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ROBERTS

THE LIAR

NORA ROBERTS

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Version_1

*For JoAnne,
the amazing forever friend*

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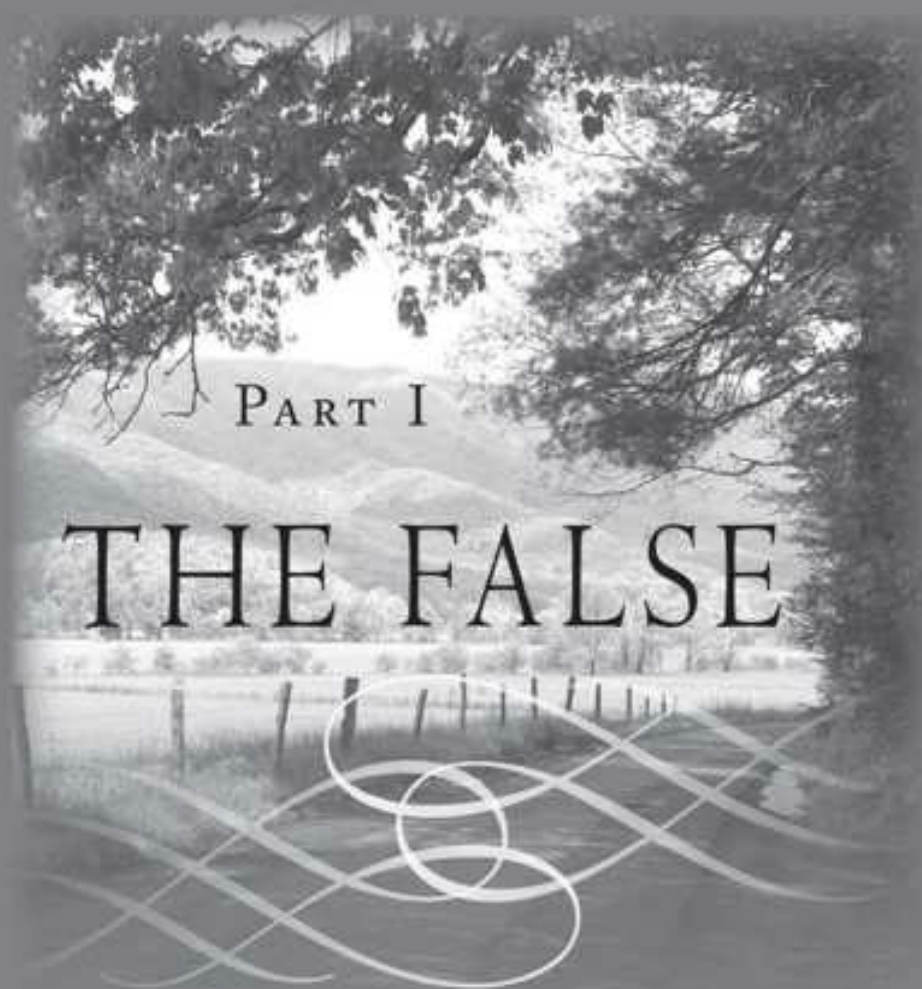
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PART I

THE FALSE

It is not the lie that passeth through the
mind, but the lie that sinketh in, and
settleth in it, that doth the hurt.

FRANCIS BACON



In the big house—and Shelby would always think of it as the big house—she sat in her husband’s big leather chair at his big, important desk. The color of the chair was espresso. Not brown. Richard had been very exact about that sort of thing. The desk itself, so sleek and shiny, was African zebra wood, and custom-made for him in Italy.

When she’d said—just a joke—that she didn’t know they had zebras in Italy, he’d given her *that* look. The look that told her despite the big house, the fancy clothes and the fat diamond on the fourth finger of her left hand, she’d always be Shelby Anne Pomeroy, two steps out of the bumpkin town in Tennessee where she was born and raised.

He’d have laughed once, she thought now, he’d have known she was joking and laughed as if she were the sparkle in his life. But oh God, she’d dulled in his eyes, and so fast, too.

The man she’d met nearly five years before on a starry summer night had swept her off her feet, away from everything she’d known, into worlds she’d barely imagined.

He’d treated her like a princess, shown her places she’d only read about in books or seen in movies. And he’d loved her once—hadn’t he? It was important to remember that. He’d loved her, wanted her, given her all any woman could ask for.

Provided. That was a word he’d often used. He’d provided for her.

Maybe he’d been upset when she got pregnant, maybe she’d been afraid—just for a minute—of the look in his eyes when she told him. But he’d married her, hadn’t he? Whisked her off to Las Vegas like they were having the adventure of a lifetime.

They’d been happy then. It was important to remember that now, too. She had to remember that, to hold tight the memories of the good times.

A woman widowed at twenty-four needed memories.

A woman who learned she’d been living a lie, was not only broke but in terrible, breathtaking debt, needed reminders of the good times.

The lawyers and accountants and tax people explained it all to her, but they might as well have been speaking Greek when they went on about leveraging and hedge funds and foreclosures. The big house, one that had intimidated her since she’d walked in the door, wasn’t hers—or not enough hers to matter—but the mortgage company’s. The cars, leased not bought, and with the payments overdue, not hers, either.

The furniture? Bought on credit, and those payments overdue.

And the taxes. She couldn’t bear to think about the taxes. It terrified her to think of them.

In the two months and eight days since Richard’s death, it seemed all she did was think about matters he’d told her not to worry about, matters that weren’t her concern. Matters, when he’d give her *that* look, that were none of her business.

Now it was all her concern, and all her business, because she owed creditors, a mortgage

company and the United States government so much money it paralyzed her.

She couldn't afford to be paralyzed. She had a child, she had a daughter. Callie was all that mattered now. She was only three, Shelby thought, and wanted to lay her head down on that slick, shiny desk and weep.

"But you won't. You're what she's got now, so you'll do whatever has to be done."

She opened one of the boxes, the one marked "Personal Papers." The lawyers and tax people had taken everything, gone through everything, copied everything, she supposed.

Now she would go through everything, and see what could be salvaged. For Callie.

She needed to find enough, somewhere, to provide for her child after she'd paid off all the debt. She'd get work, of course, but it wouldn't be enough.

She didn't care about the money, she thought as she began going through receipts for suits and shoes and restaurants and hotels. For private planes. She'd learned she didn't care about the money after the first whirlwind year, after Callie.

After Callie all she'd wanted was a home.

She stopped, looked around Richard's office. The harsh colors of the modern art he'd preferred, the stark white walls he said best showed off that art, and the dark woods and leathers.

This wouldn't be home, and hadn't been. Would never be, she thought, if she lived here eighty years instead of the scant three months since they'd moved in.

He'd bought it without consulting her, furnished it without asking what she'd like. A surprise, he'd said, throwing open the doors to this monster house in Villanova, this echoing building in what he'd claimed was the *best* of the Philadelphia suburbs.

And she'd pretended to love it, hadn't she? Grateful for a settled place, however much the hard colors and towering ceilings intimidated. Callie would have a home, go to good schools, play in a safe neighborhood.

Make friends. She'd make friends, too—that had been her hope.

But there hadn't been time.

Just as there wasn't a ten-million-dollar life insurance policy. He'd lied about that, too. Lied about the college fund for Callie.

Why?

She put that question aside. She'd never know the answer, so why ask why?

She could take his suits and shoes and ties and his sports equipment, the golf clubs and skis. Take all those to consignment shops. Take what she could get there.

Take whatever they didn't repossess and sell it. On damn eBay if she had to. Or Craigslist. Or a pawnshop, it didn't matter.

Plenty in her own closet to sell. And jewelry, too.

She looked at the diamond, the ring he'd slipped on her finger when they got to Vegas. The wedding ring, she'd keep, but the diamond, she'd sell. There was plenty of her own to sell.

For Callie.

She went through files, one by one. They'd taken all the computers, and those she didn't have back yet. But the actual paper was tangible.

She opened his medical file.

He'd taken good care of himself, she thought—which reminded her to cancel the memberships at the country club, at the fitness center. That had gone out of her mind. He'd been a healthy man, one who kept his body in tune, who never missed a checkup.

She needed to toss out all those vitamins and supplements he'd taken daily, she decided as she turned over another paper.

No reason to keep those, no reason to keep these records, either. The healthy man had drowned in the Atlantic, just a few miles off the South Carolina coast, at the age of thirty-three.

She should just shred all this. Richard had been big on shredding and had his own machine right there in the office. Creditors didn't need to see the results of his last routine blood work or the confirmation of his flu shot from two years ago, paperwork from the emergency room from when he'd dislocated his finger playing basketball.

For God's sake, that had been three years ago. For a man who'd shred enough paperwork to make a mountain range, he'd sure been possessive about his medical receipts.

She sighed, noting another, dated almost four years ago. She started to toss it aside, stopped and frowned. She didn't know this doctor. Of course, they'd been living in that big high-rise in Houston then, and who could keep track of doctors the way they'd moved every year—sometimes less than that. But this doctor was in New York City.

"That can't be right," she murmured. "Why would Richard go to a doctor in New York for a . . ."

Everything went cold. Her mind, her heart, her belly. Her fingers trembled as she lifted the paper, brought it closer as if the words would change with the distance.

But they stayed the same.

Richard Andrew Foxworth had elective surgery, performed by Dr. Dipok Haryana at Mount Sinai Medical Center, on July 12, 2011. A vasectomy.

He'd had a vasectomy, without telling her. Callie barely two months old and he'd fixed it so there could be no more children. He'd pretended to want more when she'd begun talking about another. He'd agreed to get checked, as she got checked, when, after a year of trying, she hadn't conceived.

She could hear him now.

You've just got to relax, Shelby, for God's sake. If you're worried and tense about it, it'll never happen.

"No, it'll never happen, because you fixed it so it couldn't. You lied to me, even about that. Lied when my heart broke every month.

"How could you? How could you?"

She pushed away from the desk, pressed her fingers to her eyes. July, mid-July, and Callie about eight weeks old. A business trip, he'd said, that's right, she remembered very well. To New York—hadn't lied about the where.

She hadn't wanted to take the baby to the city—he'd known she wouldn't. He'd made all the arrangements. Another surprise for her. He'd sent her back to Tennessee on a private plane, her and her baby.

So she could spend some time with her family, he'd said. Show off the baby, let her mother and grandmother spoil her and spoil Callie for a couple of weeks.

She'd been so happy, so *grateful*, she thought now. And all the while he'd just been getting her out of the way so he could make certain he didn't father another child.

She walked back to the desk, picked up the photo she'd had framed for him. One of her and Callie, taken by her brother Clay on that very trip. A thank-you gift he'd seemed to value as he'd kept it on his desk—wherever they'd been—ever since.

"Another lie. Just another lie. You never loved us. You couldn't have lied and lied and lied if you'd loved us."

On the rage of betrayal she nearly smashed the frame on the desk. Only the face of her baby stopped her. She set it down again, as carefully as she might priceless and fragile porcelain.

Then she lowered to the floor—she couldn't sit behind that desk, not now. She sat on the floor

with harsh colors against hard white walls, rocking, weeping. Weeping not because the man she'd loved was dead, but because he never existed.

. . .

THERE WAS NO TIME TO SLEEP. Though she disliked coffee, she made herself an oversized mug from Richard's Italian machine—and hit it with a double shot of espresso.

Headachy from the crying jag, wired up on caffeine, she combed through every paper in the box, making piles.

Hotel and restaurant receipts when viewed with newly opened eyes told her he hadn't just lied, but had cheated.

Room service charges too high for a man alone. Add a receipt for a silver bangle from Tiffany's—which he'd never given to her—from the same trip, another five thousand at La Perla—the lingerie he preferred she wear—from another trip, a receipt for a weekend spent in a bed-and-breakfast in Vermont when he'd said he was going to finalize a deal in Chicago, and it began to solidify.

Why had he kept all this, all this proof of his lies and infidelity? Because, she realized, she'd trusted him.

Not even that, she thought, accepting. She'd suspected an affair, and he'd likely known she had. He kept it because he'd thought her too obedient to poke through his personal records.

And she had been.

The other lives he'd lived, he'd locked away. She hadn't known where to find the key, would never have questioned him—and he'd known it.

How many other women? she wondered. Did it matter? One was too many, and any of them would have been more sophisticated, more experienced and knowledgeable than the girl from the little mountain town in Tennessee he'd knocked up when she was nineteen, dazzled and foolish.

Why had he married her?

Maybe he'd loved her, at least a little. Wanted her. But she hadn't been enough, not enough to keep him happy, keep him true.

And did that matter, really? He was dead.

Yes, she thought. Yes, it mattered.

He'd made a fool of her, left her humiliated. Left her with a financial burden that could hound her for years and jeopardize their daughter's future.

It damn well mattered.

She spent another hour going systematically through the office. The safe had already been cleared. She'd known about it, though she hadn't had the combination. She'd given the lawyers permission to have it opened.

They'd taken most of the legal documents, but there was five thousand in cash. She took it out, set it aside. Callie's birth certificate, their passports.

She opened Richard's, studied his photo.

So handsome. Smooth and polished, like a movie star, with his rich brown hair and tawny eyes. She'd so wished Callie had inherited his dimples. She'd been so charmed by those damn dimples.

She set the passports aside. However unlikely it was she'd use hers or Callie's, she'd pack them up. She'd destroy Richard's. Or—maybe ask the lawyers if that's what she should do.

She found nothing hidden away, but she'd go through everything again before she shredded or filed it all away again in packing boxes.

Hyped on coffee and grief, she walked through the house, crossed the big two-story foyer, took the curving stairs up, the thick socks she wore soundless on the hardwood.

She checked on Callie first, went into the pretty room, leaned down to kiss her daughter's cheek before tucking the blankets around her little girl's favored butt-in-the-air sleeping position.

Leaving the door open, she walked down the hall to the master suite.

She hated the room, she thought now. Hated the gray walls, the black leather headboard, the sharp lines of the black furniture.

She hated it more now, knowing she'd made love with him in that bed after he'd made love with other women, in other beds.

As her belly twisted she realized she needed to go to the doctor herself. She needed to be sure he hadn't passed anything on to her. Don't think now, she told herself. Just make the appointment tomorrow, and don't think now.

She went to his closet—one nearly as big as the whole of the bedroom she'd had back in Rendezvous Ridge, back home.

Some of the suits had barely been worn, she thought. Armani, Versace, Cucinelli. Richard had leaned toward Italian designers for suits. And shoes, she thought, taking a pair of black Ferragamo loafers off the shoe shelf, turning them over to study the soles.

Barely scuffed.

Moving through, she opened a cupboard, took out suit bags.

She'd take as many as she could manage to the consignment shop in the morning.

"Should have done it already," she muttered.

But first there'd been shock and grief, then the lawyers, the accountants, the government agent.

She went through the pockets of a gray pinstripe to be certain they were empty, transferred it to the bag. Five a bag, she calculated. Four bags for the suits, then another five—maybe six—for jackets and coats. Then shirts, casual pants.

The mindless work kept her calm; the gradual clearing of space lightened her heart, a little.

She hesitated when she got to the dark bronze leather jacket. He'd favored it, had looked so good in the aviator style and the rich color. It was, she knew, one of the few gifts she'd given him that he'd really liked.

She stroked one of the sleeves, buttery soft, supple, and nearly gave in to the sentiment to set it aside, keep it, at least for a while.

Then she thought of the doctor's receipt and dug ruthlessly through the pockets.

Empty, of course, he'd been careful to empty his pockets every night, toss any loose change in the glass dish on his dresser. Phone in the charger, keys in the dish by the front door or hung in the cabinet in his office. Never left anything in pockets to weigh them down, spoil the line, be forgotten.

But as she gave the pockets a squeeze—a habit she'd picked up from her mother on washing day—she felt something. She checked the pocket again, found it empty. Pushed her fingers in again, turned the pocket inside out.

A little hole in the lining, she noted. Yes, he had favored the jacket.

She carried the jacket back into the bedroom, got her manicure scissors out of her kit. Carefully, she widened the hole, telling herself she'd stitch it up later, before she bagged it for sale.

Slipping her fingers in the opening, she drew out a key.

Not a door key, she thought, turning it in the light. Not a car key. A bank box.

But what bank? And what was in it? Why have a bank box when he had a safe right in his office?

She should probably tell the lawyers, she thought. But she wasn't going to. For all she knew, he had a ledger in there listing all the women he'd slept with in the past five years, and she'd had

enough humiliation.

She'd find the bank, and the box, and see for herself.

They could take the house, the furniture, the cars—the stocks, bonds, money that hadn't been nearly what Richard had told her. They could take the art, the jewelry, the chinchilla jacket he'd given her for their first—and last—Christmas in Pennsylvania.

But she'd hold on to what was left of her pride.

. . .

SHE WOKE FROM SHIVERY, disturbing dreams to the insistent tugging on her hand.

"Mama, Mama, Mama. Wake up!"

"What?" She didn't even open her eyes, just reached down, pulled her little girl onto the bed with her. Snuggled right in.

"Morning time." Callie sang it. "Fifi's hungry."

"Mm." Fifi, Callie's desperately beloved stuffed dog, always woke hungry. "Okay." But she snuggled another minute.

At some point she'd stretched out, fully clothed, on top of the bed, pulled the black cashmere throw over herself and dropped off. She'd never convince Callie—or Fifi—to cuddle up for another hour, but she could stall for a few minutes.

"Your hair smells so good," Shelby murmured.

"Callie's hair. Mama's hair."

Shelby smiled at the tug on hers. "Just the same."

The deep golden red had passed down from her mother's side. From the MacNee side. As had the nearly unmanageable curls, which—as Richard preferred the sleek and smooth—she'd had blown out and straightened every week.

"Callie's eyes. Mama's eyes."

Callie pulled Shelby's eye open with her fingers—the same deep blue eyes that read almost purple in some lights.

"Just the same," Shelby began, then winced when Callie poked at her eye.

"Red."

"I bet. What does Fifi want for breakfast?" Five more minutes, Callie thought. Just five.

"Fifi wants . . . candy!"

The utter glee in her daughter's voice had Shelby opening her bloodshot blue eyes. "Is that so, Fifi?" Shelby turned the plush, cheerful face on the pink poodle in her direction. "Not a chance."

She rolled Callie over, tickled her ribs and, despite the headache, reveled in the joyful squeals.

"Breakfast it is." She scooped Callie up. "Then we've got places to go, my little fairy queen, and people to see."

"Marta? Is Marta coming?"

"No, baby." She thought of the nanny Richard had insisted on. "Remember how I told you Marta can't come anymore?"

"Like Daddy," Callie said as Shelby carried her downstairs.

"Not exactly. But I'm going to fix us a fabulous breakfast. You know what's almost as good as candy for breakfast?"

"Cake!"

Shelby laughed. "Close. Pancakes. Puppy dog pancakes."

With a giggle, Callie laid her head on Shelby's shoulder. "I love Mama."

"I love Callie," Shelby replied, and promised herself she'd do whatever she had to do to give Callie a good, secure life.

. . .

AFTER BREAKFAST, she helped her daughter dress, bundled them both up. She'd enjoyed the snow at Christmas, had barely noticed it in January, after Richard's accident.

But now it was March, and she was thoroughly sick of it, and the bitter air that showed no sign of thawing. But it was warm enough in the garage to settle Callie into her car seat, to haul all the heavy garment bags into the sleek-lined SUV she probably wouldn't have much longer.

She'd need to find enough money to buy a secondhand car. A good, safe, child-friendly car. A minivan, she thought, as she backed out of the garage.

She drove carefully. The roads here had been well plowed, but winter did its damage however exclusive the neighborhood, and there were potholes.

She didn't know anyone here. The winter had been so harsh, so cold, her circumstances so overwhelming, she'd stayed in more than going out. And Callie caught that nasty cold. The cold, Shelby remembered, that had kept them home when Richard took the trip to South Carolina. The trip that was supposed to be a family winter break.

They would've been with him on the boat, and hearing her daughter chattering to Fifi, it didn't bear thinking about. Instead she concentrated on negotiating traffic, and finding the consignment shop.

She transferred Callie to her stroller and, cursing the biting wind, dragged the top three bags out of the car. As she fought to open the shop door, keep the bags from sliding and block Callie from the worst of the wind, a woman pulled open the door.

"Oh, wow! Let me give you a hand."

"Thank you. They're a little heavy so I should—"

"I've got them. Macey! Treasure trove."

Another woman—this one very pregnant—stepped out from a back room. "Good morning. Well, hello, cutie," she said to Callie.

"You got a baby in your tummy?"

"Yes, I do." Laying a hand over it, Macey smiled at Shelby. "Welcome to Second Chances. Do you have some things for us to consider?"

"I do." A quick glance around showed Shelby racks and shelves of clothes and accessories. And a very tiny area dedicated to men's clothes.

Her hopes sank.

"I haven't had a chance to come in before, so I wasn't sure what you . . . Most of what I brought in are suits. Men's suits and shirts and jackets."

"We don't get nearly enough menswear." The woman who'd let her in tapped the garment bags she'd laid on a wide counter. "Is it all right to take a look?"

"Yes, please."

"You're not from around here," Macey commented.

"Oh, no. I guess not."

"Are you visiting?"

"We— I live here in Villanova right now, just since December, but—"

"Oh my goodness! These are gorgeous suits. Pristine condition so far, Macey."

"Size, Cheryl?"

“Forty-two Regular. And there must be twenty of them.”

“Twenty-two,” Shelby said, and linked her fingers together. “I have more in the car.”

“More?” both women said together.

“Shoes—men’s size ten. And coats and jackets, and . . . My husband—”

“Daddy’s clothes!” Callie announced when Cheryl hung another suit on a holding rack. “Don’t touch Daddy’s clothes with sticky hands.”

“That’s right, baby. Ah, you see,” Shelby began, looking for the right way to explain. Callie solved it for her.

“My daddy went to heaven.”

“I’m so sorry.” One hand on her belly, Macey reached out, touched Callie’s arm.

“Heaven’s pretty,” Callie told them. “Angels live there.”

“That’s absolutely right.” Macey glanced at Cheryl, nodded. “Why don’t you go out, get the rest?” she told Shelby. “You can leave— What’s your name, cutie?”

“Callie Rose Foxworth. This is Fifi.”

“Hello, Fifi. We’ll watch Callie and Fifi while you bring the rest in.”

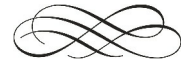
“If you’re sure . . .” She hesitated, then asked herself why two women—one of them about seven months along—would run off with Callie in the time it took her to get to the car and back. “I’ll only be a minute. Callie, you be good. Mama’s just getting something out of the car.”

. . .

THEY WERE NICE, Shelby thought later as she drove off to try local banks. People were usually nice if you gave them the chance to be. They’d taken everything, and she knew they’d taken more than maybe they might have but Callie had charmed them.

“You’re my lucky charm, Callie Rose.”

Callie grinned around the straw of her juice box, but kept her eyes glued to the backseat DVD screen and her ten millionth viewing of *Shrek*.



Six banks later, Shelby decided the luck may have run out for the day. And her baby needed lunch and a nap.

Once she had Callie fed, washed and tucked in—and the tucking-in part always took twice as long as she hoped—she geared up to face the answering machine and the voice mail on her cell phone.

She'd worked out payment plans with the credit card companies, and felt they'd been as decent as she could expect. She'd done the same with the IRS. The mortgage lender had agreed to a short sale, and one of the messages was from the realtor wanting to set up the first showings.

She could've used a nap herself, but there was a lot she could get done in the hour—if God was kind—Callie slept.

Because it made the most sense, she used Richard's office. She'd closed up most of the rooms in the big house, cut the heat back wherever she could. She wished for a fire, glanced at the black and silver gas insert under the black marble mantel. The one thing she'd enjoyed in the overwhelming house was being able to have a fire—the warmth and cheer of it—at the flick of a switch.

But that flick cost money, and she wouldn't spend it just to have gas flames when the sweater and thick socks kept her warm enough. She got out the list she'd made—what had to be done—called the realtor back, agreed to the open house on Saturday and Sunday.

She'd take Callie off somewhere, get them both out and leave that business to the realtor. Meanwhile, she dug out the name of the company the lawyers had given her that might buy the furniture so she could avoid repossession.

If she couldn't sell it in a swoop, or at least a good chunk of it, she'd try doing pieces online—if she ever had access to a computer again.

If she couldn't get enough, she'd have to face the humiliation of having it repossessed.

She didn't think the neighborhood ran to yard sales, and it was too damn cold anyway.

Then she returned the calls from her mother, her grandmother, her sister-in-law—and asked them to tell the aunts and cousins who'd also called that she was fine, Callie was fine. She was just real busy getting everything in order.

She couldn't tell them, not all of it, not yet. They knew some, of course, and some was all she could share right that minute. Talking about it made her angry and weepy, and she had too much to do.

To keep busy, she went up to the bedroom, sorted through her jewelry. Her engagement ring, the diamond earrings Richard had given her for her twenty-first birthday. The emerald pendant he'd given her when Callie was born. Other pieces, other gifts. His watches—six of them—and his army of cuff links.

