianna found her voice. “That’s okay,” she said, trying not to sound as breathless as she felt. “We can just talk it over at your house. Or here. Wherever.”

He frowned and cleared his throat. “I’d like to be a little more formal and organized about it,” he said as he started to collect Sammy’s things into his utilitarian gray diaper bag. “Draw up a contract, that sort of thing. We need to hammer out the terms.”

*Hammer out the terms.* What were the right terms for an aunt to become nanny to her secret son? “Okay, sure, I guess.”

“Meet you at the coffee shop in half an hour?”

“Sure.” Dazed, she turned and headed out to her car.

*With God all things are possible.* The pastor had said it, and she’d just witnessed its truth. She was being given a job, taking care of her son and had a place to live.

It was a blessing, a huge one. But it came at a cost: she was going to need to conceal the truth from Jack on a daily basis. And given the way her heart was jumping around in her chest, she wondered if she was going to be able to survive this much of God’s blessing.

Want to know what happens next?

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