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— A SAMPLER—





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#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

## SUSAN MALLERY

the friendship list

a novel

#### one

"I SHOULD HAVE MARRIED MONEY," ELLEN FOX said glumly. "That would have solved all my problems."

Unity Leandre, her best friend, practically since birth, raised her eyebrows. "Because that was an option so many times and you kept saying no?"

"It could have been. Maybe. If I'd ever, you know, met a rich guy I liked and wanted to marry."

"Wouldn't having him want to marry you be an equally important part of the equation?"

Ellen groaned. "This is not a good time for logic. This is a good time for sympathy. Or giving me a winning lottery ticket. We've been friends for years and you've never once given me a winning lottery ticket."

Unity picked up her coffee and smiled. "True, but I did give you my pony rides when we celebrated our eighth birthdays."

A point she would have to concede, Ellen thought. With their birthdays so close together, they'd often had shared parties. The summer they'd turned eight, Unity's mom had arranged for pony rides at a nearby farm. Unity had enjoyed herself, but Ellen had fallen in love with scruffy Mr. Peepers, the crabby old pony who carried them around the paddock. At Ellen's declaration of affection for the pony, Unity had handed over the rest of her ride tickets, content to watch Ellen on Mr. Peepers's wide back.

"You were wonderful about the pony rides," Ellen said earnestly. "And I love that you were so generous. But right now I really need a small fortune. Nothing overwhelming. Just a tasteful million or so. In return, I'll give back the rides on Mr. Peepers."

Unity reached across the kitchen table and touched Ellen's arm. "He really wants to go to UCLA?"

Ellen nodded, afraid if she spoke, she would whimper. After sucking in a breath, she managed to say, "He does. Even with a partial scholarship, the price is going to kill me." She braced herself for the ugly reality. "Out-of-state costs, including room and board, are about sixty-four thousand dollars." Ellen felt her heart skip a beat and not out of excitement. "A year. A year! I don't even bring home that much after taxes. Who has that kind of money? It might as well be a million dollars."

Unity nodded. "Okay, now marrying money makes sense."

"I don't have a lot of options." Ellen pressed her hand to her chest and told herself she wasn't having a heart attack. "You know I'd do anything for Coop and I'll figure this out, but those numbers are terrifying. I have to start buying lottery scratchers and get a second job." She looked at Unity. "How much do you think they make at Starbucks? I could work nights."

Unity, five inches taller, with long, straight blond hair, grabbed her hands. "Last month it was University of Oklahoma and the month before that, he wanted to go to Notre Dame. Cooper has changed his mind a dozen times. Wait until you go look at colleges this summer and he figures out what he really wants, then see who offers the best financial aid before you panic." Her mouth curved up in a smile. "No offense, Ellen,

but I've tasted your coffee. You shouldn't be working anywhere near a Starbucks."

"Very funny." Ellen squeezed her hands. "You're right. He's barely seventeen. He won't be a senior until September. I have time. And I'm saving money every month."

It was how she'd been raised, she thought. To be practical, to take responsibility. If only her parents had thought to mention marrying for money.

"After our road trip, he may decide he wants to go to the University of Washington after all, and that would solve all my problems."

Not just the money ones, but the loneliness ones, she thought wistfully. Because after eighteen years of them being a team, her nearly grown-up baby boy was going to leave her.

"Stop," Unity said. "You're getting sad. I can see it."

"I hate that you know me so well."

"No, you don't."

Ellen sighed. "No, I don't, but you're annoying."

"You're more annoying."

They smiled at each other.

Unity stood, all five feet ten of her, and stretched. "I have to get going. You have young minds to mold and I have a backed-up kitchen sink to deal with, followed by a gate repair and something with a vacuum. The message wasn't clear." She looked at Ellen. "You going to be okay?"

Ellen nodded. "I'm fine. You're right. Coop will change his mind fifteen more times. I'll wait until it's a sure thing, then have my breakdown."

"See. You always have a plan."

They walked to the front door. Ellen's mind slid back to the ridiculous cost of college.

"Any of those old people you help have money?" she asked. "For the right price, I could be a trophy wife."

Unity shook her head. "You're thirty-four. The average resident of Silver Pines is in his seventies."

"Marrying money would still solve all my problems."

Unity hugged her, hanging on tight for an extra second. "You're a freak."

"I'm a momma bear with a cub."

"Your cub is six foot three. It's time to stop worrying."

"That will never happen."

"Which is why I love you. Talk later."

Ellen smiled. "Have a good one. Avoid spiders."

"Always."

When Unity had driven away, Ellen returned to the kitchen where she quickly loaded the dishwasher, then packed her lunch. Cooper had left before six. He was doing some end-of-school-year fitness challenge. Something about running and Ellen wasn't sure what. To be honest, when he went on about his workouts, it was really hard not to tune him out. Especially when she had things like tuition to worry about.

"Not anymore today," she said out loud. She would worry again in the morning. Unity was right—Cooper was going to keep changing his mind. Their road trip to look at colleges was only a few weeks away. After that they would narrow the list and he would start to apply. Only then would she know the final number and have to figure out how to pay for it.

Until then she had plenty to keep her busy. She was giving pop quizzes in both fourth and sixth periods and she wanted to update her year-end tests for her two algebra classes. She needed to buy groceries and put gas in the car and go by the library to get all her summer reading on the reserve list.

As she finished her morning routine and drove to the high school where she taught, Ellen thought about Cooper and the college issue. While she was afraid she couldn't afford the tuition, she had to admit it was a great problem to have. Seventeen years ago, she'd been a terrified teenager, about to be a single mom, with nothing between her and living on the streets except incredibly disappointed and angry parents who had been determined to make her see the error of her ways.

Through hard work and determination, she'd managed to pull herself together—raise Cooper, go to college, get a good job, buy a duplex and save money for her kid's education. Yay her.

But it sure would have been a lot easier if she'd simply married someone with money.

"How is it possible to get a C- in Spanish?" Coach Keith Kinne asked, not bothering to keep his voice down. "Half the population in town speaks Spanish. Hell, your sister's husband is Hispanic." He glared at the strapping football player standing in front of him. "Luka, you're an idiot."

Luka hung his head. "Yes, Coach."

"Don't 'yes, Coach' me. You knew this was happening—you've known for weeks. And did you ask for help? Did you tell me?"

"No, Coach."

Keith thought about strangling the kid but he wasn't sure he could physically wrap his hands around the teen's thick neck. He swore silently, knowing they were where they were and now he had to fix things—like he always did with his students.

"You know the rules," he pointed out. "To play on any varsity team you have to get a C+ or better in every class. Did you think the rules didn't apply to you?"

Luka, nearly six-five and two hundred and fifty pounds, slumped even more. "I thought I was doing okay."

"Really? So you'd been getting better grades on your tests?"

"Not exactly." He raised his head, his expression miserable. "I thought I could pull up my grade at the last minute."

"How did that plan work out?"

"No bueno."

Keith glared at him. "You think this is funny?"

"No, Coach."

Keith shook his head. "You know there's not a Spanish summer school class. That means we're going to have to find an alternative."

Despite his dark skin, Luka went pale. "Coach, don't send me away."

"No one gets sent away." Sometimes athletes went to other districts that had a different summer curriculum. They stayed with families and focused on their studies.

"I need to stay with my family. My mom understands me."

"It would be better for all of us if she understood Spanish." Keith glared at the kid. "I'll arrange for an online class. You'll get a tutor. You will report to me twice a week, bringing me updates until you pass the class." He sharpened his gaze. "With an A."

Luka took a step back. "Coach, no! An A? I can't."

"Not with that attitude."

"But, Coach."

"You knew the rules and you broke them. You could have come to me for help early on. You know I'm always here for any of my students, but did you think about that or did you decide you were fine on your own?"

"I decided I was fine on my own," Luka mumbled.

"Exactly. And deciding on your own is not how teams work. You go it alone and you fail."

Tears filled Luka's eyes. "Yes, Coach."

Keith pointed to the door. Luka shuffled out. Keith sank into his chair. He'd been hard on the kid, but he needed to get the message across. Grades mattered. He was willing to help whenever he could, but he had to be told what was going on. He had a feeling Luka thought because he was a star athlete he was going to get special treatment. Maybe somewhere else, but not here. Forcing Luka to get an A sent a message to everyone who wanted to play varsity sports.

He'd barely turned to his computer when one of the freshman boys stuck his head in the office. "Coach Kinne! Coach Kinne! There's a girl crying in the weight room."

Keith silently groaned as he got up and jogged to the weight room, hoping he was about to deal with something simple like a broken arm or a concussion. He knew what to do for those kinds of things. Anything that was more emotional, honest to God, terrified him.

He walked into the weight room and found a group of guys huddled together. A petite, dark-haired girl he didn't know sat on a bench at the far end, her hands covering her face, her sobs audible in the uneasy silence.

He looked at the guys. "She hurt?"

They shifted their weight and shook their heads. Damn. So it wasn't physical. Why didn't things ever go his way?

"Any of you responsible for whatever it is?" he asked.

More shaken heads with a couple of guys ducking out.

Keith pointed to the door so the rest of them left, then returned his attention to the crying girl. She was small and looked young. Maybe fifteen. Not one of his daughter's friends or a school athlete—he knew all of them.

He approached the teen, trying to look friendly rather than menacing, then sat on a nearby bench.

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm Coach Kinne."

She sniffed. Her eyes were red, her skin pale. "I know who you are."

"What's going on?" Don't be pregnant, don't be pregnant, he chanted silently.

More tears spilled over. "I'm pregnant. The father is Dylan, only he says he's not, and I can't tell my m-mom because she'll be so mad and he said he l-loved me."

And just like that Keith watched his Monday fall directly into the crapper.

Keith left work exactly at three fifteen. He would be returning to his office to finish up paperwork, supervise a couple of workouts and review final grades for athletes hovering on the edge of academic problems. But first, he had pressing personal business.

He drove the two short miles to his house, walked inside and headed directly for his seventeen-year-old daughter's room.

Lissa looked up from her laptop when he entered, her smile fading as she figured out he was in a mood. Despite the attitude, she was a beauty. Long dark hair, big brown eyes. Dammit all to hell—why couldn't he have an ugly daughter who no guy would look at twice?

"Hi, Dad," she said, sounding wary. "What's up?" "Spot check."

She rolled her eyes. "Seriously? There is something wrong with you. I heard what happened at school today. I'm not dumb enough to date a guy like Dylan who would tell a tree stump he loved it if it would have sex with him. I'm not sleeping with anyone and I'm not pregnant. I told you—I'm not ready to have sex, as in I'm still a virgin. You're obsessed. Would you feel better if I wore a chastity belt?"

"Yes, but you won't. I've asked."

"Da-ad. Why are you like this? Pregnancy isn't the worst thing that could happen. I could be sick and dying. Wouldn't that be terrible?"

"You can't win this argument with logic. I'm irrational. I accept that. But I'm also the parent, so you have to deal with me being irrational."

He pointed to her bathroom. She sighed the long-suffering sigh of those cursed with impossible fathers and got up. He followed her to the doorway and watched as she pulled the small plastic container out of the bathroom drawer and opened it.

Relief eased the tension in his body. Pills were missing. The right number of pills.

"You are a nightmare father," his daughter said, shoving the pills back in the drawer. "I can't wait until I'm eighteen and I can get the shot instead of having to take birth control pills. Then you'll only bug me every few months."

"I can't wait, either."

"It's not like I even have a boyfriend."

"You could be talking to someone online."

Her annoyance faded as she smiled at him. "Dad, only one of us in this house does the online dating thing and it's not me."

"I don't online date."

"Fine. You pick up women online, then go off and have sex with them for the weekend. It's gross. You should fall in love with someone you're not embarrassed to bring home to meet me."

"I'm not embarrassed. I just don't want complications."

"But you do want to have sex. It's yucky."

"Then why are we talking about it?" He pulled her close and hugged her, then kissed the top of her head. "Sorry, Lissa. I can't help worrying about you."

She looked up at him. "Dad, I'm taking my pills every day, not that it matters because I'm not having sex. I'm not. I've barely kissed a guy. Having you as my father makes it really difficult to date. Guys don't want to mess with you and risk being beat up."

"Good."

She smiled even as she hit him in the arm. "You're repressing my emotional growth."

"Just don't get pregnant."

"You need to find a more positive message. How about 'be your best self'?"

"That, too. Gotta go."

"I'm having dinner with Jessie tonight. Remember?"

"No problem. Be home by ten."

He got back in his truck but before starting the engine, he quickly texted Ellen. I need a couple of beers and a friendly ear. You around tonight?

The response came quickly. Only if you bring fried chicken. I have beer and ice cream.

#### You're on. See you at six.

Ellen couldn't figure out why a six-foot-five-inch, seventeenyear-old guy crying bothered her more than pretty much any teenage girl crying. Was it reverse sexual discrimination? Because boys cried less often, their tears had more value? Was it the sheer size of Luka juxtaposed with the implied vulnerability of tears? As she was unlikely to figure out an answer, she decided to ignore the question.

"Luka, you're going to be fine," she said, reaching up to pat the teen on his shoulder as Cooper hovered nearby. "You'll take the online Spanish class and you'll do great. You're plenty smart. You just got complacent."

"He thought because he's such a hotshot on the field, his shit didn't stink," Coop said, then groaned. "Sorry, Mom. Um, I meant to say, ah, poop."

She turned to her son and raised her eyebrows. She was pleased that, despite his age and size, he took a step back and swallowed.

"I'm really sorry," he added.

"As you should be. Luka, Coach isn't throwing you off the bus."

"You didn't see him. He was really mad. He said I was an idiot."

Not exactly the word she would have chosen, but then she didn't spend much time in the jock/jockette world.

"You're a leader, so he expects better of you."

More tears filled Luka's eyes. Next to him, Coop winced.

"What if I can't get an A?"

"You won't with that attitude."

Luka sniffed. "That's what Coach said."

Cooper leaned close. "It's a teacher thing. They think alike. Welcome to my world."

She did her best not to smile. Her boys, she thought fondly. Cooper and his friends had been running in and out of her life since he'd been old enough to invite kids back to play. Luka had been a staple in her life for nearly a decade. He and his family had moved here from Yap (a tiny island in Micronesia—she'd had to look it up). Luka and Coop had met the first day of second grade and been best friends ever since.

"Luka, I forbid you to think about this anymore today. Your mom is waiting for you. Go have a nice dinner and relax this evening. Tomorrow, get your butt in gear and get going on the Spanish studies." She hesitated. "I'll talk to Coach and make sure you're still on the college trip."

His dark eyes brightened. "You will? Thanks, Ms. F. That would be great."

Before she could step back, Luka grabbed her and lifted her up in the air. It was not a comfortable feeling, but all of Coop's friends seemed to do it. He swung her around twice before setting her down. Both teens headed for the door.

"I'll be back by ten," Coop yelled over his shoulder.

"Have fun."

Ellen gave herself a little shake to make sure nothing had been crushed, then stepped out on her small deck to check out the heat level. The front of the house faced south, leaving the backyard in shade in the early evening. The temperature was close to eighty, but bearable.

The deck overlooked a small patch of lawn edged by fencing. Nothing fancy, but it was hers and she loved it. She quickly wiped off the metal table and dusted the chairs before putting out placemats, plenty of paper napkins and a cut-up lime. She'd already made a green salad to counteract the calories from the

fried chicken. Shortly after six, she heard a knock on the front door, followed by a familiar voice calling, "It's me."

"In the kitchen," she yelled as she opened the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of beer. Dos Equis for him and a Corona for herself. She glared when she saw the extra to-go container in his hand.

"What?" she demanded. "We agreed on chicken."

He held up the KFC bucket. "I brought chicken. Original, because you like it."

"Don't distract me. Are those potatoes? I can't eat those."

"Actually you can. I've seen you. You have no trouble using a fork."

She set his beer on the table. "Do you know how many calories are in those mashed potatoes? I'm not some macho athletic guy."

Keith gave her an unapologetic smile. "I'd still be friends with you if you were." He set down the food. "Stop worrying about it. You look fine." He glanced at her. "As far as anyone can tell."

She ignored that and refused to look down at her oversize tunic and baggy pants. "I like to be comfortable. Loose clothing allows me to move freely on the job." She ducked back into the house to get the salad, then joined him at the table.

He'd already taken his usual seat and opened both to-go containers. The smell of fried chicken reminded her she hadn't eaten since lunch, which felt like two days ago. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered.

Keith put a chicken breast on her plate, then handed her the mashed potatoes. She put slices of lime in both their beers. Their movements were familiar. Comfortable.

Coach Keith Kinne and his daughter had moved to Willowbrook five years ago. He'd joined the faculty of Birchly High as the football coach and athletic director. Washington State might not have the religious fever of Texas when it came to high school football, but there was still a lot of enthusiasm and the six-foot-two-inch, good-looking, dark-haired former NFL player had caught a lot of ladies' attention.

Not hers, though. Mostly because she didn't date—there wasn't time and no one she met was ever that interesting. So when she'd found him cornered by a slightly aggressive novice teacher from the English department, Ellen had stepped in to save him and their friendship had been born. They hung out together because it was easy and they complemented each other. He'd helped her when she'd bought a new-to-her car a couple of years ago and she went Christmas shopping with him for his daughter.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked, picking up his beer.

"Just thinking that it's nice we're friends. Imagine how awkward things would have been if I'd gone after you when you first moved here."

He frowned. "Don't say that. If you had, we might not be friends now. I was fresh off a divorce and I wasn't looking for trouble."

"I'm not trouble."

"You would have been if we'd dated."

What on earth did he mean? "Trouble how?"

"You know. Boy-girl trouble." He put down his beer. "Speaking of dating, Lissa got on me about my internet relationships."

"You don't have internet relationships. You find women to have sex with."

He winced. "That's what she said. Have you two been talking about me behind my back?"

"Oh, please. We have so many more interesting things to talk about." She'd never understood the appeal of casual sex. It seemed so impersonal. Shouldn't that level of intimacy be part of a relationship? Otherwise sex was just as romantic as passing gas.

"She told me to find someone I wasn't embarrassed by so she could meet her."

"That's nice."

"It freaked me out."

Ellen grinned. "That's because there are emotions attached to relationships and you don't like emotions."

"I like some of them. I like winning."

"Winning isn't an emotion."

"Fine. I like how winning makes me feel." His expression turned smug. "I get emotions."

"You're faking it." She let her smile fade. "Cooper wants to go to UCLA."

"Are you sure? He told me Stanford."

She heard a ringing in her ears as her whole world tilted. "W-what? Stanford? No. He can't."

"Why not? They have a better wrestling program. I've spoken to the coach there and he's really interested. I'm working on getting Coop a one-on-one meeting when we visit the school. With his skills and grades, he's got a good shot at getting in."

"I'm going to faint."

"Why? You should be happy."

She glared at him. "Happy? Are you insane? I can't afford UCLA and it's a state school. How on earth would I pay for Stanford? Plus, why isn't Cooper telling me about things like meeting a coach? I should know that."

"Breathe," Keith told her. "If he goes to Stanford, you'll be fine. With what you make, his tuition will be covered. If he gets a partial scholarship, it could go toward room and board. Stanford would be a lot cheaper for you than UCLA."

Her panic faded. "Are you sure?"

He looked at her. "You have to ask me that?"

"Sorry. Of course you're sure. You do this all the time." She picked up her chicken. "Yay, Stanford. Go team."

"You don't have any contact with his dad, do you? Because his income would count."

"No contact," she said cheerfully. "Jeremy disappeared before Coop was born. I hear from him every five or six years for five seconds and then he's gone again. He signed his rights away and he's never given me a penny." She smiled. "I say that without bitterness because I'm loving the Stanford dream."

Keith grinned. "You're saying you can be bought for the price of tuition?"

She smiled back at him. "I can be bought for a whole lot less than that. So why didn't he tell me about wanting to go to Stanford? Why is he keeping secrets?"

"He's becoming a man. He needs his own dreams and plans."

"But I'm his mom and he's my baby boy. Make him stop growing up."

"Sorry. Not my superpower."

She remembered what it had been like when Coop had been younger. It had been the two of them against the world. "I miss being the most important person in his life, but you're right. He needs to make his own way. What are the Stanford colors? Will they look good on me?"

### two

KEITH REACHED FOR HIS BEER, NOT BOTHERing to hide his amusement. "Is that going to be part of the decision-making process? How you look in the college colors? Because you care so much about how you look?"

"Hey!" Ellen balled up her napkin and tossed it at him. "I care. Sort of."

Keith had been around women enough to know this was not a winning line of conversation. When it came to pretty much everything, women had rules men couldn't possibly understand. He'd often thought that if Ellen put even five minutes into her appearance, she would be chasing men off with a stick. Yet if he mentioned that, he was the bad guy.

Like her clothes. They were always at least two sizes too big. Even when she wasn't teaching, she wore baggy jeans and oversize T-shirts or sweatshirts. She never put on makeup. Despite having long, wavy dark hair, she never wore it other than in a ponytail or a braid.

Not his rock, he reminded himself. Ellen was his friend and whatever made her happy made him happy, too.

"I'm sure the Stanford colors will be glorious on you," he told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Glorious? Is that the best you could come up with?"

"It is."

"Fine. Tell me about your day."

He reached for a chicken leg and put it on his plate, then added two more. "I had to deal with another pregnant girl. Why does this keep happening and why do they come to me?"

"In reverse order, they come to you because you're capable and the odds of the guy involved being an athlete are high. As for why they get pregnant, that's easy. Men don't control their sperm."

He stared at her. "What?"

"Sperm. It's not the sex that's the problem." She waved her beer bottle. "Think about it. Women can have sex all day long and not get pregnant. They can have orgasm after orgasm and nada. It's all about ejaculation. If the male half of the species made sure that didn't happen inside women, there would be no unplanned pregnancies. Everyone looks to the girl, but she's not the one who made it happen. He did."

Despite the hell that had been his day, Keith chuckled. "You always have a unique perspective."

"I know. What was it you said? I'm glorious."

"You are. So if you're right, then the system is rigged against women, but that doesn't change the pregnancy outcome."

Her expression turned sympathetic. "You worry about Lissa too much."

"Do I? As you just pointed out, she's one wayward ejaculation away from getting pregnant."

"She's on the pill."

"If she takes them."

Ellen put her hand on his forearm. "Your daughter doesn't want to get pregnant, Keith. She's a smart girl and she's on birth control. Plus, from what I can tell, she's not seeing anyone. You know how she gets—once she likes a guy, that's all she ever talks about. On the boy-girl front, things have been quiet."

"I hope you're right. The whole situation makes me crazy." Lissa was his daughter, his world. He wanted to do everything in his power to make her life perfect.

Ellen reached for the mashed potatoes. "When we're back from the college bus trip, Lissa and I will be working at the fruit stand for the rest of the summer. I'll find out what's going on. Between now and then, she's busy with school, then she'll be with you on the bus. She should be perfectly safe. And speaking of the bus trip, I think we're pretty much done with the details. What do you think?"

"I agree. I'm buying the Disneyland tickets this week," he said. "The hotel reservations are all made."

"You're a good man for doing this."

He raised one shoulder. "I don't mind it."

Since moving to Willowbrook, he'd started taking a group of his athletes on a tour of West Coast colleges. The students spent the school year raising money to pay for gas, hotels rooms and food. Keith made appointments with the various colleges the students were interested in. The trips were about two weeks long, with a few fun stops along the way. This year's students had decided they wanted to spend an afternoon on the beach in Santa Monica, a day in Disneyland and a day at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. They'd raised enough money and Keith always let them plan the agenda. They would visit a half dozen colleges, see the West Coast and, for many of his students, leave the state for the first time.

"You excited about the trip?" he asked.

Ellen smiled at him. "Excited is strong, but I'm happy to be the bus mom." It would be her first time joining him, but with Coop going, she'd volunteered. He was bringing Lissa.

"Too bad it's only guys," he said. "I think Lissa would have liked a couple of girls along."

He always had more students apply than he could manage. In November, he held a drawing with twelve students chosen at random. This year both of the female students who had won a slot had dropped out.

"She'll have me," Ellen said. "Plus Coop's like her brother. And all the guys are scared of you, so no one will bother her."

"Damn straight they're scared of me," he grumbled. "If I catch any of them with my daughter, I will let my fists do the talking."

She tsked. "Violence? Is that the best you can come up with?"

"When it comes to Lissa, yes."

They finished dinner and talked for another hour before he helped her clean up. Close to eight, she walked him to the front door.

"Thanks for listening," he said, hugging her.

"Thanks for the info on Stanford. I'll sleep easier tonight knowing I just might be able to pay for college."

She looked up at him as she spoke. As always, her bangs were too long, almost touching her big eyes. She looked impossibly young—as if there was no way she could have a seventeen-year-old son. Only she'd been Lissa's age when she'd gotten pregnant.

"You did a great job with your kid," he told her.

"Thank you. Back at you."

"Yeah, but I wasn't still in high school when she was born. And I had a wife."

"I had my parents."

"Hey, I'm trying to pay you a compliment here."

"Sorry." She smiled. "Thank you, Coach Kinne."

"You're welcome, Ms. Fox."

She laughed. "See you tomorrow."

"Always."

He walked toward his extended cab truck. Despite the hour, the sun still hadn't set. This time of year, there was a ridiculous amount of daylight in the Pacific Northwest.

As he got behind the wheel, he glanced at the duplex where Ellen lived. She'd told him how when her parents had sold their house and moved to Palm Desert to retire, they'd given her enough money for a down payment on a house. She'd impressed them by buying a duplex instead, so she would have steady income to help her pay down the mortgage.

She'd confessed that she would have preferred a single-family home, but she'd known the duplex was the smarter decision. That was Ellen—always sensible and doing the right thing. She was a good friend, one he could depend on. In some ways, not counting Lissa, Ellen was the best relationship he'd ever had.

"Peter, my youngest, called last night," Howard said, as he checked his toolbox. "His divorce is final. Maybe you'd like to meet him."

Unity Leandre stared at the big dry-erase board mounted on the wall of her garage. It was divided into five columns, one for each day of the week. The jobs were listed on the day they would be done, with an arrival time next to them. Every morning she went over the jobs with her team and decided who would do what and how long it should take.

"She doesn't want to go out with Peter," Jerry said. "He's what? In his forties?"

"Forty-five."

"That's too old for her. How old are you, Unity?"

"Thirty-four."

"See?" Jerry sounded triumphant. "That's too big an age difference. Plus Peter lives in Bellingham. The drive would be at least three hours, maybe four."

"He's a good guy," Howard insisted. "An entrepreneur."

"He owns a yard mowing service."

"It's a landscaping company. They'd have a lot in common." Jerry snorted. "Leave the girl alone. She'll find the right guy on her own. She doesn't need us butting into her business."

"I'm not butting, I'm offering to help. Unity, am I butting in?" Unity put Howard's initials next to the backed-up drain and Jerry's by the new shower fixture.

Only then did she turn toward the two seventysomething men who worked for her—part-time, of course. Because being retired didn't mean a person wasn't busy. Something she'd learned in the past three years. She had a team of five men working for her—all well over the age of sixty-five, all good at their jobs. Sure, there were times when they couldn't move as fast as someone younger, but they were skilled, careful and thorough. She would rather the job took a little longer, but was done right. Besides, most of her clients were at the Silver Pines retirement community, so they appreciated having handymen of a certain age around. As for Howard's youngest and his recent divorce, just no.

She smiled. "You're not butting, Howard, but I'm also not interested."

"You haven't met him yet. What if he's everything you've been looking for?"

Unity shook her head. Three-plus years after Stuart's death, she wasn't the least bit interested in finding a replacement.

"I'm sure he's wonderful," she said kindly. "Just not for me."

"It's because he's too old, right?" Jerry asked hopefully. He turned to Howard. "I told you to stop butting in."

The two men were fast friends. They both had gray hair, wrinkled faces and slight beer bellies. Howard was a little taller, but still shorter than Unity. She was five-ten and, as more than one of the old ladies at the retirement community had remarked, a strapping girl. Broad-shouldered and sturdy. In high school she'd been on the swim team and had almost made it to the state championships. These days her exercise program came with her job. There was plenty of bending, lifting, dragging and reaching.

Maybe she wasn't the media's idea of a beauty, but she didn't care. Stuart had thought she was pretty and that was enough for her.

She wrote down the addresses of the jobs on two pieces of paper and handed them to the guys. "Keep track of your hours and parts, please," she told them. "I'm heading over to help Dagmar this morning. You can reach me on my phone if you need me."

Jerry shook the note. "If you got a real phone, you could text us the address. And you could get one of those apps to keep track of our hours and the parts we use. Paper is so last century."

Howard rolled his eyes. "He has an e-reader, so he thinks he's all that."