She made a careful list, as she had with the clothes she'd taken to the consignment shop. She

bagged the jewelry with their appraisals and insurance information, then used her phone to search for a jewelry store, as local as she could manage, that bought as well as sold.

With the boxes she'd picked up while they'd been out, she began packing up what she considered hers, and important to her. Photographs, gifts to her from family. The realtor had advised her to "depersonalize" the house, so Shelby would do just that.

When Callie woke from her nap, Shelby kept her entertained by giving her little tasks. As she packed, she cleaned. No more housekeeping staff to scrub and polish the endless miles of tile, of hardwood, of chrome, of glass.

She made dinner, ate what she could. She dealt with bath time, story time, bedtime, then packed more, hauled boxes to the garage. Exhausted, she treated herself to a hot bath in the soaking tub with its soothing jets, then crawled into bed with her pad, intending to write out the next day's agenda.

And fell asleep with the lights on.

. . .

THE NEXT MORNING she headed out again, with Callie and Fifi and *Shrek*, and Richard's leather attaché case holding her jewelry and its paperwork, his watches and cuff links. She tried three more banks, widening her area, then, reminding herself that she had no room for pride, parked in front of the jewelry store.

She dealt with a three-year-old cranky at having her movie interrupted again, and bribed Callie into submission with the promise of a new DVD.

Telling herself it was business, just dollars and cents, she pushed Callie into the shop.

Everything shone, and seemed as hushed as a church between services. She wanted to turn around and go, just go, but made herself move forward to the woman wearing a sharp black suit and tasteful gold earrings.

"Excuse me, I'd like to talk to someone about selling some jewelry."

"You can speak to anyone here. Selling jewelry is what we do."

"No, ma'am, I mean to say I'm selling. I'd like to sell some pieces. It says you buy jewelry, too."

"Of course." The woman's eye was as sharp as the suit, and carved Shelby down, top to toe.

Maybe she wasn't looking her best, Shelby thought. Maybe she hadn't been able to camouflage the dark circles under her eyes, but if there was one thing her granny had taught her, it was that when a customer came into your place, you treated them with respect.

Shelby stiffened a spine that wanted to buckle, kept her eyes direct. "Is there someone I should speak to, or would you rather I take my business somewhere else?"

"Do you have the original receipts for the pieces you're interested in selling?"

"No, I don't, not for all, as some were gifts. But I have the appraisals and the insurance papers. Do I look like a thief, one hauling her daughter around fancy jewelry stores trying to sell stolen merchandise?"

She felt a scene rising up in her, a dam ready to burst and flood hot and wild over everything in its path. Perhaps the clerk sensed it as she stepped back.

"One moment, please."

"Mama, I wanna go home."

"Oh, baby, so do I. We will. We'll go home soon."

"May I help you?"

The man who stepped up looked like somebody's dignified grandfather, the sort in a Hollywood

movie about rich people who'd been rich forever.

"Yes, sir, I hope so. It says you buy jewelry, and I have some jewelry I need to sell."

"Of course. Why don't we go over here? You can sit down, and I'll take a look."

"Thank you."

She struggled to keep that spine straight as she crossed the shop to an ornate desk. He pulled out a chair for her, and the gesture made her want to blubber like a fool.

"I have some pieces my—my husband gave me. I have the appraisals and all that, the paperwork." She fumbled open the attaché, took out pouches and jewelry boxes, the manila envelope holding the appraisals. "I— He— We—" She broke off, closed her eyes, drew a couple of breaths. "I'm sorry, I've never done this."

"It's perfectly all right, Mrs. . . . ?"

"Foxworth. I'm Shelby Foxworth."

"Wilson Brown." He took her offered hand, shook it gently. "Why don't you show me what you have, Mrs. Foxworth?"

She decided to go with the biggest straight off, and opened the pouch that held her engagement ring.

He set it on a velvet cloth, and as he took out a jeweler's loupe, she opened the envelope.

"It says here it's three and a half carats, emerald cut, a D grade—that's supposed to be good, from what I read. And with six side stones in a platinum setting. Is that right?"

He looked up from the loupe. "Mrs. Foxworth, I'm afraid this is a man-made diamond."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's a lab diamond, as are the side stones."

She put her hands under the desk so he couldn't see them shake. "That means it's fake."

"It simply means it was created in a lab. It's a very nice example of a man-made diamond."

Callie began to whine. Shelby heard the sound through the throbbing in her head, automatically dug in her bag, pulled out the toy phone. "You call Granny, baby, tell her what you've been up to. It means," she continued, "this isn't a D-grade diamond, and this ring isn't worth what it says here on this paper? It isn't worth a hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars?"

"No, my dear, it's not." His voice was as gentle as a pat, and made it worse. "I can give you the names of other appraisers, so you can ask for other opinions."

"You're not lying to me. I know you're not lying to me." But Richard had, over and over and over. She wouldn't break down, she told herself. Not now, not here. "Would you look at the rest, Mr. Brown, tell me if they're fake, too?"

"Of course."

The diamond earrings were real, and that was all. She'd liked them because they were pretty, and they were simple. Just studs that didn't make her feel awkward in the wearing.

But she'd prized the emerald pendant because he'd given it to her the day they brought Callie home from the hospital. And it was as false as he'd been.

"I can give you five thousand for the diamond studs, if you'd still like to sell them."

"Yes, thank you. That'd be just fine. Can you tell me where I should take the rest? Is it best to go to a pawnshop? Do you know of a good one? I don't want to take Callie into someplace that's . . . you know what I mean. Sketchy. And maybe, if you don't mind, you could give me an idea what it's all really worth."

He sat back, studied her. "The engagement ring is good work, and as I said, a good example of a lab diamond. I could give you eight hundred for it."

Shelby studied him in turn as she pulled off the matching wedding ring. "How much for the set?"

She didn't break down, and she walked out with \$15,600—Richard's cuff links weren't fake, and had given her what she thought of as a bonus. Fifteen thousand six hundred was more than she'd had. Not enough to pay off debts, but more than she'd had.

And he'd given her the name of another shop that would look at Richard's watches.

She stretched her luck with Callie, tried two more banks, then gave it up for another day.

Callie picked a *My Little Pony* DVD, and Shelby bought herself a laptop and a couple of flash drives. An investment, she justified. A tool she needed to keep everything straight.

Business, she reminded herself. She wouldn't think of the fake jewelry as another betrayal, but as something that gave her some breathing room.

She spent naptime creating a spreadsheet, entered the jewelry, the payment for it. Canceled the insurance policy—and that would help her expenses.

The utilities on the big house, even with rooms closed off, were a killer, but the money from the jewelry would help there.

She remembered the wine cellar Richard had been so proud of, hauled the laptop down and began to catalog the bottles.

Somebody would buy them.

And what the hell, she'd splurge on a bottle for herself, have a glass with her dinner. She selected a bottle of pinot grigio—she'd learned a little about wines in the last four and a half years, and at least knew what she liked. She thought it would go just fine with chicken and dumplings—a Callie favorite.

By the time the day was done, she felt more in control. Especially when she found five thousand dollars tucked into one of the cashmere socks in Richard's drawer.

Twenty thousand now in the fund for cleaning up the mess and starting over.

Lying in bed, she studied the key.

"Where do you fit, and what will I find? I'm not giving up."

She could maybe hire a private detective. It would likely take a good chunk of that cleaning-up fund, but might be the sensible thing to do.

She'd give it a few more days, try some banks closer to the city. Maybe go into the city.

The next day she added thirty-five thousand on the sale of Richard's collection of watches, and two thousand three hundred more for his golf clubs, skis and tennis racket. It so boosted her mood that she took Callie for pizza between banks.

Maybe she could afford that detective now—maybe that's what she'd do. But she needed to buy a minivan, and her research told her that purchase would take a deep chunk of her fifty-eight thousand. Plus, it was only right she use some of that to bump up the payments on the credit cards.

She'd work on selling the wine, that's what she'd do, and hire the detective that way. For now, she'd just check one more bank on the way home.

Rather than haul out the stroller, she propped Callie on her hip.

Callie got that look in her eye—half stubborn, half sulky. "Don't want to, Mama."

"Me either, but this is the last one. Then we're going to go home and play dress-up tea party. You and me, baby."

"I wanna be the princess."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

She carried her now giggling daughter into the bank.

Shelby knew the routine now, walked to the shortest line to wait her turn.

She couldn't keep hauling Callie around this way, every day, disrupting routine, in and out of the car. Hell, she felt pretty damn stubborn and sulky herself, and she wasn't three and a half years old.

She'd make this the last one after all. The very last altogether, and start seriously researching private investigators.

The furniture would sell, and the wine would sell. It was time for optimism instead of constant worry.

She shifted Callie on her hip, approached the teller, who glanced at her over the tops of red-framed cheaters.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I need to speak with a manager. I'm Mrs. Richard Foxworth, and I have a power of attorney here. I lost my husband last December."

"I'm very sorry."

"Thank you. I believe he had a safe-deposit box in this bank. I have the key here, and the power of attorney."

Much quicker than fumbling around, she'd learned, telling bored bank people she'd found the key, didn't know what it went to.

"Mrs. Babbington's in her office, and should be able to help you. Straight across, to the left."

"Thanks." She went across, found the office, knocked on the open glass door. "I beg your pardon, ma'am. They said I should speak to you about getting into my husband's safe-deposit box."

She walked straight in—something else she'd learned—sat with Callie on her lap.

"I have the power of attorney here, and the key. I'm Mrs. Richard Foxworth."

"Let me check on this. You have such pretty red hair," she said to Callie.

"Mama's." Callie reached up to grab a hank of Shelby's.

"Yes, just like your mother's. You're not listed on Mr. Foxworth's box."

"I—I'm sorry?"

"I'm afraid we don't have a signature card for you."

"He has a box here?"

"Yes. Even with the POA, it would be best if Mr. Foxworth came in personally. He could add you on."

"He—he can't. He was—"

"Daddy had to go to heaven."

"Oh." Babbington's face radiated sympathy. "I'm very sorry."

"Angels sing in heaven. Mama, Fifi wants to go home now."

"Soon, baby. He—Richard—There was an accident. He was in a boat, and there was a squall. In December. December twenty-eighth. I have the documentation. They don't issue a death certificate when they can't find . . ."

"I understand. I need to see your paperwork, Mrs. Foxworth. And some photo ID."

"I brought my marriage license, too. Just so you'd have everything. And the police report on when it happened. And these letters from the lawyers." Shelby handed it all over, held her breath.

"You could get a court order for access."

"Is that what I should do? I could ask Richard's lawyers—well, my lawyers now, I guess, to do that."

"Give me a moment here."

Babbington read over the paperwork while Callie shifted restlessly in Shelby's lap. "I want my tea party, Mama. You said. I want my tea party."

"That's what we'll do, soon as we're done here. We'll have a princess tea party. You should think about what dolls you're going to invite."

Callie began to list them off, and Shelby realized the nerves of waiting gave her a sudden and

urgent need to pee.

"The POA's in order, as is the rest of your documentation. I'll show you to the box."

"Now?"

"If you'd rather come back another time—"

"No, no, I appreciate it so much." So much that she felt breathless and a little giddy. "I've never done this before. I don't know what I should do."

"I'll walk you through it. I'll need your signature. Just let me print this out. It sounds like you'll have a lot of guests at your tea party," she said to Callie as she worked. "I have a granddaughter about your age. She loves tea parties."

"She can come."

"I bet she'd love to, but she lives in Richmond, Virginia, and that's pretty far away. If you'd sign this, Mrs. Foxworth."

She could barely read it the way her thoughts were racing around in her head.

Babington used a swipe card and a passcode, accessed a kind of vault where the walls were filled with numbered drawers. Number 512.

"I'm going to step out, give you some privacy. If you need any help, just let me know."

"Thank you very much. Am I allowed to take what's in it?"

"You're authorized. Take your time," she added, and drew a curtain to block off the room.

"Well, I have to say holy . . . s-h-i-t." She set the big bag she used for Callie's things and her own, and Richard's attaché, on a table, then, clutching her daughter, stepped to the box.

"Too tight, Mama!"

"Sorry, sorry. God, I'm nervous. It's probably just a bunch of papers he didn't want in the house. It's probably nothing. It may even be empty."

So *open* it, for God's sake, she ordered herself.

With an unsteady hand, she slid the key into the lock, turned it. Even jumped a little when it clicked open.

"Here we go. Doesn't matter if it's empty. The important thing is I found it. On my own. I did it myself. I've got to set you down a minute, baby. You stay right here, you stay right here with me."

She set Callie on the floor, pulled out the box, put it on the table.

Then simply stared.

"Oh God. Holy shit."

"Shit, Mama!"

"Don't say that. I shouldn't have said that." She had to brace a hand on the table.

It wasn't empty. And the first thing that caught her eye was a stack of banded money. Hundred-dollar bills.

"Ten thousand each, and oh God, Callie, there's so many of them."

Now her hands weren't just unsteady, but shook as she counted the stacks. "There's twenty-five of them. There's two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, cash money in here."

Feeling like a thief, she flicked an anxious look at the curtain, then shoved the money into the attaché.

"I have to ask the lawyers what to do."

About the money, she thought, but what about the rest?

What about the three driver's licenses with Richard's photo? And someone else's name. And the passports.

And the .32 semiautomatic.

She started to reach for the gun, pulled her hand back. She wanted to leave it, couldn't say why

she didn't want to touch it. But she made herself lift it, remove the magazine.

She'd grown up in the Tennessee mountains, with brothers—one who was now a cop. She knew how to handle a gun. But she wasn't carrying a loaded gun with Callie around.

She placed it and the two extra mags in the attaché. She took the passports, the licenses. Discovered Social Security cards under the same three names, American Express cards, Visas. All under those names.

Was any of it real?

Had any of it ever been real?

"Mama. Let's go, let's go." Callie tugged on her pants.

"In a second."

"Now! Mama, now!"

"In a second." The tone, sharp and firm, might have had Callie's lip quivering, but sometimes a child had to be reminded that she didn't run the show.

And a mama had to remember that a three-year-old had a right to get tired of being hauled all over creation and back every damn day.

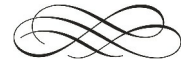
She bent, kissed the top of Callie's head. "I'm almost done, I just have to put this back now."

Callie was real, Shelby thought. That's what mattered. The rest? She'd figure it out, or she wouldn't. But Callie was real, and over \$200,000 would buy a decent minivan, pay off some of the debt, maybe squeeze out enough for a down payment on a little house once she got steady work.

Maybe Richard hadn't meant to, and she didn't know what it all meant, but he'd provided for his daughter's future after all. And he'd given her room to breathe, so she'd think about the rest later.

She hauled Callie up, shouldered the bag, gripped the attaché as if her life depended on it.

"Okay, baby girl. Let's go have a tea party."



She opened up all the rooms, turned the heat back up, even switched on the fireplaces—all seven of them.

She bought fresh flowers, baked cookies.

The time spent on her laptop researching the best way to sell a house, and fast, had suggested cookies, flowers. And as the realtor had decreed, depersonalizing.

Keep it all neutral.

As far as she was concerned, the place was as neutral as they came. She didn't find the big house welcoming, but then she never had. Maybe with softer furnishings, warmer colors—it might have felt like a home.

But that was her sensibility, and hers didn't matter.

The sooner she unloaded the damn place, the sooner that section of the crushing debt lifted off her shoulders.

The realtor arrived armed with flowers and cookies, so Shelby figured she could have saved her time and money there. She'd brought what she called a staging team with her, and they swarmed around changing the placement of furniture, displaying more flowers, lighting candles. Shelby had picked up a dozen scented candles, but decided she'd keep that to herself, just return them or keep them, depending on what seemed best when this was all said and done.

"The place is immaculate." The realtor beamed at Shelby, gave her a congratulatory pat on the shoulder. "Your cleaning crew did a terrific job."

Shelby thought of her midnight scrubblings and polishings, and only smiled. "I want it to show well."

"Believe me, it does. Short sales can be tricky, and will put some potential buyers off, but I'm confident we're going to get offers, good ones, and quickly."

"I hope you're right. I wanted to say, I've got someone coming in Monday morning to see about the furniture, but if anyone who comes in is interested in buying it, any of it, I'm going to price it to sell."

"That's excellent! There are so many wonderful pieces. I'll make sure we let people know."

She took a last critical look around herself, thought of the gun, the papers, the cash she'd locked in the safe in Richard's office.

Then she hefted the big bag she habitually carried.

"Callie and I are going to get out of the way. I have errands to run."

And a minivan to buy.

. . .

HER DADDY MIGHT NOT have approved that she didn't buy American, but the five-year-old Toyota she'd found through CarMax got high ratings on safety and reliability. And the price was right.

The price got better when she made herself haggle—offering cash. Real cash.

Her hands wanted to shake as she counted it out—half now, the rest when she picked the car up the next afternoon—but she bore down hard.

Maybe she had to pull over three blocks away, rest her forehead on the wheel. She'd never in her life spent so much money in one place. Never in her life bought a car.

Now she let herself shake, but it wasn't from nerves, no, not now. It was from stunning delight.

Shelby Anne Pomeroy—because that's who she was down into it, whatever the legal papers said—had just bought a 2010 Toyota minivan in happy cherry red. By herself. On her own.

And had shaved a thousand dollars off the deal because she hadn't been afraid to ask for it.

"We're going to be fine, Callie," she said, though her daughter was deep in her *Shrek* zone. "We're going to be just fine."

She used her cell, called the leasing company and arranged for them to pick up the SUV. And bearing down again, made herself ask for a ride to pick up the minivan.

Might as well deal with the insurance while she was at it, and Callie was in her zone. She'd just consider the SUV her office, temporarily.

Once she arranged for the car insurance to be transferred, she checked the online site where she'd listed the wine for sale.

"Oh my goodness, Callie, we've got bids!"

Delighted, fascinated, she scrolled through, adding in her head, and found over a thousand dollars already bid.

"I'm going to put another twelve bottles up tonight, that's just what I'm going to do."

Since it seemed her luck was running hot, she geared herself up for the drive into Philadelphia. Even with the GPS she made three wrong turns, had her belly knotted by the traffic. But she found the fur shop, hauled the never-worn chinchilla and her daughter inside.

To her surprise, no one looked at her like she was pathetic, or made her feel small for returning the coat. And that carved away a major chunk from a credit card, knocking the principal down to not-quite-as-scary, and lowered the painful interest rate.

She'd sat frozen for too long, Shelby admitted, and treated her little girl to a Happy Meal. Way, way too long. She'd broken the ice now, and damn it, she intended to make a flood.

She waited until she was out of the city again, gassed up the car—cursed the cold and the price of gas—then drove aimlessly for a while as Callie had fallen asleep.

Twice she drove by her own house—or the lender's house—and kept going when she counted the cars out in front. That was good, of course that was good, anyone who came to look at the house could be the one to buy it. But God, she just wanted to take Callie back, settle in, work on her accounting spreadsheet.

She stalled long enough so just the realtor waited.

"Sorry, give me one minute," Shelby said on the run. "Callie really needs to pee."

They made it—just barely. When she went back out to the great room, the realtor sat working on her tablet.

"We had a *very* successful open house. Over fifty people, and this time of year that's excellent. We had a lot of interest, and two offers."

"Offers." Stunned, Shelby set Callie down.

"Low offers, and I don't think the lender's going to accept, but it's a good start. And we have a family of four very interested. I have a good feeling about them. They're going to talk it over and get

back to me.”

“That’s terrific.”

“I also have an offer on your master bedroom suite. One of the lookers brought her sister, and while the sister isn’t in the market for a house, she is for furniture. The offer’s a little low, in my opinion, and she’d want it right away. Monday at the latest.”

“Sold.”

The realtor laughed, then blinked in surprise when she realized Shelby meant it. “Shelby, I haven’t even told you her offer.”

“It doesn’t matter. I hate that furniture. I hate every stick of furniture in this house. Except for Callie’s room,” she amended, pushing at her hair as her daughter pulled out the basket of toys Shelby kept in one of the base kitchen cabinets. “It’s the only one where I picked everything out myself. She can come haul it away tonight, for all I care. There are plenty of other places to sleep in here.”

“Can we sit down?”

“I’m sorry, of course. I’m sorry, Ms. Tinesdale, I’m a little wound up, is all.”

“I told you to call me Donna.”

“Donna. Do you want some coffee or something? I’ve forgotten every bit of my manners.”

“Just sit. You’re dealing with a lot. Frankly, I don’t know how you’re dealing with it all. I want to help you. That’s my job. The offer for the furniture is too low. Let me make a counteroffer. There’s nothing wrong with a bargain, Shelby, but I don’t like feeling you’re getting taken advantage of. Even though it’s ugly furniture.”

“Oh!” Something inside Shelby just lit up. Like vindication. “Do you think so, too? Really?”

“Just about every piece of it, except Callie’s room.”

Shelby let out a laugh that to her shock turned to weeping in a finger snap.

“I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry.”

“Mama.” Callie crawled into her lap. “Don’t cry. Mama, don’t cry.”

“I’m all right.” She clutched Callie, rocked. “I’m okay. I’m just tired.”

“Mama needs a nap.”

“I’m okay. I’m okay, baby. Don’t worry.”

“I’m going to pour you a glass of wine,” Donna announced, and dug tissues from her pocket. “You sit. I saw a bottle in the fridge.”

“It’s kind of early.”

“Not today it isn’t. Now tell me,” she continued as she went to get a glass. “What else do you want to sell? The art?”

“Oh my God, yes.” Worn to the bone, she let Callie pat a tissue over her face. “It’s on my list to see about. I don’t understand paintings like all these.”

“Rugs? Lamps?”

“I’ve packed up everything I want out of here, except for Callie’s room and my clothes, and a few things I need to keep around while we’re living here. I don’t want any of it, Mrs.— Donna. Even the dishes aren’t mine.”

“There’s quite a wine collection downstairs.”

“I’ve put twenty-four bottles online, this site I found. People are already bidding. I’m going to put another dozen on tonight.”

Donna angled her head, gave Shelby what Shelby thought of as an appraisal. “Aren’t you clever?”

“If I was clever, I wouldn’t be in this fix. Thank you,” she added when Donna gave her the wine.

"I don't think that's true, but let's start where we are. Can you give me the name of the company you have coming in about the furniture?"

"It's Dolby and Sons, out of Philadelphia."

"Good. That's good, and exactly who I'd recommend." Sipping wine, Donna made notes on her tablet, spoke briskly. "I'll make a counteroffer, but this buyer is going to have to come up to reality if she's serious about the master bedroom furniture. Otherwise, Chad Dolby—that's the oldest son, and he's probably the one who'll come in to give you a price—will make a fair offer. I know someone who would give you another price on your dishes, glassware, barware. And there are two art dealers I'd recommend for purchasing your art."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"It's my job," Donna reminded her. "And it's a pleasure. I have a daughter just a couple years younger than you. I'd hope someone would help her out if she ever found herself in . . . this kind of fix. I noticed you'd cleaned out your husband's closet."

"I did. Mama's fine, baby." She kissed Callie's hair. "You go ahead and play now. I took most of it into Second Chances," she told Donna when Callie slid off her lap.

"Perfect. Macey and Cheryl are very good at what they do, and their store gets a lot of traffic."

"Do you know everyone?"

"That's part of the job. How about the books?"

"I packed up my books, the ones I like. Richard bought the ones left in the library. He just bought them—what was it?—in a lot."

"And we'll sell them the same way." Donna nodded, tapped on her tablet. "I'm going to add that to my notes. And if it's what you want, I'm going to put some of the contacts I have in touch with you. You can set up appointments."

"That would be wonderful. I would appreciate that so much. It feels like I've been stumbling around, trying to figure out what to do with what for so long now."

"From what I'm seeing, you've figured it out very well."

"Thank you, but it helps so much to have advice and direction. You're so nice. I don't know why you made me so nervous."

Now Donna laughed. "I can have that effect. Should I give the contacts your cell number or the landline?"

"Maybe you could give them both. I try to keep my cell phone with me, in a pocket, but sometimes I forget."

"Done. These are businesspeople, and they're looking to make a profit. But they won't lowball you. If you think of anything else, you just let me know." She smiled. "I really do know everybody. And, Shelby, I'm going to get you an offer on this house, a good one. It's a beautiful space in a prime location, and the right buyer's out there. I'll find the right buyer."

"I believe you will."

And because she did, Shelby slept better that night than she had in weeks.

. . .

THE ENTIRE NEXT WEEK her head never stopped spinning. She made the deal with Dolby and Sons, shipped off wine won through the online auction house, picked up a very nice check from the consignment shop for some of Richard's clothes—and hauled in three garment bags from her own closet.

She accepted the offer for the dishes and glassware, packed it all up—and bought a set of four

colorful plastic plates, bowls, cups.

They'd make do.

Though it might have been more sensible to eke out payments, she paid off one of the credit cards in full.

One down, she thought, eleven to go.

The art—not originals, as Richard had claimed—wasn't worth as much as she'd hoped. But the quantity made up for some of that.

Every day she felt lighter. Even the storm that blew in fourteen inches of snow didn't throw her off. She bundled Callie up like an Eskimo, and together they built their first snowman.

Nothing to write home about, she thought, but she did just that, snapping pictures with her phone to send back to Tennessee.

And the adventure wore her little girl out so Callie and Fifi were tucked in by seven. That gave Shelby a long, solid evening with her spreadsheet, her bills and her to-do list.

Should she use this money here to pay off one of the smaller credit cards, just get it gone? Or should she apply that money to one of the big ones, cut the interest payment down?

As much as she wanted to say two down, ten to go, it made more sense to cut down the interest.

Carefully she made the payment online, the way she'd taught herself, logged it onto her spreadsheet.

Four hundred and eighty-six thousand, four hundred dollars down. Only two million, one hundred and eighty-four to go.

Not counting the next bill that came in from the lawyers, the accountants. But at the moment, hell, that seemed like chicken feed.

The phone rang, and seeing Donna's name on the display, she snatched it up.

Maybe.

"Hello."

"Hi, Shelby, it's Donna. I know it's a little late, but I wanted to let you know we got a good offer on the house."

"Oh! That's such good news."

"I think the lender's going to approve this. You know it can take weeks, even months, but I'm going to do everything I can to push it through. It's the family I told you about, from the first open house. They really love the house, and the location is just what they wanted. And one more thing—she hates the furniture."

Shelby let out a laugh, lifting her face to the ceiling, cutting loose. "She really does?"

"Absolutely hates it. She told me she had to look past it, pretend it wasn't there, to really *see* the house, the layout. He's nervous about the short-sale aspect, but she wants it, and he's willing to go that route. And I think if the lender counters, asking for closer to their asking price, this buyer will come up."

"Oh my God, Donna."

"I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but you should celebrate, at least a little."

"I feel like stripping naked and dancing all over this damn house."

"Whatever works."

"Maybe just the dancing part. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Fingers crossed, Shelby. I'll contact the lender first thing in the morning. You have a good night."

"You, too. Thanks again. Bye now."

She didn't strip naked, but she did bring up the satellite radio. She hit with Adele, danced around the office, picked up the lyrics, let her voice loose.

She'd had ambitions once, aspirations, dreams. She'd be a singer—a star. Her voice was a gift, and she'd tended it, used it, appreciated it.

She'd met Richard through her voice, when he came into the little club in Memphis where she was lead singer with a band they called Horizon.

Nineteen years old, she thought now. Not old enough to buy a legal beer in the club, though Ty, their drummer who'd been a little bit in love with her, used to sneak her a bottle of Corona when he could.

God, it felt good to sing again, to dance. Other than lullabies, she hadn't used her singing voice in months. She rolled through Adele, straight into Taylor Swift, then fumbled with the remote to mute the volume when her phone rang again.

Still smiling, still dancing, she answered.

"Hello."

"I'm looking for David Matherson."

"I'm sorry, you've got the wrong number."

"David Matherson," he repeated, and rattled off the phone number.

"Yes, that's this number but . . ." Something lodged in her throat. She had to clear it, grip the receiver tight. "No one by that name lives here. I'm sorry."

She hung up before he could say anything else, then hurried to the safe, carefully entered the combination.

She took the manila envelope to the desk, and with stiff and shaky fingers, opened it.

In the envelope she kept the identification she'd found in the bank box, the ones with Richard's face smiling out.

And one set of identification was in the name of David Allen Matherson.

She didn't feel like singing anymore, or dancing. For reasons she couldn't explain, she was compelled to check all the doors, check the alarm system.

Despite the waste of electricity, she left a light burning in the foyer, left the second-floor hall light on. Rather than go to her own bed, she slid in with Callie.

And lay awake a long time praying the phone didn't ring again.

. . .

THE FURNITURE COMPANY sent a crew who packed up two guest rooms, the foyer, and the dining room, where Shelby hadn't had a meal since Richard's accident. After some haggling, she'd agreed to sell the master bedroom suite to the private buyer.

She wiped out the time payment, paid off a second credit card.

Two down, ten to go.

The house felt even bigger and less friendly with so much of the furniture gone. She had a nagging itch at the base of her spine to get gone herself, but there were details yet, and they were her responsibility.

She had an appointment at one-thirty with the book buyer—made at that time so she'd have Callie down for her nap. She tied her hair back, put on the pretty aquamarine dangles her grandparents had given her for Christmas. Added some bronzer, some blush because she looked too pale. She changed the thick socks she liked to wear around the house for good black heels.

Her grandmother claimed heels might pinch the toes some, but they boosted a woman's confidence.

She jumped when the doorbell rang. The book man was a solid fifteen minutes early, time she'd

counted on to put coffee and cookies out in the library.

She rushed down, hoping he didn't ring again. Callie slept light at naptime.

She opened the door to a man younger and better looking than she'd expected—which went to show, she supposed, about assumptions.

"Mr. Lauderdale, you're timely."

"Ms. Foxworth." Smoothly, he held out a hand to clasp hers.

"Come in out of the cold. I'll never get used to northern winters."

"You haven't been in the area long."

"No, just long enough to go through a winter. Let me take your coat."

"I appreciate that."

He had a strong-looking stocky build, a square-jawed face, cool hazel eyes. Nothing, she thought, like the thin, older, bespectacled bookworm of her imagination.

"Donna—Ms. Tinesdale—said you might be interested in the books I have." She hung the sturdy peacoat in the foyer closet. "Why don't I take you right into the library so you can have a look?"

"You have an impressive home."

"It's big, anyway," she said as she led him back, past a sitting room with a grand piano nobody played, a lounge area with a pool table she still had to sell, and to the library.

It would've been her favorite room, next to Callie's, if she could have made it cozier, warmer. But for now she had the fire going, had taken down the heavy drapes—also in the to-sell pile—so the winter sun, what there was of it, could leak through the windows.

The furniture here, the leather sofa in what she thought of as lemon-pie yellow and the dark brown chairs, the too-shiny tables would all be gone by the end of the week.

She hoped the cases full of leather-bound books no one had ever read would be gone, too.

"Like I told you on the phone, I'll be moving before much longer, so I'm inclined to sell the books. I've already packed up the ones I want myself, but these—well, to tell you the truth, my husband bought them because he thought they looked good in the room."

"They look impressive, like the house."

"I guess they do. I'm more interested in what's in a book than how it looks in a cabinet, I guess. If you'd like to take a look at them, I can make coffee."

He wandered over, took out a book at random. "*Faust*."

"I read how a lot of people buy books this way, by the foot? To decorate?"

She wanted to clutch her hands together, had to order herself to relax. She should be used to this by now, she thought, it shouldn't still make her nervous.

"I guess I think it'd be nicer—more appealing to the eye, to my eye," she corrected, "if they weren't all the same. The bindings, the height. And I guess I have to say, I wouldn't be one to curl up in front of the fire and read *Faust*."

"You're not alone in that." He slipped the book back in place and turned those cool eyes on her. "Ms. Foxworth, I'm not Lauderdale. My name's Ted Privet."

"Oh, did Mr. Lauderdale send you to take a look?"

"I'm not a book dealer, I'm a private investigator. I spoke to you on the phone a couple nights ago. I asked about David Matherson."

She took a step back. Heels or not, she could and would outrun him. Get him outside, away from Callie.

"And I told you, you had the wrong number. You need to go now. I'm expecting someone any minute."

"I only need a minute." With a smile, he lifted his hands as if to show her he was harmless. "I'm

just doing my job, Ms. Foxworth. I tracked David Matherson to this area, and my information . . . I've got a photo." He reached into his inside jacket pocket, holding his other hand out and up in a gesture of peace. "If you'd just take a look. Do you know this man?"

Her heart hammered. She'd let a stranger into the house. She'd gotten careless, having so many people going in and out, and she'd let him in. With her baby sleeping upstairs.

"You let me think you were someone else." She put a whip in her voice, hope it stung. "Is that how you do your job?"

"Yeah, actually. Some of the time."

"I don't much like you or your job." She snatched the photo out of his hand. Stared at it.

She'd known it would be Richard, but seeing him—the movie-star smile, the brown eyes with hints of gold—hit hard. His hair was darker, and he wore a trim goatee she thought made him look older, just like the identification from the bank box. But it was Richard.

The man in the photo had been her husband. Her husband had been a liar.

What was she?

"This is a picture of my late husband, Richard."

"Seven months ago, this man—going by the name of David Matherson—swindled a woman in Atlanta out of fifty thousand dollars."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know any David Matherson. My husband was Richard Foxworth."

"Two months before that, David Matherson swindled a small group of investors in Jacksonville, Florida, out of twice that. I could go back, go on, including a major burglary in Miami about five years ago. Twenty-eight million in rare stamps and jewelry."

The swindling, after what she'd learned in the past weeks, didn't shock her. But the thievery, and the amount of it, had her stomach twisting, her head going light.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I want you to go."

While he tucked the photo away, he kept his eyes on hers. "Matherson was most recently based out of Atlanta, where he ran real estate scams. You lived in Atlanta before coming here, didn't you?"

"Richard was a financial consultant. And he's dead. Do you understand? He died right after Christmas, so he can't answer your questions. I don't know the answers to them. You've got no business coming in here this way, lying your way in and scaring me."

Once again, he held up his hands—but something in his eyes told Shelby he wasn't harmless at all.

"I'm not trying to scare you."

"Well, you have. I married Richard Foxworth in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 18, 2010. I didn't marry anyone named David Matherson. I don't know anyone by that name."

His mouth twisted into a sneer. "You were married four years, but you claim you don't know how your husband really made his living? What he really did? Who he really was?"

"If you're trying to tell me I'm a fool, get in line. Made his living? What living?" Overcome, she threw out her arms. "This house? If I can't get it sold and fast, they'll foreclose. You want to claim Richard swindled people, stole from people? Almost thirty million dollars? Well, if it's true, whoever hired you to find him can get in line, too. I'm digging out from the three million dollars in debt he left me holding. You need to go, you go tell your client he's got the wrong man. Or if he doesn't, that man's dead. There's nothing I can do about it. If he wants to come after me for the money, well, like I said, there's a line, and it's long."

"Lady, you want me to believe you lived with him for four years but you never heard of Matherson? You don't know anything?"

Anger swallowed fear. She'd had enough. Just enough, and that temper lit her up like a flash fire. "I don't give a good damn what you believe, Mr. Privet. Not one single damn. And if you pushed your way in here expecting I'd just pull a bunch of damn stamps and jewelry out of my pocket, or hundreds of thousands in cash to send you on your way, *I* believe you're a stupid man as well as a rude one. Get out."

"I'm just looking for information about—"

"I don't *have* any information. I don't know anything about any of this. What I *know* is I'm stuck here in this place I don't know, with this house I don't want, because I . . ."

"Because?"

"I don't know anymore." Even the temper faded now. She was just tired. "I can't tell you what I don't know. If you have any questions, you can talk to Michael Spears or Jessica Broadway. Spears, Cannon, Fife and Hanover. They're the Philadelphia lawyers handling this mess I'm in. Now, you're going, or I'm calling the police."

"I'm going," he said, following her as she strode out and went directly to the closet for his coat.

He took out a business card, held it out to her. "You can contact me if you remember anything."

"I can't remember what I don't know." But she took the card. "If it was Richard who took your client's money, I'm sorry for it. Please don't come back here. I won't let you in a second time."

"It could be the cops at the door next time," he told her. "You keep that in mind. And keep that card."

"They don't throw you in jail for being stupid. That's my only crime."

She pulled open the door, let out a little yip at the man reaching for the doorbell.

"Ah, Mrs. Foxworth? I startled you. I'm Martin Lauderdale."

He was older, with eyes of faded blue behind wire-rimmed glasses and a trim beard of more salt than pepper.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Lauderdale. Goodbye, Mr. Privet."

"Keep that card," Privet told her, and skirting around Lauderdale, walked down the cleared front walk to a gray compact.

She knew cars—after all, her granddaddy was a mechanic, and she took careful note of this one. A Honda Civic, in gray, Florida license plates.

If she saw it in the neighborhood again, she'd call the police.

"Let me take your coat," she said to Lauderdale.

. . .

BY THE END OF THE WEEK the library and the master bedroom stood empty. She sold the pool table, the piano, Richard's workout equipment and countless odds and ends through Craigslist.

She had one of the ten remaining credit cards down so close to payoff she could taste it.

She stripped the remaining art from the walls, sold that as well, and the fancy coffeemaker, the fancy bar blender.

. . .

AND WHEN SHE WOKE UP on the morning of what should have been the first day of spring to six inches of snow and still falling, she wanted to crawl back into the Princess Fiona sleeping bag currently serving as her bed.

She was living in a damn near-empty house. Worse, her baby girl was living in a damn near-empty house, with no friends, with no one to talk to or play with but her mother.

Four and a half years before, on a simmering October evening out West, she bought a pretty blue dress—Richard had liked her in blue—spent an hour blowing out her hair because he liked it smooth, and walked down the aisle of the silly little chapel carrying a single white rose.

She'd thought it the happiest day of her life, but it hadn't been her life at all. Just an illusion, and worse, just a lie.

And every day after that, she'd done her very best to be a good wife, to learn to cook the way Richard liked, to pack up and move when Richard had the whim, to dress the way he liked. To make sure Callie was washed and fed and dressed pretty when he came home.

All that's done, she thought.

"All that's done," she murmured. "So why are we still here?"

She went into her old dressing area, where she'd started some halfhearted packing in the Louis Vuitton luggage Richard had bought her in New York to replace the duffel bag she'd stuffed with clothes when she'd run off with him.

She packed in earnest now, then breaking a hard-and-fast rule, she set Callie up with *Shrek* and cereal in the kitchen while she packed her daughter's things. Following one of her mother's hard-and-fast rules—never call anybody but the police, the fire department or a plumber before nine in the morning—she waited until nine on the dot to call Donna.

"Hi, Shelby, how are you?"

"It's snowing again."

"It's the winter that won't die. They're saying we'll get about eight inches, but it's supposed to go up to about fifty by Saturday. Let's hope this is the last gasp."

"I'm not counting on it. Donna, there's not much left in the house here but me and Callie. I want to take the TV in the kitchen, the under-the-counter one, home for my grandmother. She'd just love that. And the big flat-screen—any of them. There's nine in this house, I counted. I just want to take one home for my daddy. I don't know if maybe the buyers want the others? I know the deal's not final, but we could make the sale of the TVs contingent on it. Honestly, I don't care what they want to pay me for them."

"I can propose that to them, of course. Let them make you an offer."

"That would be just fine. If they don't want them, or only want some of them, I'll take care of it." Somehow, she thought, rubbing at her aching temple.

"But . . . when I get off the phone with you, I'm calling a moving company. I can't get Callie's furniture in the van, not with the boxes I'm taking, and the suitcases and her toys. And, Donna, I'm going to ask you for an awful big favor."

"Of course, what can I do?"

"I need you to put one of those lockbox things on the house, and for us to do whatever the paperwork is that's coming if this goes through, by mail or e-mail or whatever it is. I need to go home, Donna."

Saying it, just saying it, eased the knots in her shoulders.

"I need to take Callie home. She hasn't had a chance with all that's going on to make a single friend her age. This house is empty. I think it always was, but now you can't pretend it isn't. I can't stay here anymore. If I can get everything arranged, we're leaving tomorrow. Saturday at the latest."

"That's no favor and no problem. I'll take care of the house, don't worry about that. You're going to drive all that way, alone?"

"I have Callie. I'm going to cancel this landline, but I'll have my cell if you need to reach me. And my laptop, so I'll have e-mail. If the sale doesn't go through, you'll just show it to somebody else. But I hope it does, I hope those people who want it get it, and make a home out of it. But we have

to go.”

“Will you shoot me an e-mail when you get there? I’m going to worry about you a little.”

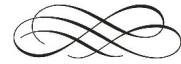
“I will, and we’ll be fine. I wish I’d known how nice you are sooner. That sounded stupid.”

“It didn’t,” Donna said with a laugh. “I wish the same about you. Don’t worry about anything here. If you need something done after you’re home, you just let me know. You’ve got a friend in Philadelphia, Shelby.”

“You’ve got one in Tennessee.”

After she hung up, Shelby took a deep breath. And she made a list, a careful one, of everything that needed doing. Once she’d crossed the last thing off, she was going home.

She was taking Callie back to Rendezvous Ridge.



It took most of the day, and some creative bribery, to keep Callie from interrupting her. Accounts to be closed, others to be transferred, the change of address, the forwarding. The cost of the moving company to break down Callie's furniture, ship it and set it up again made her wince. And she considered renting a U-Haul and doing it herself.

But she'd need help getting the bed and dresser downstairs and into a trailer anyway.

So she swallowed hard and went for it.

It paid off, to her way of thinking, as the next day, for a twenty-dollar tip, the movers took the big TV off the wall in the living room, wrapped it and carted it out to the van for her.

Donna, as good as her word, had the lockbox installed.

She packed what was left, stowed whatever she might need on the road in a big tote.

Maybe it was foolish to leave so late on a Friday. Smarter, more sensible to get a fresh start in the morning.

But she wasn't spending another night in a house that had never been hers.

She walked through, bottom to top, top back to bottom, then stood in the two-story foyer.

She could see now, with the stark art, the too sleek furnishings removed, how it might be.

Warmer colors, softer tones, maybe some big old piece, something with character, a little bit of curve in the entranceway to hold flowers, candles.

A mix of old and new, she thought, aiming for casual elegance with touches of fun.

Antique mirrors—yes, she'd group old mirrors, different shapes, along that wall, jumble books with family photos and pretty little whatnots on those shelves. And . . .

Not hers now, she reminded herself. No longer her space, no longer her problem.

"I'm not going to say I hate this place. That doesn't seem fair to whoever moves in after me. It's like putting a hex on it. So I'm just going to say I took care of it best I could while I could."

She left the keys on the kitchen counter with a thank-you note for Donna, then reached for Callie's hand.

"Come on, baby girl, we're going on our trip."

"We're gonna see Granny and Grandpa and Gamma and Granddaddy."

"You bet we are, and everybody else, too."

She walked out to the garage with Callie wheeling her little Cinderella—her once favorite princess, currently usurped by Fiona—overnight bag behind her.

"Let's get you and Fifi strapped in."

As she secured Callie in the car seat, Callie patted Shelby's cheek. Her signal for: Look at me, and pay attention.

"What is it, baby?"

"We're gonna be there soon?"

Uh-oh. Torn between amusement and resignation, Shelby patted Callie's cheek in turn. If the versions of *Are we there yet?* began before they pulled out of the garage, they were in for a very long trip.

"It's all the way to Tennessee, remember? That's going to take some time, so it's not going to be real soon. But . . ." She widened her eyes to demonstrate the excitement to come. "We're going to get to stay the night in a motel. Like adventurers."

"Venturers."

"That's right. You and me, Callie Rose. Fingers on noses," she added, and Callie giggled, put her fingers to her nose so Shelby could close the side door of the van.

She backed out of the garage, sat for a moment until the door came all the way down again.

"And that's that," she said.

She drove away without a backward glance.

. . .

TRAFFIC WAS A MISERY but she wasn't going to care about that. It would take as long as it took.

To save *Shrek* for when real boredom hit, she kept Callie entertained with songs, ones her little girl knew, and fresh ones she'd stored up to avoid the endless repetition and save her own sanity.

It mostly worked.

Crossing the state line into Maryland felt like a victory. She wanted to keep going, just keep going, but at the three-hour mark made herself get off the highway. The Happy Meal put a grin on Callie's face, and food in her tummy.

Another two hours, Shelby thought, then she'd be over halfway there. They'd stop for the night. She already had the motel picked out, the route in the GPS.

When she stopped in Virginia, she saw she'd made the right choice. Callie had had enough, and was getting her cranky on. The adventure of jumping on a motel room bed changed the mood.

Fresh pajamas, Fifi and a bedtime story did the trick. Though she doubted fireworks would wake her little girl now, Shelby went into the bathroom to call home.

"Mama. We've stopped for the night, like I said we would."

"Where are you, exactly where now?"

"At the Best Western around Wytheville, Virginia."

"Is it clean?"

"It is, Mama. I checked out the rating online before I headed here."

"You got the security lock on?" Ada Mae demanded.

"It's on, Mama."

"You put a chair under the doorknob, just for extra."

"Okay."

"How's that sweet angel?"

"She's sound asleep. She was so good on the drive."

"I can't wait to get my hands on her. And on you, sweetie pie. I wish you'd told us you were starting out today before you did. Clay Junior would've come up there, driven you down."

She was the only girl, Shelby reminded herself, and the baby of three. Her mother would fret.

"I'm fine, Mama, I promise. We're fine, and already halfway there. Clay's got work and family of his own."

"You're his family, too."

"I can't wait to see him. See all of you."

The faces, the voices, the hills, the green. It made her want to cry a little, so she worked to bump up the cheer in her voice.

"I'm going to try to get on the road by eight, but it may be a little later. But I should be there by two o'clock at the latest. I'll call you so you know for sure. Mama, I want to thank you again for letting us stay."

"I don't want to hear that from you. My own child, and her child. This is home. You come home, Shelby Anne."

"Tomorrow. Tell Daddy we're all safe for the night."

"Stay that way. And you get some rest. You sound tired."

"I am a little. 'Night, Mama."

Though it was barely eight, she crawled into bed, and was asleep in minutes like her little girl.

. . .

SHE WOKE IN THE DARK, shocked out of a dream she remembered in bits and pieces. A storm at sea, drowning waves swamping a boat—a rolling white dot in a thrashing sea of black. And she'd been at the wheel, fighting so hard to ride it out while waves lashed, lightning flashed. And Callie, somewhere Callie cried and called for her.

Then Richard? Yes, yes, Richard in one of his fine suits pulling her away from the controls because she didn't know how to handle a boat. She didn't know how to do anything.

Then falling, falling, falling into that drowning sea.

Cold, shaken, she sat up in the strange dark room, trying to get her breath back.

Because it was Richard who'd fallen into the water, not her. It was Richard who'd drowned.

Callie slept, her cute little butt hiked in the air. Warm and safe.

She slid down, lay for a while stroking Callie's back to comfort herself. But sleep was done, so she gave it up, walked quietly into the bathroom. She stood debating.

Did she leave the door open so if Callie woke in a strange place she'd know where her mama was? Or did she close the door so the light and the sound of the shower didn't wake her baby, which they were all but guaranteed to do?

She compromised, left the door open a crack.

She didn't think a motel shower had ever felt so good, warming away the last chills from the dream, washing away the dragging dregs of fatigue.

She'd brought her own shampoo, shower gel. She'd been spoiled on good products long before Richard. But then she'd been raised on them, as her grandmother ran Rendezvous Ridge's best salon.

And day spa now, Callie thought. There was just no stopping Granny.

She couldn't wait to see her, to see everyone. To just be home, breathe the mountain air, see the greens, the blues, hear the voices that didn't make hers sound somehow wrong.

She wrapped her hair in a towel, knowing it would take forever to dry, and did what her mother had taught her when she'd been hardly older than Callie.

She slicked on lotion everywhere. It felt good, that skin to skin, even if it was just her own hands. It had been so long since anyone had touched her.

She dressed, peeked out to check on Callie, and left the door open just a little wider as she started on her makeup. She wasn't going home pale and heavy-eyed.

She couldn't do anything about going home bony, but her appetite would come back once she got there, settled in, pushed some of the weights off the heavy end of the scale.

And the outfit was nice—black leggings, the grass-green shirt that made her think of spring. She added earrings, a spritz of perfume, because according to Ada Mae Pomeroy, a woman wasn't fully dressed without them.

Deciding she'd done her best, she went back into the bedroom, packed up everything but Callie's outfit for the homecoming. A pretty blue dress with white flowers and a white sweater. Then turning on one of the bedside lights, she climbed onto the bed to nuzzle her daughter awake.

"Callie Rose. Where is my Callie Rose? Is she still in Dreamland riding pink ponies?"

"I'm here, Mama!" Warm and soft as a baby rabbit, she turned into Shelby's arms. "We're on a 'venture."

"You bet we are." She cuddled for a moment because those moments were precious.

"I didn't wet the bed."

"I know. You're such a big girl. Let's go pee now, and get dressed."

Even with fussing Callie's hair into a braid tied with a blue bow to match the dress, cleaning her up again after a breakfast of waffles, gassing up the van, they were on the road by seven-thirty.

An early start, Shelby thought. She'd take it as a good sign of things to come.

She stopped at ten, another pee break, fueled her system with a Coke, filled Callie's sippy cup and texted her mother.

Got going early. Traffic's not bad. Should be there by twelve-thirty. Love you!

When she pulled back onto the highway, the gray compact slipped out three cars behind her. And kept pace.

So the young widow was heading home in her secondhand minivan. Every action she did reasonable, normal, ordinary.

But she knew something, Privet thought. And he'd find out just what that was.

. . .

WHEN SHE CAUGHT SIGHT of the mountains, the great green rise of them, Shelby's heart jumped to her throat until her eyes stung. She'd thought she knew how much she wanted this, needed this, but it was more.

It was everything safe and real.

"Look, Callie. Look out there. There's home out there. There's the Smokies."

"Gamma's in the 'mokies."

"Ssssssmokies," Shelby said with a grinning glance in the rearview.