"I love my flip phone." Unity patted her jeans pocket. "It's dependable and the battery charge lasts forever."

"That's because your phone doesn't do anything," Jerry grumbled. "Embrace technology. By the time we die, you'll be replacing us with robots."

"Not likely." Unity smiled at them. "And please don't die."

"It's gonna happen eventually," Howard said cheerfully. "See you later, Unity."

The guys left, speaking for a minute on the sidewalk before heading for their cars. Unity confirmed that she'd listened to all the messages left on the answering machine, then scanned her date book to make sure the current week's work had been transferred to the dry-erase board. Old-school, she thought. But simple and dependable. She wasn't really a technology kind of person.

After closing the garage door, she walked through the house to double-check the back door. She paused in the hall, by the wedding picture taken the week after she'd graduated from high school. She and Stuart had been so young, she thought wistfully, touching the glass protecting the photograph. But they'd been in love and so sure they would be together forever.

The familiar sadness was pushed aside for a moment when she

caught sight of the tiny glass beads on her wedding dress. There were hundreds of them, all sewn by hand. She should know—she and Ellen had spent dozens of hours carefully adding the beads to the inexpensive dress that had been all Unity could afford. She'd wanted the beautifully beaded dress, but it had been double her budget. She'd placed the order for the cheaper one, but had left the store in tears.

The next day Ellen had dropped a small, heavy box on Unity's bed. Inside had been little plastic bags filled with beautiful, iridescent glass beads.

"It'll take us right up until the wedding," Ellen had told her. "But you're going to have the perfect dress when you marry Stuart."

It was an Ellen kind of thing to do, Unity thought. She believed in showing her love rather than just talking about it. From April until the end of June that year, Ellen had demonstrated her affection with hours of beading, and in the end, Unity had married Stuart...all the while wearing the dress of her dreams.

Her gaze shifted to her late husband's face, remembering everything about that day. They'd been so thrilled to get married. It had been a magical day, but not the best day. With him, there hadn't been a best day—there couldn't be. They were all too good.

And thoughts like that were not helpful, she reminded herself, as the ache of missing him returned. Dagmar was waiting and Dagmar wasn't the type to take lateness in stride.

Unity drove the three miles to The Village at Silver Pines, otherwise known as just plain Silver Pines, and was waved in by the guard at the gate.

Silver Pines was the largest retirement community in the Pacific Northwest. There were single-family homes, condos, a golf course, several clubhouses, three restaurants, a workout facility, two pools, tennis and pickleball courts, and a grocery store. Deeper into the multi-acre complex were the indepen-

dent living apartments, assisted living apartments, memory care and rehab facilities, a skilled nursing home and an outpatient surgery center.

The community hosted weekly garage sales, movie nights and all kinds of clubs. The senior center—housed in the largest of the clubhouses—was open to the public.

Unity had discovered it and Silver Pines when she'd first moved back, three years ago. She'd decided to take up knitting, and the senior center had offered a class. She'd enjoyed the company so much, she'd joined the local pickleball league and was a regular at various events. Now, with the exception of Ellen, all her friends were over the age of sixty-five.

She drove through quiet, well-maintained streets. The association took care of all front lawns—freeing the residents from worry. Unity smiled. Maybe Howard should tell his son about the work his lawn business could have here. Not that she was interested. Too many of her friends were trying to fix her up. They liked Unity and wanted to see her "happy." When she tried to tell them it had been only three years and she was nowhere near over Stuart, they told her she shouldn't wallow. As if she had a choice about the amount of grief in her life. She also tried explaining that she'd had one great marriage and didn't need another one, but that didn't work either. Only Ellen let her be.

Unity turned onto a side street, then another, before pulling in front of a small rambler. The house was two bedrooms and two baths—about twelve hundred square feet. Sadly, Betty had fallen the previous week and broken her hip and would be moving into an independent living apartment.

Betty's soon-to-be former house, like all the other houses, was on a single level with no stairs. The path from the street to the dark blue front door had a gentle incline. There were no steps anywhere in the house. The doorways were wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair. Inside the finishes were upscale. There were several floor plans and this was one of Unity's favorites.

Dagmar met her at the front door. "You're here. Good. We can get started right away. I went and saw Betty yesterday and got a list of all the things she wants us to pack for her. The movers come in the morning and take care of the rest of it."

Dagmar, a seventysomething former librarian, had the energy level of a brewing volcano. She wore her straight hair in a chin-length bob. The color varied, sometimes significantly. Currently her swinging, shiny hair was a deep auburn with a single purple stripe on her left side. Her clothes matched her personality—vibrant hues battled prints for attention. She was as likely to show up in a Hawaiian-print caftan as riding pants and a bullfighter's bolero jacket.

Today she had on a calf-length wrap skirt done in a balloon animal print. Her twinset picked up the lime green of one of the balloons and seemed conservative enough until she turned around and Unity saw a sequined version of the Rolling Stones open mouth logo. As always, reading glasses perched on Dagmar's head.

"Let's start in the bedroom. All she wants us to pack up there are her unmentionables." Dagmar grinned over her shoulder as she led the way through the cheerful living room to the short hallway. "She used those exact words. Unmentionables. What is this? The set of *Little Women*? I told her unless she had some fur lined G-strings, the movers weren't going to care, but you know how Betty is."

Unity was used to Dagmar's whirlwind, take-charge attitude. The first time Unity had come to Silver Pines to take her knitting classes, Dagmar had spotted her immediately. Within ten minutes, she pretty much knew Unity's life story. By the end of the fifty-minute lesson, she'd introduced Unity to everyone in the class and had invited Unity to a potluck and a pickleball game. They'd been friends ever since.

"I packed up her medications yesterday," Dagmar told her, pointing to the bathroom. "I'm hiding them at my place until

she's out of rehab. You know that doctor of hers is going to mess with everything and it will take her weeks to get back on track. This way I have a stash so we can figure it out as we go."

"Because self-medication is always the answer?" Unity asked wryly.

"At our age, it can be." Dagmar pointed to the roll of packing paper on the bed. "You get going on her Swarovski collection while I pack up the girl stuff. That's mostly what she's worried about. Her glass animals and the pictures, of course." Dagmar's smile faded. "She won't have room to hang them at her new apartment. I've been thinking that I should put them all in a photo album for her."

Before Unity could say anything, Dagmar pointed to the paper. "Chop-chop. I have bridge this afternoon and I'm sure you have work you should be doing."

"Yes, ma'am."

Unity didn't take offense at the instruction—it was simply Dagmar's way. She unrolled the paper, then she walked around the small house, collecting the crystal animals in a sturdy box.

Betty had them in her hutch, of course, but also on floating shelves in the living room and den. As Unity gathered crystal swans and frogs, dogs and birds, she looked around at various rooms. The kitchen was recently remodeled, with quartz countertops and stainless steel appliances. There was plenty of storage and a back deck with room for a table and chairs, along with a barbecue.

The neighborhood was quiet. Safe, too, she thought, carefully wrapping the crystal pieces and placing them in the box.

Dagmar appeared a few minutes later with an empty box and an armful of framed photographs. Betty had been a background dancer in Hollywood musicals back in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

"She was a beautiful girl," Dagmar said. She held up a pho-

tograph of a very young Betty in a scanty costume with a spray of feathers on her head.

"She was. What an exciting life."

"She was brave." Dagmar sighed. "I never was. I studied dance all through high school. I wanted to run off to New York and be a Rockette." She smiled. "Back then you didn't have to be so tall and I just made the height requirement. But my parents were very opposed and I was too scared to do it on my own. So I went to college and got my degree in library science."

"You've led a pretty interesting life," Unity told her.

"No, dear. But I have married interesting men, so there's that."

"This is a really nice house," Unity said as she continued to pack. "The rooms are all a good size."

Dagmar's brown eyes narrowed. "Oh my God! Don't tell me you're checking it out."

"What? No. Of course not. I've never been in Betty's house before."

Dagmar put her hands on her hips. "You're what? Thirty-two?"

"Thirty-four."

"Whatever. You're a baby. You should not be eyeing houses in an age-restricted community. You already spend too much time here as it is. Not that I don't love your company but you should be with people your own age."

"I am. All the time."

Dagmar's eyebrows rose. "Really? Is this before or after you come here for whatever classes you've signed up for this time?"

Unity tried not to sound defensive. "The classes are open to the entire county."

"Yes, but you're one of the few not collecting social security who bother to take advantage of that."

"So I'm smart."

"You're troubling me, Unity. It's been three years. Don't you think it's time to want more than you have?"

"No."

Dagmar sighed. "Maybe you want to think for a second before you answer."

"Why? I like my life. I have my friends and my business."

"Yes, you have all that, but what about a man?"

"I had my man. Dagmar, let it go."

"I can't. You had a wonderful marriage and Stuart died and it's all very sad, but at some point you need to move on. Start dating. Have you thought about dating at all?"

"Since the last time you asked? Not really."

Unity did her best to keep her tone friendly. She didn't like this line of questioning. No, she hadn't thought of dating. She'd been married to Stuart and that had been enough. One month after their wedding, he'd left for basic training. She'd joined him when he'd been assigned to a base in Colorado.

That had been their life. She'd made a home at whatever base he'd been assigned to. When he'd had leave, they'd traveled everywhere together. When his work had taken him overseas, she'd waited for him to come back to her. Being married to Stuart was all she knew. Three years after his death, she still only knew how to be his wife. Even her handyman business had grown out of her life with Stuart. Now it supported her and gave her something to do with her day.

There were supposed to have been children, but they'd wanted to wait until they were thirty and then his mom had died, so they'd waited another year and then Stuart had been gone.

"I'm sorry," Dagmar said unexpectedly, pulling Unity close. "I'm pushing you and that never goes well. It's just I hate to see you wasting your life, hanging out with a bunch of old farts with cataracts and spider veins. You should be with some young people, going out and having fun."

"I have fun with you."

Dagmar released her and smiled. "I am a good time, aren't I?

And while I appreciate the compliment, I was thinking more in the lines of sex. Darling, you desperately need a man."

"I was thinking more of getting my bangs trimmed."

"How very sad. All right, young lady. One more house check for silly crystal figurines. Although I'm in no position to cast stones. After all, my house is a shrine to all things Thomas Kincaid. I can't help it. His work moves me. Plus, I can get new things dirt cheap at the estate sales around here."

Unity did one more pass through the house. For now she was happy to live in what had been Stuart's house, surrounded by his life as a boy. The familiar was comforting. But in another twenty-one or so years, she would qualify to move to Silver Pines and wasn't that something to look forward to?

## three

#### THE SHRIEKS, LAUGHS AND YELLS WERE

louder than usual, as the last day of school wound down. Ellen sat at her desk, thinking her students would be shocked to know Ms. Fox was just as excited as they were at the thought of having the summer off. But while they were done for the semester, she still had final exams to finish grading.

Ah, to have a subject that lent itself to Scantron testing, she thought wistfully, eyeing the tall stack of papers she would be wading through. But on her tests, partial credit was always available for the work done correctly, so every pencil mark had to be studied for its potential value to the final answer. She pulled the top test off the stack and uncapped her red extra-fine-point Sharpie and went to work.

Two hours and thirty-three minutes later, she had a mild headache and a slightly sore hand, but she had finished. She entered the grades into the computer, then happily hit the send button. "I am done," she said aloud, tapping her feet on the floor as she threw her arms in the air.

She'd already cleaned out her desk, so only had to gather a few personal things before walking around her classroom one last time to make sure nothing had been forgotten.

It was nearly five and the school was quiet. She locked her classroom as she left before making her way to her car. She would dump her things, then check on Coop before heading home. She wanted to work on her to-do list for the upcoming bus trip, but first she would get some takeout to celebrate. What it would be depended on whether or not Coop was, or Coop and Luka were, joining her for dinner.

She put everything in her trunk, then headed for the gym. Cooper and Luka were, as always, working out. They were obsessed with their muscles, and their earnestness about the whole thing made her giggle. Not that she let them know—they would be horrified to think they were anything but manly men.

She rounded the corner and caught a reflection out of the corner of her eye. As she glanced toward it, she saw the mirrored wall in the trophy case.

It was one of those moments when she wasn't expecting to see herself and therefore had a microsecond of wondering "Who is that?" only to realize it was her. In that second of time she had a brief impression of a nondescript person swallowed up by clothes that were far too large.

Ellen came to a stop and stared at herself. She wore a loose tunic shirt that came to midthigh. Her pull-on pants billowed as she walked. The dark colors weren't flattering.

Heat burned at her cheeks, although why she was embarrassed, she couldn't say. So she wasn't a fashionista—she was still a good person.

She remembered Keith's comment when they'd had dinner the previous week—that no one could tell if she gained weight because her clothes were so baggy. It was just her thing, she told herself. She'd always dressed this way, hadn't she?

Ellen continued to stare at herself as she remembered the summer before she began her first teaching job. Money had, as always, been so tight and she'd needed clothes to wear to work. She'd gone to a nice thrift store just outside Seattle where she'd found some wonderful, high-quality outfits at swoon-worthy prices. The only problem had been that they were two sizes too big.

Given her need and her budget, she'd bought them and worn them. Funny how all these years later, she'd never thought to start wearing things that actually fit.

She shook off the thought and started for the weight room. As she approached, she heard voices. Cooper was there, along with Luka. Ellen hovered just to the side of the door, figuring she didn't get all that much opportunity to eavesdrop and that she wouldn't be much of a mother if she didn't take advantage of a situation that presented itself.

"There's no reason to go," Coop said, sounding dejected. "I should stay home and get a job."

Go? Go where?

"You have to take the bus trip, man," Luka told him. "Don't you want to see Stanford?"

"Why? I can't go away to college. Not that far away."

Ellen pressed a hand to her mouth to keep from making any noise. Not go away to college? Where had that come from? They'd always talked about him going away. It was what he wanted.

"Coop, come on. Don't say that."

"You know I can't leave her. She needs me."

No, no, no, no! Ellen battled panic. Who needed him? She didn't even know Coop was seeing someone. What bitch had trapped him?

She went cold all over and the unthinkable pushed its way

into her brain. What if some girl was pregnant? There was a lot of that going around.

She closed her eyes. That couldn't be it. They'd talked and talked about safe sex. She bought him condoms. She reminded him of how hard it was for just the two of them and how using a condom protected him from unplanned pregnancies and STDs. Hadn't he been listening?

"You know her," Coop continued. "You know what our relationship is like. She depends on me. She won't make it without me."

Who was it? Ellen wanted to scream the question. She ran through the list of girls she knew her son hung out with and tried to figure out which one might be holding him back. Did Keith know? No, he would have said something. Maybe she should talk to Lissa. Maybe—

"That's no reason to stay here," Luka told him. "You want to go away to college."

"I can't. Luka, I can't. She's my mom and she needs me."

Ellen sagged against the wall as all the air rushed out of her body. Heat replaced the cold as she battled with the impossible. Her? The person he was talking about was *her*?

"We've always been a team," Coop said. "I'm her life. She doesn't date. I'm seventeen years old and my mom hasn't been on a single date my whole life."

"Not even one?"

"Nope. She's never gone in the evening, unless it's to hang out with Unity or Coach Kinne. She doesn't do anything but work and take care of me. How can I leave her? Who will take care of her?"

The horror returned, but this time it was laced with confusion and shame. How could her son think like this? She was perfectly capable. She'd raised him, she'd graduated from college, she had a good job. She didn't need her kid to take care of her. Why would he assume he was her everything? She had a life.

Without thinking, she began backing away from the door. She retreated to the main corridor and stood there, trying to clear her mind.

This was nothing but a misunderstanding, she told herself. Coop was reading the situation wrong. Of course she had a life and she would be fine when he was gone. Why wouldn't she be? She was more than capable of being on her own. He had to know that. He was free to go live his life—be his own person. She wanted that for him, of course, but just as important, she never wanted him to resent her the way she'd always resented her parents.

She would take a second and gather her thoughts, then return to the weight room. She would find out about his plans for the evening, then go home and... And... Well, she didn't know what she was going to do, but it would be something fun and exciting. Because of course she had things to do. Not dating didn't mean anything. Lots of people didn't date. She was absolutely and totally fine and happy and living the dream. That was her. For sure.

Unity finished tightening the new faucet in place. She ran water, then checked under the sink to make sure there were no leaks. When she was confident everything was perfect, she collected her tools, put the old faucet in the box the new one had arrived in and wiped down the counter. Only then did she go get Mr. Sweetman who was in his recliner, watching TV.

"I'm all done," she said loudly, so the eightysomething gentleman could hear her over *Judge Judy*.

Mr. Sweetman, as adorable as his name, looked up and smiled. "All done?"

"I am."

He nodded and got to his feet, a slow process that was painful to watch. When Unity couldn't bear the struggle anymore, she grabbed him by both forearms and pulled until he was standing. She matched his slow pace to the kitchen, then showed him the new faucet.

"If you press this button, the water goes from a steady stream to a nice spray," she told him. "You don't have to make it go back to a steady stream. The next time you turn it on, it's on the steady stream automatically."

"Oh, that's very nice."

She demonstrated the hose feature, showing him how he could easily rinse out his sink. He watched carefully, then practiced using the faucet before turning to her.

"Technology's a marvel. When I was growing up, we had to pump water out of a well and carry it into the house. We've come a long way."

"We have. I'll send you a bill in a day or so."

He patted her arm. "You're a good girl, Unity. Thanks for my new faucet."

She gave him a wave and let herself out.

After stowing her tools, she slid onto her seat and called her answering machine back home to pick up messages, then started her truck and drove through Silver Pines. Phyllis, the head of the local pickleball league, had asked her to stop by after work.

She was lucky that way, she thought, driving through the tidy community, waving at people she knew. Being her own boss meant she could come and go as she wanted. Although there were days when she had more work than she could handle, even with her part-time helpers.

She knew the solution was to hire a full-time employee—something she'd thought about and talked about and whined about. Ellen had threatened to place an ad online herself, just to force Unity to make a decision. It was probably the right thing to do, but Unity just couldn't seem to make herself take the step. Hiring someone seemed like a big responsibility.

A real employee would be different than her part-time team. She would have to pay him or her every week, and do payroll.

She parked in front of Phyllis's duplex. The seventysomething woman lived alone, with her two cats. Phyllis was a stern kind of person who intimidated Unity—not that she ever let herself show it. Until moving to Silver Pines, Phyllis had been a member of a tennis club and had played several times a week. Now she put the same devotion and energy into the local pickleball league. She was president of the club and in charge of all the tournaments. Phyllis had a forceful personality and got things done.

Unity had discovered the world of pickleball after she'd moved home and joined the league nearly two years ago. She liked the exercise, the comradery and the company.

"Good, you're here," Phyllis said, showing her into her living room.

They sat on opposite sofas. The room was just like Phyllis—no-nonsense and practical. Unity noticed the lack of refreshments, which surprised her. Most meetings, social or otherwise, came with at least an offer of iced tea and a cookie.

"I'll get right to the point," Phyllis said, her tone curt. "Several league members have been complaining about you, Unity."

"What?" The unexpected statement shocked her. "I don't understand. I'm on time, I support my team members. I always bring refreshments when it's my turn." She pressed her lips together to make herself stop talking.

Phyllis, a tall woman with close-cropped gray hair and small brown eyes, frowned. "It's ridiculous you were ever allowed to join the league. Look at you. You're a big, strapping girl. It's not a fair fight. None of the other pairs can defeat you. No one wants to play against you."

Unity felt herself flush. She suddenly felt all arms and legs, not to mention completely rejected. "I don't win every game."

"Nearly. I've gone through the statistics for the last three tournaments. You and your partner won all of them. You're just too young and fit. The league was always meant to be for the people

living here. You're a ringer and we don't want you around. I'm sorry, Unity, but you're being given the boot."

"You're kicking me out?"

"We are."

She said *we* but Unity had a feeling it was more a *her* decision. The whole situation was desperately unfair. "But the league is open to everyone in town. There are a lot of other people under sixty-five playing pickleball."

"They're all older than you and mostly fat. They're terrible players. We've changed the rules. You have to be fifty or over to join the league. We took a vote."

"Without me?"

Phyllis's expression wasn't the least bit sympathetic. "Yes. Without you."

Unexpected tears burned in her eyes. Unity felt exposed and foolish and ashamed. This was so much worse than being picked last for a team in school—mostly because she never had been. She loved pickleball. What was she supposed to do now?

"I'm sorry," she whispered, standing. "I didn't know."

"Now you do. Find a league with people your own age. You'll do fine."

Phyllis hustled her to the front door, showed her out, then closed it firmly in Unity's face. Unity tried to summon a little righteous anger, but she couldn't get past the giant slap of rejection.

She got in her truck, silently called Phyllis a bitch, then drove the short distance to Dagmar's house. When she was parked out front, she called her.

"You busy?" she asked, when Dagmar answered.

"Darling, I beg you, get a phone that texts. Even my friends text rather than call."

Dagmar's tone was light and Unity knew the comment was teasing, only it felt like one more judgment.

"Are you busy?" she asked again, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"Oh, no. What happened?"

"Phyllis threw me off the pickleball league. She said I was a big, strapping girl and didn't belong."

"She's a wizened old cow who hasn't had sex in over a decade. I'm sure her girl parts are about as interesting as day-old bread."

Despite everything, Unity smiled. "That's a very weird analogy."

"I know. I was struggling to make one work." The curtain at the front of the house moved. "Oh, good, you're here. Come on inside and we'll talk about it."

As always, just being in Dagmar's house made Unity feel better. While most of the residents surrounded themselves with items from their past—pictures, mementos, ornate pieces of furniture not suited to the smaller space—Dagmar had decorated her house with an elegant, beachy vibe. Pale gray grounded all the shades of blue. The sofas were comfortable, the accessories minimal. A white shag rug defined the living area. The blue-and-gray backsplash colors were repeated in the throw pillows.

The cool elegance was a contrast to Dagmar's Bohemian style. Today she had on black-and-red striped wide-leg trousers and a red T-shirt dominated by a picture of Marilyn Monroe. A dozen or so bangles rattled on her wrist.

Unity unlaced her work boots at the door and walked into the kitchen. Dagmar set a bottle of red wine on the counter and got out two glasses, then opened her refrigerator. She pulled out a fresh veggie plate, two containers of dip, a bowl of hummus and some pita chips. By the time Unity had removed the cork and poured them each a glass, the snacks were set out on the island. They each took a stool, then Dagmar held up her glass.

"Tell me what happened."

Unity briefly recounted her conversation with Phyllis. "It feels really arbitrary and, at the same time, incredibly personal. She never liked me."

"That's because she needs to be the queen bee and with you kicking her bony ass, that was never going to happen." Dagmar sipped her wine. "You could take her advice and join a league with people your own age. Take Ellen with you. She can be your partner."

Unity smiled. "Ellen doesn't believe in organized sports. Or exercise."

"What about your other friends?" There was something in Dagmar's tone as she asked the question. Something Unity couldn't put her finger on.

"You mean outside Silver Pines?"

Dagmar's brown eyes turned sympathetic. "Yes, dear. Your friends not getting social security."

Unity let her gaze slide to the window. "I have Ellen. Everyone else is pretty much, you know, here." She turned back to Dagmar. "I like the activities here. I like being busy." Her full calendar made her feel less alone. "Besides, I enjoy the people here. I think they're interesting and fun and well traveled. I have an old soul."

"What you have is an inability to move on with your life. Darling, I love you as much as if you were my own daughter, but come on. What are you doing? Pickleball with old people? The knitting club? Do you do anything with people your own age, ever?" She held up a hand. "Excluding Ellen and Cooper?"

Unity grabbed a slice of red pepper and took a bite.

"I'll take that as a no." Dagmar sighed. "It's been three years, Unity. You're thirty-four. You've been in mourning nearly 10 percent of your life."

Ten percent of her life? Unity had never thought about it that way. Not that it changed anything—time wasn't the issue.

"I've buried four husbands," Dagmar told her. "I loved each of them and the end was always painful, but you have to keep moving forward or you stagnate and die."

Unity shook her head. "You don't understand. It's different for me."

"Because you loved Stuart more? You had a greater love? I'm a terrible person for finding someone else?"

"No, of course not. It's just—" She looked at her friend. "I only want to love Stuart."

"He's not coming back. Would you rather mourn him and be alone than risk the chance of finding happiness again?"

*Yes.* Unity didn't say it, but she thought it and knew it to be true.

"I would accept you not wanting another relationship if that was all it was," Dagmar told her. "But it isn't. You're stuck, my love. What I don't understand is how you can be that way with all you see around here."

"What do you mean?"

Dagmar waved to take in the room. "We come here to die. Oh, it's a lovely place with lots to do, but we are in the final years of our lives. Look at Betty. She has plans—a river cruise, Christmas in New York. Will she still get to do that? Who knows? How long until she's gone? What about me?"

Unity's eyes widened. "What about you? Are you sick?"

"Not that I know of. But at my age, we're all one bad diagnosis away from a terrible turn in our lives. Yes, it can happen to anyone, but for those of us living here, it feels more inevitable."

She squeezed Unity's hand. "Darling, you're so young and vibrant. I hate to see you hiding from your own life. I wish you'd make friends your own age and go do exciting things. I wish you'd find a handsome man and use him for sex. I'm not saying you have to find another one true love, but you do have a responsibility to be alive, and right now, you're not."

Unity knew the words were said with love, but they still hurt. She thought of Dagmar as a second mother and the scolding, however gently delivered, made her feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"Are you cutting me off?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Never. And if you stop coming to see, I'll hunt you down

and drag you back here." Dagmar smiled gently. "Just think about it. Life is wonderful. I want you to remember there's so much out there you can experience. If not with men, then at least new horizons, new experiences. Although some of the old ones are quite wonderful." Her smile turned sly. "The feel of a man's tongue on your—"

Unity jumped to her feet. "Oh, my God! Don't say whatever you were going to say."

"I can't believe your Stuart never did that to you."

Heat flared on her cheeks and it was all Unity could do not the cover her ears and hum. "Of course he did, but I'm not discussing sex with you."

"Yes, you made that clear the time I started to tell you about my threesome. It wasn't the smartest decision I've ever made but it was a night."

"I'm leaving," Unity said, hurrying toward the door. "You're impossible."

"I'm alive. It's something you should consider."

Unity shoved her feet into her boots. "I'm alive, too. Just in a different way."

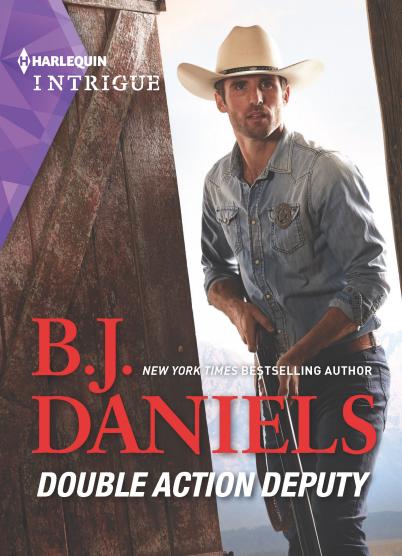
Dagmar followed her to the door. Her expression was serious. "Before you know it, you're going to be my age. It's true what they say—regrets are the very worst."

Unity hesitated, then nodded, as if she believed what she was being told. She hugged her friend, let herself out and hurried to her van.

What had started out as a good day had turned into something else very quickly, she thought as she headed for home. She felt battered and picked on and all she wanted to do was climb into bed and wish it all away. And if that didn't work, she would think about Stuart because no matter what, he was always with her. And that was never going to change.

Want to know what happens next?
Order *The Friendship List* by Susan Mallery, available now, wherever books are sold!

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## Chapter One

Ghostlike, the woman stumbled out of the dark night and into the glare of his headlights. The tattered bedsheet wrapped around her fluttered in the breeze along with the duct tape that dangled from her wrists and one ankle.

He saw her look up as if she hadn't heard his pickup bearing down on her until the last moment. The night breeze lifted wisps of her dark hair from an ashen face as she turned her vacant gaze on him an instant before he slammed on his brakes.

The air filled with the smell and squeal of tires burning on the dark pavement as the pickup came to a shuddering halt. He sat for a moment, gripping the wheel and staring in horror into the glow of his headlights and seeing...nothing. Nothing but the empty street ahead just blocks from his apartment.

He threw the truck into Park and jumped out, convinced, even though he hadn't felt or heard a thud, that he'd hit her and that he'd find her lying bleeding on the pavement. How could he have missed her?

If there'd been a woman at all.

In those few seconds, leaving the driver's side door gaping open, the engine running, he was terrified of what he would find—and even more terrified of what he wouldn't.