"Ssssssmokies. Gamma and Granny and Grandpa and Granddaddy, and Unca Clay and Aunt Gilly and Unca Forrest."

She rattled off family names, and to Shelby's surprise got most of them, down to the dogs and cats.

Maybe, Shelby thought, she wasn't the only one who wanted and needed this.

By noon she was winding, winding up through the green with her window half down so she could smell the mountains. The pine, the rivers and streams. Here there was no snow. Instead wildflowers sprouted—little stars, drops of color—and the houses and cabins she passed had daffodils springing yellow as fresh butter. Here clothes flapped on lines so the sheets would carry that scent into bedrooms. Hawks circled above in the blue.

"I'm hungry. Mama, Fifi's hungry. Are we there? Are we there, Mama?"

"Almost, baby."

"Can we be there now?"

“Almost. You and Fifi can have something to eat at Gamma’s.”

“We want cookies.”

“Maybe.”

She crossed what the locals called Billy’s Creek, named for the boy who’d drowned in it before her father was born, and the dirt road that led down to the holler and to some ramshackle houses and double-wides where hunting dogs bayed in their pens and the shotguns stayed loaded and handy.

And the sign for Mountain Spring Campground, where her brother Forrest had worked one long-ago summer, and where he’d gone skinny-dipping—and a little more—with Emma Kate Addison, a fact Shelby knew as Emma Kate had been her closest friend, diapers through high school.

Now the turn for the hotel/resort built when she was about ten. Her brother Clay worked there, taking tourists out for white-water rafting. He’d met his wife there as she worked as a dessert chef for the hotel. Now Gilly was pregnant with their second child.

But before the wives and the children, before jobs and careers, they’d run tame here.

She’d known the trails and the streams, the swimming holes and the places where the black bear lumbered along. She’d walked with her brothers, with Emma Kate, on hot summer days into town to buy Cokes at the general store, or to her grandmother’s salon to beg for spending money.

She’d known places to sit and look out at forever. How the whippoorwill sounded when dusk fell in clouds of soft, soft gray after the sun died red behind the peaks.

She’d know it again, she thought. All of it. And more important, her daughter would know it. She’d know the giddy feeling of warm grass under her feet, or cold creek water lapping her ankles.

“Please, Mama, *please!* Can we be there?”

“We’re really close now. See that house there? I knew a girl who lived there. Her name was Lorilee, and her mama, Miz Maybeline, worked for Granny. She still does, and I think Granny told me Lorilee works for her, too. And see, just up ahead, that fork in the road?”

“You eat with a fork.”

“That’s right.” Almost as impatient as her daughter, Shelby laughed. “But it also means a split in the road—where you can go one way or the other? If we went to the right—the hand you color with? If we went that way, we’d be in Rendezvous Ridge in a spit. But we go left . . .”

Her own excitement rising, Shelby took the left fork—a little faster than maybe she should. “And we’re heading home.”

“Gamma’s house.”

“That’s right.”

A few houses, some of them new since she’d left, scattered around—and the road still winding and rising.

Emma Kate’s house, with a big truck in the drive that had *The Fix-It Guys* painted on the side. And there it was. Home.

Cars and trucks everywhere, she noted. Packed in the drive, ranged on the side of the road. Kids running around the front yard and dogs with them. And the spring flowers her parents tended like babies already a show at the hem of the pretty two-story house. The cedar shakes gleamed in the sun, and the pink dogwood her mother prized bloomed as pretty as Easter morning.

A banner hung between the front-porch posts.

WELCOME HOME, SHELBY AND CALLIE ROSE!

She might have laid her head on the steering wheel and wept in sheer gratitude, but Callie bounced in her car seat.

“Out! Out! Hurry, Mama.”

She saw another sign propped on a sawhorse right in front of the house.

RESERVED FOR SHELBY

As she let out a laugh, two of the boys spotted her van, ran over cheering.

“We’ll move it, Shelby!”

Her uncle Grady’s boys, who looked to have sprung up another six inches since she’d seen them at Christmas.

“Somebody having a party?” she called out.

“It’s for you. Hey, Callie, hey.” The older of the two—Macon—tapped on Callie’s window.

“Whozat, Mama? Who?”

“That’s your cousin Macon.”

“Cousin Macon!” Callie waved both hands. “Hi, hi!”

She eased the van off the road, and with intense relief, turned off the ignition. “We’re here, Callie. At last.”

“Out, out, out.”

“I’m working on it.”

Before she could get around the van, kids swarming her, to open the side door, her mother came running.

Nearly six feet, Ada Mae had long legs to cover the ground from house to van. Her yellow sundress billowed around those legs, set off her crown of red hair.

Before Shelby could take a breath she was caught in a bear hug and surrounded by the scent of L’Air du Temps, her mother’s signature perfume.

“Here you are! Here’s my girls! My God, Shelby Anne, you’re skinny as a snake. We’re going to fix that. For goodness’ sake, you kids give us some room here. Look at you, just look!” She cupped Shelby’s face, tilted it up. “Everything’s going to be just fine,” she said when Shelby’s eyes teared. “Don’t you go running your mascara. It’s all fine now. How do you get this door open?”

Shelby pulled the handle so the side door slid open.

“Gamma! Gamma!” Callie reached out, arms stretched. “Out, out!”

“I’m going to get you out of there. How the hell do you get her out of there? Oh, just look at you!” Ada Mae covered Callie’s face with kisses as Shelby released the harness, the seat belt.

“You’re pretty as a sunbeam in May. And what a pretty dress, too. Oh, give your Gamma a big hug.”

In her yellow sling-back heels, Ada Mae turned circles in the road while Callie clung to her like a burr.

“We’re all over the place.” Tears slid down Ada Mae’s cheeks as she circled.

“Don’t cry, Gamma.”

“That’s just joy spilling out, and good thing I’ve got waterproof mascara. We’re out here, in the house, out the backyard where they’ve got the big grill going already. We’ve got food to feed the army we are, and some champagne, too, to celebrate.”

With Callie on her hip, Ada Mae pulled Shelby in for a three-generation hug. “Welcome home, baby.”

“Thank you, Mama, more than I can say.”

“Let’s get you inside, get you some sweet tea. The moving van was here not two hours ago.”

“Already?”

“Carted everything right up to Callie’s room. We’ve got it all made up so sweet and pretty. Your room’s right next to your mama’s,” she said as they walked to the house. “I put you in Clay’s old room, Shelby, as it’s bigger than the one you had. It’s been fresh painted, and we got a new mattress. The old was worn out. Callie’s in Forrest’s old room, so you know you’ll share that bath between them. We got some nice new towels in there for you. Got them from your granny’s spa, so they’re nice.”

Shelby would’ve said she shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble, but if Ada Mae wasn’t fussing, she wasn’t breathing.

“Gilly baked a cake, all fancy. She’s about ready to pop, but that girl can bake like Betty Crocker.”

Her brother Clay came out. He’d gotten his parents’ height, and their father’s coloring with his dark hair and eyes. Grinning, he plucked Shelby off her feet, spun her like a top.

“About time you got here,” he murmured in her ear.

“Soon as I could.”

“Give her over,” he ordered his mother, and snatched Callie. “Hey there, sunshine. Remember me?”

“Unca Clay.”

“Girls always remember the handsome ones. Let’s go find some trouble.”

“If anybody can,” Ada Mae said, and wrapped an arm around Shelby’s waist. “You need a cold drink and a chair.”

“I feel like I’ve been sitting for days, but I’d take the cold drink.”

Family spread around the house so there were more hugs and welcomes, more yet when they reached the kitchen. Gilly—and she did look ready to pop—stood with a boy just a year younger than Callie on her hip.

“I’ve got him.” Clay transferred his son, Jackson, to his other hip. “Got me a set now.” He took off running out the back door, letting out a war hoop that had both kids squealing.

“Born to be a daddy. And a good thing,” Ada Mae added, giving Gilly’s belly a gentle pat. “You get off your feet now.”

“I’m feeling fine. Even better now.” She wrapped her arms around Shelby, swayed with the hug. “It’s so good to see you. We’ve got pitchers of tea outside, and plenty of beer. And four bottles of champagne—your mama has decreed it’s for the ladies only, as none of the men here can appreciate it.”

“Sounds about right. I’ll start with the tea.” Shelby hadn’t caught her breath, not yet, but decided she’d catch it later. “Gilly, you just look wonderful.”

Hair as sunny as Clay’s was dark, slicked back in a pretty tail to leave her face—round with pregnancy—unframed. Eyes of cornflower blue sparkled.

“Really wonderful. Are you doing good?”

“I’m doing great. Five weeks and two days to go.”

Shelby made her way outside, onto the wide back porch, looking over the big backyard with its vegetable patch already sprouting, kids clambering over a swing set, a grill smoking, picnic tables lined up like soldiers with balloons tied to chairs.

Her father stood at the grill—the general—in one of his silly aprons. This one suggested you kiss his grits.

She was in his arms in seconds. She wouldn’t break down, she told herself. She just wouldn’t

spoil it. "Hey, Daddy."

"Hey, Shelby."

He bent from his six feet, two inches, kissed the top of her head. Handsome and fit, a marathon runner for pleasure, a country doctor by trade, he held her close.

"You're too thin."

"Mama said she'd fix that."

"Then she will." He drew her back. "The doctor says food, drink, plenty of sleep and pampering. That'll be twenty dollars."

"Put it on my bill."

"That's what they all say. Go, get that drink. I've got ribs to finish."

As she stepped back, she was caught in a round-the-back bear hug. She recognized the wonderful prickle of whiskers, wriggled around and hugged. "Grandpa."

"I was just saying to Vi the other day, 'Vi, something's missing around here. Can't quite put my finger on it.' Now I got it. It was you."

She reached up, rubbed her palm over the stone-gray whiskers, looked up into his merry blue eyes. "I'm glad you found me." She laid her head against his barrel of a chest. "It looks like a carnival here. Everything full of fun and color."

"It's time you came back to the carnival. You fixing to stay?"

"Jack," Clayton muttered.

"I've been ordered not to ask questions." Those merry eyes could turn pugnacious in a finger snap—and did. "But I'm damned if I won't ask my own granddaughter if she's fixing to stay home this time."

"It's all right, Daddy, and yeah, I'm fixing to stay."

"Good. Now Vi's giving me the hard eye 'cause I'm keeping you from her. At your six," he said, and turned her around.

There she was, Viola MacNee Donahue, in a bright blue dress, her Titan hair in a sassy curling wedge, big movie star sunglasses tipped down her nose, and her eyes bold and blue over them.

She didn't look like anyone's granny, Shelby thought, but called out to her as she flew over the lawn.

"Granny."

Viola dropped her hands from her hips, threw out her arms.

"About damn time, but I guess you saved the best for last."

"Granny. You're so beautiful."

"Aren't you lucky to look just like me? Or like I did some forty years back. It's the MacNee blood, and good skin care. That little angel of yours has the same."

Shelby turned her head, smiled as she saw Callie with cousins, rolling on the grass with a couple of young dogs. "She's my heart and soul."

"I know it."

"I should've—"

"Should've are a waste. We're going to take a little walk," she said when Shelby's eyes filled. "Take a look at your daddy's vegetable patch. Best tomatoes in the Ridge. You put the worry aside now. Just put it aside."

"There's too much of it, Granny. More than I can say right now."

"Worry doesn't get things done, it just gives a woman lines in her face. So you put the worry aside. What needs doing will get done. You're not alone now, Shelby."

"I . . . forgot what it feels like not to be, so all this seems like a dream."

“This is what’s real and always has been. Come here, darling, hold on awhile.” She drew Shelby close, rubbed her back. “You’re home now.”

Shelby looked out at the mountains, smoked with clouds, so strong, so enduring, so true.
She was home now.



Somebody brought out her grandfather's banjo, and in short order her uncle Grady's wife, Rosalee, had a fiddle, her brother Clay his guitar. They wanted bluegrass, the music of the mountains. Those high bright notes, the close harmony of strings plucked and sawed stirred memories in her, lit a light inside her. A kind of birth.

Here were her beginnings, in the music and the mountains, in the green and the gatherings.

Family, friends, neighbors swarmed the picnic tables. She watched her cousins dancing on the lawn, her mother in her yellow heels swinging little Jackson to the rhythm. And there, her father with Callie in his lap having what appeared to be a very serious conversation while they ate potato salad and barbecued ribs.

Her grandmother's laugh carried over the music as Viola sat cross-legged on the lawn, sipping champagne and grinning up at Gilly.

Her mother's younger sister Wynonna kept a hawk eye on her youngest girl, who seemed joined at the hip with a skinny guy in torn-up jeans her aunt referred to as "that Hallister boy."

As her cousin Lark was sixteen and as curvy as a mountain road, Shelby figured the hawk eye was warranted.

People kept pushing food on her, so she ate because she felt her mother's own hawk eye on her. She drank champagne even though it made her think of Richard.

And she sang because her grandfather asked her to. "Cotton-Eyed Joe" and "Salty Dog," "Lonesome Road Blues" and "Lost John." The lyrics came back to her like yesterday, and the simple fun of it, singing out in the yard, letting the music rise toward the big sunstruck blue bowl of the sky, soothed her battered heart.

She'd let this go, she thought, let all of it go for a man she'd never really known and a life she knew had been false from the first to the last.

Wasn't it a miracle that what was real and true was here waiting for her?

When she could get away, she slipped into the house, wandered upstairs. Her heart just flooded when she stepped into Callie's room.

Petal-pink walls and fussy white curtains framing the window that looked out on the backyard, and the mountains beyond it. All the pretty white furniture, and the bed with its pink-and-white canopy all set up. They'd even arranged some of the dolls and toys and books on the white bookcase, tucked some of the stuffed animals on the bed.

Maybe the room was half the size of the one in the big house, but it looked just exactly right. She moved through the Jack and Jill bathroom—sparkling, as her mother would have it no other way—and into what had been her brother's room. What was her room now.

Her old iron bed where she'd slept and dreamed through childhood faced the window, just as it had in the room down the hall. As she'd liked it best so she could wake to the mountains. A simple

white duvet covered it now, but Ada Mae being Ada Mae had set pillows in lace-edged shams against the iron headboard, and more in shades of green and blue mounded with them. A throw—blues and greens again—crocheted by her great-grandmother, lay folded at the foot.

The walls were a warm smoky green, like the mountains. Two watercolors—her cousin Jesslyn's work—graced them. Soft dreamy colors, a spring meadow, a greening forest at dawn. A vase of white tulips—her favorite—sat on her old dresser, along with the picture in its silver frame of her holding Callie at eight weeks.

They'd brought her suitcases up. She hadn't asked—hadn't had to. The boxes, well, they were probably already stacked in the garage waiting for her to figure out what to do with the things she'd felt obliged to keep from a life that no longer seemed her own.

Overcome, she sat on the side of the bed. She could hear the music, the voices through the window. That's how she felt, just a step apart, behind the glass, sitting in a room of her childhood, wondering what to do with what she'd carried with her. All she had to do was open the window and she'd be a part instead of apart.

But . . .

Right now, today, everyone said welcome home, and left all the rest unsaid. But the questions murmuring under the welcome would come. Part of what she carried with her were answers and still more questions.

How much should she tell, and how should she tell it?

What good would it do to tell anyone that her husband had been a liar, and a cheat—and she feared he might've been worse. She feared down deep in her bones he'd been a swindler and a thief. And yet whatever he'd been—even if it turned out to be worse—he was still the father of her child.

Dead, he couldn't defend or explain any of it.

And sitting here brooding about it wasn't solving a thing. She was wasting that welcome, that sunstruck day, the rising music. So she'd go down again, she'd have some cake—though she already felt a little queasy. Even as she ordered herself to get up, go down, she heard footsteps coming down the hall.

She got to her feet, put an easy smile on her face.

Forrest, her brother, the only one who hadn't been there to welcome her, stepped into the doorway.

He didn't have Clay's height, skimmed just shy of six feet, and with a more compact build. A brawler's build, their granny claimed (with some pride), and he'd done his share. He had his daddy's dark hair, but his eyes, like hers, were bold and blue. They held hers now. Coolly, she thought, and full of the questions no one asked.

Yet.

"Hey." She tried to boost up her smile. "Mama said you had to work today." As a deputy—her brother the cop—a job that seemed to suit him like his skin.

"That's right."

He had sharp cheekbones, like their father, and his mother's eyes. And right now he sported a faint purple bruise on his jaw.

"Been fighting?"

He looked blank for a moment, then flicked his fingers over his jaw. "In the line. Arlo Kattery—you'd remember him—got a little . . . rambunctious last night down at Shady's Bar. They're looking for you outside. I figured you'd be up here."

"Back a few steps from where I started."

He leaned on the jamb, doing his cool study of her face. "Looks like."

"Damn it, Forrest. Damn it." No one in the family could twist her up, wring her out and smooth her down again like Forrest. "When are you going to stop being mad at me? It's been four years. Almost five. You can't stay mad at me forever."

"I'm not mad at you. Was, but I'm more into the annoyed stage now."

"When are you going to stop being annoyed with me?"

"Can't say."

"You want me to say I was wrong, that I made a terrible mistake, running off with Richard like I did?"

He seemed to consider it. "That'd be a start."

"Well, I can't. I can't say that because—" She pointed to the picture on the dresser. "That makes Callie a mistake, and she's not. She's a gift and a glory, and the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You ran off with an asshole, Shelby."

Every muscle in her body went hot and tight. "I didn't think he was an asshole at the time or I wouldn't have run off with him. What makes you so righteous, Deputy Pomeroy?"

"Not righteous, just right. It's an annoyance to me that my sister took off with an asshole, and I've barely seen her or the niece who looks just like her in years."

"I came when I could. I brought Callie when I could. I did the best I knew how. You want me to say Richard was an asshole? There I can oblige you, as it turns out he was. I had the bad judgment to marry an asshole. Is that better?"

"Some." He kept his gaze level on hers. "Did he ever hit you?"

"No. God, no." Stunned, she lifted her hands. "He never touched me that way. I swear."

"You didn't come back for funerals, for births, for weddings. Clay's, you made Clay's, but barely. How'd he keep you away?"

"It's complicated, Forrest."

"Simplify it."

"He said no." Temper began to simmer and burn inside her. "Is that simple enough?"

He stirred himself to lift his shoulders, let them fall. "You didn't always take no for an answer so easy."

"If you think it was easy, you're wrong."

"I need to know why you looked so tired, so thin, so beaten when you came home for what seemed like ten minutes at Christmas."

"Maybe because I'd come to realize I'd married an asshole, and one who didn't even like me very much."

Temper hammered against guilt with guilt slapping against fatigue.

"Because I'd come to realize before I found myself a widow and my child without a father that I didn't love him, not even a little. And didn't like him much, either."

Tears clogged her throat, threatening to burst through the dam she'd so laboriously built to hold them back.

"But you didn't come home?"

"No, I didn't come home. Maybe I married an asshole because I was an asshole myself. Maybe I couldn't figure out how to pull myself and Callie out of the muddy mess I'd made. Can you leave it at that for now? Can that be enough for now? If I have to talk about all the rest of it now, I think I'll break into pieces."

He walked over, sat beside her. "Maybe I'll move annoyed down to mildly irked."

Tears swam and spilled; she couldn't help it. "Mildly irked's progress." She turned, pressed her face to the side of his shoulder. "I missed you so much. Missed you like an arm or a leg or half my heart."

"I know." He draped an arm around her. "I missed you the same. It's why it's taken close to five years to get down to mildly irked. I got questions."

"You always have questions."

"Like why you drove down from Philadelphia in a minivan that's older than Callie, and with a couple of suitcases and a bunch of packing boxes and what looks like a big-ass flat-screen TV."

"That's for Daddy."

"Huh. Show-off. I got more questions yet, but I'll wait on them. I'm hungry and I want a beer—I want a couple of beers. And if I don't get you down there shortly, Mama's bound to come looking, then she'll skin my ass for making you cry."

"I need some time to settle myself before the questions start. I need to breathe for a while."

"This is a good place for it. Come on, let's get down there."

"Okay." She got up with him. "I'm going to be mildly irked with you for being mildly irked with me."

"That's fair."

"You can work some of that off getting Clay to help you bring in that TV, and then help figure out where it needs to go."

"It needs to go in my apartment, but I'll just come over here and watch it, and eat all Daddy's food."

"That's fair, too," she decided.

"I'm working on fair." He kept an arm draped around her shoulders. "You know Emma Kate's back."

"What? She is? But I thought she was up in Baltimore."

"She was up until about six months ago. I guess more like seven now. Her daddy had that accident last year, fell off Clyde Barrow's roof, busted himself up pretty good."

"I know about that. I thought he was doing okay."

"Well, she came back to take care of him—you know how her mama is."

"Helpless as a baby duck with no feet."

"That's the truth. She stayed a couple months. He was in and out of the hospital, in physical therapy, and her being a nurse, she could help more than most. The guy she's hooked up with, he came down off and on. Nice guy. Shortening it up, the time off and budget cuts cost her her job at the Baltimore hospital—or made it hard for her to keep on. She and her guy, they moved on down as she got an offer to work at the clinic in the Ridge."

"Daddy."

"Yeah. He says she's a damn good nurse. Matt—that's her guy—he moved on down with her, started a business with his partner. Griff's out of Baltimore, too. Construction-type business. They're The Fix-It Guys."

"I saw a truck with that name on it at Emma Kate's house."

"Matt and Griff are doing a new kitchen for Miz Bitsy. What I hear is she changes her mind every five minutes on what she wants, so it's taking a while. Emma Kate and Matt got the apartment across from mine, and Griff's got the old Tripplehorn place out on Five Possum Road."

"That place was falling down when we were ten," she remembered.

And she'd loved it.

"He's fixing it up. Likely take him the rest of his life, but he's got it going."

“You’re stock full of news, Forrest.”

“That’s only because you haven’t been around to hear it. You should go see Emma Kate.”

“I wish she’d come today.”

“She’s working, and she’s likely still in the annoyed stage where you’re concerned. You might have to work some to bring that down.”

“It’s hard knowing how many people I hurt.”

“Then don’t do it again. If you decide to leave, say goodbye proper.”

She looked out the back door, saw Clay running around with his son on his shoulders, and her grandmother pushing Callie on the swings.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ve already been gone too long.”

. . .

SHE SLEPT IN HER childhood bed on a new mattress, and though the night was cool, kept the window open a crack so the night air could waft in. She woke to a quiet rain, snuggled right in with a smile on her face as the sound of it pattered so peacefully. She’d get up in just a minute, she told herself, check on Callie, fix her baby some breakfast.

She’d deal with the unpacking, and all the other chores that needed doing. In just five more minutes.

When she woke again, the rain had softened to a misty drizzle, a drip and plop from leaves and gutters. Around it she heard the birds singing. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d woken to the song of birds.

Rolling over, she glanced at the pretty glass clock on the bedside table, then shot up like an arrow from a bow.

She scrambled up, dashed through the bath and into Callie’s room to find the bed empty.

What kind of a mother was she, sleeping till after nine o’clock and not having a clue where her daughter might be? Barefoot, a little panicked, she raced downstairs. A fire burned in the living room hearth. Callie sat on the floor, the old mutt Clancy curled beside her.

Stuffed animals sat in a line while Callie busily poked and prodded at the pink elephant lying trunk up on a kitchen towel.

“He’s very sick, Gamma.”

“Oh, I can see that, baby.” Curled in a chair, sipping coffee, Ada Mae smiled. “He’s looking peaked, no doubt about it. It’s lucky you’re such a good doctor.”

“He’s going to be all better soon. But he has to be brave ’cause he needs a shot.” Gently, she rolled him over, and used one of her fat crayons as a syringe. “Now we kiss it, kiss the hurt. Kisses make hurts feel better.”

“Kisses make everything feel better. Morning, Shelby.”

“I’m so sorry, Mama. I overslept.”

“It’s barely nine on a rainy morning,” Ada Mae began as Callie leaped up, ran to Shelby.

“We’re playing hospital, and all my animals are sick. I’m going to make them better. Come help, Mama.”

“Your mama needs her breakfast.”

“Oh, I’m fine, I’ll just—”

“Breakfast is important, isn’t it, Callie?”

“Uh-huh. Gamma made me breakfast after Granddaddy had to go help the sick person. I had slambled eggs and toast with jelly.”

“Scrambled eggs.” She lifted Callie for a kiss. “And you’re all dressed so nice. What time did she get up?”

“About seven. And don’t start. Why would you deny me a couple hours with my only granddaughter? Have we had fun, Callie Rose?”

“Lots and lots and *lots* of fun. I gave Clancy a dog cookie. He sat like a good boy, and he shook my hand, too. And Granddaddy gave me a piggyback ride all the way downstairs because I was quiet and didn’t wake you up. He had to go help the sick people. So I’m helping the sick animals.”

“Why don’t you bring your animals in the kitchen while I fix your mama some breakfast? She’s going to eat it all up like you did.”

“I don’t want you to have to feel you need to— Yes’m,” she finished, warned by the narrowed stare.

“You can have a Coke since you never did learn to be civilized and drink coffee. Callie, you can bring all the sick animals and fix them up right over there. You’re going to have eggs with ham and cheese—get some protein in there. I’ve got the whole day. I took off work until middle of the week. I’ve got a connection with the boss.”

“How will Granny run the place without you?”

“Oh, she’ll manage. Get your Coke, sit down there while I get this going. She’s fine, Shelby,” Ada Mae added in an undertone. “She’s busy and she’s happy. And your daddy and I enjoyed her company this morning. Now, I don’t have to ask how you slept. You look better already.”

“I slept ten hours.”

“New mattress.” Ada Mae chopped some ham. “And the rain. Makes you want to sleep all day. Haven’t been sleeping well, have you?”

“Not especially.”

“Or eating much.”

“It’s been hard to work up an appetite.”

“A little pampering might make that easier.” She glanced over at Callie. “I’m going to tell you you’ve done a good job with that girl. Of course, some of it’s just disposition, but she’s well-mannered without being all prim about it—something that just makes my back itch in a child—and she’s happy.”

“She wakes up every day raring to go.”

“She wanted you first thing, but all I had to do was take her to your bedroom door, show her you were there sleeping, and she was fine. That’s a good thing, Shelby. A child who clings usually says more about the mother clinging. And I expect it’s been hard not to cling, on both sides these past months, when it’s just been the two of you.”

“I never saw any kids her age around the neighborhood up North. But then it was so awful cold, and it seemed it was snowing every five minutes. Still, I was going to look for a good preschool, just so she could socialize, but . . . I just didn’t after—you know. I didn’t know if it was the right thing for her after. And you and Daddy came for a while, and Granny came, and that was good. It helped us both having y’all there.”

“I hope it did. We all worried we’d left you alone too soon.” Ada Mae poured whisked eggs in the skillet over the ham chunks, grated cheese into the mix. “I don’t know if I could’ve left if you hadn’t said you’d come home as soon as you could.”

“I don’t know how I’d’ve got through if I hadn’t known I could come home. Mama, that’s enough eggs for two people.”

“You’ll eat what you want, then one bite more.” Over her shoulder she sent Shelby a narrow look. “They’re wrong when they say you can’t be too thin, because you are. We’re going to plump

your mama up, Callie, and put roses in her cheeks.”

“Why?”

“Cause she needs it.” Ada Mae plated the eggs, added a slice of toast, passed it over the counter. “And one bite more.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now.” Ada Mae busied herself tidying the already tidy kitchen. “You’ve got a hot stone massage booked at two o’clock at Mama’s.”

“I do?”

“Could do with a facial, too, but I’ll do that myself later in the week. A woman drives clear down from Philadelphia hauling a toddler’s earned a good massage. And Callie and I have plans this afternoon.”

“You do?”

“I’m taking her over to Suzannah’s. You remember my good friend Suzannah Lee? She couldn’t come yesterday as she had her sister’s girl’s wedding shower. That’s Scarlet? Scarlet Lee? You went to school with Scarlet.”

“Sure. Scarlet’s engaged?”

“Got a May wedding planned, to a nice boy she met in college. They’re getting married here as Scarlet’s people are here, then moving clear up to Boston, where he’s got a job in advertising. Scarlet got her teaching degree so that’s what she’ll be doing.”

“A teacher?” Shelby had to laugh. “As I remember, Scarlet hated school like it was spinach soaked in arsenic.”

“Goes to show. What it goes to show, I can’t say, but it goes to show. Anyway, I’m taking Callie over to Suzannah’s, show her off some, and Suzannah’s getting her granddaughter, Chelsea—she’s three, like Callie—that’s her son Robbie’s daughter who married Tracey Lynn Bowran. I don’t think you’ve met Tracey. Her people are from Pigeon Forge. She’s a nice girl, a potter. That’s one of her bowls there, with the lemons in it.”

Shelby glanced at the rich brown bowl with its bold blue and green swirls. “It’s beautiful.”

“She’s got herself a kiln, works out of her house. They carry some of her pieces in town, at The Artful Ridge, and up at the hotel gift shop, too. We’ll be giving you and Tracey a day off as Suzannah and Chelsea and Callie and me, we’re having us a playdate.”

“She’ll love that.”

“So will I. I’m going to be greedy with her for a while, so I expect you to indulge me. I’m taking her over about eleven. They’ll get acquainted, then we’ll have lunch. If the weather lets up, we’ll take them out awhile.”

“Callie usually naps about an hour in the afternoon.”

“Then they’ll have a nap. You can stop fretting about it, as I can see you are.” With her chin jutted up, Ada Mae fisted a hand on her hip. “I managed to raise you and two boys besides. I think I can handle a toddler.”

“I know you can. It’s just . . . she hasn’t been out of my sight in . . . I can’t think how long. And fretting because she will be says more about me.”

“You were always a bright girl. I wouldn’t have any other kind,” Ada Mae added as she came around the island, laid her hands on Shelby’s shoulders. “Sweet Jesus, girl, you’re nothing but knots. I booked you with Vonnie—you remember Vonnie, she’s a cousin on your daddy’s side.”

Vaguely, Shelby thought, as cousins were legion in her family.

“Vonnies Gates,” Ada Mae continued. “Your daddy’s cousin Jed’s middle girl. She’ll work these out of you.”

Shelby reached her hand back, laid it over her mother's. "You don't have to feel you need to take care of me."

"Is that what you'd say to your daughter, under these circumstances?"

Shelby sighed. "No. I'd tell her it was my job and my wish to take care."

"Well then. One bite more," Ada Mae murmured, kissing the top of Shelby's head.

Shelby ate one bite more.

"After today, you'll clear your own dishes, but not today. What do you want to do this morning?"

"Oh. I should unpack."

"I didn't say should," Ada Mae reminded her as she cleared Shelby's plate. "I said want."

"It's both. I'll feel more settled once I get things put away."

"Callie and I'll help you with that. When's the rest of your stuff coming?"

"I've got everything. I brought everything."

"Everything." Ada Mae stopped and stared. "Honey, they only took up a couple of suitcases, well, and Callie's things since you had those boxes marked. Clay Junior didn't stack more than a half dozen boxes, if that, in the garage."

"What was I going to do with all those things, Mama? Even when I find a house—and I have to find a job first—I couldn't use all those things. Did you know there are companies that come in, look things over and buy furniture all at once, right out of the house?"

She said it conversationally, lightly, as she rose, bent to pick up Callie, who was dancing, holding her arms up. "The realtor helped me find them. She was such a help to me with that sort of thing. I should send her flowers when the sale's all done, shouldn't I?"

The question didn't distract her mother as Shelby had hoped.

"All that furniture? Why, Shelby, there were seven bedrooms in that house, and that big office, and I don't even know all the other rooms. It's as close to a mansion as I've ever been in without paying for the tour. And so new." Shock and worry clear on her face, Ada Mae rubbed the heel of her hand between her breasts. "Oh, I hope you got a good price for all that."

"I worked with a very reputable company, I promise. They've been in business over thirty years. I did a lot of research online on that kind of thing. I swear, I could get a job as a researcher with all I've done with it, if I didn't think I'd want to shoot myself before the first week was done."

"We're going to unpack, Callie. You gonna help before you and Gamma go?"

"I'll help! I like helping Mama."

"Best helper ever. Let's get started. Mama, do you know if Clay took up the box that had Callie's little hangers? I can't use regular ones for her things yet."

"He took up everything that had her name on it. I'll just go out and look, be sure."

"Thanks, Mama. Oh, I'll go out, change the car seat over to your car."

"I wasn't born yesterday." The edge in Ada Mae's voice told Shelby her mother was still reeling from the idea of selling all that furniture.

She didn't know the half of it yet.

"Your daddy and I got the same one you use," Ada Mae added. "It's all ready for her."

"Mama." Shelby stepped over and with her free arm pulled her mother into a hug. "Callie, you have the best Gamma in the whole world."

"My Gamma."

And that distracted Ada Mae—enough, Callie thought as she knew her mother would chew over the idea of selling all the furniture in a near-to-ten-thousand-square-foot house in one fell swoop.

. . .

IT WAS ODD not having Callie underfoot or playing in her eye line, but she'd been so excited about the playdate. And it was true enough she'd be done with the unpacking and sorting in half the time without Callie "helping."

By noon, with everything put away, the beds made, she wondered what in the hell to do with herself.

She glanced at her laptop with some dislike, but made herself boot it up. No notices from creditors—so that was good news. Nothing yet on the sale of the house, but she wasn't expecting it. She did read a short e-mail from the consignment shop, letting her know they'd sold two of Richard's leather jackets, his cashmere topcoat and two of her cocktail dresses.

She replied with a thank-you, telling them yes, it was fine to wait until the first of the month to send a check to the address she'd left with them.

With unpacking and business done, she showered, dressed. Still too early to go in for the massage—and wouldn't that be heaven? So she'd take a walk. She could use a good walk.

The thin drizzle persisted, a steady trickle of wet out of a sky soft and gray as smoke. But she liked walking in the rain. She pulled on a hoodie, short, soft leather boots, and reached for her big bag. Her Callie bag. And remembering she'd given it to her mother to take, pushed her wallet into the back pocket of her jeans.

She felt so light, so unencumbered, she didn't know what to do with her hands, so slipped them into the pockets of the hoodie, found the little pack of wet wipes she'd stuffed in there the last time she'd worn it—when she hadn't been so unencumbered.

She drew in a deep breath of the cool, damp air when she stepped outside. Just stood breathing in with her fingers around Callie's wet wipes and the empty afternoon stretching ahead of her.

Everything was greening and sprouting and blooming with the misty rain turning the green, the color, more vibrant. All those scents—wet grass, wet earth, the tender sweetness of hyacinths dancing purple among the yellow of daffodils—drifted to her as she walked the long, familiar road.

She could walk by the Lee house, just to check. It was getting on to nap time, and Callie wasn't a hundred percent on the potty training in her sleep. About ninety-eight, but she'd be so embarrassed if she had an accident because her grandmother didn't think to take her in to pee before her nap.

She could just walk by, just a quick peek to . . .

"Stop it. Just stop. She's fine. Everything's just fine."

She'd listen to her mother's advice, take the day to do what she wanted. A walk in the rain, taking her time, time enough to study the mountains in their smoky blanket, to appreciate the spring flowers and the quiet.

She glanced over at Emma Kate's house, noted the handyman truck in the drive, and the bright red car behind it. She wondered how she'd approach Emma Kate now that they were both back in the Ridge.

And her friend got out of the car.

She wore a hoodie, too, in a bold candy-pink Callie would have loved. She'd changed her hair, Shelby thought as Emma Kate pulled two market bags out of the backseat. She'd hacked off the long nut-brown braid Shelby remembered, wore it all cute and shaggy, with bangs.

She started to call out, then could think of nothing to say and felt stupid and awkward.

As she swung the door closed, Emma Kate spotted her. Her eyebrows lifted under the warm brown fringe of bangs as she hauled one strap onto her shoulder.

"Well, look who's standing out in the rain like a wet cat."

"It's just a drizzle."

"It's still wet." She stood hipshot a moment, bags hanging from her shoulders, her wide mouth unsmiling, her deep brown eyes critical even through the rain. "I heard you were back."

"I heard the same about you. I hope your daddy's doing okay."

"He is."

Feeling more stupid just standing there, Shelby walked up the short driveway. "I like your hair."

"Granny talked me into it. I'm sorry about your husband."

"Thanks."

"Where's your little girl?"

"With Mama. They have a playdate with Miz Suzannah's granddaughter."

"Chelsea. She's a pistol. You got a destination, Shelby, or are you just out wandering in the wet?"

"I'm going into Viola's, but I have all this time on my hands with Callie off with Mama, so . . . I'm wandering first."

"Then you'd better come inside, say hello to my mother or I won't hear the end of it. I've got to take her these groceries anyway."

"That'd be nice. Here, let me take one."

"I've got it."

Rebuffed, as she was meant to feel, Shelby hunched her shoulders as they walked to the door. "I . . . Forrest said you're with someone, and living in town."

"I am. Matt Baker. We've been together about two years now. He's at Viola's right now, fixing one of the sinks."

"I thought this was his truck."

"They have two. This is his partner's. Griffin Lott. Mama's redoing the kitchen, and driving us all insane."

Emma Kate opened the door, glanced back at Shelby. "You're the talk of Rendezvous Ridge, you know. That pretty Pomeroy girl who married rich, was widowed young, come back home again. What will she do?" Emma Kate smirked a little. "What will she do?" she said again, and walked inside with her market bags.



Griff considered himself a patient man. He didn't fly off the handle as a rule. And when he did, all bets were off, but it took a lot of pushing to get him off the ground.

But right at the moment he was seriously considering duct-taping Emma Kate's pretty adorable mother's mouth closed.

He'd worked on getting the base cabinets in all morning, and she'd been peppering him with questions all morning.

Breathing down his neck, hanging over his back, all but crawling up his ass.

He knew damn well Matt had taken off to Miz Vi's place to spare himself the headache of his girlfriend's sweet, chatty—and let's face it—ditzzy mother.

Worse, she was still dithering—"dithering" would be the word of the day—about the cabinets even as he installed them. And if he had to take them out because she changed her mind again, he might do worse than duct tape.

He had bungee cords, and he knew how to use them.

"Oh now, Griff honey, maybe I shouldn't have gone with the white. They're so plain, aren't they? And white's cold, it's just a cold color, isn't it? Kitchens ought to be a warm place. Maybe I should've gone with the cherrywood after all. It's so hard to know before you see them right there where they're going, isn't it? How do you know what it's going to look like until you see what it looks like?"

"Clean and fresh," he said, trying to sound cheerful when he wanted to grind his teeth. "Kitchens should be clean and fresh, and that's what you're going to have."

"Do you think so?" She stood, nearly at his elbow, twisted her linked fingers together. "Oh, I don't know. Henry finally just threw up his hands and said he didn't care either way. But he'll care if it isn't right."

"It's going to look great, Miz Bitsy." He felt like someone, possibly himself, was shooting a nail gun dead center of his forehead.

He and Matt had dealt with fussy clients back in Baltimore. The control freaks, the whiners, the demanders and the ditherers, but Louisa "Bitsy" Addison was the undisputed queen of the ditherers.

She made the previously reigning champs—John and Rhonda Turner, who'd had them tear out a wall in their row house in Baltimore, build it back in, then tear it out a second time—seem resolute, steady as a brick wall—in comparison.

What they'd estimated as a three-week job—with a three-day contingency built in—was currently in week five. And God knew when it would end.

"I don't know," she said for the millionth time, patting her hands together under her chin. "White's kind of stark, isn't it?"

He set the cabinet, pulled out his level, shoved one hand through his mop of dark blond hair.

“Wedding gowns are white.”

“Now, that’s true, and . . .” Her already big brown eyes got bigger, and a giddy thrill shone out of them. “Wedding gowns? Oh now, Griffin Lott, do you know something I don’t? Has Matt popped the question?”

He ought to throw his partner under the bus. He ought to throw him under, then back up and drive over him again. But . . . “I was just using an example, like . . .” He did a frantic mental search. “Magnolias, for instance. Or—” Sweet Jesus, give me one more. “Ah, baseballs.”

Crap.

“The hardware’s going to punch it all up,” he continued, just a little desperately. “And the countertop. That warm gray’s going to give you friendly and sophisticated at the same time.”

“Maybe it’s the wall color that’s wrong. Maybe I should—”

“Mama, you’re not having those walls repainted.” Emma Kate marched in.

Griff could’ve kissed her, could have dropped down and kissed her feet. Then he lost track of her completely when the redhead stepped in behind her.

He actually thought, Holy shit—and hoped he hadn’t said it out loud.

She was beautiful. A man didn’t get to be just shy of his thirtieth birthday without seeing some beautiful women, even if it was just on a movie screen. But this one, in the flesh, was one quick *wow*.

Masses of curling hair the color of a sunrise all tumbling around a face that looked like it had been carved out of porcelain—if they carved from porcelain, how would he know? Soft, full lips with a perfect dip at the top, and big, deep, sad blue eyes.

His heart actually skipped a couple of beats, and his ears buzzed for a minute so he missed most of the argument between Emma Kate and her mother.

“The kitchen’s the heart of a home, Emma Kate.”

“The way you keep turning and twisting it, you’re lucky to have a heart left. Let Griff work, Mama, and say hello to Shelby.”

“Shelby? *Shelby*! Oh my God!”

She raced across the room, grabbed the redhead in a wide, swaying hug. Shelby, grabbed Shelby, Griff thought. Nice name, Shelby. Currently his favorite name ever.

Then it clicked. Shelby—or Shelby Anne Pomeroy, as Bitsy squealed as she gave the redhead another squeeze. His friend Forrest’s sister.

Miz Vi—on whom he had a mad crush—Miz Viola’s granddaughter.

You could see if you stopped being dazzled for two seconds, just how Miz Vi had looked as a young woman. How Ada Mae might have looked twenty-some years back.

Miz Vi’s granddaughter, he thought again. The widow.

No wonder she had sad eyes.

He immediately felt guilty for wanting to wrap her up the way Bitsy was—then reminded himself it wasn’t his fault her husband was dead.

“Oh, I’m just sick about missing your welcome home yesterday, but Henry and I had to go to his cousin’s daughter’s wedding, clear to Memphis. And I don’t even like his cousin. Just a snooty woman, puts on airs because she married a Memphis lawyer. But it was a beautiful wedding, with the reception at the Peabody Hotel.”

“Mama, give Shelby a chance to breathe.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I’m just going on and on. I’m so excited to see you. Griff, Emma Kate and Shelby here were joined at the hip, I swear, before they were so much as a year old right up to . . .”

It seemed to occur to her just why Shelby was home.

"Oh, honey. Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. You're so young to have such a tragedy in your life. How are you holding up?"

"It's good to be home."

"Nothing like home. And here mine's all torn up, so I can't even fix you something nice. And you so thin, too. Honey, you're skinnier than a New York model. You always were tall enough to be one. Emma Kate, do we have any Coke? You always were fond of Coke, weren't you, Shelby?"

"Yes, ma'am, but don't trouble about it. I love your new cabinets, Miz Bitsy. They're so clean and fresh, and just so pretty against that blue-gray on the walls."

Widow or not, at that moment Griff wanted to kiss her. Everywhere.

"Why, that's just what Griff said. He said they were clean and fresh. Do you really think—"

"Mama, we haven't even introduced Shelby. Shelby, this is my boyfriend's partner, Griffin Lott. Griff, Shelby—it's Foxworth, isn't it?"

"Yes." She turned those amazing eyes on him, and yeah, hearts could skip a beat. "It's nice to meet you."

"Hi. I'm a friend of your brother's."

"Which one?"

"I guess both, but mostly Forrest. And I might as well tell you right off, I'm in love with your grandmother. I'm working on a way to get her away from Jackson so we can run off to Tahiti."

That wonderfully shaped mouth curved, those sad eyes lightened, just a little. "It's hard to blame you."

"Griff's living out at the old Tripplehorn place," Emma Kate added. "He's rehabbing it."

"So you work miracles?"

"As long as I can use tools. You should come by and see it sometime. It's coming along."

She smiled at him, but it didn't reach those big sad eyes this time. "You've got your work cut out for you. I need to get on. I'm due at my grandmother's place."

"Now, Shelby, you come back when this is all finished and we'll have a nice long talk." Bitsy fluttered around her. "I expect to see you in and out of here just like you used to be. You know you're same as family here."

"Thank you, Miz Bitsy. It was nice meeting you," she said to Griff again, turned to go.

"I'll walk you out." Emma Kate shoved the market bags at her mother. "There's cold cuts and made-up salads and plenty of ready-to-eat food. You don't have to worry about cooking until your new stove's in. I'll be right back."

Emma Kate said nothing on the way to the door. "Say hey to Granny," she said as she opened it.

"I will." Shelby stepped out, turned. Bitsy's open welcome made Emma Kate's reserve all the more painful. "I need you to forgive me."

"Why?"

"Because you're the best friend I've had in my life."

"That was then. People change." After shaking back her shaggy hair, Emma Kate stuck her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. "Look, Shelby, you've had a hard knock, and I'm sincerely sorry about it, but—"

"You have to forgive me." Pride demanded she walk away; love wouldn't allow it. "I didn't do right by our friendship. I didn't do right by you, and I'm sorry. I'll always be sorry. I need you to forgive me. I'm asking you to remember that friendship before I ruined it, and forgive me. At least enough to talk to me, to tell me what you've been doing and how you are. Just enough for that."

Emma Kate studied her face, her dark eyes thoughtful. "Tell me one thing. Why didn't you come back when my granddaddy died? He loved you. I needed you."

"I wanted to. I couldn't."

With a slow shake of her head, Emma Kate stepped back. "No, that's not enough for forgiveness. You tell me why you couldn't do something you had to know was important, just sent flowers and a card like that was enough. Tell me the straight truth on that one thing."

"He said no." The shame of it washed over Shelby's face, burned in her heart. "He said no, and I didn't have the money or the nerve to go against him on it."

"You always had nerve."

Shelby remembered the girl who'd always had nerve like she remembered her cousin Vonnie. Vaguely.

"I guess I used it up. It's taking all I've got left to stand here and ask you to forgive me."

Emma Kate took a long breath. "You remember Bootlegger's Bar and Grill?"

"Sure I do."

"You meet me there tomorrow. Seven-thirty should work for me. We'll talk some of this out."

"I need to ask Mama if she can watch Callie."

"Oh yeah." The chill came back, cooler and damper than the drizzling rain. "That would be your daughter, the one I've never laid eyes on."

That twisted—both shame and guilt. "I can keep saying I'm sorry, as many times as you need to hear it."

"I'll be there at seven-thirty. Come if you can make it."

Emma Kate went back inside, then leaned back against the door and let herself cry just a little.

. . .

GRIFF SET THE LAST base cabinet in blessed peace since Emma Kate fell on her sword and took her mother shopping. He gave himself a break, swigging Gatorade straight from the bottle and eyeing the progress.

He didn't doubt the champion waffler would love every square inch of the remodeled kitchen once it was done. And it would look clean and fresh—just like the redhead.

Something going on there, he mused, with Bitsy going on about how Emma Kate and Shelby had been friends practically in the womb, and Emma Kate standing there as stiff and cool as he'd ever seen her. And the redhead sad and awkward.

Girl fight, he supposed. He had a sister, so he knew girl fights could be long and bitter. He'd have to poke at Emma Kate. It was just a matter of finding the right spot, getting her to open up and spill.

He wanted to know.

And he wondered how long was a reasonable length of time before a guy asked a widow out.

He should probably be ashamed of himself for wondering, but he just couldn't drum it up. He hadn't had such a quick and strong reaction to a woman in . . . ever, he decided. And he liked women a lot.

He set the Gatorade down and decided since Matt was taking all damn day to fix a sink, he'd start on the upper cabinets. Plus it wouldn't be just the sink, he thought, as he hauled his stepladder over. There'd be conversation. Nothing got done in Rendezvous Ridge without considerable conversation.

And iced tea. And questions, and long, lazy pauses.

He was getting used to it, found he enjoyed the slower pace, and definitely appreciated the small-town vibe.

He'd had a choice to make when Matt decided to move to Tennessee with Emma Kate. Stay or

go. Find a new partner, run the business himself. Or take the leap and start over, more or less, in a new place with new people.

He didn't regret taking the leap.

He heard the front door open. That took getting used to, the way people in the Ridge rarely locked a door.

"Did you have to make her a new sink?" Griff called out, then set the drill on the last screw of the first upper.

"Miss Vi found a few other things for me to do. Hey, you're moving along. This looks great."

Griff grunted, stepped down to eye the cabinet. "Word of the day is 'dithering,' which has a picture of Bitsy Addison beside it in every dictionary across the land."

"She has a little trouble sticking to decisions."

And there was Matt's gift for understatement.

"I don't know how she decides to get out of bed in the morning. I'd be further along if your woman had gotten here sooner and taken Bitsy away. She's thinking the white's too white, and maybe she picked the wrong countertop. Or the wrong paint color. Don't ask about the backslash."

"Too late now to change her mind on any of it."

"You try telling her."

"You gotta love her."

"Yeah, you do. But Christ, Matt, can't we put her in a box for the next three days?"

Grinning, Matt took off his light jacket, tossed it aside.

Where Griff was long and lanky, Matt was tough and ripped. He wore his black hair neat and trim where Griff's strayed past his collar with a hint of curl. Matt kept his square-jawed face clean-shaven while Griff's narrow, hollow-cheeked one tended toward scruff.

Matt played chess and enjoyed wine tastings.

Griff liked poker and beer.

They'd been as close as brothers for nearly a decade.

"Got you a sub," Matt told him.

"Yeah, what kind of sub?"

"That fire-breather one you like. The one that burns off the stomach lining."

"Cool."

"How about we get a couple more up, take a break? A quick one? Who knows how long Emma Kate can keep Bitsy out of our hair."

"Deal."

As they got to work, Griff decided to start poking.

"Miz Vi's granddaughter stopped by. The one who just moved back. The widow."

"Yeah? Heard some buzz about that while I was in town. What's she like?"

"A heart-stopper. Seriously," he said, when Matt spared him a look. "She's got hair the color of her mom's and Miz Vi's. Like that painter used."

"Titian."