Could he have just imagined the woman in his headlights? It wouldn't be the first time he'd had a waking nightmare since he'd come home to recuperate. He felt the cold breeze in his face even though it was June in Montana. The temperature at night dropped this time of year, the mountains still snow-capped. He shivered as he rounded the front of the truck and stopped dead.

His heart dropped to his boots.

The pavement was empty.

His pulse thundered in his ears.

I am losing my mind. I hallucinated the woman.

For months, he'd assured himself he was fine. Except for the nightmares that plagued him, something he'd done his best to keep from his family since returning to Cardwell Ranch.

Doubt sent a stab of alarm through him that made him weak with worry. He leaned against the front of the pickup. Why would he imagine such an image? What was wrong with him? He'd seen her. He'd seen every detail.

He really was losing his mind.

As he glanced around the empty street, he suddenly felt frighteningly all alone as if he was the last person left alive on the earth. This late at night, the new businesses were dark in this neighborhood, some still under construction. The ones that were opened closed early, making the area a ghost town at night. It was one reason he'd taken the apartment over one of the new shops. He'd told his folks that he moved off the ranch for the peace and quiet. He didn't want them knowing that his nightmares hadn't stopped. They were getting worse.

A groan from the darkness made him jump. His heart pounded in his throat as he turned to stare into the blackness beyond the edge of the street. The sound definitely hadn't been his imagination. The night was so dark he couldn't see anything after the pavement ended. The sidewalks hadn't been poured yet, some of the streets not yet paved. He heard another sound that appeared to be coming from down the narrow alley between two buildings under construction

He quickly stepped back to the driver's side of his pickup and grabbed his flashlight. Walking through the glow of his headlights, he headed into the darkness beyond the street. The narrow beam of light skittered to the edge of the pavement and froze on a spot of blood.

Deeper into the dirt alley, the beam came to rest on the woman as she tried to crawl away. She clawed at the ground, clearly exhausted, clearly terrified, before collapsing halfway down the alley.

She wasn't an apparition. And she was alive! He rushed to her. Her forehead was bleeding from a small cut, and her hands and knees were scraped from crawling across the rough pavement and then the dirt to escape. In the flashlight's glow, he saw

that her face was bruised from injuries she'd suffered before tonight. From what he could tell, his pickup hadn't hit her.

But there was no doubt that she was terrified. Her eyes widened in horror at the sight of him. A high-pitched keening sound filled the air and she kicked at him and stumbled to her feet. He could see that she was exhausted because she hadn't taken more than few steps when she dropped to her knees and tried to crawl away again.

She was shivering uncontrollably in the tattered sheet wrapped around her. He caught up to her, took off his jacket and put it over her, fearing she was suffering from hypothermia. He could see that her wrists and ankles were chafed where she'd been bound with the duct tape. She was barefoot and naked except for the soiled white sheet she was wrapped in.

"It's all right," he said as he pulled out his cell phone to call for help. "You're all right now. I'm going to get help." She lay breathing hard, collapsed in the dirt. "Can you tell me who did this to you? Miss, can you hear me?" he asked, leaning closer to make sure she was still breathing. Her pale eyes flew open, startling him as much as the high-pitched scream that erupted from her.

As the 911 operator came on the line, he had to yell to be heard over the woman's shrieks. "This is Deputy Marshal Brick Savage," he said as he gave the address, asking for assistance and an ambulance ASAP.

## Chapter Two

After very little sleep and an early call from his father the next morning, Brick dressed in his uniform and drove down to the law enforcement building. He was hoping that this would be the day that his father, Marshal Hud Savage, told him he would finally be on active duty. He couldn't wait to get his teeth into something, a real investigation. After finding that woman last night, he wanted more than anything to be the one to get her justice.

"Come in and close the door," his father said before motioning him into a chair across from his desk.

"Is this about the woman I encountered last night?" he asked as he removed his Stetson and dropped into a chair across from him. He'd stayed at the hospital until the doctor had sent him home. When he called this morning, he'd been told that the woman appeared to be in a catatonic state and was unresponsive.

"We have a name on your Jane Doe," his father said now. "Natalie Berkshire."

Brick frowned. The name sounded vaguely famil-

iar. But that wasn't what surprised him. "Already? Her fingerprints?"

Hud nodded and slid a copy of the *Billings Gazette* toward him. He picked it up and saw the headline sprawled across the front page, *Alleged Infant Killer Released for Lack of Evidence*. The newspaper was two weeks old.

Brick felt a jolt rock him back in his chair. "She's that woman?" He couldn't help his shock. He thought of the terrified woman who'd crossed in front of his truck last night. Nothing like the woman he remembered seeing on television coming out of the law enforcement building in Billings after being released.

"I don't know what to say." Nor did he know what to think. The woman he'd found had definitely been victimized. He thought he'd saved her. He'd been hell-bent on getting her justice. With his Stetson balanced on his knee, he raked his fingers through his hair.

"I'm trying to make sense of this, as well," his father said. "Since her release, more evidence had come out in former cases. She's now wanted for questioning in more deaths of patients who'd been under her care from not just Montana. Apparently, the moment she was released, she disappeared. Billings PD checked her apartment. It appeared that she'd left in a hurry and hasn't been seen since."

"Until last night when she stumbled in front of my pickup," Brick said. "You think she's been held captive all this time?"

"Looks that way," Hud said. "We found her

older model sedan parked behind the convenience store down on Highway 191. We're assuming she'd stopped for gas. The attendant who was on duty recognized her from a photo. She remembered seeing Natalie at the gas pumps and thinking she looked familiar but couldn't place her at the time. The attendant said a large motor home pulled in and she lost sight of her and didn't see her again."

"When was this?" Brick asked.

"Two weeks ago. Both the back seat and the trunk of her car were full of her belongings."

"So she was running away when she was abducted." Brick couldn't really blame her. "After all the bad publicity, I can see why she couldn't stay in Billings. But taking off like that makes her either look guilty—or scared."

"Or both. This case got a lot of national coverage for months. Unfortunately, her case was tried in the press and she was found guilty. When there wasn't sufficient evidence in the Billings case to prosecute, they had no choice but to let her go. My guess is that someone who didn't like the outcome took the law into his own hands."

Brick nodded. "It would be some coincidence if she was abducted and held by someone who had no idea who she was." He shook his head, remembering the terror he'd seen in her eyes. "What if she's innocent of these crimes?"

"It seems that all of her nursing care positions involved patients with severe health issues," Hud said. "It's no surprise that a lot of the old cases are being

reopened now. All of her patients died before she moved on to her next nursing job."

"So foul play was never considered in most of the other deaths?" Brick said. "But it is now even though she was released. No wonder she ran."

His father nodded. "Several of the Billings homicide detectives are on their way. I get the impression they might have discovered more evidence against her. It's possible they plan to arrest her—or at the least, take her into custody for questioning."

Brick rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to imagine the woman he'd found last night as a cold-blooded killer. "And if they don't?"

"Unless one of the other investigations across the country wants her detained, then, when she's well, she'll be released from the hospital and free to go."

"To be on her own knowing there is someone out there who means her harm?" Brick couldn't help being shocked by that. "Someone abducted her, held her captive for apparently weeks and if not tortured her, definitely did a number on her." He couldn't help his warring emotions. The woman might be guilty as sin. Or not. Clearly, she wasn't safe. He'd seen how terrified she'd been last night. *Someone* had found her. He didn't doubt they would again.

"Once the press finds out who the woman is in our hospital, it will be a media circus," his father was saying. "I know you found her, but I'd prefer you stay out of this. However, I'm sure Billings homicide will want to talk to you. This will have to be handled delicately, to say the least." "You don't think I can do delicate?"

The marshal smiled as he leaned back in his chair. "I think you're going to make a damned good deputy marshal, maybe even marshal, in time." In time. Time had suddenly become Brick's enemy. "You've gotten the training," his father continued, "and once you get the last medical release…"

Brick didn't need the reminder of what had happened to him. The fact that he'd almost died wasn't something he'd forgotten. He had the scars to remind him. Those and the nightmares. But he hadn't just been wounded in the mountains of Wyoming and almost died. He'd killed the man who shot him. He wasn't sure which haunted him the most.

He also didn't need another pep talk on being patient until he got a mental health physician to release him for active duty. Until then, he was sentenced to doing menial desk job work.

"I should get going." No matter what his father said, he had to see the woman again. He wasn't scheduled to work until later. He had plenty of time to stop by the hospital before his appointment with the shrink and his desk job shift. But as he started to get to his feet, his father waved him back down.

"Brick, if you're thinking of going by the hospital, you should know that she can't tell you what happened to her or who is responsible. She's in what the doctor called a catatonic or unresponsive state, something often associated with trauma."

"I know, I already called, but I have to see her." He couldn't forget that moment when she'd appeared

in front of his headlights. It haunted him—just as the woman did. "I found her. I almost hit her with my pickup. I feel...connected to her."

Brick knew it was a lot more than that. He was going crazy sitting behind a desk, cooling his heels until the shrink said he was ready to get to work. It left him too much time to think.

Not that he would tell his father or the psychiatrist he was required to see later today, but finding that woman last night *had* brought back his ordeal in Wyoming. That was another reason he wanted—needed—to see this through.

Marshal Hud Savage leaned forward to study his son. "How are the nightmares?"

Brick shook his head, not meeting his gaze. "No longer a problem."

He watched his son shift on his feet, anxious to get out the door. "Son, you know how happy I was when you wanted the deputy marshal job that was coming open."

"I can do the job, if that's what you're worried about."

"I believe you can, but not yet."

"I'm healed. Doc cleared me weeks ago."

"I'm not talking about your physical injuries. You need clearance from a mental health professional as well, and I heard you missed your last appointment."

Brick swore. "I'm fine. I had a conflict... Besides, is it really necessary after all this time?"

"It is." He was more convinced of that after see-

ing how personally involved Brick had become with the woman he'd found last night. Although Brick and Angus were identical twins, they were so different it amazed him. Brick had always been the carefree one, hardly ever serious, ready with a joke when he got in trouble. He was also the one who made his mother laugh the most and that meant a lot to Hud.

Dana was delighted to have her son come home six months ago to recuperate. Hud knew she hoped that he'd be staying once he was well. Brick had always taken wrangling jobs with his brother. That was how he'd ended up down in Wyoming. She'd thought maybe she could convince him, like she had Angus, to stay on the ranch and work it with his twin.

So Dana wasn't as pleased that he wanted to follow his father's footsteps into law enforcement. She blamed Hud for making the profession look too glamorous, which had made him laugh. Her dream was that their children would embrace the ranch lifestyle and return to Cardwell Ranch to run it.

But Brick had always stubbornly gone his own way even as a child.

"It wasn't just your body that went through the trauma," Hud said now to his son. "You need to heal. I suspect one of the reasons you're so interested in this case is that finding that woman in the condition she was in brought back what happened to you in Wyoming."

Brick scoffed. "I was *shot*. I wasn't tied up in some basement and abused."

"I don't think you've dealt with how close you

came to dying or the fact that you were forced to take another man's life. It's standard procedure, son. Don't miss today's appointment."

BRICK GLANCED AT the time as he drove to the hospital. There would be hell to pay if he missed his doctor appointment. But he had to at least see the woman again. He felt confused. Not that seeing her lying in the hospital bed would probably help with that confusion.

He still couldn't believe that the woman he'd rescued was the notorious nurse who'd worked as a nanny for a young couple in Billings. The couple's newborn son had multiple life-threatening medical problems. They'd opted to take their son home and be with him for as long as they had.

Natalie Berkshire had sworn that when she came into the nursery she found the baby blue. She'd tried to resuscitate him, screaming for the mother to call 911. But he was gone. An autopsy revealed that the baby had died from lack of oxygen. It wasn't until fibers from the baby's blanket were found in his lungs that Natalie was arrested, and then released when the case against her wasn't strong enough for a conviction.

Now as Brick took the stairs to her floor, he told himself that he was invested in this case whether his father liked it or not. True, he was restless and ached to get back to actively working, but he also wanted to prove to his father that he could do this job.

He knew his dad had had his reservations. All

Brick had known growing up on Cardwell Ranch in the Gallatin Canyon was wrangling horses and cattle. He'd never shown an interest in law enforcement before, so he couldn't blame him for being skeptical at first

After coming home to recuperate after his ordeal in Wyoming, he'd realized it was time to settle down. When he'd heard about the deputy marshal position coming open, he'd jumped at it. He told himself that he wasn't grabbing up the first thing that came along, as his father feared. Somehow, it felt right.

At least he hoped so as he came out of the stair-well on Natalie Berkshire's floor. He was only a little winded by the hike up the stairs, but he was getting stronger every day. Physically, he was recovering nicely, his doctor had said. If it wasn't for the night-mares...

Walking down the hall, he was glad to see the deputy stationed outside her door. He'd been relieved last night when his father had assigned a deputy to guard her after the lab techs had taken what evidence they could gather—including her fingerprints, which ID'd her.

Brick had feared she was still in danger from whoever had held her captive. At the time, he hadn't known just how much danger this woman was in—or what she was running from.

After being raised in a house with his marshal father, he believed in innocence until proven guilty. If this woman was guilty, she deserved a trial. But even as Brick thought it, he wondered if she could get one anywhere in this country after all the publicity.

As he approached her room, he hoped his father hadn't told the guard not to let him in.

"Hey, Jason," Brick said as he approached the deputy sitting outside her door. The marshal department in Big Sky was small, so he knew most everyone by name even though he was new. And everyone knew him. Being the marshal's son was good and bad. He wouldn't get any special treatment—not from his father. If anything, Hud Savage would be tougher on him. But he couldn't have anyone thinking he was special because of his last name.

"That must have been something, finding her like you did," Jason said.

Brick nodded as he looked toward her closed door. "Any trouble?"

"Not a peep out of her."

"No one's come by looking for her?" Brick knew how news traveled in this small canyon town. He feared that whoever had held the woman captive would hear that she'd been taken to the hospital. The hospital was small and busy during the summer season. If someone were determined to get in, they would find a way.

"Nope."

Brick heard a sound inside the room and looked quizzically to the guard.

"Nurse." The deputy grinned. "Good-looking one too. I'd let her take my vitals."

Brick smiled, shaking his head at the man, and

pushed open the door. As he did, the nurse beside the bed who'd been leaning over the patient now looked up in alarm.

He took in the scene in that split second as the door closed behind him. The guard was right. The nurse was a stunner, blonde with big blue eyes.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said as he stepped deeper into the room, sensing that something was wrong.

"You didn't." The nurse began to nervously straighten the patient's sheet before she turned toward him to leave. He realized with a start that the patient had been saying something as he walked in. He'd seen Natalie's lips moving. Her eyes had been open, but were now closed. Had he only imagined that she'd spoken? How was that possible if the woman was catatonic and nonresponsive?

Also, when he'd come in and the nurse had been leaning over the patient, she'd clearly been intent on what Natalie was saying. She'd straightened so quickly as he'd come in. But before that, he'd seen something in the nurse's face...

The hair rose on the back of his neck.

"I heard the patient was catatonic. Any change?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid not," the nurse said and started toward him on her way out of the room.

"Please don't let me stop you from what you were doing."

"I'm finished." She had to walk right past him to get out the door. As she approached, he looked at her

more closely. If he was right and had heard Natalie speak, then the nurse had lied about there being no change. But why would she lie?

Looking past her, he noticed a pillow on the floor where she'd been standing. It had apparently fallen off the bed. It seemed strange that she hadn't taken the time to pick it up and put it back on the patient's bed. But that wasn't half as odd as her apparent need to get out of this room as quickly as possible.

His gaze shot to her uniform. No name tag.

Even as he raised his arm to stop her, he still couldn't be sure of what he'd thought he'd seen—and heard. But he couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong here. That he'd walked into something... "Hold up just a minute."

The moment he reached for the woman, she jerked back her arm and spun to face him. Before he could react, she jammed her forearm into his throat. As he gasped for air, she kicked him in the groin.

Even as the pain doubled him over, he grabbed for her, but she slipped through his fingers. He tried to call to the deputy stationed outside the door, but he had no breath, no air, no voice. All he could do for a few moments was watch her push out of the hospital room door.

Limping to the door after her, he found the deputy out in the hall talking to the doctor. The hallway was empty. He tried to speak but nothing came out as he bent over, hands on his knees, and sucked in painful breaths.

The woman in the nurse's uniform was long gone.

## Chapter Three

The marshal sat back in his chair and listened as his son told him again what had happened at the hospital. Brick had called it in on his way to his psychiatrist's office. Hud had been glad to see that his son hadn't used what happened to him at the hospital as an excuse to get out of his doctor's appointment.

Hud had been having trouble believing this story. The doctor had insisted that Natalie Berkshire was still catatonic and questioned if the deputy had actually heard her speak. But the description of the nurse Brick had seen didn't match that of any woman who worked at the hospital. Five-foot-five, blonde, big blue eyes, a knockout.

"So you didn't actually witness her doing anything to the patient," Hud said now. He could see how upset his son was. Finding the woman last night had clearly shaken him and now this. As Brick had said, he felt responsible for her, something he admired in his son. But Brick couldn't take on this kind of responsibility every time he helped someone as a deputy marshal. He wondered again if this job was right

for him. Or if his son was ready for any of this after what had happened to him.

"No, I didn't actually see her threaten the patient, but there was a pillow on the floor and she was acting...suspicious. Also, I swear, I heard the patient say something to her. If you'd seen the nurse's reaction to whatever Natalie was saying..."

"But you didn't hear the actual words?" Hud asked.

Brick shook his head. "She was whispering and the nurse was leaning over her. My attention was on the nurse and her expression. I'm telling you, the nurse was looking down at the patient as if she wanted to kill her. But whatever Natalie was saying appeared to have...shocked her."

"You got all of this in an instant when you walked into the room?"

His son shrugged. "It was just a feeling I got when I walked in that something was wrong. So maybe I was paying more attention. I know what I saw *and* what I heard. If I hadn't gone in when I did, who knows what the woman would have done."

Hud groaned inwardly. If they arrested every person who acted suspicious there would be no room in the jails for the true criminals. He said as much to his son.

"She was pretending to be a nurse. Not to mention the fact that she attacked me, an officer of the law. Isn't that enough?"

"You said you grabbed her arm as she was start-

ing to leave. Did you announce yourself as a deputy marshal?"

Brick sighed. "No, but I was wearing my uniform, and if you'd seen the way she was looking down at the patient..."

Hud admitted it sounded more than a little suspicious. "Okay, the hospital staff will be watching for her should she try to get into the woman's hospital room again. She could just be a reporter looking for a story. Brick?" He could see how rattled his son was. All the talk in the marshal's department would be about this case. "I want you to take the rest of the week off. I'll talk to your doctor at the beginning of next week. If he gives the all clear..."

His son chuckled and shook his head. "By then, Natalie Berkshire will either be arrested and hauled off for questioning, or gone."

"It's for the best."

BRICK SWORE UNDER his breath. "I know what I saw and what I heard. That woman posing as a nurse was in that room to kill Natalie. But whatever Natalie said to her made her hesitate. Then I walked in... What if this nurse is the one who's been holding Natalie captive?"

"I'll find out the truth," his father said. "I wasn't just suggesting that you take the rest of the week off. It's an order. Go camping. You're too involved in this case. Take advantage of this time off. Hike up into the mountains to a nice lake and camp for a few days. I brought you on too soon and I'm sorry about that."

He was about to argue when his father's phone rang. He wasn't leaving. Not until he convinced the marshal that he couldn't get rid of him that easily.

Then he saw his father's expression as he finished his phone conversation and hung up. What had happened? *Something*. "I'm meeting with a psychiatrist. I'm doing everything you asked. So stop trying to get rid of me. Tell me what's happened. You know I'll find out one way or another anyway. And if you don't want me trying to find out on my own—"

With a sigh, Hud said, "From your description and surveillance cameras at the hospital, they've been able to make a possible ID of the woman pretending to be a nurse. Her name is Maureen 'Mo' Mortensen."

"She must have some connection to the case," Brick said

His father nodded. "The baby in Natalie Berkshire's care when he was allegedly murdered was her sister's."

Brick swore. "That would explain why she was standing over Natalie staring down at her as if she wanted to kill her."

"What makes this case more tragic is that Maureen Mortensen's sister committed suicide just days after Natalie was released."

"Tricia Colton," he said. "I remember seeing the husband on the news. He blamed Natalie for destroying his family. His wife had hung herself in the family garage. So Maureen Mortensen is her sister? Is

she in the military or something? She attacked me as if she was trained in combat."

"She was a homicide detective in Billings."

"Was?"

"She's been temporarily suspended."

"Why?" Brick asked.

"I suspect it has something to do with her conflict of interest in the case. Apparently, she had been doing some investigating on her own before Natalie was released. She was ordered off the case, but refused to listen." He gave Brick a meaningful look.

Brick ignored it as he thought of what he'd seen at the hospital. "She wasn't the one who abducted and held Natalie Berkshire captive."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling I got that she hadn't seen Natalie for a while." He felt his father's gaze on him. "What?"

"Always trust your instincts."

He smiled. It was the most affirmation his father had given him since he'd signed on as a new deputy. "Thanks."

"But that doesn't mean that you aren't wrong."

He thought about it for a moment. "This woman, Mo, wants her dead—not tied up and tortured."

"You have no evidence that Mortensen was trying to kill the woman," his father pointed out. "Also, the doctor said that Natalie Berkshire couldn't have spoken to the woman. She's still nonresponsive."

Brick shook his head. "I swear I heard her. What's more, the fake nurse-slash-cop heard her."

"I've put a BOLO out on Mortensen to have her picked up for questioning."

"How about for assaulting a lawman?"

"It's enough to at least hold her for a while. I'm sure Billings PD will want to talk to her once they get here. But I do wonder how it was that she found out Natalie Berkshire was in the Big Sky hospital," his father said. "Unless she's been looking for her since her suspension—and Natalie's disappearance."

"Well, now she's found her," Brick said. "I wouldn't be surprised if she tries to get to her again."

Brick was still trying to process everything his father had told him. He'd been so sure that Natalie Berkshire had been the victim and that Maureen Mortensen was the criminal. Even if his father picked up the blonde cop, his instincts told him that she wouldn't be behind bars long. When she got out, he put his money on her going after Natalie Berkshire.

Maybe his father was right, and Maureen "Mo" Mortensen wouldn't have killed the woman lying in the hospital bed if he hadn't walked in. But from her expression, she'd darn sure wanted to.

"I bet the cop hasn't gone far," he said, wondering where she'd been staying. Probably at one of the local motels. He said as much to his father.

"I know she hurt your ego and you might want to go after her yourself because of it, but you're staying out of this. I shouldn't have put you on the schedule until we had the release from the mental health doctor. Don't argue with me about this. And come to dinner tonight. Your mother would love to see you." Brick rose and started for the door.

"One more thing," his father said behind him.
"I'm going to need your badge, star and weapon."

Brick turned to look at him as he slowly took off his star, pulled his badge and unsnapped his holster and laid all three on his father's desk.

"You can order me to take a few days off, but you can't make me go camping. Just as you can't order me to come to dinner." He turned and walked out, telling himself that becoming a deputy and working under his father was a huge mistake.

Maureen "Mo" Mortensen wiped the steam off the cracked mirror and locked eyes with the woman in the glass, but only for an instant. She didn't like what she saw in her blue eyes. It scared her. Sometimes she didn't recognize herself and the woman she'd become.

Splashing cold water on her face, she thought of what had happened at the hospital. She'd come close to getting caught. But that wasn't all she'd come close to. If that deputy marshal hadn't walked in when he had...

She was still shaken, not just by Natalie's condition. She felt sick to her stomach at the memory. She'd looked down at the woman's bruised face. It had been true, what she'd heard. Natalie had been abducted and held prisoner. She'd thought she couldn't feel sympathy for what the woman must have gone through, but she'd been wrong. She didn't wish that sort of treatment on anyone, even a murderer.

For a long moment, she'd stood next to Natalie's bed, staring down at her. Had she been trying to see the monster behind the skin and bone? When the woman had opened her eyes, it had startled her. She'd read on her chart that she was catatonic. But looking into the Natalie's eyes, she'd seen fear, surprise and then something even more shocking—resignation.

Natalie had known why Mo had sneaked into the hospital dressed as a nurse. Would Mo have gone through with it? She might never know because the woman's words had stopped her cold.

Mo still felt stunned. By the time the words had registered, the deputy had come into the hospital room. She'd wanted to scream because she'd known that her chance to question Natalie had passed. All she could do was clear out of there with the hope that she could get another chance to question Natalie alone

It surprised her that now she wanted the truth more than she wanted vengeance.

Unfortunately, she also now had the law looking for her. Getting free of the deputy had been instinctive. How could she reach Natalie again, though, with even more people looking for her? That cocky deputy marshal would be after her.

She pushed the thought away. She had more problems than some deputy marshal. Her body ached. Even when she could find the haven of sleep, she often woke bone-weary, more tired than she'd ever been. In her dreams, she'd been chasing Natalie Berkshire for months. In real life, it had only been since the woman had been released from custody—two weeks ago.

Today was the closest she'd come to finishing this. That moment of hesitation had cost her. She remembered looking into those pale hazel eyes. Natalie had known exactly who she was. The words she'd spoken weren't those of a mad woman. Nor of a liar. That was what had made them so shocking.

Natalie had known why Mo was there. She'd been ready to die. Because she knew she deserved it? Or because she knew she couldn't keep running?

In all the time she'd been a cop, Mo had never hesitated when everything was on the line, and yet earlier... If Natalie really had been catatonic... If she hadn't opened her eyes. If she hadn't spoken... The thought chilled her. Would she have gone through with what she'd planned?

Shaking her head at her disappointment in not being able to question Natalie after the woman had dropped that bombshell, she threw what little she'd brought into her suitcase. She didn't have time for introspection or recriminations. Or to try to analyze what the woman said or what it could mean.

She would get another chance to talk to Natalie—hopefully alone. She had to. Natalie had evaded almost everyone—except whoever had abducted her. Mo thought about the woman's bruises. Whoever had found her didn't want her dead. They wanted to punish her and had.

The thought pained her. It wasn't as if the woman was a stranger. She'd known Natalie. Or at least she

thought she'd known her. Mo had spent time at that house with her sister and brother-in-law and their live-in nanny. She'd watched the woman not just with little Joey, but with her sister. Tricia had bonded with Natalie. The three women had become friends. Mo had liked the quiet, pleasant Natalie Berkshire. What's more, she'd seen that her sister had liked the woman as well and vice versa. Natalie, during those months, had become part of the family.

That thought hurt more than she wanted to admit. They'd all trusted the woman—even Mo. She *had* to talk to Natalie again. If there was even a chance that what she'd said might be true...

It surprised her how just a few words from the woman could change everything. When a friend at the police department had called her to say that something had come up on the scanner, she'd driven to Big Sky as fast as she could. The marshal in Big Sky said he'd called Billings PD to let them know that he had Natalie Berkshire after she'd apparently escaped after being abducted. Mo had arrived late last night. When she'd stopped on the edge of Big Sky to get something to eat at an all-night convenience store and deli, she'd overheard a table of nurses talking. One night shift nurse had described the woman who'd been brought in.

Mo had felt a chill ripple through her. From the description, she'd known it was true. The patient was Natalie, no matter how bizarre the circumstances that had landed her in the Big Sky hospital.

She'd listened to the night nurse talking in a low,

confidential tone and caught enough to know that the woman brought in had been held captive for an unknown amount of time. She heard the words *duct tape*, *bruises*, *a torn and filthy sheet*.

She'd also heard that a deputy marshal by the name of Brick Savage had found her and gotten her to the hospital—the closest hospital in the area—where she had originally been listed as a Jane Doe. Until her prints had come back.

This morning, Mo had picked up scubs and Crocs at the discount store. She'd walked into the hospital as if she knew what she was doing. The older woman at the information desk only smiled as she went by.

Upstairs, she'd found Natalie's room by looking for the deputy she'd heard had been parked outside it. All she'd had to do was give him a smile and walk right into the room.

One glance toward the bed and she'd known she was about to get her chance for justice. It was Natalie, and given the shape she was in, Mo knew that someone else had caught up to her first. She'd suspected for some time that she wasn't the only one looking for the woman.

She'd thought she'd known exactly what she would do when she found her. She owed it to her sister and to Thomas, her sister's still grieving husband, and to little Joey, their infant son. She'd kept what she was doing from Thomas. He'd been so devastated by the loss of his son and wife that he'd begged Mo to let it go.

"I can't take anymore," he'd cried when she'd argued that she had to find evidence to stop Natalie.

"But she'll kill again," she'd argued.

"For the love of God, Mo. I never want to hear that woman's name again. For months Tricia and I thought we'd get justice. When Natalie was released..." Tricia had killed herself. "I need to make peace with this. I hope you can, too."