"Right. It's long and curly. And she got their eyes, too. That dark blue that's nearly purple. She looks like something poets write about, right down to the sad eyes."

"Well, her husband died, what, like right after Christmas. Happy freaking holidays."

About three months, Griff calculated, and that was probably too soon to ask her out on a date.

"So what's up with her and Emma Kate? Check the level."

"What do you mean, what's up? Take your end up a couple hairs. Stop there. Perfect."

“Bitsy went on about what good friends they were—are—whatever, and the body language said the opposite. I don’t remember Emma Kate ever talking about her.”

“Don’t know,” Matt said as Griff set the screws. “Something about how she left with the guy she married.”

“It has to be more than that.” Griff prodded again, wondered if he’d need his drill. Matt never hung onto the more subtle details when it came to people. “A lot of people move somewhere else when they get married.”

“They lost touch or something.” Matt just shrugged. “Emma Kate mentioned her a couple times, but didn’t have much to say about her.”

Griff could only shake his head. “Matt, what you know about women could fit in a thimble. When a woman brings something up, then doesn’t have much to say about it, she’s got a *lot* to say about it.”

“Then why doesn’t she say it?”

“Because she needs the right opening, the right angle. Forrest hasn’t said much, either, but he knows how to keep things tucked away. I didn’t think about giving him an opening on it before.”

“Before you knew she was a heart-stopper.”

“There’s that.”

Matt checked the level again, all sides, before they moved on to the next.

“You don’t want to start sniffing around a widow with a kid who’s a friend’s baby sister.”

Griff only smiled as they lined up the second cabinet. “You don’t want to start sniffing around some sassy southern girl who keeps telling you she’s too busy to start anything up.”

“I wore her down, didn’t I?”

“Best thing you ever did. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Griff let go of the cabinet to attach it to the first. “You should ask Emma Kate what the deal is.”

“Why?”

“Because after she walked the redhead out, *she* had sad eyes. Before she walked her out, she was a little bit pissed, and after, she looked sad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So you should ask her.”

“Why would I ask her about something like that? Why stir it up?”

“Matt, jeez. Something’s in there. It’ll just stay in there being pissed or sad until it’s stirred up and let out.”

“Like a wasps’ nest,” was Matt’s opinion. “You want to know so much, you ask her.”

“Wuss.”

“About this kind of stuff? Oh yeah, and not ashamed.” He checked the level. “Right on the mark. We do good work.”

“We fix it.”

“That we do. Let’s get the rest of this line up, then have a sub.”

“I’m with you, brother.”

. . .

VIOLA STARTED OUT doing hair for fun, doing up her sisters’ or her friends’ hair in fancy dos like they saw in magazines. She told the story of how the first time she took the scissors—and her granddaddy’s straight razor—to her sister Evalynn’s hair, she escaped a hiding because it looked as

fine as what Miz Brenda down at Brenda's Beauty Salon charged good money for.

She'd been twelve, and from that point on, in charge of cutting everybody's hair in the family, and styling the girls—her mama included—for special occasions.

When she'd been carrying her first, she'd worked for Miz Brenda, and had done some side business out of the tiny kitchen in the double-wide where she and Jackson had started out. When Grady had been born—with her still four months shy of her seventeenth birthday, she added on manicures, and worked exclusively out of the two-bedroom house they rented from Jack's uncle Bobby.

By the time her second followed close on Grady's heels, she squeezed in cosmetology school with her mother minding the babies.

Viola MacNee Donahue had been born ambitious, and wasn't afraid to give her husband a few prods in the same direction.

By the time she was twenty, with three children and the loss of one that had broken off a piece of her heart she would never get back, she had her own salon—buying Brenda's place when Brenda ran off on her own husband with a guitar player from up in Maryville.

It put them in debt, but while Viola wasn't one to agree with the preacher saying how God would provide, she believed He'd look kindly on those who worked themselves sweaty.

She did just that, spending often eighteen hours a day on her feet while Jack worked just as hard and long at Fester's Garage.

She had a fourth child, worked herself steadily out of debt, then dived right back into it when Jack started his own car repair and towing service. Jackson Donahue was the best mechanic in the county, and he'd been carrying most of Fester's business as Fester was stumbling drunk by noon five days out of seven.

They made their own, raised four children, and bought a good house.

And with the nest egg Viola tucked away, she bought the old dry goods, expanded, and had the town talking when she put in three fancy pedicure chairs.

Business stayed steady enough, but if you wanted more, you figured out how to get it. Tourists wandered through the Ridge here and there, looking for quaint or cheap, or picturesque in a quieter setting than Gatlinburg or Maryville.

They came to hike and fish and camp, and some to stay in the Rendezvous Hotel and ride the white water. Those on vacation tended to be looser with their money, and more apt to take a few indulgences.

So she took the leap, expanded yet again. And yet again.

The locals called her place Vi's, but the tourists came into Viola's Harmony House Salon and Day Spa.

She liked the sound of it.

The latest—and, Viola claimed, the last—expansion added on what she billed a Relaxation Room, which was a fancy name for waiting area, but fancy it was. Though she enjoyed bold, rich colors, she'd kept the tones soft, added a gas-burning fireplace, banned all electronic devices, and offered specialty teas made local, spring water, deep-cushioned chairs and plush robes with her logo embroidered on them.

Since the expansion, this latest and last, had been in the works while Shelby had been moving from Atlanta to Philadelphia, Shelby hadn't seen it all done.

She couldn't say it surprised her when her grandmother led her through a locker room/changing area and into the room that smelled lightly of lavender.

"Granny, this is amazing."

She kept her voice down as two women she didn't know sat in oatmeal-colored chairs paging through glossy magazines.

"You try some jasmine tea. It's made right here in the Ridge. And relax some before Vonnie comes to get you."

"This is as nice as any of the spas I've been to. Nicer."

Amenities included shallow dishes of sunflower seeds, a wooden bowl of sharp green apples, clear pitchers of water with inserts holding slices of lemon or cucumber, and hot pots for tea clients could drink out of pretty little cups.

"It's you who's amazing."

"It's not enough to have ideas if you just let them sit around. You come see me when Vonnie's done with you."

"I will. Would you . . . could you just check with Mama? I just want to be sure Callie's behaving."

"Don't you worry about a thing."

Easier said than done—or so Shelby thought, until Vonnie, who couldn't have been more than five-three, had her on a warm table in a dim room with soft music playing.

"Girl, you've got enough rocks in these shoulders to build a three-story house. Take a deep breath for me now. And another. That's the way. Let it go now."

She tried, then she didn't have to try. She drifted.

"How're you feeling now?"

"What?"

"That's a good answer. I want you to take your time getting up. I'm going to turn the lights up a little, and I've got your robe lying over your legs."

"Thank you, Vonnie."

"I'm going to tell Miz Vi you could use another next week. It's going to take a few times to get you smoothed out, Shelby."

"I feel smooth."

"That's good. Now, don't go getting up too fast, you hear? I'm going out and get you some nice spring water. You want to drink a lot of water now."

She drank the water, changed back into her street clothes and made her way out to the salon area.

Four of the six hair stations were working, and two of the four pedicure chairs were occupied. She saw two women getting manicures and glanced at her own nails. She hadn't had her nails done since right before Christmas.

While the Relaxation Room stood as a sanctuary of quiet, the salon rang with voices, the bubble of footbaths, the whirl of dryers. Five people called out to her—three beauticians, two customers—so she got caught up in conversations, acknowledged offers of sympathy and of welcome before she found her grandmother.

"Perfect timing. I just finished doing Dolly Wobuck's highlights, and my next appointment canceled, so I've got time to give you a facial. Go put a robe back on."

"Oh, but—"

"Callie's fine. She and Chelsea are having a tea party, with costumes. Ada Mae said they hooked together like two links in a chain and reminded her of you and Emma Kate."

"That's good to hear." Shelby tried not to think of that cool look in the eyes of her childhood friend.

"She'll have your baby home in a couple hours. That'll give you time for a facial, and us time to

talk.” Viola tipped her head, and the light through the front window tipped gold in the red. “Vonnie did you some good, didn’t she?”

“She’s wonderful. I don’t remember her being such a little thing.”

“Takes after her mama.”

“She may be little, but she has wonderfully strong hands. She wouldn’t let me tip her, Granny. She said Mama had seen to it, and anyway, we’re family.”

“You can tip me by giving me an hour of your time. Go on, get a robe on. The facial rooms are in the same place. We’ll be in the first one. Get!”

She did as she was told. She wanted Callie to make friends, didn’t she? To have someone to play with, to be with. It was healthy and right. And foolish to feel so anxious because she was spending the day at her grandmother’s salon.

“I’ve got just the thing for you,” Viola said when Callie came in. “It’s my energizing facial. It’ll give you and your skin a boost. Just hang that robe on the hook there, lie down here and we’ll tuck you up.”

“This is new, too. Not the room, but the chair, some of the machines here.”

“If you want to be competitive, you’ve got to keep up.” Viola took out a bib apron and tied it over her cropped pants and bold orange T-shirt. “I’ve got a machine in the next room that works on lines with electrode pulses.”

“Really?” Shelby slipped under the sheet onto the inclined chair.

“Only two of us trained to use it for now, that’s me and your mama, but Maybeline—you remember Maybeline?”

“I do. I can’t remember a time she didn’t work for you.”

“Been some years, and now her girl’s working here, too. Lorilee’s got the same good touch on nails as her mama. Maybeline’s training on the new machine now, so we’ll have three can use it. Not that you have to worry about lines for some time yet.” She laid a light duvet over the sheet, then banded back Shelby’s hair. “But let’s have a look at things. Your skin’s a little dehydrated, baby. Stress’ll do that.”

She started out with a cleanse, her hands soft as a child’s on Shelby’s face.

“There are things a girl can tell her granny she might not say right out to her mama. It’s that safety zone. And Ada Mae, she looks at bright sides, she’s blessed with that outlook. You’ve got trouble, and it’s not grief. I know how grief looks.”

“I’d stopped loving him.” She could say it out loud, with her eyes closed and her grandmother’s hands on her face. “Maybe I never really did love him. I know now he didn’t love me. It’s hard knowing that, hard knowing we didn’t have what we should have and he’s gone.”

“You were young.”

“Older than you were.”

“I got awful lucky. So’d your grandpa.”

“I was a good wife, Granny. I can say that and know it’s true. And Callie—we made Callie, so that’s something special. And I wanted another baby. I know maybe it’s wrong wanting another when things aren’t the way they should be, but I thought maybe it’s just how it would be, and it was all right. It could be good if there was another baby for me to love. I had such a hunger for another baby, such a yearning in me.”

“I know that hunger well.”

“And he said that was fine. He said it’d be good for Callie to have a brother or sister. But it didn’t happen, and it happened so easy and fast the first time. I had tests, and he said he had tests.”

“Said he had?” Viola repeated as she worked a gentle exfoliant into Shelby’s skin.

"I . . . I had to go through all his papers, and his files after. There were so many things to go through."

Lawyers and accountants and the tax people, the creditors, the bills and debt.

"And I found a doctor's receipt or invoice, whatever. Richard, he kept everything. It was from a few weeks after Callie was born, the time I brought her home, her first visit, and he said he had a business trip. He was so good about us coming home, he made all the arrangements. Private plane and a limo to get me to it. But he went to a doctor in New York and had a vasectomy."

Viola's hands paused. "He got himself snipped and let you think you were trying to make a baby?"

"I'm never going to be able to forgive him for that. Out of all of it, it's that I can't forgive."

"His right to decide if he wanted to make another baby, but not his right to get fixed and not tell you. It's a terrible lie. And a man who could tell that terrible lie, live with that terrible lie, had something missing inside him."

"There were so many lies, Granny, and finding them after he's dead?" There was an emptiness left there, Shelby thought, that could never be filled again. "I feel like a fool, I feel like I lived with a stranger. And I don't understand why he married me, why he lived with me."

Despite what churned up inside her, Viola kept her hands gentle, her voice calm. "You're a beautiful girl, Shelby Anne, and you said you were a good wife. And you're not to feel like a fool because you trusted your husband. What else did he lie about? Were there other women?"

"I don't know for certain, and can't ask. But I have to say yes, from things I found, yes, there were other women. And I find now I don't care. I can't even care how many—he took so many trips without us. And I went to the doctor a few weeks ago, got tested in case . . . He didn't give me anything, so if he had other women, he was careful. So I don't care if he had a hundred other women."

She worked up her nerve while Viola slathered on the energizing mask.

"The money, Granny. He lied about the money. I never paid much attention to it because he said that was his business, and mine was to run the house and Callie. He—he could lash out like a whip over that without raising his voice or his hand."

"Cold contempt can be a sharper blade than hot temper."

Comforted, Shelby opened her eyes, looked into her grandmother's. "He cowed me. I hate admitting it, and I don't even know how it happened. But I can look back and see it so clear. He didn't like me asking questions about money, so I didn't. We had so much—the clothes and the furniture and the restaurants and the travel. But he was cheating there, too, and running some sort of scam. I'm still not clear on all of it."

She closed her eyes again, not in shame—not with Granny—but in weariness. "Everything was on credit, and the house up North, he hadn't made even the first payment on the loan, and he bought it back in the summer. I didn't know a thing about it until he told me in November we were moving. And there were the cars, and the credit cards, and the time payments—and some debts in Atlanta he left behind. Taxes unpaid."

"He left you in debt?"

"I've been sorting it out, and setting up payment plans—and I sold a lot off in the last few weeks. There's an offer on the house, and if it goes through, it'll take a lot off."

"How much did he leave you owing?"

"As of right now?" She opened her eyes, looked into her grandmother's. "One million, nine hundred and ninety-six thousand dollars and eighty-nine cents."

"Well." Viola had to draw in breath, let it out slow. "Well. Jesus Christ in a rocking chair, Shelby

Anne, that's a considerable sum of money."

"When the house sells, it'll cut it back. The offer's for one point eight million. I owe a hundred and fifty more than that on it, but they forgive that with this short-sale business. And it started out around three million. Some over that with the lawyers' bills, and accounting bills."

"You paid off a million dollars since January?" Viola shook her head. "That must've been one holy hell of a yard sale."



A massage, an energizing facial and coming home to find her little girl bubbling over with happiness, those went a long way toward lifting Shelby's mood.

But the biggest lift had been unburdening herself to her grandmother. She'd told her everything—about finding the safe-deposit box and what was in it, the private detective, the spreadsheet she'd created, and her need to find a paying job as soon as she could.

By the time she'd given Callie her supper, her bath, tucked her in for the night, she felt she knew all there was to know about Chelsea—and had made a promise to have Chelsea over as soon as she could.

She went back down, found her father stretched out in the La-Z-Boy recliner he loved, watching a basketball game on his new TV. And her mother sitting on the sofa crocheting.

"She go down all right?"

"Out like a light before I'd finished her bedtime story. You wore her out today, Mama."

"It sure was fun. The two girls were like tadpoles swimming in their own pond, hardly still a minute. Suzannah and I talked about taking turns, having Chelsea come here, then taking Callie there. And I've got Tracey's number for you, right in on the kitchen board. You ought to call Chelsea's mama, honey, make a good bridge there."

"I will. You gave her a happy day. Can I ask you for a favor?"

"You know you can."

"I ran into Emma Kate today."

"I heard about that." Fingers still working yarn and needle, Ada Mae glanced up with a smile. "It's the Ridge, baby. If I don't hear about something ten minutes after it happened, I know I have to have your daddy check my hearing. Hattie Munson—you remember she lives across from Bitsy, though they're feuding about something half the time. They're feuding now because Bitsy's getting a new kitchen and didn't take Hattie's advice about the new appliances. Hattie's boy works for LG, but Bitsy bought Maytag, and Hattie took that as a personal insult. Of course, Hattie Munson takes offense if she sneezes in her own kitchen and you don't say *Gesundheit* from yours."

Amused at the way her mother found a way to wind through a story, and how her father cursed at the ballplayers, the referees, the coaches, Shelby eased a hip on the arm of the couch.

"So, they might be feuding, but Hattie doesn't miss any tricks and saw you and Emma Kate outside Bitsy's house, and saw you go on in. How's that kitchen coming? I haven't gotten over there in more than a week."

"They were putting cabinets in. Pretty ones."

"Emma Kate's young man—Matt—and Griffin. Cutie-pies, the pair of them—and they do fine work. I'm having them do me a master bath, an en suite, out of your old room."

"Now, Ada Mae." Clayton surfaced from the game long enough to hear about the bathroom.

"I'm doing it, Clayton, so you'd best climb on board. Griff said how they could take out that wall, and I could have me a spa-like en suite bathroom. I've been looking at magazines, getting ideas. And Griff, he's got whole books just on plumbing fixtures—I've never seen the like of some of them. He's done himself an en suite already. I went over to the old Tripplehorn place to see it, and it's like a magazine, even if he is still sleeping on an air mattress on the bedroom floor. He's finished the kitchen over there now, and it just makes me green with envy."

"Don't even start, Ada Mae."

"I like my kitchen just fine," she said to Clayton, then grinned at Shelby, mouthed, *For now*. "I bet you and Emma Kate picked up right where you left off."

Miles from that, Shelby thought. "That's the favor. She said she'd like to meet me tomorrow, at Bootlegger's, about seven-thirty, if I could. But—"

"You go right on and do that. Old friends are the bricks and mortar of your life. I don't know what I'd do without Suzannah. Your daddy and I will watch Callie, get her to bed. We'd love to."

"Finally something I can agree to." Clayton looked over at his daughter. "You take some time catching up with Emma Kate. We'll spoil Callie."

"Thank you." She leaned over, kissed her mother, got up, kissed her father. "I'm going on up because a day of pampering's made me sleepy. Thanks for that, too, Mama. And we'll need to eat at six tomorrow night. I'm cooking dinner."

"Oh, but—"

"I'm doing it, Ada Mae," she said in the same tone her mother had used to her father, and had Clayton snickering.

"I've gotten to be a pretty good cook, and you'll judge for yourself. I'm going to pull my weight while Callie and I are here, because I was raised right. 'Night."

"She was raised right," Clayton said when Shelby started upstairs. "So let's pat ourselves on the back there, and we'll see what's for dinner tomorrow."

"She wasn't so pale and tired-looking tonight."

"No, she wasn't. Let's see how it goes for the next few days, and be glad we've got them home."

"I am, and I'll be gladder when she makes things up with Emma Kate."

. . .

IT WASN'T HARD to keep busy. By mid-morning, she hauled out the stroller. Taking Callie on a stroll around town, picking up what she wanted for the chicken dinner she intended to make for her parents was an easy—casual—way to wander around the Ridge and see if anyone was hiring.

The clouds had lifted, and the air had the bright-edged sparkle of spring after a shower. She put Callie in her pink denim jacket with a light cap—and since she might find herself applying for a job, did her makeup before setting out.

"Are we going to see Chelsea, Mama?"

"We're walking to town, baby. To the grocery store, and I have to open up a bank account. Maybe we'll stop in and see Granny."

"See Granny! Chelsea, too."

"I'll call Chelsea's mama later, and we'll see."

She passed Emma Kate's house, noted the workman truck in the drive—and had to resist the urge to lift a hand in a wave across the street where she imagined Hattie Munson's eagle eye was trained on her.

People like Ms. Munson did plenty of talking, she knew. There was welcome in the Ridge, but there were those—and more than a few—who'd enjoy gossiping over the back fence and in the grocery store aisle, over lunch at Sid and Sadie, about the poor Pomeroy girl who'd come home a widow with a child. But what did you expect when she'd run off that way with a man nobody knew a thing about?

They'd talk about how she'd moved north, rarely came home, dropped out of college after her parents had worked hard to send her.

There'd be plenty to gossip about. And they didn't know the half of it.

The smart thing to do would be to keep her head down, be friendly and get steady work. Steady work would mean some sort of day care for Callie, so that had to be balanced.

Day care would be good for Callie. Just look how she'd latched onto this Chelsea. She needed to interact with other kids, even if it meant most of any paycheck coming in went out again.

While Callie talked to Fifi, Shelby took the fork into town. She kept her eyes peeled for houses for sale. When she moved out on her own, she wanted something close by. Close enough maybe Callie could walk to her grandmother's, or to Granny's. To friends, to town, just as she had.

A little house, two bedrooms, maybe with enough land for a small garden. She'd missed gardening in the condo, and hadn't had a chance in Philadelphia.

She let her mind drift, imagined the house in her head. Like a cottage, that's all they needed, and she'd plant flowers and have a vegetable patch, some herbs. She'd teach Callie how to plant and tend and harvest.

She could haunt yard sales and flea markets for furniture, for bargains she could refinish or paint or reupholster. Warm colors and sink-into chairs.

They'd have a good life here, whatever it took to make it.

She took the main road, with shops and a few old houses on each side of the winding street.

She could work in a gift shop, or wait tables, ring up sales at the drugstore or food at the market. Granny had told her she could come work at the salon, but she didn't have any real talent for hair—or a license. Whatever she did there would be make work, and her family was already making enough for her.

She could check at the hotel or the lodge just outside of town. Not today, not with Callie along, but they should go on her list.

She liked the way it all looked, freshening up for spring with storefronts shining in the sunlight, tubs and hanging baskets of flowers decking the buildings that climbed up or down the hilly road. She enjoyed seeing people stopping to talk, a few tourists wandering along the steep sidewalks, hikers with their big backpacks taking pictures of the town well, where legend had it star-crossed lovers, from feuding families, would meet at midnight.

Until the girl's father shot the boy dead, and the girl died of a broken heart.

Their rendezvous, so it was said, gave the town its name, and the well—haunted, of course—ended up on a lot of cameras and canvases.

Maybe she could get an office job since she had decent computer skills. But the truth was she had no experience there. Her work experience spread to helping out at the salon—filling shampoo bottles, sweeping the floor, working the register—babysitting, working in the college bookstore a couple of semesters.

And singing with the band.

She wasn't likely to form a band, and was beyond filling shampoo bottles. So retail maybe. Or maybe she could look into opening a day care. But the Ridge had one—and those who had family usually had a mother or cousin or sister who'd watch their kids when they worked.

Retail, she thought again. Retail or waitressing. There could be opportunities there, especially since summer was coming, and summer brought more tourists, more hikers, more families who rented cabins or stayed at the hotel.

The Artful Ridge—local artists mostly. Mountain Treasures, gifts and whatnots. The Hasty Market—selling staples and snacks for anyone who didn't want to go the half mile to Haggerty Food Market. There was the pharmacy, the ice cream shop, the bar and grill, the Pizzateria, Al's Liquors.

Farther down and around the corner sat Shady's Bar, which was just that. And her mama would have a heart attack if she took a job there.

Considering her options, she stopped in the salon first so her granny could show off Callie.

"I'm going to do your hair," Viola told Callie. "Crystal, get me one of those booster seats, would you? You can sit right here at Granny's station, Callie Rose. I used to do your Gamma's hair, and your mama's. Now I get to do yours."

"Callie's hair." Callie lifted her arms to Viola, then brushed at Viola's hair. "Granny's hair."

"About the same, isn't it—though mine takes some doing these days."

"Some doing," Callie echoed, and made Viola laugh.

"Have a seat there, Shelby, Crystal doesn't have another head for a half hour. Look at this beautiful hair."

Callie, who could sometimes be fussy and impatient at hair-fixing time, sat happily staring at herself in the mirror.

"I wanna be a princess, Granny."

"You *are* a princess, but we'll give you hair worthy of your rank." She brushed through the curls, grabbed one of the big silver clips to hold some back, and began to do a fancy French braid on the side.

"I heard Bonnie Jo Farnsworth—that's a cousin of Gilly's sister's husband—is getting a divorce from her husband. That's Les Wickett, Shelby, who ran with Forrest some when they were boys. They haven't been married two years, and have a baby not six months old. Had a big wedding at the hotel cost her daddy two arms and his left leg."

"I remember Les a little. I'm sorry to hear he's having troubles."

"I heard trouble's been brewing since before they cut the wedding cake." Crystal, who owned a tumbling mane of streaky blond hair, gave a knowing wiggle of her eyebrows. "But I probably shouldn't say."

"Of course you should say." Viola tied off the first braid, started on the second. "And in considerable detail."

"Well, maybe you didn't know that Bonnie Jo used to go around with Boyd Kattery."

"Loretta Kattery's middle boy. Those Kattery boys are rough customers. Forrest had a set-to with Arlo—the youngest of them—not long ago when Arlo got skunk drunk down to Shady's and started a fight over a pool game. Arlo took a swing at Forrest when Forrest went in to break it up. You know Arlo, Shelby. Bony boy with straw-colored hair and a bad attitude. Drove a motorcycle, and tried to catch your eye."

"I remember Arlo. He got suspended and sent off awhile for beating up on a boy half his size outside of school."

"Boyd's considerably worse, let me tell you." As she talked, Crystal readied her station for the next customer. "And he and Bonnie Jo were always sneaking off, then they broke up when he got arrested for . . ."

She glanced at Callie, who was too busy admiring herself in the mirror to pay attention.