She had known that she wouldn't find peace until Natalie was either dead or behind bars. She had been determined that Natalie would not destroy another family.

But then Natalie had opened her eyes and said the only words that could have changed her mind even temporarily.

Mo moved to the motel room door, suitcase in hand. She looked back to make sure she hadn't left anything behind. She figured that it wouldn't take long, between the deputy who'd gotten a good look at her and the surveillance cameras, before they knew her name. That would definitely make finding her easier since she'd used her real name when she'd checked into the motel.

She wouldn't make that mistake again, she thought. Nor would it be a good idea to stay in any one place too long. Not that she was planning on this taking any longer than necessary. She would get back into the hospital. Security would be tighter. They would be watching for her.

Mo knew that the best thing she could do was wait until Natalie was released, but she had no idea

when that would be. Also, she knew that Billings homicide were on their way—because some old cases were now being reopened and other departments were anxious to talk to Natalie. If they didn't arrest her and Natalie was released from the hospital, she would run like a scared rabbit and be all that much harder to catch

She picked up her purse on the table by the door, swung the strap over her shoulder and, shifting the suitcase in her hand, reached with the other one to open the door. She already had a plan simmering at the back of her mind, a way to get into the hospital again.

She'd go to the store, get some supplies to change her appearance. This time she'd go in not as a nurse, but as a male workman instead. She would bluff her way in and no matter what she had to do, she'd get into Natalie's room. She would get the truth out of the woman and then...

Mo refused to think beyond that point. What she had in mind had never sat easy with her. But she felt she had no choice. She was convinced of what would happen if Natalie was as guilty as she believed and she didn't stop her.

With purse and suitcase in hand, she opened the door and stepped out of the motel room—right into a pair of deputies...and handcuffs.

Want to know what happens next?

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## SHERRY L WOODS

A SWEET MAGNOLIAS
NOVEL

## NETFLIX

A NETFLIX ORIGINAL SERIES

> Stealing Home

## CHAPTER ONE

Maddie focused on the wide expanse of mahogany stretching between her and the man who'd been her husband for twenty years. Half her life. She and William Henry Townsend had been high-school sweethearts in Serenity, South Carolina. They'd married before their senior year in college, not because she was pregnant as some of her hastily married friends had been, but because they hadn't wanted to wait one more second before starting their lives together.

Then, after they'd graduated, there had been the exhausting years of medical school for Bill, when she'd worked as an entry-level bookkeeper, making poor use of her degree in business, just to keep their heads above water financially. And then the joyous arrival of three kids—athletic, outgoing Tyler, now sixteen, their jokester, Kyle, fourteen, and their surprise blessing, Katie, who was just turning six.

They'd had the perfect life in the historic Townsend family home in Serenity's oldest neighborhood, surrounded by family and lifelong friends. The passion they'd once shared might have cooled ever so slightly, but they'd been happy.

Or so she'd thought until the day a few months ago when Bill had looked at her after dinner, his expression as distant as a stranger's, and calmly explained that he was moving out and moving on...with his twenty-four-year-old nurse, who was already pregnant. It was, he'd said, one of those things that just happened. He certainly hadn't planned to fall out of love with Maddie, much less *in* love with someone else.

Maddie's first reaction hadn't been shock or dismay. Nope, she'd laughed, sure that her intelligent, compassionate Bill was incapable of such a pitiful cliché. Only when his distant expression remained firmly in place did she realize he was stone-cold serious. Just when life had settled into a comfortable groove, the man she'd loved with all her heart had traded her in for a newer model.

In a disbelieving daze, she'd sat by his side while he'd explained to the children what he was doing and why. He'd omitted the part about a new little half brother or sister being on the way. Then, still in a daze, she'd watched him move out.

And after he'd gone, she'd been left to deal with Tyler's angry acting out, with Kyle's slow descent into unfamiliar silence and Katie's heartbroken sobs, all while she herself was frozen and empty inside.

She'd been the one to cope with their shock when they found out about the baby, too. She'd had to hide her resentment and anger, all in the name of good parenting, maturity and peace. There were days she'd wanted to curse Dr. Phil and all those cool, reasoned episodes on which he advised parents that the needs of the children came first. When, she'd wondered, did her needs start to count?

The day of being completely on her own as a single parent was coming sooner than she'd anticipated. All that was left was getting the details of the divorce on paper, spelling out in black and white the end of a twenty-year marriage. Nothing on those pieces of paper mentioned the broken dreams. Nothing mentioned the heartache of those left behind. It was all reduced to deciding who lived where, who drove which car, the amount of child support—and the amount of temporary spousal support until she could stand on her own feet financially or until she married again.

Maddie listened to her attorney's impassioned fight against the temporary nature of that last term. Helen Decatur, who'd known both Maddie and Bill practically forever, was a top-notch divorce attorney with a statewide reputation. She was also one of Maddie's best friends. And when Maddie was too tired and too sad to fight for herself, Helen stepped in to do it for her. Helen was a blond barracuda in a power suit, and Maddie had never been more grateful.

"This woman worked to help you through medical school," Helen lashed out at Bill, in her element on her own turf. "She gave up a promising career of her own to raise your children, keep your home, help manage your office and support your rise in the South Carolina medical community. The fact that you have a professional reputation far outside of Serenity is because Maddie worked her butt off to make it happen. And now you expect her to struggle to find her place in the workforce? Do you honestly think in five years or even ten she'll be able to give your children the lifestyle to which they've become accustomed?" She pinned Bill with a look that would have withered anyone else. His

demeanor reflected a complete lack of interest in Maddie or her future.

That was when Maddie knew it was well and truly over. All the rest, the casual declaration that he'd been cheating on her, the move, none of that had convinced her that it really was the end of her marriage. Until this moment, until she'd seen the uncaring expression in her husband's once-warm brown eyes, she hadn't accepted that Bill wouldn't suddenly come to his senses and tell her it had all been a horrible mistake.

She'd drifted along until this instant, deep in denial and hurt, but no more. Anger, more powerful than anything she'd ever felt in her life, swept through her with a force that brought her to her feet.

"Wait," she said, her voice trembling with outrage. "I'd like to be heard."

Helen regarded her with surprise, but the stunned expression on Bill's face gave Maddie the courage to go on. He hadn't expected her to fight back. She could see now that all her years of striving to please him, of putting him first, had convinced him that she had no spine at all, that she'd make it easy for him to walk away from their family—from *her*—without a backward glance. He'd probably been gloating from the minute she suggested trying to mediate a settlement, rather than letting some judge set the terms of their divorce.

"You've managed to reduce twenty years of our lives to this," she said, waving the settlement papers at him. "And for what?"

She knew the answer, of course. Like so many other middle-aged men, his head had been turned by a woman barely half his age.

"What happens when you tire of Noreen?" she asked. "Will you trade her in, too?"

"Maddie," he said stiffly. He tugged at the sleeves of his monogrammed shirt, fiddling with the eighteencarat-gold cuff links she'd given him just six months ago for their twentieth anniversary. "You don't know anything about my relationship with Noreen."

She managed a smile. "Sure I do. It's about a middle-aged man trying to feel young again. I think you're pathetic."

Calmer now that she'd finally expressed her feelings, she turned to Helen. "I can't sit here anymore. Hold out for whatever you think is right. He's the one in a hurry."

Shoulders squared, chin high, Maddie walked out of the lawyer's office and into the rest of her life.

An hour later Maddie had exchanged her prim knit suit and high heels for a tank top, shorts and well-worn sneakers. Oblivious to the early-morning heat, she walked the mile to her much-hated gym, with its smell of sweat pervading the air. Set on a side street just off Main, the gym had once been an old-fashioned dime store. The yellowed linoleum on the floor harked back to that era and the dingy walls hadn't seen a coat of paint since Dexter had bought the place back in the 1970s.

Since the walk downtown had done nothing at all to calm her, Maddie forced herself to climb onto the treadmill, put the dial at the most challenging setting she'd ever attempted and run. She ran until her legs ached, until the perspiration soaked her chin-length, professionally highlighted hair and ran into her eyes, mingling with the tears that, annoyingly, kept welling up.

Suddenly a perfectly manicured hand reached in front of her, slowed the machine, then cut it off.

"We thought we'd find you here," Helen said, still in her power suit and Jimmy Choo stiletto heels. Helen was probably one of the only women in all of Serenity who'd ever owned a pair of the expensive shoes.

Beside her, Dana Sue Sullivan was dressed in comfortable pants, a pristine T-shirt and sneakers. She was the chef and owner of Serenity's fanciest restaurant—meaning it used linen tablecloths and napkins and had a menu that extended beyond fried catfish and collard greens. Sullivan's New Southern Cuisine, as the dark green and gold-leaf sign out front read, was a decided step up from the diner on the outskirts of town that simply said Good Eatin' on the window and used paper place mats on the Formica tabletops.

Maddie climbed off the treadmill on wobbly legs and wiped her face with the towel Helen handed her. "Why are you two here?"

Both women rolled their eyes.

"Why do you think?" Dana Sue asked in her honeyed drawl. Her thick, chestnut hair was pulled back with a clip, but already the humidity had curls springing free. "We came to see if you want any help in killing that snake-bellied slime who ran out on you."

"Or the mindless pinup he plans to marry," Helen added. "Though I am somewhat hesitant to recommend murder as a solution, being an officer of the court and all."

Dana Sue nudged her in the ribs. "Don't go soft now. You said we'd do *anything*, if it would make Maddie feel better."

Maddie actually managed a faint grin. "Fortunately

for both of you, my revenge fantasies don't run to murder"

"What, then?" Dana Sue asked, looking fascinated. "Personally, after I kicked Ronnie's sorry butt out of the house, I wanted to see him run over by a train."

"Murder's too quick," Maddie said. "Besides, there are the children to consider. Scum that he is, Bill is still their father. I have to remind myself of that on an hourly basis just to keep my temper in check."

"Fortunately, Annie was just as mad at her daddy as I was," Dana Sue said. "I suppose that's the good side of having a teenage daughter. She could see right through his shenanigans. I think she knew what was going on even before I did. She stood on the front steps and applauded when I tossed him out."

"Okay, you two," Helen interrupted, "as much fun as it is listening to you compare notes, can we go someplace else to do it? My suit's going to stink to high heaven if we don't get out in the fresh air soon."

"Don't you both need to get to work?" Maddie asked.
"I took the afternoon off," Helen said. "In case you wanted to get drunk or something."

"And I don't have to be at the restaurant for two hours," Dana Sue said, then studied Maddie with a considering look. "How drunk can you get in that amount of time?"

"Given the fact that there's not a single bar open in Serenity at this hour, I think we can forget about me getting drunk," Maddie noted. "Though I do appreciate the sentiment, that's probably for the best."

"I have the makings of margaritas at my place," Helen offered.

"And we all know how loopy I get on one of those,"

Maddie retorted, shuddering at the memory of their impromptu pity party a few months back when she'd told them about Bill's plan to leave her. "I think I'd better stick to Diet Coke. I have to pick the kids up at school."

"No, you don't," Dana Sue said. "Your mama's going to do it."

Maddie's mouth gaped. Her mother had uttered two words when Tyler was born and repeated them regularly ever since: no babysitting. She'd been adamant about it then, and she'd stuck to it for sixteen years.

"How on earth did you pull that off?" she asked, a note of admiration in her voice.

"I explained the situation," Dana Sue said with a shrug. "Your mother is a perfectly reasonable woman. I don't know why the two of you have all these issues."

Maddie could have explained, but it would take the rest of the afternoon. More likely, the rest of the week. Besides, Dana Sue had heard most of it a thousand times.

"So, are we going to my place?" Helen asked.

"Yes, but not for the margaritas," Maddie said. "It took me the better part of two days to get over that last batch you made. I need to start looking for a job tomorrow."

"No, you don't," Helen said.

"Oh? Did you finally get Bill to hand over some sort of windfall?"

"That, too," Helen said, her smile smug.

Maddie studied her two friends intently. They were up to something. She'd bet her first alimony check on it. "Tell me," she commanded.

"We'll talk about it when we get to my place," Helen said

Maddie turned to Dana Sue. "Do you know what's going on?"

"I have some idea," Dana Sue said, barely containing a grin.

"So, the two of you have been plotting something," Maddie concluded, not sure how she felt about that. She loved these two women like sisters, but every time they got some crazy idea, one of them invariably landed in trouble. It had been that way since they were six. She was pretty sure that was why Helen had become a lawyer, because she'd known the three of them were eventually going to need a good one.

"Give me a hint," she pleaded. "I want to decide if I should take off now."

"Not even a tiny hint," Helen said. "You need to be in a more receptive frame of mind."

"There's not enough Diet Coke in the world to accomplish that," Maddie responded.

Helen grinned. "Thus the margaritas."

"I made some killer guacamole," Dana Sue added. "And I got a big ole bag of those tortilla chips you like, too, though all that salt will eventually kill you."

Maddie looked from one to the other and sighed. "With you two scheming behind my back, something tells me I'm doomed anyway."

The tart margarita was strong enough to make Maddie's mouth pucker. They were on the brick patio behind Helen's custom-built home in Serenity's one fancy subdivision, each of them settled onto a comfy chaise longue. The South Carolina humidity was thick even though it was only March, but the faint breeze stirring the towering pine trees was enough to keep it from being too oppressive.

Maddie was tempted to dive straight into Helen's

turquoise pool, but instead she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. For the first time in months, she felt her worries slipping away. Beyond her anger, she wasn't trying to hide anything from her kids—not her sorrow, not her fears, but she did struggle to keep them in check. With Helen and Dana Sue, she could just be herself, one very hurt, soon-to-be-divorced woman filled with uncertainty.

"You think she's ready to hear our idea?" Dana Sue murmured beside her.

"Not yet," Helen responded. "She needs to finish that drink."

"I can hear you," Maddie said. "I'm not asleep or unconscious yet."

"Then we'd better wait," Dana Sue said cheerfully. "More guacamole?"

"No, though you outdid yourself," Maddie told her. "That stuff made my eyes water."

Dana Sue looked taken aback. "Too hot? I thought maybe you were just having yourself another little crying jag."

"I am not prone to crying jags," Maddie retorted.

"You think we didn't notice you were crying when we got to the gym?" Helen inquired.

"I was hoping you'd think it was sweat."

"I'm sure that's what everyone else thought, but we knew better," Dana Sue said. "I have to say, I was disappointed you'd shed a single tear over that man."

"So was I," Maddie said.

Dana Sue gave her a hard look, then turned to Helen. "We may as well tell her. I don't think she's going to mellow out any more than she has already."

"Okay," Helen conceded. "Here's the deal. What

have all three of us been complaining about for the past twenty years?"

"Men," Maddie suggested dryly.

"Besides that," Helen said impatiently.

"South Carolina's humidity?"

Helen sighed. "Would you try to be serious for one minute? The gym. We've been complaining about that awful gym all our adult lives."

Maddie regarded her with bafflement. "And it hasn't done a lick of good, has it? The last time we pitched a fit about the place, Dexter hired Junior Stevens to mop it out...once. The place smelled of Lysol for a week and that was it."

"Precisely. Which is why Dana Sue and I came up with this idea," Helen said, then paused for effect. "We want to open a brand-new fitness club, one that's clean and welcoming and caters to women."

"We want it to be a place where women can get fit and be pampered and drink a smoothie with their friends after a workout," Dana Sue added. "Maybe even get a facial or a massage."

"And you want to do this in Serenity, with its population of five thousand seven hundred and fourteen people?" Maddie asked, not even trying to hide her skepticism.

"Fifteen," Dana Sue corrected. "Daisy Mitchell had a baby girl yesterday. And believe me, if you've seen Daisy lately, you know she'll be the perfect candidate for one of our postpregnancy classes."

Maddie studied Helen more intently. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"As serious as a heart attack," she confirmed. "What do you think?"

"I suppose it could work," Maddie said thoughtfully. "Goodness knows, that gym is disgusting. It's no wonder half the women in Serenity refuse to exercise. Of course, the other half can't get out of their recliners because of all the fried chicken they've consumed."

"Which is why we'll offer cooking classes, too," Dana Sue said eagerly.

"Let me guess. New Southern Cuisine," Maddie said.
"Southern cooking isn't all about lima beans swimming in butter or green beans cooked with fatback,"
Dana Sue said. "Haven't I taught you anything?"

"Me, yes, absolutely," Maddie assured her. "But the general population of Serenity still craves their mashed potatoes and fried chicken."

"So do I," Dana Sue said. "But ovenbaked's not halfbad if you do it right."

"We're losing focus," Helen cut in. "There's a building available over on Palmetto Lane that would be just right for what we have in mind. I think we should take a look at it in the morning. Dana Sue and I fell in love with it right away, Maddie, but we want your opinion."

"Why? It's not as if I have anything to compare it to. Besides, I don't even know what your vision is, not entirely anyway."

"You know how to make a place cozy and inviting, don't you?" Helen said. "After all, you took that mausoleum that was the Townsend family home and made it real welcoming."

"Right," Dana Sue said. "And you have all sorts of business savvy from helping Bill get his practice established."

"I put some systems into place for him nearly twenty years ago," Maddie said, downplaying her contribution

to setting up the office. "I'm hardly an expert. If you're going to do this, you should hire a consultant, devise a business plan, do cost projections. You can't do something like this on a whim just because you don't like the way Dexter's gym smells."

"Actually, we can," Helen insisted. "I have enough money saved for a down payment on the building, plus capital expenses for equipment and an operating budget for the first year. Let's face it, I can use the tax write-off, though I predict this won't be a losing proposition for long."

"And I'm going to invest some cash, but mostly my time and my expertise in cooking and nutrition to design a little café and offer classes," Dana Sue added.

They both looked at Maddie expectantly.

"What?" she demanded. "I don't have any expertise and I certainly don't have any money to throw at something this speculative."

Helen grinned. "You have a bit more than you think, thanks to your fabulous attorney, but we don't really want your money. We want you to be in charge."

Maddie regarded them incredulously. "Me? I hate to exercise. I only do it because I know I have to." She gestured at the cellulite firmly clinging to her thighs. "And we can see how much good that's doing."

"Then you're perfect for this job, because you'll work really, really hard to make this a place women just like you will want to join," Helen said.

Maddie shook her head. "Forget it. It doesn't feel right."

"Why not?" Dana demanded. "You need work. We need a manager. It's a perfect match."

"It feels like some scheme you devised to keep me from starving to death," Maddie said.

"I already told you that you won't be starving," Helen said. "And you get to keep the house, which is long since paid for. Bill was very reasonable once I laid out a few facts for him."

Maddie studied her friend's face. Not many people tried explaining anything to Bill, since he was convinced he knew it all. A medical degree did that to some men. And what the degree didn't accomplish, adoring nurses like Noreen did.

"Such as?" Maddie asked.

"How the news of his impending fatherhood with his unmarried nurse might impact his practice here in the conservative, family-oriented town of Serenity," Helen said without the slightest hint of remorse. "People might not want to take their darling little kiddies to a pediatrician who has demonstrated a complete lack of scruples."

"You blackmailed him?" Maddie wasn't sure whether she was shocked or awed.

Helen shrugged. "I prefer to think of it as educating him on the value of the right PR spin. So far people in town haven't taken sides, but that could change in a heartbeat."

"I'm surprised his attorney let you get away with that," Maddie said.

"That's because you don't know everything your brilliant attorney knew walking into that room," Helen said.

"Such as?" Maddie asked again.

"Bill's nurse had a little thing going with *his* attorney once upon a time. Tom Patterson had his own reasons for wanting to see Bill screwed to the wall."

"Isn't that unethical?" Maddie asked. "Shouldn't he have refused to take Bill's case or something?"

"He did, but Bill insisted. Tom disclosed his connection to Noreen, but Bill continued to insist. He thought Tom's thing with Noreen would make him more understanding of his eagerness to get on with life with her. Which just proves that when it comes to human nature your soon-to-be ex really doesn't have a clue."

"And you took advantage of all those shenanigans to get Maddie the money she deserves," Dana Sue said admiringly.

"I did," Helen confirmed with satisfaction. "If we'd had to go in front of a judge, it might have gone differently, but Bill was especially anxious for a settlement so he could be a proper daddy to his new baby *before* the ink is dry on the birth certificate. As you reminded him on your way out the door, Maddie, he's the one in a hurry."

Helen regarded Maddie intently. "It's not a fortune, mind you, but you don't have to worry about money for the time being."

"I still think I ought to look for a real job," Maddie said. "However much the settlement is, it won't last forever, and I'm not likely to have a lot of earning power, not right at first, anyway."

"Which is why you should take us up on our offer," Dana Sue said. "This health club could be a gold mine and you'd be a full partner. That's what you'd get in return for your day-in, day-out running of it all—sweat equity."

"I don't see what's in it for the two of you," Maddie said. "Helen, you're in Charleston all the time. There are some fine gyms over there, if you don't want to go

to Dexter's. And Dana Sue, you could offer cooking classes at the restaurant. You don't need a spa to do it."

"We're trying to be community minded," Dana Sue said. "This town needs someone to invest in it."

"I'm not buying it," Maddie said. "This is about me. You both feel sorry for me."

"We most certainly do not," Helen said. "You're going to be just fine."

"Then there's something else, something you're not telling me," Maddie persisted. "You didn't just wake up one day and decide you wanted to open a health club, not even for some kind of tax shelter."

Helen hesitated, then confessed. "Okay, here's the whole truth. I need a place to go to work off the stress of my job. My doctor's been on my case about my blood pressure. I flatly refuse to start taking a bunch of pills at my age, so he said he'd give me three months to see if a better diet and exercise would help. I'm trying to cut back on my cases in Charleston for a while, so I need a spa right here in Serenity."

Maddie stared at her friend in alarm. If Helen was cutting back on work, then the doctor must have made quite a case for the risks to her health. "If your blood pressure is that high, why didn't you say something? Not that I'm surprised given the way you obsess over your job."

"I didn't say anything because you've had enough on your plate," Helen said. "Besides, I intend to take care of it."

"By opening your own gym," Maddie concluded. "Won't getting a new business off the ground just add to the stress?"

"Not if *you're* running it," Helen said. "Besides, I think all of us doing this together will be fun."

Maddie wasn't entirely convinced about the fun factor, but she turned to Dana Sue. "And you? What's your excuse for wanting to open a new business? Isn't the restaurant enough?"

"It's making plenty of money, sure," Dana Sue said. "But I'm around food all the time. I've gained a few pounds. You know my family history. Just about everybody had diabetes, so I need to get my weight under control. I'm not likely to stop eating, so I need to work out"

"See, we both have our own reasons for wanting to make this happen," Helen said. "Come on, Maddie. At least look at the building tomorrow. You don't have to decide tonight or even tomorrow. There's time for you to mull it over in that cautious brain of yours."

"I am *not* cautious," Maddie protested, offended. Once she'd been the biggest risk-taker among them. All it had taken was the promise of fun and a dare. Had she really lost that? Judging from the expressions on her friends' faces, she had.

"Oh, please, you weigh the pros and cons and calorie content before you order lunch," Dana Sue said. "But we love you just the same."

"Which is why we won't do this without you," Helen said. "Even if it *does* put our health at risk."

Maddie looked from one to the other. "No pressure there," she said dryly.

"Not a bit," Helen said. "I have a career. And the doctor says there are all sorts of pills for controlling blood pressure these days."

"And I have a business," Dana Sue added. "As for my

weight, I suppose we can just continue walking together a couple of times a week." She sighed dramatically.

"Despite what y'all have said, I'm not entirely convinced it isn't charity," Maddie repeated. "The timing is awfully suspicious."

"It would only be charity if we didn't expect you to work your butt off to make a success of it," Helen said. "So, are you in or out?"

Maddie gave it some thought. "I'll look at the building," she finally conceded. "But that's all I'm promising."

Helen swung her gaze to Dana Sue. "If we'd waited till she had that second margarita, she would have said yes," Helen claimed, feigning disappointment.

Maddie laughed. "But if I'd had two, you couldn't have held me to anything I said."

"She has a point," Dana Sue agreed. "Let's be grateful we got a maybe."

"Have I told you two how glad I am that you're my friends?" Maddie said, feeling her eyes well up with tears yet again.

"Uh-oh, here she goes again," Dana Sue said, getting to her feet. "I need to get to work before we all start crying."

"I never cry," Helen declared.

Dana Sue groaned. "Don't even start. Maddie will be forced to challenge you, and before you know it, all of Serenity will be flooded and you'll both look like complete wrecks when we meet in the morning. Maddie, do you want me to drop you off at home?"

She shook her head. "I'll walk. It'll give me time to think"

"And to sober up before her mama sees her," Helen taunted.

"That, too," Maddie agreed.

Mostly, though, she wanted time to absorb the fact that on one of the worst days of her life she'd been surrounded by friends who'd given her a glimmer of hope that her future wasn't going to be quite as bleak as she'd imagined.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was almost dusk when Maddie walked through the wrought-iron front gate of the monstrosity of a house that had been in the Townsend family for five generations. According to Helen, Bill had reluctantly agreed to let her remain there with the children, since the house would one day be Tyler's. Staring up at the massive brick facade, Maddie almost regretted winning that point. She would have been happier in something cozier with a white picket fence and some roses. The upkeep on this place could bankrupt her, but Helen assured her she'd made provisions for that, too, in the settlement.

As she opened the front door, she braced herself to deal with her mother. But when she walked into the family room at the back of the house, it was Bill she discovered sitting on the sofa with Katie napping in his arms and the boys lounging in front of the TV, their attention riveted on a show she was pretty sure she'd never allowed them to watch. She immediately stiffened at the sight of some sort of extreme-fighting competition.

One thing at a time, she warned herself. Getting rid of her soon-to-be ex was her first priority.

Before she opened her mouth, though, she allowed

herself a long hard look at him, something she hadn't dared to do earlier. His blond hair was still thick, but there were a few silver strands she'd never noticed before, and an unhealthy pallor beneath his tan. The lines on his face, which once had lent character to his handsome features, made him look tired now. If it was still her business, she'd have been worried about him.

She reminded herself of how furious she'd been a few hours ago. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, reclaiming her earlier anger. "And where is my mother?"

The boys, used to her neutral tone and careful remarks about their father, regarded her with surprise. Bill merely frowned his disapproval.

"She left when I got here. I said I'd stay till you got home. We need to talk," he said.

"I said all I have to say to you at Helen's office," she retorted, standing her ground. "Do I need to repeat it?"

"Maddie, please, let's not start a scene in front of the kids."

She knew he was less concerned about that than about having to face any more of her justifiable outrage. Even so, he had a point. Tyler was already looking as if he might leap to her defense. He'd felt compelled to do that too many times lately. He'd been stuffing down his own feelings in an attempt to be supportive to her. It was too much of a burden for a sixteen-year-old boy who'd once idolized his dad.

"Fine," she said tightly. "Tyler, Kyle, go upstairs and finish your homework. I'll fix supper as soon as your dad leaves."

"Mine's done," Tyler said, not budging, his expression defiant

"Mine, too," Kyle said.

She gave them a warning look that had them scrambling to their feet.

"I'll take Katie," Tyler offered, picking up his sleeping sister.

"Goodbye, boys," Bill called after them.

"Bye, Dad," Kyle answered. Tyler said nothing.

Bill stared after them, his expression sad. "Tyler's still furious with me, isn't he?"

"Can you blame him?" she replied, incapable of dealing with Bill's injured feelings.

"Of course not, especially with you feeding his resentment every chance you get," he responded.

"I do not do that," Maddie said heatedly. "As much as it pains me, I've done everything I can to keep them from hating you or seeing how badly you hurt me. Unfortunately, Ty and Kyle are old enough to reach their own conclusions and to see through whatever charade I put on."

Bill immediately backed down. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you've tried. It's just so frustrating. The kids and I used to be so close, but now Katie's the only one who acts as if nothing's changed."

"Katie adores you," Maddie said. "She's six. Even after all these months, she doesn't fully understand that you're never coming back here to live. The boys know exactly what's going on and that their lives will never be the same. Katie just cries herself to sleep every night when you're not here to read her a story and kiss her good night. Not a day goes by when she doesn't ask me what she did wrong and how we can fix it and when you're coming back for good."

She thought she caught a hint of guilt on Bill's face,

but then the polite mask she'd gotten used to seeing lately returned. She tried to remember the last time his eyes had lit up at the sight of her, the last time he'd actually met her gaze at all. Sadly, she couldn't. She suspected it was long before he'd announced he was leaving her, most likely in the early days of his affair with Noreen. How had she not noticed such a dramatic change?

"Would you sit down, Maddie?" he said irritably. "I can't get into this with you looming over me."

"Into what? Surely there can't be more bad news. Breaking up our marriage and our family pretty much covered all the bases, didn't it?"