“For, ah, having certain illegal substances in his possession. Then Bonnie Jo took up with Les, and before you can click your heels they’re planning a wedding. You ask me, her daddy was so relieved she was marrying a nice boy and done with Boyd, he’d’ve paid double what that wedding cost. But Boyd got released right before the wedding, and there’s been some talk down in the holler he and Bonnie Jo have, well, taken up again, and now the two of them are off down to Florida, where he has cousins—she left that baby behind like it was leftover pizza or something. And it’s said the cousins make up some of the substances he was put away for.”

It was nearly as good as a massage and facial, just sitting there for twenty minutes, watching her granny create a princess do for her girl while Callie preened in the mirror. And listening to gossip that wasn’t about her.

Viola looped the braids into a crown, gathered the curls into a tail she fixed with a rose-trimmed band.

“Pretty. I’m pretty, Granny!”

“Yes, you are.” Viola bent down so their faces reflected together. “A girl should know when she’s pretty. But there’s a couple things I can think of right off more important.”

“What’s more?”

“Being smart. Are you smart, Callie Rose?”

“Mama says.”

“And she knows. Then there’s being kind. If you can be pretty and smart and kind, well, that’s what makes a real princess.”

She kissed Callie’s cheek, lifted her down. “If I didn’t have somebody coming in, I’d take you two girls out to lunch. Next time we’ll plan it.”

“Next time we’ll take you out to lunch.” Shelby settled Callie in her stroller. “Crystal, I’m thinking I should find some work. Do you know anybody who’s hiring?”

“Oh, let’s see now. Spring and summer they hire on extra a lot of places. I didn’t think you’d be after work, Shelby, not with the money you’d have from—”

She slapped a hand over her mouth, looked at Callie in distress. “I’m awful sorry. I don’t know why my mouth just runs out without being hitched up to my brain.”

“It’s all right. I just want to keep busy. You know how it is.”

“I know how it is to need to pay the bills, but if you want busy work, maybe over at The Artful Ridge. It’s got some class, and they do good business, especially once the tourists start coming in. Might be they could use another hostess at the big restaurant. They want good-lookers there. Oh, and Rendezvous Gardens—you know the landscape place? They always need help this time of year. That could be fun if you like plants and such.”

“Thanks. I’ll think about it. We’ve got to get to the food market. I’m making dinner for Mama and Daddy tonight. Granny, you and Grandpa should come. I’d love to make dinner for you.”

“I’d love to have you make dinner for me. I’ll tell Jackson.”

“It’s at six, but you could come a little early because I have to leave by about twenty after seven and meet Emma Kate.”

“Have you met Emma Kate’s boyfriend?” Crystal asked.

“Not yet.”

“She hooked a good one. Now the other—Griffin?” She patted a hand to her heart. “If I wasn’t engaged to be married for the second time in my life, I’d head straight in that direction. He’s got a swagger to him. I just love a man who’s got a swagger to him.”

“There’s your eleven-thirty just come in, Crystal.”

“I’ll bring her right back. It was nice talking to you, Shelby.” She gave Shelby a good, hard

squeeze. "It's really good to have you home."

"It's good to be home."

"Her first husband had a swagger to him," Viola said under her breath. "And he swaggered off with anything female he could talk into it."

"I hope she does better this time."

"I like this one. No swagger, but a steady way about him, which she needs to balance her out. I love that girl like I love raspberry sherbet, but she needs that balance. What's for dinner?"

"I'm going to surprise you. And I'd better get to the market or we'll be ordering from the Pizzeria."

She ran into Chelsea and her mother in the food market, which added a half hour onto her time—and produced a deal to meet at the town park the next day so the girls could play together.

Now that she was cooking a meal for six she fiddled with the menu as she shopped. She made a good roast chicken with garlic and sage and rosemary, and she could make some red potatoes in that zingy dressing she cut out of a magazine, the carrots in butter and thyme Callie liked so much, and some peas. And she'd make biscuits.

Richard hadn't cared for her biscuits, called them hick bread, she remembered.

Well, the hell with him.

Maybe she'd make some appetizers, really do it up. And profiteroles for dessert. The cook they'd had three times a week in Atlanta had shown her how to make them.

She loaded up ingredients, bribed Callie with animal crackers. And tried not to swallow out loud when she checked out.

For family, she reminded herself as she counted out the money. Family was putting a roof over her head, and her daughter's. She could and would afford to pay for a good family dinner.

It wasn't until she wheeled the cart and stroller outside that she remembered she'd walked.

"Oh, for God's sake, how stupid am I?"

Three bags of groceries, a stroller and a mile-and-a-half walk.

Muttering to herself, she crammed two bags in the back of the stroller, slung the big Callie bag over one shoulder and hefted the last grocery bag.

She switched arms at the half-mile mark, seriously considered calling her mother, or poking into the sheriff's office to see if Forrest was there and could give her a ride.

"We'll make it. We'll make it fine."

She thought back to when she'd run the mile into town, and back again, as a child. Up and down those hills, around those curves.

Well, now she had a child, and three bags of groceries. And she might be working up a blister on her heel.

She made it to the fork, arms aching, and stopped to gather herself for the last leg.

The Fix-It Guys truck pulled up beside her. Griff leaned out the window.

"Hey. Did your car break down? Griff," he added, in case she'd forgotten. "Griffin Lott."

"I remember. No, my car didn't break down. I didn't take the damn car because I wasn't intending to buy so many groceries."

"Damn car," Callie said to Fifi, and had Shelby sighing.

"Okay. Want a ride home?"

"More, at this moment, than I want a long and happy life. But . . ."

"I get you only met me yesterday, but Emma Kate's known me for a couple years. I'd be in jail if I were an ax murderer. Hey, cutie. Is your name Callie?"

"Callie." The little girl angled her head, an accomplished flirt, and fluffed at her new hairdo. "I'm

pretty.”

“As pretty as they come. Look, I can’t leave you by the side of the road with the pretty girl and three bags of groceries.”

“I was going to say I want a ride, but you don’t have a car seat.”

“Oh. Right.” He shoved a hand at his hair. “We’ll break the law, but it’s less than a mile, and I’ll drive slow. I’ll pull over anytime another car’s coming, either direction.”

Her heel burned, her arms ached and her legs felt like rubber stretched too hard and long. “I think driving slow’s going to be enough.”

“Hold on. Let me help you.”

That made the second person who wasn’t family in the last little while who’d offered to help her. It was hard to remember how long before that anyone had.

He got out of the truck, took the bag from her. Feeling came back into her arm in pins and needles.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

He stowed the groceries while she lifted Callie out. “You sit right there,” Shelby told Callie. “Sit still while I fold up the stroller.”

“How does it— Oh, I get it.” Griff folded the stroller as if he’d been doing so for years.

She turned back to Callie as he stowed it, and saw her daughter had opened a takeout bag sitting on the seat beside her.

She was now eating french fries.

“Callie! Those aren’t yours.”

“I’m hungry, Mama.”

“It’s okay.” Laughing, Griff got in the truck. “I wouldn’t trust anybody who could resist fries. I had to pick up some stuff in town, grabbed lunch for me and Matt while I was at it. She can have some fries.”

“It’s past her lunchtime. I didn’t expect to be gone so long.”

“Didn’t you grow up here?”

She took a deep breath as he drove—true to his word—at about twenty miles an hour. “I should’ve known better.”

Now sitting on her lap, Callie held out a fry to Griff.

“Thanks. You look like your mother.”

“Mama’s hair.”

“Yours is really pretty. Have you been to Miz Vi’s?”

“That’s Granny, Callie. Miz Vi’s Granny.”

“Granny did my hair like a princess. I’m pretty and smart and kind.”

“I can see that. You’re the first princess I’ve had in my truck, so this is a pretty big deal for me. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Fifi. She likes french fries.”

“I would hope so.” He eased into the driveway. “Whew.” He took a mock swipe at his forehead. “Made it. You get the princess and her carriage. I’ll get the groceries.”

“Oh, that’s all right, I can—”

“Haul in three bags of groceries, a kid, a stroller and whatever’s in that suitcase you’ve got there? Sure you can, but I’ll get the groceries.”

“You carry me!” Callie shoved out of Shelby’s arms, threw herself at Griff.

“Callie, don’t—”

"I've got my orders." He climbed out, crouched down, tapped his back. "Okay, princess, climb aboard."

Callie said, "*Whee*," and hooked herself on for a piggyback while Shelby scrambled out the other door to try to heft whatever was left.

He beat her to it, pulled out two grocery bags, and with one in each arm, her daughter bouncing gleefully on his back, headed to the front door.

"Is it locked?"

"I don't think so. Mama may have . . ." She trailed off as he was already going inside, Callie clinging to his neck and chattering in his ear like he was her new best friend.

Flustered, Shelby pulled out the stroller, got the last bag, swung her Callie bag on her shoulder. She managed to get it all in the house, left the stroller by the door to deal with later.

He'd set the bags on the island. Before she could speak, he stopped her heart by swinging Callie off his back, dangling her upside down while she squealed in insane delight, then tossed her up in the air, catching her neatly. And settled her on his hip.

"I love you," Callie said, and kissed him enthusiastically on the mouth.

"Is that all it takes?" Grinning, he gave her hair a tug. "Obviously I've been going about my conquests the wrong way for a lot of years."

"You stay and play with me."

"Would if I could, but I've got to get back to work."

Callie took a hank of his hair, obviously finding it to her liking, and wound it around her finger. "You come back and play with me."

"Sure, sometime." He looked over at Shelby, smiled, and since she was staring, she saw he had eyes as green and clever as a cat's. "You've got a keeper here."

"She is. Thank you. Ah, do you have children?"

"Me? No." He set Callie down, gave her a friendly pat on the butt. "Gotta go, Little Red."

She wrapped her arms around his legs in a hug. "Bye, mister."

"Griff. Just Griff."

"Gwiff."

"Grrr-iff," Shelby corrected automatically.

"Grrr," Callie said, and giggled.

"Grrr-iff's gotta go," he said, glanced back at Shelby. "You set?"

"Yes. Yes, thank you so much."

"No problem." He started out. "Love this kitchen," he added, and strode to the door and out—he did have a swagger about him—before she could think of anything else.

"Grrr-iff," Callie told Fifi. "He's pretty, Mama, and he smells good. He's going to come back and play with me."

"I . . . umm. Huh."

"I'm hungry, Mama."

"What? Oh. Of course you are." Giving herself a shake, Shelby got back to reality.



By the time her mother got home, Shelby had the chicken in the oven, the potatoes and carrots scrubbed, and the dining room table—used only for important meals—set with the good dishes.

Not the *best* dishes, which were her father's grandmother's and worth more in sentiment than money, but the company dishes with the roses around the rims.

She'd added linen napkins, folding them into fussy standing fans, rearranged candles and flowers into a pretty centerpiece, and was finishing the last of the pastries for the profiteroles.

"Oh my goodness, Shelby! The table looks just beautiful, like for a high-class dinner party."

"We *are* high class."

"We're sure going to eat like we are—and it smells *wonderful* in here. You always were one to know just how things should go together to look pretty."

"It's fun, fussing a little. I hope it's all right I asked Granny and Grandpa to come."

"You know it is. Mama told me when I stopped into Vi's after my garden club meeting—and after Suzannah and I did a little shopping. I got Callie the *cutest* outfits for spring. I had the best time."

She set three shopping bags on the counter, began to pull things out. "I can't wait to see her wearing this—it's just precious, isn't it? The little skirt with the pink and white stripes, and the frilly shirt. And these pink Mary Janes! Now, I checked her size before I left, so they should fit. But if they don't, we'll just take them back."

"Mama, she'll love those. She'll just go crazy for those shoes."

"And I got this cute shirt with 'Princess' on it, and the sweetest little white cardigan sweater with ribbon trim." She pulled more out as she talked. "Where is she? Maybe she can try some on."

"She's napping. I'm sorry she's napping so late, but it all took me longer, and then I had to fix her lunch, and she was revved up, so I didn't get her down until almost three."

"Oh, we won't worry about that. So I stopped into Vi's, and there was Maxine Pinkett—you remember she moved to Arkansas a few years ago, but she was back visiting, and came into Vi's hoping I could give her a cut and color. I don't do hair anymore as a rule, but she's an old customer, and I know what she likes."

Shelby had a misty memory of Mrs. Pinkett, so made assenting noises as she began to fill the pastries with cream.

"She told me that she was disappointed when Crystal told her I was off, then I walked in, and she asked if I couldn't please see to her hair. She's not happy at all with the stylists she's tried in Little Rock. So I set her up. Turns out her daughter's husband may take a job in Ohio now, and this after she moved to Little Rock to be close by her daughter and three grandchildren. She's in a state, let me tell you. I know just how she feels, so I . . ."

Ada Mae shut her eyes, gave herself a shake. "I can't keep my mouth shut with a stapler."

"You don't have to. You didn't get to make many memories with Callie for more than three years. And more, I see now, she didn't get to make them with you. That's on me, Mama."

"It's all over and done now, and we're making plenty of memories all around. What are you making there? Little cream puffs? Oh, she's awake." Ada Mae looked toward the baby monitor on the counter. "I'm going to take her new things up, and we'll have some fun. You need help here, honey?"

"I don't, Mama, thanks. I don't want you to do a thing but sit down to this meal. You go have fun with Callie."

"Oh, I hope the pink Mary Janes fit, 'cause they couldn't be cuter."

She'd take pictures of Callie in the pink Mary Janes, Shelby thought. Callie might not remember them when she grew up, but she'd remember her grandmother loved her, enjoyed getting her pretty clothes. She'd remember her granny had fixed her hair like a princess.

That's what counted. Like a good family dinner at the dining room table, that's what counted.

She finished the pastries, basted the chicken, got the potatoes and carrots going.

She needed to change, not only for dinner, but to go out and meet Emma Kate. With a glance at the timer, she ran upstairs, tiptoed from the landing to her room so she didn't distract Callie and her mother and their fashion show.

And spent the next fifteen minutes agonizing over what to wear. She'd once had three, maybe even four times as many clothes, and had never agonized.

Maybe, she thought, because it had stopped being important.

It was the bar and grill, she reminded herself. People didn't dress up especially to go there. It was at least three giant steps up from Shady's, but about an equal amount down from the big restaurant at the hotel.

She settled on black jeans, a simple white shirt. And she'd put the leather jacket she'd kept—one she just loved—over it. The pewter gray went well with her hair, and wasn't as harsh as black.

Since the evenings ran cool yet, she chose heeled half boots.

Mindful of the meal, she slipped straight back down and into the kitchen, grabbed an apron this time to start on the biscuits.

It was fun to fuss, she thought, and after hunting up a pretty platter for the chicken, stood trying to imagine if it would look better if she laid the potatoes and carrots around the chicken or if she put them in bowls.

Forrest came in the back door.

"What's all this?" He sniffed the air. "What is that?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong. It smells like . . . It smells like I'm hungry."

"You can stay for dinner if you want. Granny and Grandpa are coming. I'm cooking."

"You're cooking?"

"That's right, Forrest Jackson Pomeroy, so take it or leave it."

"Do you always get dressed up to cook dinner?"

"I'm not dressed up. Hell. Am I too dressed up to go to Bootlegger's?"

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because, you idiot, I'm going to Bootlegger's and I don't want to dress wrong."

"I meant why are you going to the bar and grill when you're fixing dinner?"

"I'm going after dinner, if you need every detail of it. I'm meeting Emma Kate."

His face cleared. "Oh."

"Am I too dressed up or not?"

"You're okay." He opened the top oven, peered in at the chicken. "That looks damn good."

"It will be damn good. Now stay out of the way. I need to set out the appetizers."

"Aren't we fancy?" He stepped around her, got himself a beer.

"I just want it to be nice. Mama's getting me massages, and Granny's fixing Callie's hair, and—you saw how they fixed the rooms upstairs for us. I just want it to be nice."

He gave her shoulder a rub. "It is nice. The table looks like a company meal. It's good you're meeting Emma Kate."

"We'll see how good when I do. She's still awful mad at me."

"Maybe you should fix her a chicken dinner."

It felt good to have her family around the table enjoying a meal she'd made. And made her realize it was the first time. There'd be a second time, she promised herself, and she'd make sure Clay and Gilly and little Jackson were around the table that next time.

She knew she'd done well when her grandfather had seconds of everything—and Granny asked for the recipes.

"I'll write them out for you, Granny."

"You'll want to do it twice." Ada Mae got up to help clear. "That chicken put mine to shame."

"You'd better've saved room for dessert."

"We've got room, don't we, Callie?" Jack patted his belly so Callie leaned back in her booster chair to pat hers.

The best was watching eyes go big when she came in carrying the tower of profiteroles she'd made, with their topping of melted chocolate.

"That's as pretty as anything you'd see in a restaurant," her father told her. "Is it as good as it looks?"

"You're going to find out. I need to go, so Mama, would you serve this up? I don't want to be late."

"You don't go till you've put on some lipstick." This was her grandmother's decree. "Something with a little pink in it. It's spring."

"All right. Make Forrest help with the dishes."

"I was going to," he said immediately. He grabbed her hand when she bent over to kiss Callie. "It was a real good meal, Shelby. Don't drink and drive."

"You're the one with a beer on the table. Callie, you be a good girl."

"Gamma said I get a bath with bubbles."

"Won't that be fun? I won't be late."

"Oh, be late." Ada Mae served up generous portions of pastry. "Go have some fun."

"I will. Don't—"

"Scat!"

"All right."

It felt odd going out at night, on her own. And then add in the nerves, the worry that Emma Kate wouldn't forgive her.

But she put on lipstick, added a little more blush for good measure. And drove to town hoping she'd find the right words, make the right penance to get her best friend back in her life.

The streetlights gleamed, and she caught a few lights glimmering in the mountains. Shops shut down by six, but she noted Pizzateria was doing good business, and a few people strolled along the sidewalk.

She found the stingy parking lot beside the bar and grill already jammed, started hunting up a

place on the street. Maybe she had to give herself a mental push to get out of the car, but she did it, and walked the half block down, opened the door, stepped into the noise.

She didn't recall the place doing this level of business on weeknights. But then she hadn't reached legal drinking age when she left so had spent more time with pizza or at the ice cream parlor.

Still, most of the tables and booths were full, and the air smelled of beer and barbecue.

"How're you doing?" A waitress—hostess?—approached with an easy smile, and dark eyes that scanned the crowded room, probably looking for a free table. "I can seat you at the bar if you're . . . Shelby? Shelby Anne Pomeroy!"

Shelby found herself enveloped in a hug that smelled of peach blossoms.

She drew Shelby back, a good-looking woman with skin like polished walnut and thickly lashed dark eyes. "You don't remember me."

"I'm sorry, I—" It clicked, stunning her. "Tansy?"

"You do remember. Can't blame you for taking a few minutes. I've changed some."

"Some?" The Tansy Johnson she'd known had been gawky, gap-toothed, acne-prone and bespectacled. This one was admirably curvy with a gorgeous smile, clear skin and luminous eyes.

"My skin cleared up, I filled out, got my teeth fixed and wear contacts."

"You look just fantastic."

"It's nice to hear it. But then, you and Emma Kate never made fun of me like some of the girls did. I'm sorry about your husband, Shelby, but I'm glad you're home."

"Thanks. You work here now. It's busier than I remember, and nicer."

"That's good to hear, too, because I don't just work here, I'm the manager. And I happen to be married to the owner."

"Wow. Things have changed. When did you get married?"

"A year ago in June. I'm going to tell you all about my Derrick first chance, but Emma Kate's waiting for you."

"She's already here?"

"I'll take you over. I got you a corner booth—prime real estate, especially on Wing Night." She hooked her arm through Shelby's. "You've got a little girl, don't you?"

"Callie. She's three."

"I'm going to have one."

"Oh, that's great, Tansy." It called for another hug. "Congratulations."

"Just hit four weeks, and I know they always say wait until after the first trimester, but I can't wait. So I'm telling everybody, even complete strangers. Look who I found!"

Emma Kate looked up from her phone. "You made it."

"I did. I'm sorry if I'm late."

"You're not. I forgot it was Wing Night, so I had Tansy save us a table and got here a little early."

"Sit down." Tansy waved toward the booth. "And you two do your catching up. What'll you have, Shelby? First one's on the house."

"I'm driving, so . . . Well, I ought to be able to handle one glass of wine."

"We've got a nice selection by the glass." Tansy rattled off several choices.

"The pinot noir sounds perfect."

"I'll get that right out to you. You okay there, Emma Kate?"

Emma Kate lifted her beer. "I'm good, Tansy."

"So good seeing you." Tansy gave Shelby's shoulder a squeeze before she walked away.

"I didn't recognize her for a minute."

“She grew up. She’s about the happiest person I know, but then she always had a sunny nature.”

“Despite being bullied and picked on half the time. I remember in high school especially how Melody Bunker and Jolene Newton made deviling her a mission.”

“Melody’s as sour and snotty as she ever was. She was second runner-up in the Miss Tennessee pageant—something she tosses around like candy wrappers. You know she’s never forgiven you for beating her out for Homecoming Queen.”

“God, I haven’t thought about that in years.”

“Melody’s existence is based on being the prettiest and most popular. She fell short. And Jolene hasn’t evolved much, either.” Emma Kate leaned back, settled into the corner of the booth, diagonal from Shelby. “She’s engaged to the son of the hotel’s owners, and likes to drive around town in the fancy car her daddy bought her.”

A waitress brought over Shelby’s wine. “Tansy says enjoy, and just let me know if you want anything else.”

“Thank you. I don’t care about Melody or Jolene,” Shelby continued while she turned the wineglass around and around in small circles with her fingers. “I want to hear about you. You got your nursing degree just like you said you would. Did you like Baltimore?”

“I liked it well enough. I made some friends, had good work. Met Matt.”

“It’s serious, you and Matt?”

“Serious enough I dealt with my mama’s shock and horror when I told her we were moving in together. She still gives me pushes toward marriage and babies.”

“Don’t you want that?”

“I’m not in a rush about it, like you were.”

Shelby accepted the hit, took a sip of wine. “You like working at the clinic?”

“I’d have to be stupid not to like working for Doc Pomeroy. Your daddy’s a good man, a fine doctor.” After another sip of her beer, Emma Kate straightened a couple of inches. “What did you mean, you didn’t have the money to come back? The word I got was you were rolling in it.”

“Richard handled the money. As I wasn’t working—”

“Didn’t you want to work?”

“I had Callie to tend to, and the house. And I’m not qualified for any serious work. I didn’t finish college or—”

“What about singing?”

It flustered her not to finish a sentence. There’d been a time when she and Emma Kate could finish each other’s—but this was different.

“That was just a childish fantasy. It wasn’t like I had any real skills or experience, and I had a child, and he married me, provided for me and Callie, gave us a good home.”

Emma Kate sat back again. “And that’s all you wanted? To be provided for?”

“With Callie, and having no skills or the education—”

“Did he tell you that you were stupid? You want my forgiveness, Shelby?” Emma Kate said when Shelby went silent. “You tell me the truth. You look me in the eye and you tell me the truth.”

“All the time, one way or the other. How was he wrong? I didn’t know how to do anything.”

“That’s a big bucket of bullshit.” With her eyes fired up, Emma Kate set the beer down, shoved it aside and leaned across the table. “You didn’t just sing in that band, you did most of the managing and marketing. You figured out how to do that. They made you assistant manager at the college bookstore after a month so you knew how to do that. You started writing songs, and they were good, Shelby, damn it, so you knew how to do that. You redecorated my bedroom when we were sixteen—and not only did it look beautiful, but you figured out how to get around Mama on it. Don’t

sit there and say you didn't know how to do anything. That's him talking. Speak for yourself."

The words, fast as machine-gun fire, left Shelby breathless.

"None of those things were practical or realistic. Emma Kate, things change when you have a child depending on you. I was a housewife and a stay-at-home mother. There's nothing wrong with that."

"There's not a thing wrong with that if it makes you happy, if it's appreciated. It doesn't sound like it was appreciated, and when you talk about it you don't look happy."

She shook her head in denial. "Being Callie's mama is the best thing in my life—it's the light in it. Richard worked so I could stay home with her. A lot of mothers who want to can't, so I should be grateful he provided for us."

"There's that word again."

She felt sick inside, with a thin layer of shame coating it. "Do we have to talk about this?"

"You want me to forgive you for running off—and that I could—but to forgive you for cutting me off, for staying away, for not being there for me when I most needed you. But you're skirting around the truth of it."

She was because the center was so dark and sticky. The noise of voices and dishes that had seemed festive and fun when she'd come in now pounded against her head.

Her throat felt so painfully dry she wished she'd asked for water. But she pushed the words out.

"I didn't have the money because if I managed to tuck a thousand dollars away, he'd find it, and he'd take it. To invest, he'd say, because I didn't have a head for money. I had charge accounts, didn't I, if I wanted to buy clothes or some other toy or outfit to spoil Callie with so I didn't need cash money. And what was I complaining about, I had someone to clean the place, someone to help with Callie, someone to cook because I didn't know anything but country cooking. I should be grateful. And I couldn't take off to Tennessee every time somebody died or got married or had a birthday. He needed his wife home."

"He cut you off from your family, your friends. He whittled your world right down, didn't he, and hammered at you to be grateful for it."