"You know, Madelyn, sarcasm doesn't become you."

"Well, pardon me all to hell!" she snapped, blaming the margaritas for her lack of inhibition. "Sarcasm is pretty much all I have left."

His gaze narrowed. "You never used to swear."

"Until recently, I never had anything to swear about," she told him. "Would you just say whatever's on your mind and leave? As I understand it, this is no longer your home, so I'd appreciate it if you'd call before coming by again."

He gave her a defeated look and for an instant, she almost felt sorry for him. He'd made his choice, he was getting everything he wanted, but he didn't seem all that happy about it. Before she could allow herself to remember the way she'd once loved him, she steeled herself and sat on the edge of a chair opposite him.

"I didn't want things to turn out like this," he said, meeting her gaze for the first time in weeks. "I really didn't."

Maddie sighed. "I know. Things happen."

"If it weren't for the baby..." His voice trailed off.

Maddie's temper stirred. "Don't you dare say that you'd have stayed with me if it weren't for Noreen getting pregnant. That demeans her and me."

He stared at her blankly. "How? I'm just trying to be honest."

"It suggests you're only with her because of the baby and it says you think I'd take you back after you cheated on me if there weren't a baby to consider. You had an affair, Bill. I'm not sure I could have forgiven that."

"Maybe not right away, but we might have fought harder to get back on track, to keep our family intact."

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly. "Maybe we would have, but that ship has pretty much sailed."

"Can you at least promise me you'll do what you can to help me fix things with the kids? I miss them, Maddie. I thought after all these months things would be better, but they're not. I'm running out of ideas."

"What you're running out of is patience," she retorted. "You wanted everything to fall neatly into place the instant you said goodbye to me, but unfortunately kids' emotions can't turn on a dime. They're hurt and angry and confused. You're going to have to work to change that. I can't just wave a magic wand and make it okay. I agreed to let you have as much time with them as you want. What more do you expect?"

"An advocate," he suggested.

"It's one thing for me not to say anything negative about you to the children," she told him. "But I'm not going to be a cheerleader for dear old dad."

"Did you know that Tyler has flatly refused to set foot in my new place as long as Noreen is there? What am I supposed to do, ask her to leave? It's her apartment." "Ty didn't say anything to me about that," she said, just a little pleased that her son had taken such a stand. She knew, though, that he and his father needed to mend fences. Bill had always been an important part of their oldest son's life. Despite his busy schedule, Bill had never missed a ball game, a school conference or any other activity that meant something to Tyler. Sixteen was the worst possible age to have that kind of supportive relationship disrupted.

"I'll talk to him," she offered, backing off her refusal to become Bill's advocate. She would do it for Ty's sake. "But," she reminded Bill, "he's sixteen and has a mind of his own. I can't force him to do anything. You may have to give it some time, work a little harder to win him back."

"I'd appreciate anything you can do." He stood up. "Well, that's all I really wanted."

"Okay, fine."

"And to say one more time how sorry I am."

She felt the sting of tears in her eyes and blinked hard to keep them from falling. Just in case one escaped, she turned away. "Me, too," she said.

She kept waiting for him to leave, but she wasn't prepared for the quick brush of his lips on her cheek before he strode out of the family room and out of the house.

Now the tears fell unchecked. "Well, damn you all to hell, Bill Townsend," she muttered, hating that the quick, careless kiss had meant anything at all.

"Mom?"

Swiping at her tears, she gazed up at Tyler, who was studying her worriedly. "I'm okay," she assured him.

"No, you're not," he said, then added heatedly, "I hate him for what he's done to you. He's such a lying

hypocrite. All that talk he used to give me about how you're supposed to treat someone you care about was just a crock."

"Ty, he's your dad. You don't hate him," she chided. "And what he told you is the way it's supposed to be. People who care about each other should be kind and supportive and faithful. Unfortunately life doesn't always follow the rules."

"You can't make me love him," he said, his tone unyielding. "I heard what he asked you. He wants you to convince me he's not a jerk."

"He loves you. He came over here because he misses spending time with you."

"I'm not the one who left," Tyler said bitterly. "He is. Why should I go out of my way to see him, especially when *she's* around all the time?"

Maddie moved to the sofa and held out her hand. "Come here."

He hesitated, then came closer and awkwardly took her outstretched hand.

"Sit here beside me," she said. When he was seated, she turned and met his gaze. "Ty, you're old enough to understand that things don't always work out with grown-ups just because we want them to. It's not anybody's fault."

"Are you telling me that Dad having an affair and getting Noreen pregnant is as much *your* fault as it is his?"

Her lips curved in a small smile at that. "Well, no, I can't say that, but obviously things weren't good between your dad and me or he wouldn't have turned to her."

"Did you know they weren't good?"

"No," she told him candidly. In hindsight, the signs

were there, tiny fissures so small she could be forgiven for missing them, but at the time she'd thought their marriage was as solid as anyone's could be.

"Then it *was* all his fault," Tyler concluded, still being fiercely loyal to her.

As much as she wanted to agree with him, she was determined to be fair. "Spend some time with him, Ty, just the two of you. Listen to his side of things," she encouraged. "You've always been so close. Don't lose that."

"He'll just make a bunch of excuses. I don't want to hear them." Ty regarded her warily. "Are you going to *make* me spend time with him?"

"I won't force you to, no," she said. "But I will be disappointed in you if you don't at least try to meet him halfway."

"Why?" he asked incredulously. "He walked out on you, Mom. On all of us. Why do we need to be fair?"

"He didn't walk out on you, Kyle and Katie," she said quietly. "He isn't divorcing you. Your dad loves every one of you."

"Man, I don't get you," her son said angrily, yanking his hand away and standing up. "How come I'm the only one in this house who sees Dad for the scumbag he is?"

"Tyler Townsend, don't talk about your father like that!" she said.

His gaze locked with hers, then eventually faltered. "Whatever," he mumbled and stalked out of the room.

Maddie watched him go, her heart aching. "Damn you, Bill Townsend," she said for the second time that night.

The old Victorian house on the corner of Main and Palmetto Lane was at the western fringe of downtown

Serenity. Not that there was much of a downtown anymore, Maddie thought as she stood with Helen and Dana Sue. The hardware store had stuck it out, as had the drugstore with its old-fashioned soda fountain, but Willard's Grocery had been empty for a decade, ever since a superstore with discount grocery prices had opened twenty-five miles away on the outskirts of Charleston. It had quickly become evident that residents would rather drive all that way for a bargain than pay a few cents more to keep a local merchant in business.

The white paint on the Victorian was peeling, the shutters were askew and the porch sagged. The lawn hadn't been cut in ages and most of the picket fence was broken. Maddie dimly remembered the place as it had been when old Mrs. Hartley was alive. Yellow roses had tumbled over the white fence, the porch and sidewalk had been swept daily and the shutters had gleamed with dark green paint.

Mrs. Hartley, who must have been in her eighties by then, had sat on the porch every afternoon with a pitcher of iced sweet tea and welcomed anyone who happened to walk by. More than once, Maddie had climbed onto the swing hanging from the porch rafters and eaten sugar cookies while her grandmother had visited with the elderly woman. Nana Vreeland and Mrs. Hartley had been witness to most of the changes in Serenity through the years, and Maddie knew she'd absorbed their love for the small town with its friendly people, old white clapboard churches and acres of green space with a small lake in the middle that was home to a family of swans. Free summer concerts in the bandstand by the lake drew everyone in town on Saturday nights.

Despite Serenity's charm, a lot of people Maddie's

age had been eager to leave and never come back, but not Maddie or Bill. They'd never wanted to live anywhere else. Nor had Helen or Dana Sue. The slower pace and sense of community meant something to all of them.

"Boy, this place brings back a lot of memories," Maddie said at last. "What a shame that none of Mrs. Hartley's kids wanted the property or made any effort to take care of it."

"Their loss is our gain," Helen said briskly. "We can get it for a song."

"I'm not surprised," Maddie said. "Are you sure it's safe to go inside? Looks to me as if all sorts of critters might have taken up residence in there."

Dana Sue nudged her in the ribs. "Do you think we've forgotten about your terror of spiders and snakes? Helen made sure the real-estate agent had it all swept out last week. There's nothing in there but the resident ghost."

"Oh, please," Maddie said. "How can there be a ghost? No one's died here."

"But wouldn't it be fabulous if there were a ghost?" Dana Sue persisted. "Just think of the PR value. There's nothing a Southerner loves quite so much as a good ghost story or bragging rights to having one up in the attic."

"I'm not sure having a ghost would be much of a recommendation for a health club," Helen said. "What if it appears in a mirror one day? It could scare twenty years off someone's life and pretty much destroy the place's reputation as a fitness mecca. I'm not sure even I could win that lawsuit." She met Maddie's gaze. "Ready to go inside?"

"Sure. Why not?" Maddie said, still trying to see what the two of them obviously saw in the run-down house. Even her memories of the way it had once been didn't help her to envision it as a thriving spa.

Not two minutes later, though, once she'd stepped across the threshold and into the sunlight pooling on the old oak floors, her pulse began to race a little faster. The downstairs rooms were huge. The windows were dingy, but even so they let in streaming rays of sun. With pale yellow walls and white woodwork, the spa would be cheerful and welcoming. The floors could be brought back with sanding and a good coat or two of polyurethane.

When she reached the dining room, which faced the back of the property, she realized that the French doors and tall windows opened to a wooded lot with a small stream trickling through it. Treadmills set up to face that way would give the illusion of walking or running outdoors. Wouldn't that afford women a sense of serenity while they exercised?

Dana Sue latched on to her hand and tugged her into the kitchen.

"Can you believe this?" she demanded, gesturing around her. "The appliances are old and the cabinets are a mess, but the room is huge. Just imagine what we could do with it."

"I thought the idea of this place was to make people forget about food, not to feed them," Maddie said.

"No, no, no," Dana Sue chided. "It's supposed to give them a place to make healthy choices. We could set up a counter over here and a few small tables in that area by the door. We could even open it onto the back patio and add a few tables outside." "Can you cook and serve in the same space?" Maddie asked

"There won't be any cooking done here, except for whatever classes we offer. I'll cater the salads from the restaurant kitchen. We can get a professional refrigerator or display case for those. And we'll offer smoothies and other drinks. Can't you just imagine what fun it would be to work out with a couple of friends, then sit out there gazing at that stream and eating a chicken Caesar salad and drinking mineral water. You'd leave here feeling a thousand percent better, even if you never lost an ounce. And if we offered a hot tub and massages, oh, my gosh..." She sighed rapturously.

"That sounds great for someone who has all morning or all afternoon, but won't the people who can afford what you're talking about be working?" Maddie asked, continuing to play devil's advocate.

"We've thought of that," Helen said. "We could offer day-long or half-day packages for women who want to be really pampered for a special occasion. But we could also have a half-hour workout and lunch deal for someone who only has an hour-long break from work. And there are so many bedrooms, we could even convert one room to a nursery and hire a day-care worker so moms could exercise in peace."

Maddie regarded them with surprise. It was beginning to seem they had an answer for everything. "You've really given this a lot of thought, haven't you."

Helen shrugged. "What can I say? I hate Dexter's place and I really need to work out. I might as well create someplace I'll enjoy going."

"Me, too," Dana Sue said. "If I own a place like this, though, I'll have to stay in shape. I'll be happy.

Doc Marshall will be happy. Even my daughter will stop commenting about the bulge around my middle."

"You do not have a bulge around your middle," Maddie said indignantly. "That's ridiculous!"

"Compared to my daughter, I'm downright obese," Dana Sue insisted. "To tell you the truth, I think Annie's taking the whole dieting thing to extremes, but every time I try to talk to her about it, she freaks out. And I can't get her near a scale to prove my point."

Helen regarded her with alarm. "You don't think she's anorexic, do you? Lots of teenage girls are, you know."

"The idea scares me to death," Dana Sue admitted. "I watch her like a hawk to see what she's putting in her mouth, and she seems to eat okay. Maybe she's just burning it all up. Some people are just plain lucky to have high metabolisms."

Helen exchanged a worried look with Maddie.

"Dana Sue, don't ignore this," Maddie said gently. "It can be really dangerous."

"Don't you think I know that?" Dana Sue snapped in a rare display of temper that proved just how worried she was. "I was there when Megan Hartwell collapsed at the prom, same as you. She nearly died, for goodness' sake."

Maddie backed off. That night had been one none of them would ever forget. It was the first time they'd seen what an eating disorder could do to someone their age. Heck, back then no one had even *acknowledged* there was such a thing as an eating disorder. Before that, Megan Hartwell's dieting obsession had just been a joke among them. If Dana Sue's daughter did have a prob-

lem, surely Dana Sue would recognize it and deal with it without Maddie or anyone else nagging her.

"Sorry," she apologized.

Dana Sue gave her a hug. "No, I'm sorry for biting your head off."

"Okay, let's try to focus on this place," Helen said briskly. "Maddie, now that you've seen it, what do you think?"

"I think it's a very ambitious plan," she said cautiously.

"Not for us," Dana Sue said. "We can do anything we set our minds to. We are, after all, the Sweet Magnolias. Everyone at Serenity High knew we were destined to succeed. They said so in our yearbooks."

"They also said we were most likely to raise a ruckus and land in jail," Maddie said.

Helen grinned. "Okay, so it was a toss-up. But we've all stayed on the straight and narrow. And we *have* succeeded."

Dana Sue nodded. "Pretty much."

"Maybe you two can claim success," Maddie said. "Helen not only made it through law school, but she's built an incredible practice all over the state. Dana Sue, you've created a restaurant that's as good as anything in Charleston, and that's saying something. What have I ever done?"

"You put your worthless hubby through med school, managed a home and raised three great kids. That's nothing to sneeze at," Helen said.

"I just don't know," Maddie said. "This would be a huge time commitment and I really need to pay attention to the kids right now. They need me."

"We know that. We probably understand your pri-

orities better than any other boss would," Dana Sue told her

Maddie knew that was true, but she still wasn't ready to say yes. There was one significant consideration she couldn't ignore. "I'd be terrified of messing up and costing you a small fortune," she admitted.

"If I'm not worried about that, why should *you* be?" Helen asked

Despite the reassurance, Maddie couldn't seem to shake the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that she was getting in way over her head. "How big a hurry are you two in to do this?" she asked.

"I took out an option on the property yesterday for thirty days," Helen said.

"Then give me thirty days to make up my mind," Maddie pleaded.

"What will you know in thirty days that you don't know right this minute?" Dana Sue argued.

"I'll be able to do some cost projections, some market analysis, take a look at what's being offered in other towns in the area," Maddie began.

Helen grinned again. "I told you she'd focus on all that sensible stuff," she said to Dana Sue.

"Well, it's important to know exactly what's involved," Maddie retorted. "And I want to look at the job market while I'm at it. I should see if there's something I'm better suited to do."

"In Serenity?" Helen scoffed.

"I could be qualified for lots of things," Maddie said, though without much conviction.

"You are," Helen concurred, "but not a lot of folks are going to offer you a partnership in your own business based on your résumé."

"I have to look," Maddie said stubbornly. "I have to be sure that this is the right thing for all of us. I'd never forgive myself if I just said yes and you wound up blowing a small fortune because I was incompetent or hadn't done my homework."

"I respect that," Helen said. "I really do."

Maddie met her gaze. "But? I hear a but in there."

"But you haven't taken a risk in over twenty years, and look where that's gotten you. I say it's high time to just throw caution to the wind and do what your gut tells you to do. You used to trust it."

"So?" Dana Sue prodded. "What's your gut saying, Maddie?"

Maddie gave them a rueful smile. "It's saying yes," she admitted.

"Well, hallelujah!" Dana Sue enthused.

Maddie shook her head. "Don't get too worked up. From what I can see, my gut hasn't been reliable for some time now. Up until a few months ago, I thought I had a good marriage."

"Don't blame your gut for that one," Helen said. "Blame Bill for being an excellent liar."

"Maybe so, but I think this time I'll be more comfortable if I do a little research before taking the plunge. Come on, guys, thirty days. Is that so much to ask?"

Her friends exchanged a look.

"I suppose not," Dana Sue said reluctantly.

"I bet she'll be ready in a week," Helen told Dana Sue.

Maddie frowned. "What makes you so sure?"

"I looked at the want ads in this morning's paper," Helen said. "Trust me, you won't beat our offer." When

Maddie started to respond, Helen held up a hand. "It's okay. You need to see for yourself. I understand that."

"Thank you," Maddie said.

"Just in case, though, I think I'll go ahead and start on the partnership paperwork," Helen said.

"Keep on being so smug, and I'll turn you down just to spite you," Maddie threatened.

"No, you won't," Helen said with confidence. "You're way too smart to do that."

Maddie tried to remember the last time anyone had complimented her on her intelligence, rather than her baking or hostessing skills. Maybe working with her two best friends would be good for her. Even if this health-club idea went belly-up, she might walk away with her self-esteem bolstered in a way it hadn't been in years, to say nothing of the fact that they were bound to share a lot more laughter than she'd had in her marriage for a long time now. She ought to say yes for those reasons alone.

Because she was suddenly tempted to do just that, she gave Helen and Dana Sue quick hugs and headed for the door. "I'll call you both," she promised.

And, she vowed, not one minute before her thirty days was up.

## CHAPTER THREE

At thirty, Cal Maddox had been coaching high-school baseball for only two years, but he knew the sport as few did. He'd played five seasons in the minors and two years in the majors until an injury had sidelined him. He'd been forced to accept that years in the minor leagues trying to get back what he'd once had would be an exercise in futility.

Sharing his love of the game and his expertise with kids who might still have a shot drew him as nothing else had during those frustrating months of rehab. He owed one man for yanking him out of his initial depression and making him realize that possibilities existed outside of pro ball.

Serenity School Board chairman Hamilton Reynolds, an ardent Atlanta Braves fan during Cal's brief tenure with the team, had sought him out at the rehab center and changed his outlook and his life. He'd convinced Cal to come to Serenity.

In all his years working up to his shot with the big leagues and since, he'd never seen anyone with the raw, natural talent of Tyler Townsend. Ty was every coach's dream, a kid with good grades, an easygoing tempera-

ment and a willingness to practice and learn. He'd been all-state his sophomore year and had been headed down that road again this year, at least until a few weeks ago. Now, Cal thought, he was a kid spiraling out of control.

Cal watched Ty's halfhearted pitches to the plate with increasing dismay. The players, who usually had to struggle to make contact with the kid's fastball, were slamming the balls over the fence right and left today. Worst of all, Ty didn't even seem frustrated by his inability to get the batters out.

"Okay, that's it for today," Cal called. "Everybody do a lap around the field, then head for the locker room. Ty, I'd like to see you in my office after you've changed."

Cal headed inside to wait. On some level, he half expected Tyler to blow off the meeting, but twenty minutes later the kid appeared in the doorway, his expression sullen.

"Come on in," Cal said. "Close the door."

"My mom's picking me up in ten minutes," Tyler said, but he sprawled in a chair across from Cal. Though he had the gangly limbs of a lot of boys his age, Ty had none of the awkwardness. His slouching posture now, however, was indicative of his overall bad attitude.

"I think we can cover this in ten minutes," Cal said, hiding his frustration. "How do you think you pitched today?"

"I sucked," Ty responded.

"And that's okay with you?"

Ty shrugged and avoided his gaze.

"Well, it's not okay with me." Cal's words drew no reaction, which meant sterner measures were called for. "Here's the deal. If you expect to pitch our opener in two weeks, you're going to have to show me that you

deserve it. Otherwise I'll put Josh in the starting rotation and you'll spend the season on the bench."

Expecting a fight or at least a reaction, Cal was disappointed when Ty merely shrugged.

"Do what you want," Ty said.

Cal frowned at the utter lack of interest. "It is not what I want," he said impatiently. "What I want is for you to get your act together and pitch like we both know you can." He regarded the boy with real concern. "What's going on with you, Ty? Whatever it is, you know you can talk to me, right?"

"I guess."

Cal pressed on, hoping to get some kind of response that would clue him in to what was troubling the boy. "Your other teachers tell me you're not concentrating in class. Your grades are slipping. None of this is like you."

"Well, maybe I've changed," Ty said sourly. "People do, you know. Out of the blue, they just fucking change." He stood up and took off before Cal could react.

Well hell, Cal thought. He'd gotten what he was after—a genuine reaction—but he didn't know anything more than he had before he'd hauled the kid into his office. He wasn't sure which worried him more, the uncharacteristic swearing or the attitude. Cal had heard plenty of foul language in the high-school locker room. But he'd never heard it from Ty before.

Nor had he seen that kind of bitterness and resignation from a boy who could have the whole world of professional baseball at his feet a few years down the road. Normally Ty hung on Cal's every word, determined to soak up every bit of knowledge Cal had to share. His

exuberance and commitment to the team had made him a role model for the other kids.

Cal pulled a file and jotted down the Townsends' phone number. Nine times out of ten when a kid lost focus like this, there was something going on at home or he'd gotten mixed up in some kind of substance abuse. Cal flatly refused to believe a kid as smart as Tyler would suddenly start doing drugs; besides, he'd seen no real evidence of that or alcohol abuse so that left some kind of upheaval in the kid's home life.

Cal sighed. There was nothing like calling parents and digging around in their personal issues to make his day. He'd rather take a hard fastball in the gut.

Maddie had been on three job interviews that day. None of them had gone well, pretty much proving Helen's point. Maddie had been out of the workforce too long for her degree or her work experience to count for much. Her résumé of early jobs looked pitiful, especially with the fifteen-year gap since the last one. *She* might think she was executive material, but no one else would so she'd kept her expectations modest.

When each of the human resources people had seen that gaping void, they'd regarded her with dismay. Each had asked some variation of the same question: What have you been doing all this time?

Keeping house, raising kids, resolving squabbles and balancing the checkbook. Not even the unpaid hours she'd put in handling the inevitable billing problems in Bill's medical practice seemed to count for much.

The only thing more discouraging had been her own lack of excitement about any of the jobs. Most of them had been clerical positions, the kind of entry-level work

she'd done twenty years ago. It struck her as ironic that all those years of life experience had left her unqualified for even that type of work.

She was still thinking about it—and about the alternative Helen and Dana Sue were offering her—when Ty yanked open the car door and climbed in, his increasingly frequent scowl firmly in place. He'd yanked his T-shirt on inside out, yet more evidence that he wasn't himself. Since he'd discovered an interest in girls, he'd taken more care with his appearance, but today he looked unkempt. Given the streaks of dirt on his arms and his perspiration-matted dark blond hair, it didn't even look as if he'd showered after practice.

"How was practice?" she asked automatically.

"It sucked."

"Having trouble with your fastball?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, turning to avoid her startled gaze. "Let's just get the hell out of here. I want to go home."

Keeping her temper in check, she regarded her son with a neutral expression. She would deal with his language later. "Ty, what's going on?" she asked quietly.

Her son's mood had been increasingly dark ever since Bill's last visit. Her attempt to force the issue the other night had apparently fallen on deaf ears. He was still angry and he still wasn't speaking to his dad. When Bill had come by the night before to pick up the kids, Ty had remained locked in his room, refusing to see him.

On some level, she'd counted on the start of baseball season to provide a certain normalcy for him. He loved the game. He excelled at it. He'd claimed there was nothing he wanted more than a shot at being a professional ballplayer. Usually by this time in spring practice,

he was quoting Coach Maddox every chance he got. Of course, in the past his father had been there to listen.

When he remained stubbornly silent, she prodded again. "Ty, talk to me. I'm not starting this car until you do. What's going on with you?"

"Why does everybody keep asking me that?" he exploded. "You know what's going on. We've already talked it to death. Dad walked out for some bimbo. What am I *supposed* to do when I find out my dad's a jerk? Can't we just leave it alone? I'm sick of talking about it."

Maddie couldn't really blame him for being sick of the topic, but clearly he needed to discuss it further, if not with her, then with a professional. He needed to deal with his resentment in a more constructive way than lashing out at anyone and everyone around him.

"Sweetie, yes, we've talked about his, and I know you don't understand what your father's done," she said for what must have been the thousandth time. "But that doesn't give you the right to call him names, okay? He's still your father and deserves your respect. I do not want to have to tell you that again, understood?"

He regarded her incredulously. "Come on, Mom. I know you keep painting this rosy picture of things, but even you have to know what a jerk he is."

"What I think of your father isn't the point," she said. "He loves you, Ty. He wants you to be as close as you always were."

"Then why the hell did he leave us for *her*? She's not much older than me."

"She *is* an adult, though," Maddie said. "You, your brother and sister need to give her a chance. If your father loves her, I'm sure she has plenty of good qualities." She managed to get the words out without gagging.

"Yeah, right. I've seen her good *qualities*," he retorted. "Like a 38-D, I'd say."

"Tyler Townsend!" she protested. "You know better than to make a remark like that. It's rude and inappropriate."

"It's the truth."

Maddie fought to temper her remarks. "Look, change is never easy, but we all have to adapt. I'm trying. You could help me a lot if you'd try, too. You're a role model for Kyle and Katie. They're going to follow your lead when it comes to how they treat your dad and his..." Maddie stumbled. Until the divorce was final and the relationship could be legalized, there was no name for what Bill's new love could be called, at least not in front of her children.

"Special friend," Tyler suggested sarcastically. "That's what Dad calls her. It makes me want to puke."

Maddie would not allow herself to agree with him. That didn't mean it was easy to give him a chiding look. "Careful, Tyler. You're very close to crossing a line."

"And Dad hasn't crossed a line?" he said. "Give me a break."

"Did something happen yesterday that I don't know about?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Did you have words with your father?"

He remained stubbornly silent and kept looking out the window, refusing to meet her gaze.

Obviously she wasn't going to get through to him, not this afternoon. But she had to keep trying. At the very least, she had to rein in his nastier comments.

"Maybe we should table this discussion for now, but

in future I want you to speak to your father—and other adults, for that matter—in a respectful manner."

Ty rolled his eyes. Maddie let it pass.

"Let's talk some more about why baseball practice sucked," she suggested, finally putting the car into gear and pulling away from the curb.

"Let's not," he said tersely, then looked directly at her as if seeing her for the first time. "How come you're all dressed up?"

"Job interviews."

"And?"

She resorted to his terminology. "They sucked."

For the first time since he'd climbed into the car, Ty grinned. He looked like her carefree kid again...and so much like his dad had looked at that age, it made her heart ache.

"A chocolate milk shake always makes me feel better when I've had a bad day," he suggested slyly.

Maddie grinned back at him, relieved to see the improvement in his mood. "Me, too," she said, and whipped the car into the left-turn lane to head for Wharton's Pharmacy, which still had an old-fashioned soda fountain

Ever since her own childhood, that soda fountain had been the place where some of the most important events in her life had played out. She and Bill had shared sodas there during high school. She, Helen and Dana Sue had shared confidences. Bill had even proposed to her in the back booth with the view of Main Street with its flower-filled planters and wide, grassy median. They'd celebrated the arrival of each new baby by making a ceremonious first visit to the soda fountain so Grace and Neville Wharton could gush over the latest Townsend.

Going there today would be bittersweet, but fitting, Maddie thought. Maybe she and her son would be able to start the healing process over chocolate milk shakes. Then again that was asking an awful lot of a shake.

"I was real sorry to hear about you and Bill," Grace Wharton told Maddie in an undertone while Ty was at the counter getting their milk shakes. "I just don't know what men are thinking when they walk away from a fine family to be with a girl who's still wet behind the ears."

Maddie could only nod agreement. As much as she liked Grace, she knew that anything she said would be reported far and wide by nightfall. Fortunately, Ty came back to their booth before Grace could pry anything more from her.

"I hear you've been looking for a job," Grace said, regarding Maddie with sympathy. "There's mighty slim pickin's here in Serenity. It's a crying shame the way this town has been losing business to those big ole stores outside Charleston. I tell Neville all the time if we didn't do such a good business with the soda fountain, we'd have to shut our doors, too. Goodness knows, the pharmacy's not making money the way it once did. People would rather carry their prescriptions thirty miles than pay a little more for good service right here at home."

"It's affecting you, too?" Maddie asked, surprised. "Don't people realize how wonderful it is to have a pharmacist who knows them and who's willing to bring the prescription right to the door in the middle of the night if need be?"

"Oh, they care enough about that in an emergency, but it's the day-in, day-out prescriptions we're losing and the over-the-counter medicines they can buy cheaper someplace else. Losing that factory over in White Hill hasn't helped, either. Folks there had good jobs with decent pay. Now all those jobs are off in some foreign country." Grace shook her head sorrowfully. "It's a crying shame, that's what it is. Well, I'll leave you two to enjoy your milk shakes. Honey, if you need anything, you just let me know. I'll be happy to look after the kids for you or anything else you need."

"Thanks, Grace," Maddie said sincerely. She knew Grace meant it, too. That was the comfort of a place like Serenity. Neighbors helped each other out.

When she turned to face her son, his expression was troubled.

"Mom, are we short on cash because of Dad leaving? Is that why you're trying to find a job?"

"We're okay for now," she assured him. "But the alimony payments your dad agreed to won't last forever. I'm trying to plan ahead."

"I thought Helen and Dana Sue wanted you to start up a new business with them," he said.

Maddie was astonished. "How on earth do you know about that?"

"Mom, it's Serenity and Dana Sue," he said.

"Are you suggesting this town has a thing for gossip?" she inquired wryly. "And my best friend has a big mouth?"

"I'm not falling into that trap," he sidestepped neatly. "But I do go to school with Dana Sue's daughter."

"And she's been talking about this health-club idea?"

Ty nodded. "I think it sounds cool. I bet it'd be a whole lot more fun than working in some stuffy old office."

"I pretty much think what they want me to do is work in their office," she said.

"But you like them, right? I do. Dana Sue's a riot and Helen gives just about the best Christmas presents ever."

"Ah, yes. Important qualifications for a sound working partnership."

"I'm just saying—"

She gave his hand a quick squeeze. "I know what you're saying and you're right. Working with them would be wonderful."

"Then what's keeping you from saying yes?"

She'd given the offer a lot of thought the past few days and knew exactly why she was hesitating. She'd even explained it to her friends, but it had fallen on deaf ears. "I don't want to let them down," she said honestly. "Right now, I'm just not sure if I can give the job the attention it needs."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Ty said, startling her. "You do?"

"I know I'm letting the baseball team down," he admitted. "But I just can't seem to concentrate. That's what Coach was all over me about today at practice. He said if I don't get it together, he'll pull me from the starting rotation."

"Can he do that?" she demanded indignantly.

Tyler shrugged. "He's the coach. It's his call."

"He won't be the coach for long if the team starts losing." Angry on her son's behalf, she said, "Want me to talk to him? It's not fair that he's leaning on you so hard right now. I'm sure if he understood what's going on, he'd cut you some slack."

Ty looked horrified. "No way, Mom. He's right. If I

suck, I've got no business being on the field. I just have to work harder, I guess."

"You could call your dad," she suggested. "He's always been able to help you before."

"No!" Ty said fiercely. "I am not calling Dad about anything, okay? I'm not." He pushed his unfinished milk shake aside and left the booth. "I'll wait in the car." "Ty!"

He didn't even look back.

Maddie stared after him in dismay. What on earth was she supposed to do now? It wasn't as if *she* could start coaching him. She understood quite a lot about baseball thanks to her son's love of the game, but she certainly didn't have any technical expertise. Besides, Coach Maddox had more pitching skill and pro ball experience than anyone in the entire region. If he couldn't get through to Ty, then maybe what her son needed was counseling of some sort to help him deal with the other issues in his life. Maybe it was time to give that possibility serious consideration.

Unfortunately, even suggesting such a thing when Ty was still so angry might make the problem worse. He might think she was losing faith in him. In the past she and Bill would have talked over the situation and made a decision together. Now she'd rather eat dirt than turn to him. She had to handle this on her own.

"Mind a bit of advice?" Neville Wharton asked, slipping into the booth opposite her.

"I'd be grateful," she said.

"If I were you, despite what Tyler says he wants or doesn't want, I'd sit down with the coach and tell him what's going on. Cal's got real good instincts about working with kids if he knows what he's up against."

Maddie tried to imagine spilling her personal humiliation to a man she barely knew. She didn't think she could do it.

Neville smiled. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "That once you tell one person it'll be all over town, but the truth is everyone in Serenity probably already knows what's going on with you and Bill, anyway. And I like the Maddox boy. He's got a good head on his shoulders. The students at school look up to him, especially the boys on the baseball team."

Only someone Neville's age would refer to the base-ball coach as a boy, she thought. Cal Maddox had to be thirty at least, given the time he'd spent in the minors and the all-too-brief time he'd been in the Major League before coming to Serenity two years ago to coach.

"I'll give it some thought," Maddie promised. "Thanks, Neville."

"Tyler will be okay," he reassured her. "That boy of yours is just going through a rough patch, that's all. It's tough having his dad walk out. He doesn't know how to handle it. Same as you, I imagine."

He gave her a wink. "And for what it's worth, I think you ought to open that fancy spa with Helen and Dana Sue, too. I imagine even Grace might wander over there for one of those massages, just to see what it's like."

"Is there anyone in this town who hasn't heard about their plan?" Maddie asked, exasperated.

"I doubt it," he said. "I figure those two gals knew you'd be a hard sell and wanted to get folks on their side to help with any convincing that needed to be done."

"Oh, great," she grumbled. "I've half a mind to turn the job down."

He grinned. "You'll get past that," he said with con-

viction. "A smart gal like you won't walk away from the chance of a lifetime just to be stubborn."

"You realize if we get half the women in Serenity on some sort of health kick, Neville, your soda fountain will suffer," she warned him.

"Nah," he said, showing a complete lack of concern. "I've been in this business more than fifty years. Good intentions can't hold out against hot-fudge sauce for long. And I'll be sure to send my best customers over there to work off the calories. That way we'll both profit."

She studied him with surprise. "Then you really think this health club is a good idea?"

"Are you kidding me?" he asked incredulously. "Have you looked at the magazine racks lately? Fitness and weight loss and all that sort of thing is all anyone writes about these days. That tells me folks must be pretty worked up about it. Women sit at my counter every single day and talk about low-carb this and low-fat that. If it's a craze, you three gals may as well make some money from it. Goodness knows, you won't have any competition from Dexter's."

"No question about that," Maddie agreed. "Thanks, Neville. I'd better get out to the car before Tyler melts. It's hot as blazes out there, even if it is only March."

"I know. Makes you wonder what July will be like, doesn't it?" he said with a shake of his head.

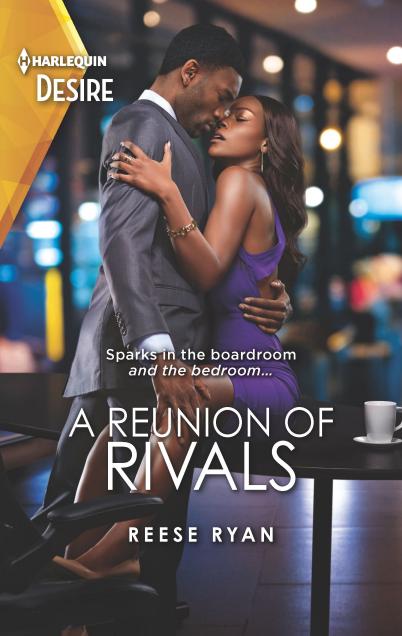
The weather was the least of Maddie's concerns. Even with all of Neville's well-meaning advice, she still didn't know what to do about her one solid job offer...or about her very angry and disillusioned son.

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## One

Max Abbott had a king-size headache and a serious case of jet lag. After spending seven days in Vegas on a business trip that ended with the three-day-long bachelor party of a college friend, he was grateful to be back in Magnolia Lake—his small Tennessee hometown nestled in the Smoky Mountains.

He'd drunk way too much and slept far too little. And this morning, his thirtysomething body was clearly protesting his twentysomething antics over the weekend.

Max was the marketing VP of King's Finest, his family's world-renowned distillery. So he usually made a point of arriving in the office ahead of his team. But today he was so exhausted he could barely see straight. If it hadn't been for his father—Duke Abbott, the company CEO—calling an emergency

meeting this morning, he would've stayed home and slept it off.

Instead, he lumbered into the office still wearing his Saint Laurent shades at ten thirty—half an hour before the scheduled meeting. Just enough time to check in with his assistant.

"Good morning, chief." Molly Halloran glanced up from typing furiously on her keyboard.

He removed his shades, squinting at the light pouring in from the nearby windows.

"Sheesh!" she exclaimed in a voice reminiscent of Lucille Ball's in *I Love Lucy*. "Must've been *some* weekend."

"It was." Max parked his butt in the chair in front of Molly's desk, not willing to expend the additional energy to take the dozen or so steps to his office. "And good morning to you, too, sunshine."

"Can I get you some coffee? You're going to need it if you don't want to look like the stiff in *Weekend at Bernie's* the rest of the day." She bounced out of her seat and moved toward the coffeemaker before he'd even grunted his response.

Molly's brutal honesty was one of the reasons he valued her so much. And if it caught him in the chin with a right hook every now and again, so be it.

He pulled out his phone and checked his text messages and email to see if anything pressing required his attention.

There was nothing that couldn't wait until he was fully conscious, which, at this rate, might be in a day or two.

Max thanked Molly when she handed him a black mug engraved with the white King's Finest Distillery logo. He set his phone on her desk and wrapped his hands around the warm cup, inhaled the fragrant black liquid and took his first sip of coffee of the day. He released a small, contented sigh, his eyes drifting closed momentarily.

"We've got twenty minutes to go over everything." She tapped on the fitness wearable on her wrist. "That takes into account the five minutes you'll need to walk to the conference room."

Brutally honest and extremely efficient.

"Fine." He took another swig of coffee, set his mug down and opened the notes app on his phone. "Shoot."

"Your father is being tight-lipped about this meeting." She lowered her voice, her blue-gray eyes shifting away from him. "But last week, while you were gone, he asked me and Emily to compile everything you and Zora had on your proposal to add fruit brandies to the KFD lineup."

That woke him up more than the bulletproof coffee had.

Three years ago, his grandfather, Joseph Abbott, the founder of King's Finest Distillery, had proposed that the company begin making fruit brandy. His father had been opposed. In a compromise, they'd spent a small mint to set up separate stills and bring in a brandy distiller. The company began experimenting with making small batches of fruit brandy, using the excess, overly ripe fruit supplied by his grandfather's best friend, who owned an orchard just outside of Knoxville.

The brandy they'd produced was damn good. So for the past two years, Max and his sister, Zora, the company's VP of sales, had been trying to convince their father to move forward with bringing a KFD brandy to market.

His father agreed that the quality was outstanding. Still, he hadn't been ready to commit to expanding the company's basic product line beyond the limited-edition moonshines they'd rolled out in honor of the company's jubilee three years ago.

He would pick the day I feel like I've been run over by a truck to discuss this.

"Print me a copy of everything you have on—"

Molly shoved a binder with colored tabs in his direction. "That's everything. Oh, and I took the liberty of updating the projected sales numbers. I also created a quick summary of the key selling points. It's on page one."

Note to self: get Molly that limited edition Star Wars electric pressure cooker she's been eyeing for her birthday.

She finished briefing him on the materials, then urged him in the direction of the conference room, armed with a fresh cup of coffee, promptly at five minutes to eleven,.

At least now he more closely resembled a fully functioning human being.

Max entered the room and slid into his usual chair beside Zora.

"Glad you could join us," his sister whispered, elbowing him in the ribs. "I thought we might need to send someone to revive you."

"Ha-ha." He didn't look in his sister's direction. Instead, he focused on the older man seated on the other side of the table whose snow-white hair and beard contrasted his dark brown skin. "Good morning, Mr. Bazemore."

"Morning, Max." A wide smile spread across Dixon Bazemore's face as they both rose to their feet and shook hands. The old man had been the owner of Bazemore Orchards longer than Max had been alive. "Good to see you, young man."

"You, too, Mr. B." Molly's instincts about the reason for the meeting had been right. Why else would Dixon Bazemore be here? Still, he asked, "What brings you to see us today?"

"We'll go over everything during the meeting," Max's father interjected. "We're waiting for one more person."

Max glanced around the table. All of the members of the executive committee were present. His grandfather and father. His brothers Blake and Parker, the operations VP and CFO, respectively. Blake's wife, Savannah—the company's events manager. Zora, him and his father's admin, Lianna, who was there to take notes.

"Who are we—"

"I'm sorry. I got a little turned around finding my way back here from the parking lot. But I've got your portfolio, Grandad."

Max snapped his attention in the direction of the familiar voice. He hadn't heard it in more than a decade, but he would never, *ever* forget it. His mouth went dry, and his heart thudded so loudly he was sure his sister could hear it.

"Peaches?" He scanned the brown eyes that stared back at him through narrowed slits.

"Quinn." She was gorgeous, despite the slightly

irritated flare of her nostrils and the stiff smile that barely revealed her dimples. "Hello, Max."

The *good to see you* was notably absent. But what should he expect? It was his fault they hadn't parted on the best of terms.

Quinn settled into the empty seat beside her grandfather. She handed the old man a worn leather portfolio, then squeezed his arm. The genuine smile that lit her brown eyes and activated those killer dimples was firmly in place again.

Max had been the cause of that magnificent smile nearly every day that summer between his junior and senior years of college when he'd interned at Bazemore Orchards.

"Now that everyone is here, we can discuss the matter at hand." His father nodded toward Lianna, and she handed out bound presentations.

"As you can see, we're here to discuss adding fruit brandies to the King's Finest Distillery lineup—a venture Dad, Max and Zora have been pushing for some time." Duke nodded in their general direction. "I think the company and the market are in a good place now for us to explore the possibility."

"Excellent." His sister beamed. "Would this be a permanent addition to the product lineup?"

"I'll only commit to a limited-edition trial." Duke frowned slightly. He always did what was best for their family-owned distillery. But Zora—the youngest and the only girl in a family of four boys—was still his "princess," and his father hated disappointing her. "But if the numbers support it, as with the special-edition moonshines we introduced a few years ago, I'm willing to discuss making the line permanent."

"Bourbon is what we're known for," Parker, also known as Negative Ned, chimed in. "Won't adding other liquors to the lineup dilute our brand?"

Parker wasn't being argumentative. He was painstakingly methodical and questioned everything. It was the way his intricate mind worked.

Zora rolled her eyes and folded her arms, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "Pepsi sells several types of soda, water, tea, juice and energy drinks. It hasn't damaged their reputation as a top beverage company."

Parker thought about Zora's words for a moment, then nodded sagely. He scribbled on the ever-present pad in front of him and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Good point. Go on."

Duke fought back a chuckle, then continued.

Max should have been riveted by the conversation. After all, this project was one he'd been fighting for over the past thirty months. Yet, it took every ounce of self-control he could muster to keep from blatantly staring at the beautiful woman seated directly across the table from him.

*Peaches.* Or rather, Quinn Bazemore. Dixon Bazemore's granddaughter. She was more gorgeous than he remembered. Her beautiful, deep brown skin looked silky and smooth.

The simple gray shift dress she wore did its best to mask her shape. Still, it was obvious her hips and breasts were fuller now than they'd been the last time he'd held her in his arms. The last time he'd seen every square inch of that shimmering brown skin.

Zora elbowed him again and he held back an audible *oomph*.

"What's with you?" she whispered.

"Nothing," he whispered back.

Maybe he wasn't doing such a good job of masking his fascination with Quinn.

Max opened his booklet to the page his father indicated. He was thrilled that the company was ready to give their brandy initiative a try, even if it was just a test run.

He understood why Mr. Bazemore was there. His farm had been providing the fruit for the brandy and would continue to do so. But that didn't explain the presence of his ex.

Quinn shifted in her seat beneath Max Abbott's heated stare. She refused to glance in his direction. She wasn't here to flirt with the handsome-as-ever Max Abbott. She'd come to King's Finest Distillery for two reasons: to help save her grandfather's farm and to build a case study for the consultancy she'd launch as soon as the farm was on stable ground again.

It was a venture she'd mused about as an undergrad. But she'd settled into a comfortable public relations career instead. Until six months ago, when she'd found herself out of a job and unable to work in her field within a fifty-mile radius of her home in Atlanta.

With no immediate plans, she'd packed up her condo and accepted her grandfather's invitation to their family farm just outside of Knoxville, where she'd spent her summers as a kid.

Just until she figured out her next move.

The excitement of helping her grandfather establish important strategic partnerships revived her interest in her forgotten venture. So she'd dusted off her business plan, plugged in the holes and improved

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on it. Now she needed to build her portfolio while she waited out the remaining six months of the noncompete clause in her employment agreement with her former PR firm. Then she'd return to Atlanta and launch her new practice.

This proposed partnership with the worldrenowned King's Finest Distillery would be the cornerstone of her growing portfolio. So if that meant pretending not to be affected by the man who'd broken her heart and crushed it into minuscule pieces without so much as a backward glance, she'd suck it up and do just that.

If Max could behave as if that summer between them had never happened, so could she.

Duke was explaining that they would begin the venture with apple-, peach- and cherry-flavored brandies, and that all of the fruit would be sourced from Bazemore Farms.

Quinn's heart swelled when everyone in the room applauded. She was relieved no one had objected to making her grandfather's farm the sole source for the fruit. It was a sweet deal for the farm, which had been struggling in recent years. Partly because of a shift in the market and how difficult it had become to get solid, reliable help at a price the farm could sustainably afford. Partly because of the shady accountant who'd taken over the books after her grandmother's death several years ago.

"This will be a co-branded product, something we've never done before. A partnership that was brokered by Dixon's lovely granddaughter, Quinn." Duke gestured toward her. "She's here in her capacity as an executive of Bazemore Farms, but she's also

a collaboration expert. We had a fine chat last week about some of her innovative ideas for quickly getting this venture to market. Quinn."

"Thank you, Mr. Abbott." Quinn stood, pulling a stack of presentations from her bag. She walked around the table, placing one in front of each person as she explained how she'd created lucrative partnerships between clients in the past.

"As a rep at one of Atlanta's most prestigious PR firms for the past eight years, I..." Quinn stammered, unsettled by the jolt of heat that surged through her when Max's eyes met hers as she handed him a copy of the presentation.

It was her nerves, *not* Max Abbott, that had caused her words to come out in a jumble.

Despite the silent outrage in the widened eyes framed by thick, neat brows, the man was still devastatingly handsome. He was a little older and his shoulders were a bit broader. But he looked essentially like the boy she'd fallen in love with that one passionate summer. The last she'd spent with her grandparents before going off to college. The summer Max had been an intern, living and working on the farm.

That was more than a decade ago. Time had treated him well.

"I've handled sensitive public relations campaigns for some of the biggest names in fintech," she continued

"We already have a PR person," Parker interrupted, shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"You have a college student who handles social media, your newsletter, and the occasional press release." Quinn maintained her warm smile. Duke had warned her Parker would be a tough nut to crack, and that Max and Zora might be insulted by the idea of bringing her on to execute the project that had been their baby. "But a project of this magnitude requires a dedicated, experienced professional who'll get vendors and consumers excited about the new product line. Just as Savannah did for the company's jubilee and the associated release of limited-edition moonshines a few years ago."

Savannah smiled approvingly, and Parker nodded in agreement, silenced for the moment.

"If you'll turn to page five, we can quickly review a rundown of how I'm proposing to help King's Finest and Bazemore Farms make the most of this joint venture"

"You're bringing in someone else to execute our proposal?" Max ignored her completely, asking the question of his father instead. "Zora and I are fully capable of—"

"Speak for yourself, big brother." Zora turned her chair toward him before their father could respond. "I have a lot on my plate. We've seen a real uptick in our international sales and domestic market share in regions outside of the South since the jubilee. I'm traveling extensively over the next few months. I can't add another thing to my to-do list right now. Neither can my team. As long as we're consulted regularly, I'm all for bringing someone else on to do the heavy lifting."

Quinn exhaled quietly, and her racing heart slowed in response to Zora's encouraging nod.

"And you've had your hands full with the expansion of our marketing efforts," Duke reminded him.

"So it would be better to have someone wholly dedicated to the project."

Max's nostrils flared, and a streak of red bloomed across his forehead and cheeks. He opened his mouth to object further, but his grandfather cut him off.

"Let Quinn finish her presentation, son. Then we can discuss any concerns privately and make our final decision." Joseph Abbott nodded in her direction. "Please continue, Quinn."

She smiled gratefully at the older man she'd always called Grandpa Joe, then inhaled deeply, smiled broadly and put on the presentation of her life.

She'd won over Joseph and Duke Abbott, the company's founder and CEO. Zora and Savannah were also on board. Blake, she couldn't quite read but Parker and Max definitely required convincing. So that was what she would do.

In this room, in this moment, Max Abbott wasn't her first love, her first real kiss, her first...everything. He was a skeptical company executive, not unlike the dozens she'd encountered before in her career.

Despite whatever else Max might be feeling toward her—curiosity, animosity, maybe even attraction—he was a sensible individual. And like every other Abbott at the table, she knew he wanted what was best for King's Finest.

She just needed to convince him that she was the best person for the job. And convince herself that working with her ex wasn't her worst idea ever. Her entire future was riding on it.

## Two

Max groaned quietly as Quinn finished her presentation. He'd sifted through her proposal and listened carefully, ready to poke holes in it and rip it apart. But the plan was solid, and Quinn had suggested useful partnerships he and Zora hadn't considered.

Still, this project was *his* and Zora's baby. They'd taken their grandfather's request to add flavored brandies to the lineup seriously. Had worked with him to develop it. Worn their father down until he'd agreed to invest in the stills and bring in an expert brandy distiller. Revisited the topic at *every* damn quarterly meeting for the past two years. So for his father to just hand off the project to his ex of all the goddamned people on the face of God's green earth... Yeah, it felt a hell of a lot like a solid knee in the nuts. Even if no

one in the room besides him and Quinn were aware of their romantic history.

But his father was right. He and Zora had their hands full with all of the additional business King's Finest was doing. Much of it could be credited to the efforts of his sister-in-law, Savannah, who'd become their de facto PR person since she'd joined the company three years ago. Savannah handled event management for both the distillery and the renovated barn on the edge of his parents' property, which they rented out for weddings and other events.

The company's event and tour business was booming now. But Savannah was six months pregnant with her and Blake's second child, and their two-year-old son was already a handful. The last thing his sister-in-law needed was another project.

"Well, what do you think?" Grandpa Joseph beamed. Dixon and Quinn had been dispatched on an hour-long tour of the King's Finest Distillery while the Abbotts formally debated the Bazemore Farms proposal. "That one's a sharp cookie, eh?" His grandfather chuckled. "I remember the first time I met Quinn. She was about three years old and she had more questions than any kid that age I'd ever encountered besides Zora." He grinned at his only granddaughter.

"I love the plan she put together for us." Zora thumbed through the document Quinn had prepared. "Having her handle all of this is a godsend. And she's got the right personality for the job. She didn't skip a beat or get frustrated with Parker's myriad questions or Max's pushback." Zora raised an eyebrow at him. "And I love her suggestions for finding new ways to partner with state and local vendors."

"Excellent. Blake, how about you?" Duke asked Max's eldest brother, the heir apparent to the King's Finest CEO-ship.

"I love everything about the plan." Blake tapped the cover of the presentation. "I like Quinn, and I know the distributors will like her, too. If she can do half of what she's presented here, I'm sold."

"Parker?" Duke turned to him, as if prepared for the worst.

Parker scanned the data again. "The numbers look good. If you're sure we can do this without compromising our position in the bourbon market..." He shrugged. "I'm fine with moving forward on a trial basis. Say...six months once it goes to market. If sales are good, we can talk long-term."

"Sounds fair." Duke nodded, then turned to him. "And what say you, Max?"

Max released a quiet breath. Every eye in the room was focused on him. Quinn's plan was flawless; he had no legitimate reason to object to it.

So what was he going to say?

That he didn't want to work with her because it would be a constant reminder that he'd been a complete dick to her thirteen years ago?

"The plan is fine...okay, it's good," he amended in response to everyone's guffaws and raised eyebrows. "It's damn good. I'll give you that. But this is our company." He tapped the table with his index finger. "Our project. A project we're doing in memory of Savannah's grandfather Martin. Don't you think we should be the ones to handle it rather than bringing in an outsider?"

Had that come off as spoiled and elitist as it sounded in his head?

God, I hope not.

"Seriously, dude? *She's not one of us*," Zora mimicked him in a whiny, low voice. "*That's* the best you can do?"

Everyone at the table laughed.

"You gotta admit, that argument is weak sauce, bruh." Blake chuckled. "Quinn is an experienced professional and she and Mr. B are good people."

"And I know she's not technically family, but I wouldn't exactly call her an *outsider*, either," Grandpa Joe added, sounding a little hurt by the dig. "I've always been quite fond of the girl. Considered her an honorary granddaughter."

"I know, Gramps. And I didn't mean anything by it." Max sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. "I guess what I'm saying is that I have a lot of time and energy invested in this project. So the idea of relinquishing complete control of it isn't sitting well with me."

"I can respect that, Max." His father nodded sagely as he rubbed his whiskered chin. He leaned forward on one elbow. "What can we do to make you more comfortable with Quinn running point on the project?"

Translation: This is happening, son. You've been outvoted.

"I want to be the point person on this project internally," Max said definitively. "And it should be clear that Quinn reports to me."

"Done." His father shrugged. "That'll leave me more time to golf. Anything else?"

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"I plan to be as involved in the project as my schedule permits." Max folded his hands on the table in front of him. "And I need to have the option to terminate the agreement early should I find just cause."

Duke stroked his chin as he silently contemplated Max's request. He nodded begrudgingly. "Agreed, but I get the final say on such a drastic action."

"Perfect." Grandpa Joe slapped the table and chuckled. "Lianna, order us some lunch. We've got reason to celebrate. And make sure to break out the good mason jars so we can all sample a little of that brandy."

Just peachy.

He'd be working closely with the one ex who had it out for him. The stiff smile she'd given him when he'd used her nickname made it obvious she was still harboring a grudge that would impede their working relationship. This project was too important to his grandfather and their company. He wouldn't permit his past mistake to interfere with family business. He'd handle this the way he handled every other business problem: by facing it head-on.

That meant clearing the air with Quinn the first opportunity he got.

The Bazemores had returned to the conference room where a selection of pastas from a local Italian restaurant awaited them. They'd shared a meal with the Abbotts and sampled the peach, apple and cherry brandies. All of them were remarkably good.

Max's father and grandfather had invited Dixon to join them for a celebratory round of golf and, doubtless, more drinking. Parker had left to walk Cricket—his fiancée Kayleigh Jemison's golden retriever. That

left Zora, Quinn, Blake and Savannah, who were seated at the table chatting after the meal.

Quinn was mooning over the adorable photos of Max's nephew, Davis, on Blake's phone.

Max had waited patiently, not actively joining in the conversation, instead staying engaged and nodding or chuckling whenever warranted. He needed a moment alone with Quinn.

He glanced at the text message that flashed on his watch: The league wants to talk sponsorship in an hour. We need to review notes.

For the past several months he'd been working on a sponsorship deal with the Memphis Marauders professional football team. Turning down the call wasn't an option. But he didn't want to put off clearing the air with Quinn, either.

If they were going to work together, they needed to start off with a clean slate.

Max stood abruptly and everyone in the room turned toward him. He cleared his throat. "Hey guys, I need to speak with Quinn for a moment...privately," he added, for the benefit of his sister, who'd shrugged.

Blake and Savannah exchanged a puzzled look.

"Yeah, sure." Blake stood, helping his wife up.

Savannah rubbed her growing belly. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Quinn. Lianna will give you my contact information. I'd love to meet for lunch later this week."

Blake and Savannah left, hand in hand. Zora folded her arms.

"Zora." Max gave her his *I'm not bullshitting right now* voice. A voice he'd had to employ often over the years with his little sister.

"Fine." Zora stood, then looked at Quinn. "As long as you're okay with this."

"It's fine, but thank you, Zora." Quinn smiled politely as she stood, gathering her papers. A clear sign that she was leaving, too.

Zora shot Max a warning look and breezed out of the room

As soon as the door closed behind his sister, Quinn turned to him and scowled. "Why would you give everyone the impression something is going on between us?"

He tried not to take her words personally, but damn if it didn't feel like she'd kicked him in the teeth wearing a pair of steel toe boots.

There was a time when her greatest desire had been for them to go out on a proper date and let the world see them together. Rather than sneaking around and hooking up in his shabby little loft over the barn or in the bed of his truck, parked beneath the stars.

Heat stung his cheeks as he jammed his hands into his pockets. "They probably assume I want to talk about the project or catch up with an old friend."

He pretended not to notice the way she pressed her lips together and furrowed her brows when he referred to them as *friends*.

Damn. Is there a draft in here?

The chilly vibe coming from his ex was all too real.

"And I really would love to catch up at some point. But first, I need to tell you just how sorry I am."

"No." She shook her head, her tousled beach waves swinging gently.

He curled the fingers still shoved into his pockets into tight fists. Max couldn't help remembering how he'd sifted the soft strands through his fingers as she had lain in his arms. And the dreamy way she'd gazed up at him after they'd made love.

There was nothing remotely romantic about the frosty look Quinn cast in his direction from beneath her long, thick eyelashes.

"No, you won't allow me to apologize to you, or no, you're not willing to accept my sincere apology?" He sat on the edge of the conference table.

"Both." Quinn folded her arms, her expression neutral. Despite the iciness that slid over his skin in response to her answer, her tone and expression betrayed no anger. "A—I don't want your apology. B—There's no need for it."

Heat spanned his forehead. Max had imagined having this conversation with Quinn dozens of times. He'd envisioned anger, forgiveness and lots of incredibly hot makeup sex. What he hadn't foreseen was Quinn standing here calm, callous and completely out of fucks to give.

Not that he didn't deserve it.

"I appreciate you saying that, Quinn. But I'd feel better if—"

"No." Her voice vibrated with thinly veiled anger this time and her eyes narrowed. "You don't get to do this."

"I don't get to do what? Apologize?" Max was genuinely stunned by her refusal.

"You don't get to absolve yourself of guilt this way." Quinn raked her fingers through her hair and tucked a few strands behind her ear. "It's been thirteen years. If you didn't see fit to apologize before now, I can't

imagine that your apology is sincere. So let's not do this, *please*."

The soft, pleading tone with which she ended her request reminded him of how she'd uttered his name during those sultry summer nights.

Max winced and swallowed hard. His hushed tone matched hers. "You have every right to be angry with me, Quinn."

"I wasn't angry, Max. I was hurt." Her stony expression faltered momentarily. "By the end of that summer you'd proclaimed your undying love for me. Then as soon as you returned to campus you broke up with me via a one-sided, two-minute phone call. For months, I wondered what I'd done wrong. I finally realized that it wasn't anything I'd done." She shrugged, her smile returning. "You were just an ass. A handsome, charming one. But an ass nevertheless."

"On that we can agree." He sighed, folding his arms.

She flashed the triumphant half smile he remembered so well.

"If there's nothing else, I should go." She lifted her bag onto her shoulder. "We can meet in the morning to strategize, if that works for you."

"Are you staying at the farm?" he asked.

"I am," she said in a tone that made it clear she felt the question too personal. "Why?"

"You have nearly an hour drive to get here." He walked her toward the door. "So you name the time." "Ten o'clock?"

"See you then." His heart thudded as he watched her slip out the door.

He'd screwed up by walking away from Quinn the

way he had. Now those chickens had come home to roost.

Max groaned quietly as he sank onto a nearby chair. He and Quinn would only need to work closely together at the outset of the project. After that, they could work together remotely, when necessary. He could certainly keep it together for a few months.

Shit.

It was the same lie he'd told himself when he'd first laid eyes on Quinn that summer.

Just look at how that turned out.

## Three

Quinn changed her outfit for the third time this morning. It was unlike her. She was organized and decisive. With her planner on hand, she was always ready for the day ahead. But she hadn't slept well last night. It didn't help that she'd drifted off while reviewing her notes for her upcoming meeting with Max.

He'd seemed disappointed to discover that her proposal was a good one. He'd clearly been expecting her to flop. And if she did, Max would no doubt be ready to pull the plug on their project. So there was no room for failure, fear or hesitance. She had to show up today at Max's office with her game face on. Make it clear that she knew *exactly* what she was doing.

This deal meant too much to her grandfather's farm and to her future. So she wouldn't allow herself to be intimidated by the fact that Max clearly didn't want her there. Nor would she be distracted by Max's good looks, his charm or the fact that when his eyes met hers she still felt...something for him.

When she'd seen him yesterday, a jolt of electricity had rocketed up her spine. His dark eyes had seemed to peer straight through her, like armor-piercing rounds shredding her flesh, despite the mental suit of armor she'd donned before she'd stepped into the room.

The truth was that she hadn't gotten lost on her way back to the conference room that morning. She'd simply needed a moment to compose herself before she came face-to-face with Max again.

It'd been thirteen years since she'd seen Max Abbott, more than a third of her thirty-one years. Enough time to give her distance and perspective. Enough time to realize that Max Abbott hadn't been as important in the overall scheme of her life as her teenage brain had once believed.

Yes, he'd been her first love, and over that long, hot summer she'd allowed herself to believe that Max was the alpha and omega of her romantic life. That there would never be another man for her.

Quinn laughed bitterly. God, you were naive.

Unfortunately, she hadn't learned her lesson after Max. She'd still wanted to believe that people were inherently good and could be taken at their word. Her most recent ex had finally cured her of her Pollyannaish misconceptions.

The cold, hard fact was that there were a lot more liars in the world than there were people she could count on. But her grandfather was firmly in the latter camp. She wouldn't disappoint him by allowing her inconvenient history with Max to sabotage this deal.

Quinn followed the smell of pancakes, bacon and coffee down the stairs. Her grandfather stood over the sizzling cast-iron pan with a spatula in hand.

The memory of her grandmother—vibrant and beautiful until the day she died—standing there in the kitchen, cooking in that pan, with that spatula, flashed through Quinn's brain. Her mouth curved in a faint smile, though her chest suddenly felt heavy.

"You've got her smile, you know." Her grandfather's voice startled her from the daze she'd fallen into.

"I know." Quinn's smile deepened. She set the heels she was wearing today by the kitchen door. "And I love that I'll always have that connection to her."

She didn't bother to ask how her grandfather knew she'd been thinking of her grandmother. It was hard not to enter what had been Lydia Bazemore's domain and *not* think of her.

"Maybe you'll have a little girl someday with that same smile." Her grandfather winked, chuckling when she rolled her eyes and groaned in response. "Hey, an old man can dream."

"Hate to break it to you, Gramps, but there are zero prospects of a great-granddaughter on the horizon. At least not from me." She kissed her grandfather on his stubbly cheek. "I can't speak for Marcus and Mavis," she said of her younger twin siblings.

"I don't think the world is ready for the progeny of Marcus or Mavis." Her grandfather laughed, and she did, too.

Her younger brother and sister were hyperfocused science geeks who lived in their own little world. A

world she never quite fit into. They were just five years younger than she was, but with the emotional distance between her and her younger siblings, it might as well have been five light-years.

The two of them were more like their parents—both scientists working in academia—than Quinn would ever be. At the dinner table with her family, she'd always felt like the answer to one of those Sesame Street skits: Which one of these doesn't belong?

"One day." He smiled. "Just not today." Her grandfather nodded toward the coffeemaker. "Grab yourself a cup of coffee and have a seat. I know you have to get out of here soon."

Quinn didn't argue. Instead, she poured herself a cup of coffee and added creamer from the fridge. Then she pulled out one of the yellow-vinyl-and-chrome chairs from beneath the chrome and yellow Formica table. Her grandparents had owned the vintage set for years, and, despite its age, it was in excellent shape. She sank onto the chair.

Her grandparents had always been frugal and sensible, saving up for when they'd leave the farm to their children or grandchildren and then travel the world. But none of their children or grandchildren had ever taken an interest in owning the farm. And then her grandmother had died suddenly of a stroke a few years ago, leaving her grandfather devastated.

Since Quinn had come to stay with him a few months ago, he'd been the happiest she'd seen him since the death of her grandmother. Maybe it was because her smile reminded him of his beloved wife's. Or maybe it was because it had given him a new purpose—fussing over her.

Her grandfather brought their plates to the table and they settled into their usual morning rhythm. Only there was nothing usual about this morning. Today she would return to King's Finest, where she and Max would start working together on this project.

"You must've had a good time at the country club yesterday." Quinn put a forkful of the buttery pancakes in her mouth and chewed.

"We did." He nodded. "And I would've told you all about it, but you were knocked out when I got back. I put all of your paperwork on your desk and draped one of your grandmother's quilts over you." He sipped some of his coffee. "You haven't crashed like that since the day you first arrived here from Atlanta. When you were so stressed-out it was like you were all tied in knots."

There was an odd stretch of silence between them as he nibbled on his bacon and she ate her pancakes.

"You seemed tense in the meeting yesterday." He peered at her over his coffee cup. "Particularly with Max." He set his cup down and folded his arms on the table, his dark eyes assessing hers. "Everything okay between you two?"

"Of course." Quinn drank long and deep from her coffee mug before lowering it. She forced a smile much bigger and brighter than the occasion called for. "Why wouldn't it be? I haven't seen him since I was eighteen."

One of her grandfather's wiry eyebrows seemed to levitate. He frowned. "You remember *exactly* how long it's been since you've seen the boy?"

Quinn froze, her smile still in place.

"It was the summer before I went to college." She stuffed more pancakes in her mouth and chewed.

"But there's no bad blood between you two, right? I mean, you got on well enough the summer he interned for me, but if there's something I need to know—"

"There isn't." Quinn placed a hand on her grandfather's forearm. Her voice was firm as she met his gaze. "Everything is fine."

"You're sure? Because I sensed some tension on his side of the table, too. When you walked in that door, it was like the boy had seen a ghost."

It'd felt that way for her, too, though she'd had the advantage of expecting that ghost and bracing for it.

"Well, like I said, we haven't seen each other in... what...?" She made a show of counting in her head. "Thirteen years. That's bound to surprise someone, right?" She laughed nervously. "As for the tension... Look at it from Max's perspective. He's the VP of marketing and I come waltzing in the door with my fancy plan. To him, it must feel like a challenge to his authority. Like I'm saying I can do his job better than he can. But it's not about that. It's about this single joint project and how we can make it amazing by thinking more broadly about opportunities for collaboration."

Her grandfather nodded and sighed—a sure sign he wasn't convinced of her explanation for the tension he'd noticed.

"Well, you don't want to be late on your first day." He stood, collecting his dishes. "Leave everything when you're done. I'll clear the table."

Quinn ate the last of her bacon and finished her coffee. "Thanks, Gramps." She got up, pushed her

chair under the table and kissed his cheek again. "I'll keep you posted on how things go today. But don't wait up for me. By the time I drive back from Magnolia Lake, it'll probably be pretty late."

He stopped running the water in the sink and frowned. "You know I believe in doing things face-to-face rather than on the phone or those video calls. But I hate that you'll be on the road so much."

"I know, but it won't be forever. Just until we get everything sorted out and in motion."

"Still, it's an hour each way. Maybe we should rent a place for you in Magnolia Lake for a few months."

"Things are already tight around here." Quinn hated bringing it up. Her grandfather felt bad enough about being so distraught over the death of his wife that he hadn't noticed the accountant he'd hired to manage the books—something her grandmother had handled—was robbing him blind.

It had been Quinn's distinct pleasure to throw the guy out on his ass and report him to the local sheriff.

"I know." He nodded solemnly. "But I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you. So keep an eye out for a room or apartment you can rent short term. I'll ask around at the senior center—"

"Not necessary." Quinn shook her head vehemently. She'd end up staying in some creepy room filled with dolls or cats or hooked up on a blind date with someone's worthless grandson.

No thanks.

"I'll handle it. You just worry about sticking it to them in the next Scrabble tournament." Quinn grinned at her grandfather.

Her grandfather raised his fists and shuffled his feet

as he bobbed and weaved, doing his best Muhammad Ali imitation. "This time, I'm gonna take every last one of those suckers out."

Quinn laughed. Her grandfather was still smarting over his second-place finish in the last tournament. "I know you will, Grandad."

She got into the Honda her younger brother had gifted her when the lease for her expensive import had ended. Here in rural Tennessee, she couldn't get anywhere without a reliable car, and she'd never learned to drive her grandfather's truck—a stick shift.

It was a long drive, and she used the time to review the plan in her head while listening to something soothing and upbeat.

Prepare the plan. Don't worry about the man.

That would be her motto as long as she worked with Max. Still, she couldn't help thinking about how handsome he looked. Or how incredible he smelled. The heat she'd felt standing so close to him when the two of them were alone. His pained expression when she wouldn't accept his apology.

She shut her eyes and sighed. It didn't matter if she was still attracted to him. It didn't matter that her memories of that summer had come roaring back to her in her sleep, as vivid as the day they'd occurred. Her summer fling with Max was a part of her distant past. And that was exactly where it would stay.

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## the Ollinext door

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHELSEA M. CAMERON

## Chapter One

Tris

I smelled the ocean before I saw it. I took the long way back; the scenic route. Anything to prolong the inevitable. Turning my car onto a back road, I sighed as I rounded a corner and drank in the view of blue waves crashing over the rocky shore, coating the rocks and turning them dark. This was my home, whether I wanted to admit it or not. I'd started my life here in Salty Cove, and now I was back.

All too soon, I reached the turn for my parents' road. *My* road now. It took everything in me not to start crying when I pulled into the driveway and shut off the car. Time to face my new reality.

"We're here," I said to the snoring gray lump in a crate in the backseat. "Can you please wake up and comfort me right now?"

With that, my Weimaraner, Dolly Parton, raised her head and blinked her sweet blue eyes at me.

"Thank you."

I got out of the car and went into the back to let her out of the crate. She jumped out and shook herself before sniffing the air.

"I know, you can actually smell the ocean here. It's not covered up by city smell. At least one of us will be happy with this situation."

Dolly started snuffling the ground and then found a spot to pee while I looked up at the house. Why did it look smaller? I hadn't been here for months and in that time, it had shrunk. The white paint peeled in places, and the flower boxes on the wraparound porch needed watering. I hoped the garden out back wasn't in as bad a shape.

The side door opened and out came my mother carrying a chain saw. She didn't look at me immediately, but then she did and her face broke out into the most brilliant smile that made her look years younger.

"Hey, Mom," I said.

She put the chain saw down on the porch before opening her arms. "Welcome home, baby girl."

I forced myself not to cringe at the nickname. I was twenty-two, hardly a baby at this point.

Still, I let myself be folded into her arms, and I drank in the familiar scent of fresh-baked bread and fresh-cut wood. She rubbed my back up and down and then leaned down to pet Dolly, who lost her shit and lapped up the attention.

"A tree came down last week, so I've been cutting it up. Come on in and see your father. You can bring your stuff in later. He's been antsy to see you all day."

I looked back at my car, which was packed to the roof with all the shit that I had left after I'd sold most of everything in a last-ditch attempt to cover my rent.

Mom put her arm around me and started filling me in on town gossip, but a loud rumbling distracted me. I turned my head in time to watch a sleek black motorcycle pull into the driveway next door.

"Is that—" I started to say, but then the rider got off the bike and pulled off their helmet, shaking out their short dark hair

"Oh, yes, that's Jude. Her parents moved down to Florida and left her the house."

Jude Wicks. I hadn't seen her since she graduated four years ahead of me in school.

Jude didn't glance in my direction as she covered the bike, jogged up the steps, and slammed the front door of the house. I jumped at the sound.

Dolly whined and I looked down at her.

"Her parents left her the house?" I asked as Mom and I walked up the steps and into the house. We didn't have air-conditioning, so fans were doing all the work, just blowing around the semi-moist sea air.

Mom was distracted from answering by Dad yelling at her from his recliner. He'd hurt his back working for the power company for thirty-five years and was retired. They relied on Mom's income as a real estate agent and substitute teacher.

"Iris is here," Mom called to him.

"Baby girl!" he yelled when I came around the corner. "Hi, Dad."

I went over to give him a huge hug. Dolly immediately put her chin in his lap and whined for attention.

"Hello, Dolly," Dad said with a chuckle, setting his coffee down next to a stack of library books beside his chair.

"What are you reading now?" I asked.

He held up the book he'd rested on the arm of the chair to keep his place. "Started reading these young adult books. This one's about these kids who are planning a heist to steal this magic stuff. You can have it when I'm done."

Mom poked her head in and asked me if I wanted some coffee. "Sure, thanks."

I sat down on the couch as Dolly curled up at his feet and closed her eyes.

Mom brought me a cup of black coffee and some creamer. I added enough so that the coffee turned from black to khaki. Perfect.

"How was your drive?" Mom asked.

We caught up on my trip, the fact that she'd cleared out my room for me, and what else was happening in town. Mostly it was about who my parents knew that had died, what they had died from, and talking shit about a few while simultaneously hoping they rested in peace. Less than an hour at home and I already wanted to escape, but I was stuck here, at least for now.

I had to unpack my car, find a place for Dolly's food and water bowls, and settle into my room. Luckily for me, my brother, who was ten years older, had vacated it a long time ago to go to college.

My bed was small, but Mom had bought me a new mattress recently, so there was that. Still, it was a twin bed, when I'd been sleeping in a queen in my apartment. That had been left on the street. No one wanted someone else's mattress. The bed frame had been taken by Natalie, one of my former coworkers. I missed her already, and needed to text her that I'd made it home safe. She was so worried about me moving back to Maine that she'd literally bought me bear spray. I told her that the likelihood that I would die from a bear attack was slim to none, but she wouldn't listen.

The walls started to close on me as I looked at the tiny bed. Sure, I'd had to share my old apartment with someone I didn't like, but my bedroom had been twice this size, and I'd had two big, beautiful windows that looked out on a courtyard filled with flowers and butterflies and twittering birds. Maine had all those things, but it wasn't the same.

To add insult to injury, none of my sheets or blankets were going to fit the bed. I added that to the list of things I needed to get with money I didn't have.

Dolly followed me into the room and climbed up on the bed. She took up most of it.

"I'm going to end up on the floor," I said to her. She closed her eyes and huffed out a sigh.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked around. At least the posters I'd had on the walls in high school were gone, and the room was freshly painted white. My window looked out toward the ocean, which sparkled at me beyond a row of trees. At least I could see the ocean every day here.

My phone buzzed with yet another text. Natalie. I sent her a quick message that I'd arrived safe and had not been mauled by a bear. I ignored the message from Anna, my old roommate, about some dishes I'd apparently left behind and if it was okay for her to have them. Whatever. She could knock herself out. She'd stolen a bunch of my other shit, so I wasn't sure why she was contacting me about this. I considered blocking her number so I'd never have to speak to her again.

I reached out and stroked Dolly's velvet head. She leaned into my touch. "What are we gonna do?" I asked. She didn't answer.

Later that night, after I unpacked my car and had dinner that consisted of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and a fiddlehead salad, I sat on the couch as Mom watched a reality talent show and Dad read.

This was my life now.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" Mom asked during a commercial break.

"I'm not sure."

I hadn't thought any further than today. Everything else was a blank. I was always the girl with the plan, but now, I was adrift. An unmoored boat, lost at sea with no hope of rescue.

"I was talking to Cindy Malone the other day and they're hiring for summer help at The Lobster Pot," Mom said. "You did that in high school. I know she'd hire you. At least it would give you something during the summer until you can find something more permanent if you need to."

I tried not to make a face and instead grabbed one of the books on Dad's "to be returned to the library" pile. Another young adult book; this time a Cinderella retelling. I read the blurb on the back and if I wasn't mistaken, it was a romance between two girls. I was surprised that my dad would want to read that. I wasn't going to comment, though. I cracked open the book and started to read. Mom still stood waiting for an answer.

"Oh, uh, sure. I'll call her tomorrow," I said.

I mean, what else was I going to do? Go down to the local bar and take up day drinking? Hang out at the gas station with the local teens? Sit on the beach with the tourists and get a horrible sunburn? I tried not to think about what I could be doing right now, if I was in Boston. Maybe dinner and drinks or pizza with my friends, a hot yoga class at my favorite studio, or even just taking a book to a coffee shop to read for a while and watch people pass on the street. If I wanted to have a professionally made cup here? I'd have to drive at least ten minutes and they definitely didn't have nondairy milk or know what a macchiato was.

Not that I could even afford a macchiato since I was fucking broke, and I needed money sooner rather than later. Working at The Lobster Pot was my best option.

"Sounds good, baby girl," Mom said with a smile. Her

shoulders relaxed and she sat back in her chair. I realized she'd been worried. She seemed to be relieved I'd agreed to her plan so easily.

My parents and I hadn't really talked about what happened and why I was back, mostly because it wasn't for just one reason. There were many reasons, all culminating with me packing my shit in my car, loading up my dog, abandoning my friends, and driving back here.

I asked Mom if there was any ice cream in the freezer and she said that there was. While I was getting a spoon, I glanced out the window, which happened to look right into our neighbor's living room.

Jude.

The lights were on and she stood in the living room wearing nothing but a sports bra and some athletic shorts. The spoon I'd just grabbed clattered on the floor. As I stood up from retrieving the spoon, I found her staring directly at me. Instead of looking away like a normal person, I stared back.

Her hair had been long in high school and her arms hadn't been so...sculpted back then. At least not that I remembered. My mouth went dry and I held on to the spoon for dear life.

"What are you looking at?" a voice said behind me and I shrieked and dropped the spoon again. I turned around and found my mom leaning over my shoulder to see what I'd been staring at.

"Oh, nothing, just staring off into space." I rushed with my spoon and the ice cream back into the living room. My parents kept the room dark and the only light was from my dad's lamp and the TV, so I could hide in a corner with my lobster-red face.

What had come over me? I'd just stood there leering like a fucking creeper. Part of me expected a knock at the door and for her to storm in and ask what I'd been staring at.

That didn't happen, but it didn't stop me from looking up from my book every few minutes to check and make sure.

Before bed, I took Dolly out to do her business and my eyes kept flicking over to the house. The lights were still on, but I wasn't going to stare this time. I hadn't asked for more information from my mom about Jude, but I did wonder what she was doing back here. She'd hated this town, from what I remembered, so it couldn't just be because of her parents' house.

High school in a small town in Maine was brutal for anyone who didn't conform, and Jude had been adamant about not conforming. I'd done my best to get through, and the drama club had been my safe haven. I'd never thought seriously about acting after high school, since that was way out of my league, but I still thought about it every now and then. There was a community theater group a few towns away. Could I put myself out there and get into it again?

Dolly was taking her sweet time, sniffing the bushes at the edge of the porch to find the right one to pee near. I jumped as I heard a door slam, the door to the neighbor's house.

I froze with my back to the house, pretending I wasn't completely aware of what was happening. Was she leaving

again on that motorcycle? Where would she go tonight? The only bar in town closed in less than an hour, and there was nothing else open. Unless she might be going to a friend's house for a party?

Or perhaps she was going to the beach for a midnight swim. I shivered at the thought of Jude slipping beneath the waves like a mermaid.

My ears perked for the rumble of the motorcycle starting up, but I didn't hear it. Dolly finally found her perfect spot and did her thing. She seemed content to sniff around the yard, so I let her, wrapping my arms around myself and breathing the sharp sea air. I'd missed this smell, even if I hadn't missed much else. Maybe I'd go for a midnight swim. The only danger of doing that in the height of the summer was encountering drunken teenagers, out having a bonfire on the beach and smoking a lot of weed.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths before turning around. I told myself not to look at the porch next door, but my eyes had other ideas.

She was there, sitting on the porch on an Adirondack chair and staring out toward the ocean, just like I'd been doing. An open beer rested on the porch railing.

I swiveled my head away so she wouldn't catch me looking again, and at that moment Dolly decided that she'd make a mad dash for Jude's yard.

"Dolly!" I yelled as she bounded up the porch and went right for Jude. Well, shit. "Dolly, come back!"

She completely ignored me. I was going to have to go get her.

Groaning inside, I dragged myself over to the house, preparing for anything. What I found was Jude petting Dolly's head and Dolly closing her eyes in bliss and then trying to climb in Jude's lap.

"Dolly," I said, but she acted as if I wasn't even there.
"I'm sorry. I should have kept her on the leash." I couldn't look up at Jude, so I watched her hands stroke Dolly's head.
The air around the porch seemed thicker somehow, or maybe it was just harder to breathe near Jude.

"It's okay," she said, and I felt like I'd never heard her voice before. I wasn't sure if I had. "I don't mind."

Dolly finally stopped trying to climb into the chair and settled for putting her paws and her head in Jude's lap.

"Sorry," I said again. I needed to take Dolly and get the hell out of here, but I couldn't move. My feet were glued to her porch.

"Haven't seen you in a while, Iris," she said. Her voice had a rough quality that made me think of bar smoke and darkness. There was a hard quality about her that made my stomach flip over a few times.

"Yeah, I moved back today." My gaze finally crept its way up to her face only to find her watching me with fathomless brown eyes. Her face was all sharp angles, along with her haircut. A fluttering in my stomach erupted, and I forgot what we were talking about until she blinked again.

"When did you get back?" My voice trembled, and I hoped she didn't hear it.

Her fingers danced back and forth on Dolly's head. "Last year," she said, but didn't elaborate. Chatty.

"I should probably go," I said, stating the obvious.

"Stay if you like," she said, picking up her beer and gesturing to the empty chair next to her.

"Okay?" I collapsed into the chair and tried to calm my galloping heart.

"Do you want a beer?" she asked after a few seconds of silence.

"No, thank you." What was I doing here? I should have grabbed Dolly and run back into the house. Was Jude doing this so she could confront me about staring at her earlier?

I had no idea how to have a conversation with her so I stopped trying to think of things to say and just sat there, my insides twisting around like pissed-off snakes. At least Dolly was enjoying herself.

Jude didn't seem eager to say anything either, so there we were. I kept expecting my mom to open the door and yell for me to come back. At least that would give me an escape route.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Jude. She petted Dolly with one hand and the other lifted the beer to her lips periodically. She wore a T-shirt and the same shorts as earlier.

I needed to stop thinking about that earlier non-outfit. I blushed hard and hoped she couldn't see in the dark.

If I strained my ears, I could just barely hear the crash of the waves. Somewhere nearby, a soft boom followed by another let me know someone was setting off fireworks.

"That's a cool motorcycle," I blurted out, and wished I could walk into the ocean and disappear.

"Thank you. It's not very useful in the winter, but it's good for getting around in the summer." She pressed her lips together as if she'd said too much.

"I've never been on a bike. I'm scared I'd fly off or something." This kept getting worse and worse.

"I'm sure you'd be fine, once you tried it. Do you always let fear dictate your life?"

I sat up, shocked. "No," I said, but it didn't sound convincing. "You don't even know me." I didn't know her either, but I was the one being called out.

"True. Just something to think about." She moved Dolly's head and stood up. "See you later," she said, and went into the house, leaving me and Dolly wondering what the hell had just happened.

Dolly came over to me and whined.

"Let's go home," I said and she seemed to understand me. I got up with shaking legs and made my way back to the house. The lights were still on next door when I glanced back one more time.

## Chapter Two

Jude

I tried to remember her, but since there had been four years between us in high school, the memories were hazy. She'd had friends, from what I'd seen, and seemed to do okay in that fishbowl environment. Not always fighting against the current like me.

I didn't know what she was doing back here, and I was trying not to care, but this was one of the first interesting things to happen in Salty Cove in a while. I also hadn't missed the way she'd looked at me earlier. Might be my imagination, but I was pretty sure I'd seen interest there, which was interesting on its own. She'd definitely been in-

terested in guys, last I knew. I'd known that I liked girls, and girls only, from a young age. I'd refused to hide who I was and had come out at an age where kids were the most vicious. Still, I'd gotten through it but bore the hidden scars.

Not that I was going to pursue anything with her, even if she was interested. No, I wasn't ready, even now. It had been more than two years but not much had changed. Living in Salty Cove and fishing for lobster was like living in a space where time barely passed, where it moved so slow that you didn't notice and suddenly you were old and still living the same life you'd had for dozens of years, even though you swore you wouldn't. This town locked you in, made you forget that there was anything or anyone outside it.

I should probably get out more, but look what getting out of Maine had gotten me. I was back to the place I never wanted to be and I didn't have any plans about leaving. Where would I go? I'd lost everything. I was lucky to have parents who were thrilled that they could stop paying a property manager and get free labor from their daughter. Now they could spend their time soaking up the sun and drinking cocktails every afternoon in Florida. If I could stand to be with them, I might have joined them.

No, I don't think I could handle living in Florida. I wasn't really handling living here, but it was easier to float through my life in a familiar environment, even if that environment was so homogenous that everyone was related to everyone else. Except for me.

My thoughts drifted from my life here back to Iris. She'd clearly gone off to college and now she was back. I knew her father had retired with some injuries, so maybe that was why. Or maybe it was something else and she'd needed a soft place to land. This town was a safety net for so many people. She seemed a little frenetic, or maybe that was her personality. Nervousness radiated from her in waves. It didn't bother me, though, which was surprising. I normally gravitated toward people who were like me, reserved and quiet, but if she was going to be next door for a while, maybe we could hang out. I definitely needed more friends, since I didn't have anyone close, just acquaintances.

I'd touched on a nerve when I'd told her not to live in fear, but I'd done that on purpose to see what would happen. Chalk it up to boredom.

She was cute too, I'd have to give her that much. Wideset blue eyes that had untold stories behind them underneath light brown curls. Her curves were generous and lush. No, I wasn't going to think about her body. Completely inappropriate. I hadn't thought about anyone's body that way since...

Everything always came back to that. To her. I couldn't even think her name without a stab to my heart.

If Iris was cute was irrelevant because I wasn't going to love anyone ever again. I'd done it once and once was enough. I'd gambled and lost, big time. Iris probably wasn't going to come back anyway, because I'd been rude and had just left her on the porch with her dog. I'd been afraid that she was going to start asking me personal questions, or try

to talk to me, and I was out of practice talking to other people. That was the best part of my job: the no talking to anyone. Sure, there was the stink of bait and the hard physical labor, but every day when I went out, I got to be alone. I preferred being alone these days. It hadn't always been like that, and I still had friends who tried to get in touch every now and then. Some were persistent and kept trying, even when I gave them nothing. I guess there was something to be said for that. Too bad I was such a shitty friend. Maybe I could practice with Iris.

I finished my beer inside and put the TV on so the house wasn't so silent. I didn't really watch it, but the noise and color distracted my brain for a little while. Due to my job, I'd adjusted to a different sleep schedule, so after I put the bottle in the recycling, I stripped off my clothes and headed to bed. I slept with the windows open and the sound of the ocean doing its best to lull me to sleep.

My eyes closed and I felt myself float toward sleep on a soft current. It only lasted for a minute as my brain conjured her face and then I was wide-awake and trying not to cry. They weren't nightmares, exactly, but they did keep me from ever getting a good night's sleep. Most of the time my job exhausted me so much that my body would sort of shut down anyway and I'd take a nap or two in the afternoon, but for the most part, I didn't sleep.

After trying about six different sleeping positions, I got up and grabbed a blanket to sit with on the couch. I was learning how to crochet, which kept my hands busy and my mind thinking about stitches and counting and making sure I didn't leave a hole. I was testing out different techniques on squares, and eventually I'd put them all together as a blanket. At least, that was the plan. I was only on the second square, and my squares didn't exactly look like the pictures, but at least I was doing something. I'd burned through so many hobbies in the last two years, including puzzles, wire jewelry, baking bread, and raising succulents, to keep myself sane. Barely.

I curled up on the couch for a few hours of rest before my alarm went off. It was still dark when I got up and got dressed. I kept my regular wardrobe separate from my work wardrobe. I had to. You could never get the stink of bait out of jeans, let me tell you. I actually kept my work clothes on the porch so they didn't funk up the house. I tossed my extra jacket, boots, and oil pants in a bag on the back of my bike, packed up some protein bars and a sandwich, coffee, and water for the day, sucked down a protein shake, and I was ready for work. My bag was already packed with the other essentials: sunblock, a hat, gloves, a portable charger for my phone, and a few tampons. Just in case.

I spared one glance for the house next door, but the lights were all off, since most normal people weren't awake at this hour. At first, it had been horrible, waking before the sun. Now I relished this quiet. I often spent entire days where I only had to communicate in a few words or grunts. That probably wasn't healthy, but it was working for me right now.

I headed down to the wharf to grab my dinghy and row out toward my boat. I wasn't alone, and shared a few nods and waves and grunts with my fellow cohorts. There weren't a whole lot of women on the water, but the guys had never really said much to me. I was sure they had talked behind my back, but no one said anything to my face. Not that I would have put up with any bullshit from them. I'd been telling men off my entire life and needed more practice.

My shoulders popped and cracked as I rowed out to my boat, named the June Marie. I'd bought it from a man who had named it for his wife and daughter, as many did, and I hadn't been able to come up with a better name, so I kept it. Maybe one of these days I'd change it to something like the Salty Bitch, but then that would mean I was staying here and the boat was mine and this was my life now. I didn't want this to be my life. I used to picture my life in so many different ways, and now it was a blank. I was stuck, but I couldn't find the way forward. I wanted to dream again. I just didn't know how. Back in the day, I'd planned on getting my MBA and then opening a coffee shop or a greenhouse or a bar. I didn't know what my business would be. I just knew that I wanted to work for myself, and that seemed like the way to do it. I'd been young and naïve then.

The *June Marie* roared to life and I steered it out of the harbor. The first few days like this on the water had been spent acclimating to the waves and the up-and-down motion of the boat, but somehow, my body had stopped fighting it and I wasn't puking over the side while trying not to hit a buoy or a seal.

I always played music on the boat, so I turned on my favorite playlist. Lizzo blasted from the small speakers I'd rigged up in the cabin. It was cold as fuck today, so I wrapped myself up and sucked down half of my thermos of coffee as the sun rose. The forecast was for temps in the eighties later, a rarity for Maine. Right now the air was downright frosty. That wasn't something I had bargained on when I started. I'd learned a lot since then. A bunch of the guys I'd hung out with in high school had worked for their dads, and I'd helped out once or twice, so I wasn't completely new to fishing. I'd still had to fumble my way through at first.

I reached my first buoy, which was painted white with a black stripe around the middle. I hadn't been very creative there, I had to admit. I set about the nasty job of throwing bait into bags to re-bait the trap, and then the business of hauling the trap up from the ocean floor. If I wasn't such a small operation (only fifty traps), I might have had help in the form of a sternman, but then I would have had to talk to someone, and that would have been the worst. I'd rather curse and struggle and take longer doing things on my own than hire someone else. Plus, I'd have to pay them and I was barely making it work as it was. At least I didn't have to pay a mortgage.

I lost myself in the rhythm of my work: bait, haul trap, pull out lobsters, measure, rubber band, re-bait, toss back in ocean.

By the time most people were getting up for work, I was almost halfway through my traps for the day. I had two rotations and alternated them every other day. My body had grown used to the physical work, but I would never get used to the smell of bait and diesel. No amount of showers seemed to remove the smell. Guess that was another bonus of having a sternman: someone else got to do the stinky jobs.

I had a decent haul and headed back to the lobster pound, where they'd buy the lobsters right from the boat, boil them in the restaurant upstairs, and serve them all in the same day. I also threw a few in a cooler on the back of the bike for myself, since it was cheaper than buying organic chicken at the grocery store.

I hosed myself off near the dock and decided to head home instead of hanging out to shoot the shit with the other lobstermen. Sometimes I lurked and they let me hang on the edges of their conversations, listening but not contributing. They didn't seem to mind, since we were all in the trenches together. I could have joined if I wanted to, but I'd never tried and the longer I didn't try, the harder it became.

I stopped quickly to fuel up the bike and grab a fresh-baked croissant and another huge black coffee at the only gas station in town. It was also a variety store, stocking everything from guns to gummies to wedding gowns. Seriously. I didn't know who was buying said gowns, but they had them anyway.

The lobsters went into the fridge out back before I stripped completely and ran for the shower. I honestly didn't care if the neighbors saw me dashing through the house

after I abandoned my clothes in the doorway. I didn't used to, anyway. Maybe now I should care a little bit about a certain neighbor seeing me completely naked. No, I wasn't going to think about that. I wasn't going to think anything. I was just going to close my eyes and try and wash off the smell of dead fish guts and also not think about anything at all. Nothing. I wanted to think nothing.

I wanted to be nothing.

## Chapter Three

Iris

I barely slept at all that night, and it wasn't because Dolly hogged the bed and I had to find space for my body around her. I couldn't stop thinking about the odd interaction with Jude and what it could all mean.

By the time I gave up on trying to sleep and got up for breakfast, I hadn't found any more clarity.

"Good morning," Mom said when I came out to the kitchen. "I've got waffles going if you want some. I've got a showing later and then a meeting, so it's going to be just you and your father this afternoon."

I grabbed a strip of bacon from where it was drying on a paper towel and crunched into it. "That's fine. I'm going to go over to The Lobster Pot and see about the job and maybe go get some groceries."

Since I'd moved out for college, my diet had changed and I wanted to be able to make smoothies and salads and so forth. My parents were old school and thought eating massive amounts of vegetables and salad was a strange fad for weirdos who did yoga.

"Sounds good, baby girl." Mom kissed my cheek and poured some batter into the waffle iron. I asked if she needed help, but was promptly herded out of the kitchen. Dolly stood at the door, whining to go out. This time, I took her on a leash.

The motorcycle was gone already, so I didn't have to worry about seeing Jude.

I sighed and waited for Dolly. It hadn't even been a week and I was ready to murder someone for a brown butter hazelnut crunch donut from Union Square Donuts, or a peanut butter cannoli from Mike's Pastry, or a slice of puttanesca pizza from Regina Pizzeria. I was really hungry, apparently.

All my life, I'd dreamed of getting out of this town, of leaving and building a life where I could go to the grocery store and not everyone knew who I was. Boston somehow seemed less scary than New York, and I'd had my pick for getting a degree in marketing with an English minor. I'd wanted to work for either a nonprofit or for an ethical company focused on sustainability or environmentalism. I'd ended up working at a few startups and burning out,

fast. I shoved those melancholy thoughts of my many failures away. I could wallow another time.

Dad hoisted himself out of his chair for breakfast, and I joined my parents at the table. They chatted about this and that, not really involving me in the conversation. My parents had gotten used to their empty nest, no doubt, and would also have to adjust to having me back here.

This was what I hated. I hated that my mother was making me breakfast and putting it on my plate, as if I was a child. I hated that I couldn't just leave the house without telling them where I was going and when I'd be back. I hated sleeping on a twin bed. I hated that my life didn't look the way I'd always planned that it would. By now, I was supposed to be living in my own apartment with a bay window that looked onto a courtyard. I was supposed to go to a job every day that I loved and that made me feel like I was doing good for the world. Instead I was eating waffles my mom had made me. Way to fall into those depressing thoughts again, Iris.

"You're awfully quiet. You okay?" Dad asked, touching my arm. I pushed the rest of my soggy waffles around my plate. "Yeah, just thinking."

Mom and Dad shared a look that only two people who have been married for thirty-plus years could share.

"You know you can talk to us about anything, right? We're here for you," he said. Mom got up and put her arms around my neck. "We love you, baby girl, and we're happy to have you here. Even if it didn't turn out the way

you planned. You can stay as long as you want, okay?" She smacked a kiss on my cheek and I wanted to run away.

"Thanks," I said, but my voice sounded hollow. I didn't want them taking care of me. I was supposed to take care of myself. I was a fucking adult and I'd had to run home to Mommy and Daddy at the first sign of trouble. The "trouble" came when I was almost evicted from my apartment for failing to pay rent when I'd had to quit a shitty job and couldn't seem to find another one. I'd burned through my credit cards and had to throw in the towel.

By now, the whole fucking town knew I was back because nothing stayed secret here for more than a day. When I'd eventually go to the grocery store, certain people would come up to me and ask all kinds of questions, pumping me for more details while pretending they were just being kind because they wanted to know the dirt. My mom would also get inundated when she went to work at school and at the real estate office, and I wondered what she would say to everyone.

Before I could do anything, Mom cleared my plate and went to start the dishes. Dad went back to his chair, groaning the whole way.

"I'm off to work," she said, kissing the top of my head like I was five. She kissed Dad and whispered something to him that I couldn't make out. I had the feeling it had to do with me.

"I'll bring pizza home later, so don't worry about dinner," she called as she walked out the door.

"Great," I said under my breath.

I hung around with Dad for a little while, finishing up the lesbian Cinderella book before getting dressed in shorts and a tank to go to The Lobster Pot. I left Dolly with Dad, since she was conked out at his feet. He could keep her alive for a few hours.

I cringed when I saw my gas gauge because it meant one more chance I might have to interact with someone. I suppose I could have stayed in the house and not left for a week or more, but I couldn't handle that. I needed out.

For half a second, I thought about driving right back to the city, but I couldn't leave Dolly. No, this was my only option right now. Being here, in Salty Cove.

The pumps were busy at the only gas station in town, go figure, and the lot was full of pickup trucks all parked next to each other. Country music blared from one of them, and a pack of teenagers huddled together sipping beer from cans "hidden" in paper bags. Subtle.

I rolled my eyes and waited for a pump. Although I hadn't lived here for years, I bet I could name nearly all of the people in this parking lot.

Finally, a pump opened up and I pulled my sedan up to it, cringing at the prices. They were so much higher here, but nearly everything else was cheaper, compared to Boston.

I got my gas without having to chat with anyone, but I knew I wouldn't be as lucky at the grocery store, so I decided to hit The Lobster Pot first.

It was nearly lunchtime on a Saturday in June, and the

parking lot was full, but I found one spot way in the back. The little restaurant doubled as a wharf, and it was also the port for a local seal and whale watch tour boat. People walked up the rickety steps to the restaurant as others headed down to a tour boat, chatting excitedly about seeing whales. Families sat on picnic tables and cracked into fresh lobsters before drenching the meat in bowls of clarified butter. Now I was hungry.

I headed up the stairs to the restaurant, which didn't have an empty table in sight, and had a line out the door. Since I'd worked here ages ago, I walked right in and leaned on the corner of the counter. The open kitchen bustled with people pulling fries and shrimp out of the fryolater, grilling burgers on the enormous industrial grill, and calling orders out over the mic near the pickup area. Complete organized chaos.

I snagged a server who'd been cleaning the tables.

"Is Cindy around?" I knew she would be. That woman practically lived here.

"Yeah, I'll go get her," the server said, her eyes wild with the stress of keeping up with the summer crowd. I wanted to tell her that she would get through it, and to just breathe because I'd been there. Looked like I was going to be back in that place again, but at least I had some experience dealing with a rush like this.

Cindy came out a few minutes later, wearing a polo with the restaurant logo and an apron stained with grease over it.

"Iris Turner, as I live and breathe. Get over here and give me a hug, girl," she said, holding her arms out. I hugged her and inhaled the scent of butter and fried fish. Soon, I would smell the same. No matter how much I'd showered after I came home from work, the oil penetrated my pores and I'd smelled like that all the time.

"What are you doing back here?" Great, she didn't know yet, which meant Mom hadn't told her. Thank you, Mom.

"Yeah, I'm back home for a little while. Trying to figure out what to do next. My mom said that you were needing some help, which is why I'm here." Might as well get right to the point.

Cindy put her arm around me and pulled me into the back where her office was. "Come on back and sit with me for a little while. I'm dead on my feet." She collapsed into a rickety office chair, and I pulled out a folding chair that was propped up against the wall. The office was a mess of papers and a computer that looked older than I was and made a strange chugging noise as it struggled to keep working.

"It's real nice to have you back, Iris, and I would love to hire you on for the summer. You're an answer to our prayers, actually. We've been having a hard time getting help for some reason, and I won't even have to train you since you already know the ropes. When can you start?"

"How about tomorrow?" I needed to get busy and stay busy. I also had past due bills that were racking up late fees, not to mention my student loans.

"Perfect. How about you come in at ten and we can retrain you on everything before lunch. What size polo are you?" She reached into a box next to her desk and pulled

out a red polo shirt that was exactly the same as what she had on, except it was clean.

"That looks fine," I said, taking the shirt.

"Here, take a few more, so you don't have to keep washing that one." Cindy loaded me up with shirts and then wanted to shoot the shit for a little while, asking if I was happy to be back and saying my parents were probably pleased to have me. I kept a smile on my face and lied through my teeth until someone came back and said they couldn't find any more straws.

"Duty calls," Cindy said, getting up with a sigh. She gave me a hug and told me she'd see me the next day and I died a little inside. I considered getting something to eat before I left, but the line was too long and I'd be eating this food nearly every day for the rest of the summer anyway.

The task of getting a job completed I braved the grocery store the way I did when I was in the city: with earbuds in and a podcast turned all the way up, and without making eye contact with anyone.

Five minutes after getting my cart, when I was trying to find a decent avocado, there was a tap on my shoulder. I wanted to ignore it, but I pulled out my earbuds and turned around only to find my third grade teacher. I put another smile on my face and did the chatty small talk until my teeth ached. I finally found two acceptable avocados and moved on to lettuce, then fruit. I had two more encounters by the time I made it through the produce, and then two more when I was buying dog food for Dolly. By the time I made it to the dairy aisle, I was worn out and wanted to

shut myself in my room and not talk to another person for at least three days.

I checked out, and the bored teenager bagging my groceries didn't talk to me, for which I was grateful.

Dolly was waiting by the door when I got back home and about knocked me over. She was nearly as tall as I was on her hind legs, and she was a good sixty pounds.

"Easy, girl, I've got groceries here." I balanced the bags and tried not to tip over as she jumped up to lick my face.

I stumbled to the kitchen and dropped everything. I had wanted to do this all in one trip, and I'd succeeded. After petting Dolly and telling her how much she was missed, I put away the groceries. Dad shambled out of the living room to see what I'd gotten.

"What's this?" he said, holding up a package of chia seeds. "Isn't this what you put on those pottery things and it looks like hair when it grows?"

I gritted my teeth. "Yes, but they're also really good for you. I put them in my smoothies."

He made a grunting noise and dropped the container on the counter like it had burned him. I got a few more questions about other ingredients I'd bought. He also wanted to know what was up with the small blender I'd put on the counter to make smoothies. I answered him as patiently as I could before he refilled his water bottle, grunted again, and headed back to his chair. Sounded like he was grumpy and maybe having a bad pain day with his back, so I wasn't going to hassle him.

I took Dolly out into the yard for some exercise, bringing her favorite ball and the thrower that went with it.

The motorcycle was back, so Jude was home from wherever she'd gone. I wanted to ask my mom, because she would definitely know, but I didn't want to seem like I was actually interested in the answer, even though I was.

I chucked Dolly's ball as far as I could get it and she raced after it like a goofball, ears flying. I laughed as she brought it back. She danced just out of reach, getting down in her play position before running off again.

"Come back, you doofus! I can't throw it if you don't give it back!" I chased her and finally got the ball from her mouth, setting it back in the thrower before hurling it again. I should probably also take her for a walk up the road a little bit later. Maybe after dinner.

I tossed the ball for a while, wondering what Jude was doing and wondering if she could see me. Not like I was going to pose, or act different if she could. Dolly didn't show any signs of getting tired, so I was going to do this until Mom got home.

"Hey," a voice said behind me.

I swiveled slowly to find Jude leaning on her porch, wearing a white tank top over a black bra, and those same shorts from the other night. Or maybe she had multiple pairs of the same ones.

"Hey," I said, and it sounded like a question.

"Do you want some lobster?"

I couldn't answer for a second because the words didn't make sense. "Do I want lobster?"

"Yeah. I have extras and I don't want them to go to waste."

That was curious, because you could definitely cook lobsters and then have the meat for a few days. Or you could freeze them. But I hadn't had lobster in forever and the thought of it drowning in butter was making my mouth water. Mom was bringing home pizza, but lobster sounded much better right now.

"Sure," I said. I called to Dolly and walked over to what I was now thinking of as Jude's house.

"They're boiling now, but I can make lobster rolls or you can just take them if you want."

Huh. One of those things meant staying and having dinner with her, and the other meant taking the lobsters and running.

The choice was mine.

"A lobster roll would be amazing," I said after a few seconds. I was going to eat with her, if only to satisfy my curiosity about her life and what she was doing here.

"Cool," she said. "Come on in. Dolly is welcome too, of course."

Dolly dropped her ball at Jude's feet and wagged her tail, looking up at Jude. My dog had a crush.

"Thanks," I said, following Jude into the house. I knew I'd been in here when I was a kid when our parents hung out, but it had been a long time. This house was bigger than my parents' and definitely decorated in the New England style with lots of wood, plaid, camo, and if I wasn't mistaken, that was a deer head on the living room wall.

Dolly raced through the house, sliding on the hardwood and nearly crashing into a table.

"I'm sorry. She has no manners," I said, trying to grab her, but she was too fast. Her gray fur was shiny and hard to get a grip on.

"It's fine, let her go."

Dolly went right for the couch, sniffing it before hopping up on it and lying down, taking up almost the whole thing.

I rolled my eyes. "So, she's just going to make herself at home, apparently."

I followed Jude back to the kitchen, where she stood over a large pot of steaming water. She tucked some hair behind her ear. Her hair hung just below her chin in a bob that was longer in front and cropped close to her neck in the back. Attractive. Very attractive.

"I can do corn too, if you want," she said. "I wasn't really planning on having company, but I like to cook a bunch of whatever I'm eating and then I have leftovers in the fridge. Do you want a drink?"

"Sure, why not?"

Jude cracked open a beer and handed it to me. I wasn't much of a drinker, but I drank in social situations. This seemed like the kind of night where a drink was a nice addition.

"Thanks," I said and took a sip. The beer was crisp and light. Not bad. "Do you need any help?"

Jude shook her head and checked on the pot before yanking out four bright red lobsters and putting them in a colander in the sink. I watched as she dumped out the rest

of the water and filled it up again. Her arms flexed and muscles popped along her shoulders and back, and I had to look away. Where was Dolly?

"Why do you have so many lobsters?" I asked.

"I'm a lobsterman." She hefted the pot and put it back on the stove. I almost slid out of my chair.

"You're a lobsterman?"

"Technically lobsterwoman, but yes." She checked the burner and then turned around to face me.

"Wow," I said, because what else did you say to something like that? "So *that's* why you have so many lobsters."

"Occupational hazard," she said with a shrug. "It's mostly because I'm lazy and I happen to love the taste of lobster. I also bring home clams a lot too. You'd think after over a year of doing it, that I'd be sick of them, but not yet." She dropped several ears of corn in the pot and then went to clean out the lobsters.

"Are you sure I can't help?" I was feeling completely useless.

"I'm assuming you know how to crack a lobster," she said

"Seeing as how I spent five summers at The Lobster Pot, I'm going with yes." I took a lobster cracker from her and stood at the sink next to her. "Race you?"

She arched one dark eyebrow. "You're on."

We each picked up a lobster and looked at each other.

"Ready, set, go!" I said and went for the claws first. I'd never speed-cracked a lobster, but this was my moment. I'd done this plenty of times before, so I was confident in my abilities. After getting the claws and knuckles clean, I went for the tail, sliding the meat out in one piece. I turned to declare my victory. Jude had already finished with the first lobster and was working on her second.

"Fine, I see how it is," I said, dropping the tail into the bowl.

Instead of going for the other lobster, I watched her crack her second. Her hands were just so efficient. I wondered briefly if she had calluses on her palms or fingers. From all the lobster trap hauling. What a mental image *that* was. Jude, all decked out in the waterproof orange overalls and boots and maybe a tank to show off her arms and shoulders. Before I could take a headfirst dive into that fantasy, I said I'd chop up the lobster meat for the lobster rolls.

Jude checked on the corn and pulled out some celery, chives, mayo, lemon juice, and buns. I was used to simple white hotdog buns, but Jude had some brioche from a local bakery.

"Wow, these are going to be classy," I said as she buttered the rolls and gave them a quick grill in a skillet, while I chopped the celery and mixed it with the lobster meat. "Am I in charge of mixing and measuring?" I pulled some of the corn out of the pot.

"Yeah, go for it. I'm guessing you've made a lobster roll before."

I had. I'd made hundreds. Maybe thousands. It was pretty simple and you didn't mess with a classic. I mixed everything up in the bowl, and then Jude brought the buns over. I assembled the rolls and she added corn to our plates.

They were definitely inherited from her parents, like the rest of the house. Off-white plates with dark blue trim, each chipped in multiple places, and a few had clearly been glued back together. Looking closely, I could see a faded print of what might have been a rooster in the center, but it was hard to tell.

"Thank you," I said, and we sat at the dining table. I heard my mother's car pulling into the driveway next door and sent her a quick text that I was over at Jude's having dinner and to save me some pizza. Then I turned my phone off. I'd deal with the questions later. Right now I was starving, both for food and for more information about Jude.

"Thank you so much for inviting me over," I said again, picking up my first lobster roll.

She licked some stray mayo from the side of her hand. "Thank you so much for accepting. It's been a long time since I had dinner with anyone else in this house."

I wanted to ask her if she was lonely, but I didn't want to pry. No, that was a lie. I did want to pry, but I didn't want her to think I was rude. Big difference.

"Why did you come back?" I asked. Oops. Didn't mean for those words to come out of my mouth so soon. I shoved the lobster roll in so I wouldn't blurt out anything else that would cause her to throw me out before I'd finished eating.

Jude picked up an ear of corn and started to eat it carefully. I was like a toddler when I ate corn. I got butter all over my face and usually a few kernels ended up in my bra and it was all a disaster. Jude ate as if she had been taught

to eat by a proper British monarch. She hadn't answered and I started to feel like this had been a mistake.

"Sorry," I said as I chewed. "I didn't mean that to sound like an interrogation. I can tell you why I'm back. Because I'm a fucking failure." I took another huge bite and chased it with a swallow of beer. Perfection. Why hadn't I had this combination before?

Jude didn't comment on my outburst. Just kept eating her corn and keeping eye contact with me. It was eerie, the way her eyes seemed to give me an anchor while everything whirled and stormed in my brain.

"I did what you're supposed to do," I continued. "I went to college and got a fucking degree and then I couldn't get a decent job that would help me pay my rent and then I got more into debt and then I got to the point where it was get evicted or come home. I did everything right and went to school for marketing, which everyone said was a guarantee, but all of those people are fucking liars. And do you know how hard it is to get someone to rent you a decent apartment that isn't infested with roaches, or is bigger than a shoebox? No one tells you about that shit. And then when you can't pay your rent, there's no backup plan. It's too bad, so sad, sucks to be you. I would have died before I asked my parents to bail my sorry ass out, even if they had any extra money, which they don't. So I came home and now I have a job at The Lobster Pot and I have no idea what I'm doing with my life except cleaning up my dog's poop and this is nothing how I thought my life would be and that fucking sucks." I heaved a breath as if I'd been running up the stairs.

"Life never happens the way you plan it to, does it?" Jude put down her naked ear of corn that had been stripped of its delicious kernels by her clever teeth.

"What did you think your life was going to be?"

She laughed darkly, and I shivered at the sound. Jude's laugh was pure sin. I closed my eyes for a second to compose myself. "I thought I was going to kick the dust of this town off my feet and never come back. I didn't care where I went, as long as it was anywhere but here."

Our eyes locked and I had one of those moments when you connect with another person and they can feel it too, and you don't know anything else in this world but how that person understands what you'd been through. They got it. Jude got it.

"Same," I said. "I was only going to come back for Christmas and funerals."

"I wasn't even going to do that," she said, picking up her first lobster roll. She took a bite. "This is really good. Perfect amount of mayo and pepper."

"Thank you." The compliment made my cheeks get hot. "So, why are you back?" I asked. I wanted to know. I needed to

"That's a question with a lot of answers and I'm not sure I'm ready to share them. I can hear them whispering about me at the bank or the library. I know how this town works. Everyone wants to hear about it, but I get satisfaction from keeping that little mystery to myself."

That made complete sense. Whispers and gossip stuck to you like superglue and you couldn't shake a reputation, once it was created in someone's eyes. They put you in a box, and you could set that box on fire, but they would leave you in it even if you burned alive.

Jude finished her first lobster roll and moved on to the second while I went for my corn.

"You could tell me," I said. "If you wanted to share it with someone. I'm not going to tell anyone. They're talking about me too."

I shuddered at the thought. It wasn't just that I'd come home in disgrace after moving away. Being queer in a town like this meant that you were constantly talked about as well, and not in a complimentary way. I hadn't come out until my senior year of high school, and even that had been a nightmare. I'd waited until just before graduation so I could say "bye bye fuckers" and never see any of those people again. Yet here I was, hiding from them in a restaurant a few years later. My parents had been pretty nonchalant about the whole thing, and most of the adults in my life really didn't seem all that pressed about it. At least not any of the ones I ended up coming out to, like Cindy. A few people, like the queen bee bitch in school, Marina, had been spreading rumors about me being queer for years and greeted my coming out with smugness. From what I'd gleaned from social media, she'd gone off to college in New York, but had come back to work for her parents who made stained-glass windows and Christmas ornaments. I'd had to avoid her at the grocery store last time. In a town this size, I didn't know how long a conversation with her could be avoided.

Jude had been out her whole high school career. I still remembered some of the words people hurled at her like rocks in the hallways. I'd only been a freshman, but I remembered. Sure, there were other people who were out and our school had a GSA, but that didn't stop the local homophobes, and their parents, and their grandparents. It had been a whole lot different for me even just a few years later.

Jude sipped from her beer and regarded me.

"I'll think about it," she said after a little while.

We finished the rest of our food in silence, my mind racing with so many questions I still had, but Jude wasn't like an oyster. You couldn't just shuck the truth out in one motion, getting right to the good stuff. Jude was a lobster: a hard outer shell that was difficult to crack that covered squishy insides. No doubt she'd built up that shell for a reason, and it was going to take a damn good reason for her to let someone in.

I didn't know why I was so intent on being that someone, but from the moment I'd seen her getting off that motorcycle, I'd been completely and utterly captivated by her. Maybe it was boredom, but I didn't think so. Sooner or later I was going to figure Jude out. It was probably a better use of my time than moping about my miserable life.

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