He had, of course he had. She hadn't seen it happening because it was so gradual—until it was just her life.

"Sometimes I thought he hated me, but he didn't. He didn't feel that much for me. The first few months, even the first year, it was exciting and full, and he made me feel so special. I let him run everything. I was along for the ride, and I was carrying Callie and so happy about it. After she came, he . . . it was different."

She took a breath, let herself settle into it.

"I thought it was different," she said slowly, "because a baby changes things. He never paid much attention to her, and if I said anything about that, he'd get angry or act insulted. He was making sure she had a good life, wasn't he? I didn't want to travel so much with the baby, and he didn't push. So he was gone a lot. Sometimes he'd come back and things would be good for a while, sometimes not so good. I never knew which it was going to be. I couldn't anticipate how it was going to be, so I tried to make sure everything was the way he liked it. I wanted my girl to have a peaceful, happy home. That was the most important thing."

"But you weren't happy."

"It was the life I'd made, Emma Kate. The choices I'd made."

"You chose to be abused."

Her spine went stiff and hard. "He never laid a hand on me or Callie in anger."

"You're smart enough to know that's not the only kind of abuse."

Though her tone was brisk, no-nonsense, she kept it low, under the other chatter. Even in a noisy restaurant people often heard what you'd rather they didn't.

"He made you feel less, feel small and stupid and obliged. And he cut you off as much as he could from people who'd make you feel whole and special and really happy. And from what I'm hearing, he used Callie to keep you in line."

"Maybe he did. He's dead now, so it's over with."

"Would you have stayed with him, just stayed living like that?"

Frowning, Shelby ran a finger around the rim of her glass. "I thought about divorce—I'd be the first in our family, and that was a weight. But I thought about it, especially when he went on this last trip. It was supposed to be the three of us, a family vacation. A few days in the warm, but when Callie got sick and we couldn't go, he went anyway. He left us in the awful house the day after Christmas, where I didn't know a soul, and our girl was running a fever."

Now she looked up, and some of the bottled rage gleamed out. "He didn't even say goodbye to her, in case she was contagious, he said. I thought, He doesn't love her. It's okay if he doesn't love me, but he doesn't love our daughter, and she deserves better. She damn well deserves better. I thought about a divorce, but I didn't have money for a lawyer, and I thought he had so much money he might go ahead and get the divorce, and what if he took Callie to spite me? I was thinking what to do, how I could do it, when they came to the house, the police. They said there'd been an accident down in South Carolina, the boat, and Richard was missing."

She picked up the wine now. "He'd called in an SOS, said he was taking on water, and the engine had gone out. They were talking to him, getting the—what do you call it?—bearings or headings or whatever it is, sending out a rescue boat, but they had lost contact."

"They found the boat, all wrecked, and they searched for him, for almost a week. They found some of his things. His windbreaker, all torn up, and one of his shoes. Just one. They found one of the life preservers. They said the boat capsized, and he got washed away and likely drowned. So I didn't have to think about getting a divorce."

"If you feel guilty about that, you are stupid."

"I stopped being guilty about it."

"There's a lot more, isn't there?"

"There's more, but can this be enough for now? Just enough for right now?" Needing the contact, she reached over to grip Emma Kate's hand. "I'm sorry for hurting you, and I'm sorry for not being strong enough to stand up for what I knew was right and best. I just . . . God, I need some water." She glanced around for the waitress, then pushed out of the booth. "Wait!"

When she rushed off, skirting around tables, trying to get through the crowd at the bar, Emma Kate got up to follow.

"Are you sick? The bathrooms are the other way."

"No. I thought I saw somebody."

"A lot of somebodies in here on Wing Night."

"No, somebody from Philadelphia. This private detective who came looking for Richard."

"Private detective? That is more."

"Couldn't have been him. No reason for it. It's just talking so much about Richard, and thinking about all of it. I don't want to think about it anymore right now. I want it off my mind for right now."

"All right."

"Can we just talk about something else? Even Melody and Jolene, I don't care. Anything else."

"Bonnie Jo Farnsworth's getting a divorce. She married Les Wickett in a big, fancy wedding not two years ago."

"I heard about that. She's taken up with Boyd Kattery again, and they're in Florida maybe cooking meth with his cousins."

"So you're getting back in the loop. Let's go sit back down. I want another beer since I'm not driving."

Grateful, Shelby walked back with her. "You live close."

"We live in one of the apartments over Mountain Treasures so I left my car parked and walked over. Let me find the waitress and . . . oh hell."

"What?"

"Matt and Griff just came in. I got caught up. I was supposed to text Matt if I decided I didn't want him to come in and give me an excuse to ditch you. Since I didn't, we're going to have the boys around so I won't be able to pry any more out of you once you relax again."

"Is it enough that I've told you more than anyone but Granny?"

"It'll do for now." Emma Kate smiled, waved her hand.

"Your Matt's awful cute."

"He really is. And really good with his hands."

As Shelby choked out a laugh, Matt worked his way through. He hooked his really good hands under Emma Kate's elbows, lifted her off her feet, kissed her. "There's my girl." He set her on her feet, turned to Shelby. "And you're Shelby."

"It's nice to meet you."

"Really happy to meet you. You two weren't leaving, were you?"

"Just heading back to the table," Emma Kate told him. "I'm ready for another round."

"This one's on Griff."

"Two Black Bears. I think I'm going for a Bombardier. What'll you have, Shelby?"

"I was just after a glass of water."

"I don't know if I can afford that, but I'll dig deep since it's you."

"I'm driving," Shelby said as an explanation as they maneuvered back to the booth.

"We're not." Matt said it cheerfully, draped an arm around Emma Kate's shoulders when they sat. "And we had a really good day. Put in a little OT at your mother's, hon, and the countertop's done."

"How'd she like it?"

"She didn't like it. She *loved* it. Told you she would."

"You have more faith, and less experience, with Mama's waffling ways."

"I saw the kitchen the other day, when some of the cabinets were in," Shelby told Matt. "It already looked wonderful. You do nice work."

"I like your friend. She has excellent taste and a very good eye. How do you like being back home?"

"It feels good, and right. It's a big change for you from Baltimore."

"I couldn't let this one get away."

"That shows you have excellent taste and a very good eye."

"We'll drink to that when Griff gets back with the beer. He said your daughter's cute as they come."

"I think so."

"When did Griff see Callie?" Emma Kate wondered.

"Oh, he gave me a ride home this afternoon when I found myself carting three grocery bags and Callie on foot. I had a brain freeze in the market. She's smitten with him."

"Sounded like he was smitten with her. So . . ." Smiling, Matt twirled a lock of Emma Kate's hair

around his finger. "Now that we're such good friends, tell me something embarrassing about Emma Kate her mother wouldn't know about. I think I've worked most of the embarrassing stories out of Bitsy."

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I couldn't tell you about the time she stole two cans of Budweiser out of her daddy's six-pack, and we sneaked out of the house and drank them until she got sick in her mother's hydrangeas."

"Sick? Hydrangea sick on one can of Bud?"

"We were fourteen." Emma Kate narrowed her eyes at Shelby, but there was a laugh in them. "And Shelby was sicker."

"I was. I chugged it down as fast as I could because the taste was so hard and sour to me, then I sicked it all back up again. I never did acquire a genuine taste for beer."

"She doesn't like beer?" Griff set the pilsners in front of his friends, a glass of water with a slice of lime in front of Shelby, then slid in beside her with his own drink. "That may affect my plans for playing up to you so I can enlist your help in running off with Viola."

"He's not altogether kidding." Matt lifted his glass. "Well, to friends, even when they don't have the good sense to drink beer."

. . .

PRIVET SAT OUT in his car making notes. He'd parked across the street from where Shelby had left her minivan. It seemed to him the young widow was enjoying herself, having a glass of wine with an old friend. She wasn't quite as oblivious as he'd thought, as she'd nearly spotted him.

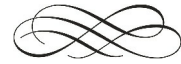
Now it looked like she was having a double date in the local bar and grill.

And still she'd made no suspicious moves, was hardly tossing money around.

Maybe she'd had nothing to do with it, after all. Maybe she didn't know anything.

Or maybe she was smart enough to sit tight in Nowhere, Tennessee, until she thought the coast was clear. Considering what was at stake, he could give it a few more days.

For his cut of nearly thirty million, he could spare the time.



She had fun, grown-up fun, normal-night-out-with-people fun. She saw glimmers of her old friendship with Emma Kate break through, and it gave her hope that it would beam bright again.

Seeing a man, and he seemed like a good man, besotted—that was the word that came to her mind—over her friend made her glow a little.

She liked the way they looked together, easy and comfortable but with some sparks over the familiarity. She'd seen her friend in love before, but with the teenage angst and drama and wonder that flamed like a comet over a night sky, and was as quickly lost from view. What she saw here struck her as real and grounded, a good, sturdy sapling sinking roots.

If the lost years came home to her not only in the way Emma Kate fit with Matt, but the connection between her and Griff, the obvious brotherhood between him and Matt, she could be grateful they opened that very tight unit to include her for an evening.

Maybe she had to work some to stay relaxed sitting next to Griff—pretty much hip to hip in the little booth. It had been so long since she'd been in close proximity with a man, which explained the occasional belly flutters. But he made conversation easy—they all did. And God it felt good not to talk about herself and her problems for an hour.

She nursed her water to make it all last.

"I don't think things have changed so much in the Ridge that it could've been easy to start up a new business, especially since you're not . . . local."

Matt grinned at Shelby across the table. "You mean for us Yankees."

"That would be a factor. But you do have the cutest accent," she said, and made him laugh.

"It helps we're good, and I mean damn good. Then there's the Emma Kate factor." He gave her shaggy hair a tug. "Some people were curious enough about the Yankee their own Emma Kate hooked up with to hire us for some odd jobs."

"Painting," Griff commented. "I thought we'd never stop painting. Then Emma Kate's father gave us a boost when a tree fell on the Hallister house. They called him in for the roof, and he nudged them to us for the rest. Their bad luck was our good."

"That Hallister boy's family?" Shelby wondered. "The one my cousin Lark's glued to?"

"That's the one," Emma Kate confirmed. "And Granny gave them another lift."

"Did she?"

"She hired Dewey Trake and his crew out of Maryville to do the Relaxation Room at the day spa, and finish off the little patio. Some this and that," Emma Kate continued.

"What about Mr. Curtis? He always did her work."

"He retired about two years back, and even Granny couldn't coax him out to take this one on. So she hired Trake, but that didn't last two weeks."

“Shoddy work.” Griff tipped back his beer.

“Overpriced,” Matt added.

“Granny thought so, and fired him.”

“I happened to be in there at the time.” Griff picked up the story, that easy rhythm. “Man, she lit into him. He’d had about four days on the job and was already running behind, making noises about overruns and delays. A lot of bullshit, basically. She handed him his ass, and told him not to let the door hit it on the way out.”

“Sounds like Granny.”

“That’s when I fell for her.” Griff let out a sigh, ending it on what Shelby would term a dreamy smile. “Something about a woman who can hand somebody their ass just does it for me. Anyway, not to let an opportunity slide—”

“Dewey Trake’s bad luck being your good.”

“Exactly. I asked her if she’d let me take a look.”

“Griff’s our community liaison,” Matt said.

“And Matt handles the accounting. It works. I took a look, asked to see the plans, told her I could have an estimate for her by the next morning, but ballparked it for her on the spot.”

“You were eleven hundred off,” Matt reminded him.

“Ballpark, on the spot. She measured me up—you’ve probably been measured up by Miz Vi.”

“Countless times,” Shelby agreed.

“Fell a little deeper, but restrained myself from asking her to run away with me. Timing’s everything. She said something like: ‘Boy, I want this done before Christmas and I want it done right. You get me that estimate, written down proper, first thing in the morning, and if I like it, be prepared to start work then and there.’”

“I take it she liked it.”

“She did, and the rest is history,” Griff claimed. “Once you get the thumbs-up around here from Viola Donahue, you’re pretty well set.”

“It didn’t hurt that Griff went out and snapped up that old house, and its four overgrown, trash-strewn acres,” Matt put in. “It was just crying, ‘Buy me, Griff, come on! I’ve got tremendous potential.’”

“It really does,” Shelby agreed, and earned a quick, flashing grin from Griff that had those butterflies swarming again.

“You can’t miss it if you know where to look. A lot of people thought—probably still think—I was crazy.”

“That probably gave you another nice, hefty lift. We do prize our crazy in the South.”

“Why, you know that young Lott boy from up to Baltimore?” Emma Kate began.

“He may be addled,” Shelby finished, “but he’s handy.”

She saw Forrest wander in. Checking up on me, she thought. Some things didn’t change.

“The law’s coming,” Griff commented as Forrest walked over to the booth. “Hey, Pomeroy. Is this a raid?”

“Off-duty. I’m here for the beer and wild women.”

“This one’s taken.” Matt squeezed a little closer to Emma Kate. “But you can slide in and get the beer.”

“Beer first.” He nodded toward Shelby’s glass. “Is that water?”

“Yes, Daddy. Did you come from home? Is Callie doing all right?”

“Yes, Mama. She had a bubble bath of epic proportions, talked her granddaddy into two stories, and was sleeping with Fifi when I left. You want another round of water?”

"I should probably get back."

"Relax. Another round?" he asked the rest of the table.

"I'd take a Diet Coke this time, Forrest," Emma Kate told him. "I've had my quota."

When her brother went off to order the drinks, Shelby looked around. "I know we didn't come in here all that much, but I don't remember it ever doing this kind of business."

"You should see it every other Saturday night." Since he had another coming, Matt drained his beer. "They have live entertainment. Griff and I are talking to Tansy—and she's talking to Derrick—about adding on—bigger stage, dance floor, second bar."

"They could use it for private parties." Now Griff scanned the room. "You keep it all in line with the original architecture, make sure you've got good acoustics, good traffic flow. They'd have something."

"Drinks are coming." Forrest slid in on the edge of the bench. "How's that kitchen going for Miz Bitsy?"

"A couple more days," Matt said, "we're out of there."

"You know, my mama's talking about doing a big master bath off the bedroom. With a steam shower." He narrowed his eyes at Griff. "You did know."

"Maybe we've had a few words about it."

"It's going to eat up Shelby's old room, and as she has Clay's now and Callie's got mine, that's all the bedrooms there are."

"Are you planning on moving back in with your parents?"

"No, but you never know." He shot Shelby a glance. "Do you? So if she gets her way—and she will—and my circumstances change, I'll be moving into your place."

"I've got the room. You still on for Sunday?"

"You still buying the beer?"

"I am."

"Then I'll be there."

"Griff's taking out another wall or two at the old Tripplehorn place," Emma Kate told Shelby.

"Do you think when I've lived there twenty years it'll be the old Lott place?"

"No," Forrest said flatly. "Hey, Lorna, how're you doing tonight?"

The waitress served the drinks. "I'm doing just fine, but I'd be doing better if I was sitting down here having a drink with all these handsome men."

She set Shelby's water in front of her, bussed the empties. "You watch out for this one, honey." She gave Griff a poke on the shoulder. "A man this charming can talk a woman into most anything."

"I'm safe enough. He's pining for my grandmother."

Lorna set the tray of empties on her hip. "You Vi's grandbaby? Of course you are, you look just like her, to the life. Well, she's sure on top of the world having you home. You and your little girl. I was in the salon today, and she showed me a picture she took with her phone of your baby after Vi did her hair up. She couldn't be prettier."

"Thank you."

"Just give a holler if you need something else. I heard you, Prentiss!" she called over her shoulder when another table hailed her. "Keep an eye on him anyway," she said to Shelby.

"I don't remember her. Should I remember her?"

"You remember Miss Clyde?"

"I had her for English literature, twelfth grade."

"So did we all. Lorna's her sister. She moved here from Nashville about three years ago. Her husband dropped stone dead from a heart attack at fifty."

“That’s sad.”

“They didn’t have any kids, so she packed up, came here to live with her sister.” Forrest took a sip of his beer. “Derrick says Tansy’s his right hand around this place and Lorna’s his left. Did you see Tansy?”

“I did. It took me more than a minute to recognize her. Matt said they’re thinking about adding on here, putting in a dance floor and a stage and a second bar.”

“Now you’ve done it,” Emma Kate said as the talk turned to demolition and materials. “It’ll be nothing but construction talk now.”

She liked the construction talk, and the extra half hour she took to sit with her brother.

“This was nice, but I’ve got to get on.”

“I’ll walk you out to your car,” Griff began as he slid over to let her out.

“Don’t be silly. I think my brother keeps the streets of the Ridge safe enough. You can take my seat,” she told Forrest, “spread out a little.”

“I’ll do just that. Why don’t you text me when you get home?”

She started to laugh, saw he was serious. “How about I text you if I have any trouble getting home, all one and a half miles of it? ’Night, everybody. Thanks for the drink, Griff.”

“It was water.”

“I’ll see if I can do more damage next time.”

She walked out happy. Happy enough to roll the windows down despite the chill, turn the radio up and sing along. She didn’t notice the car pulling out after her and following her that mile and a half.

Inside the bar, Forrest switched seats. “Walk her to her car?”

Griff studied his beer. “Your sister’s hot.”

“Don’t make me punch you.”

“You can punch me, but she’ll still be hot.”

Forrest decided to ignore him, shifted his focus to Emma Kate. “It looks like you two made things up.”

“We got a start on it.”

“How much did you get out of her?”

“Enough to be damn sure that dead husband of hers was a son of a bitch. You figured he was, Forrest.”

“Yeah, I figured he was.” Forrest’s eyes chilled; his mouth thinned. “Couldn’t do a goddamn thing about it.”

“What kind of a son of a bitch?” Griff demanded.

“The kind that made her feel stupid and small and kept his money in a tight fist.” The angry heat she’d banked down flashed out now. “The kind who likely had affairs while she was home taking care of the baby—the baby I got the clear impression he didn’t pay much mind to. And there’s more to it, I know there’s more. She didn’t let it all out tonight.”

Emma Kate took a long breath. “I swear, if he hadn’t gotten himself killed, I’d be holding your coat while you kicked his ass, Forrest, or you’d be holding mine.”

“She should’ve done some ass-kicking herself.”

“I bet nobody’s ever made you feel stupid or small.” Griff shook his head. He thought of those sad eyes, and the bright, flirtatious little girl.

His anger went on simmer. It could boil up—long, slow and rolling. If and when it boiled over, it scalded to the bone.

“My sister was hooked up with a guy for a while. Passive-aggressive, manipulative fucker. He

twisted her up pretty good, and he only had a few months to do it. No kid involved. People like that, they start off making you feel like you're the most amazing thing on the planet, you're perfect, they're lucky to have you in their life. Then they start chipping away, a little at a time. Got on her to lose weight, and my sis is no pudge."

"She's not," Forrest agreed. "I've met her. Your sister's hot."

"Well played. This jerk was all over Jolie. Why didn't she do something with her hair? If she couldn't afford a better salon since she's stuck working in some dead-end job, he'd pay for it. His treat."

"Kick and kiss," Matt said. "I remember that guy. When Jolie finally broke it off, Griff baited him into taking a swing."

"I needed to get a punch in, and that way I could say he threw the first."

"It's still assault."

"Shut up, Deputy, it was worth it."

"Shelby was always so . . . what's the word?" Forrest muttered.

"Vibrant," Emma Kate supplied. "She went after things. She wouldn't walk over somebody to get it, but she'd go head-to-head with you. And if you tried walking over her or somebody else, especially somebody else?" She paused to glance at Griff. "You got your ass handed to you."

"She's still vibrant. You two don't see it maybe because you've known her all your lives. But I see it."

Emma Kate cocked her head at Griff. "Why, Griffin Lott. Shelby said her little girl was smitten with you. Are you smitten with the mama?"

"Her brother's sitting right here, and he's already threatened to punch me."

"She'd be your type," Matt put in.

"My type?"

"Because you don't have a type, as long as she's female."

"Her brother's sitting right here," Griff repeated, and applied himself to his beer.

. . .

SHELBY KEPT THE PLAYDATE in the park and enjoyed it nearly as much as Callie. Best of all, she and Chelsea's mother made an arrangement. Tracey would watch the girls for a few hours while Shelby ran some errands the next day, and two days later, Shelby would do the same for her.

Everybody won a little something.

And maybe, she thought as she once again examined her wardrobe, she'd net herself at least a part-time job.

She opted for a dress—simple lines in pale yellow for spring—and a good pair of nude pumps, with a short white jacket to set it off.

She pulled her hair back into a tail, fastened on earrings with little pearl drops. Costume, as she'd had them since college, but pretty and right for the outfit.

With her mother back at work, she and Callie had the house to themselves, and she didn't have to explain she was gearing up for a job hunt. If she got lucky and landed one, she'd present it all as a *fait accompli*.

If she got a job *and* sold the house? She'd do handsprings up and down High Street in front of God and everybody.

"Mama's pretty."

"Callie's prettier." Shelby glanced over where Callie sat on the bed, methodically stripping the

clothes off two Barbie dolls.

"Baby, why are your Barbie dolls naked?"

"They need to change clothes for Chelsea's house. Chelsea has a kitty named Snow White. Can I have a kitty?"

Now Shelby looked down at the old dog who snored at the foot of the bed. "And how do you think Clancy would feel about that?"

"He could play with the kitty. My kitty's name's Fiona, like *Shrek*. Can I have a kitty, please, Mama? And a puppy. I want a puppy most."

"I tell you what, when we get a house of our own, we'll see about getting a kitty."

"And a puppy, too! The puppy's name is Donkey, like *Shrek*."

"We'll see about that."

Richard had had a no-pet policy. Well, when she had a house for Callie, they'd have a dog and a cat.

"And a pony!"

"Now you're pushing it, Callie Rose." But she scooped her up, spun her around. "Is Mama really pretty today? I want to look my best today."

"Mama's beautiful."

She pressed her cheek to her daughter's. "Callie, you're my best thing in the world."

"Is it time to go to Chelsea's house?"

"Just about. You dress those dolls, then we can put them in the Callie bag and take them to Chelsea's house."

Once she'd dropped Callie off, chatted with Tracey, she headed straight into town.

She was capable, she told herself. She was smart enough to learn. She even knew a little about art, and she knew—or had known—some of the local artists and craftspeople. It made perfect sense to try to wrangle a part-time job at The Artful Ridge.

After she parked, she sat for a moment, gathering herself.

Don't act desperate. If worse comes to worst, buy something. She could do this.

Fixing a smile on her face, ignoring the churning in her belly, she got out of the car, strolled down the sidewalk, and into The Artful Ridge.

Oh, it was pretty—she'd love to spend time here. It smelled of scented candles and glowed with natural light. She saw half a dozen things at a glance she'd be happy to have in her own home, once she got one.

Wrought-iron candlesticks, pale blue blown-glass wineglasses, a painting of a mountain stream on a misty morning, a long, sinuous jar the color of top cream polished like glass.

Tracey's pottery, too—and she loved the tulip-shaped stacking bowls.

Glass shelves sparkled, and while the old wood floor creaked a little, it held a subtle gleam.

The girl who came around the counter couldn't have been more than twenty and wore a half dozen colorful studs around the curve of her ear.

Not in charge, Shelby thought, but maybe a gateway.

"Good morning. Anything I can help you with today?"

"It's just beautiful in here."

"Thank you! We carry local artists and artisans. There are so many talented people in the area."

"I know it. Oh, that's one of my cousin's paintings. A set of them." She stepped over to a grouping of four small watercolors.

"You're a cousin to Jesslyn Pomeroy?"

"I am, on my daddy's side. I'm Shelby Pomeroy. Foxworth now."

Who your people were mattered, Shelby knew, and could be another gateway. “She’s my uncle Bartlet’s middle daughter. We’re all so proud of her.”

“We sold one of her paintings just last Saturday to a man from Washington, D.C.”

“Isn’t that wonderful? Cousin Jessie’s art on somebody’s wall in Washington, D.C.”

“Are you visiting the Ridge?”

“I was born and raised here, and while I’ve been away a few years, I’ve moved back home. Just a few days ago, actually. I’ve been settling in. The fact is, I’d like to find some part-time work. It would be just lovely to work in a shop like this, with my cousin’s art right there.

“And Tracey Lee’s,” she added, as it never hurt to know people. “Her little girl and mine have become best friends already.”

“We can’t keep Tracey’s coffee mugs on the shelf. They just fly out of here. My sister Tate’s married to Robbie’s—that’s Tracey’s husband—to Robbie’s cousin Woody. They’re living up in Knoxville.”

“Would that be Tate Brown?”

“That’s right. It’s Bradshaw now, but that’s my sister. You know Tate?”

“I do. She dated my brother Clay for a time when they were in high school. So she’s married and living in Knoxville?”

Gateways, Shelby thought, as they chatted about family connections.

“We’re just starting to look for some extra help, for the season. Would you like to talk to the manager about it?”

“I would, thank you.”

“Just give me a minute. Browse around if you like.”

“I will.” In fact, as soon as the girl was out of sight, Shelby checked the price on the tall jar. Winced a little. A fair price, she imagined, but a little out of her reach right now.

She’d make it a goal.

When the girl came back moments later, the friendly had drained out of her eyes, and her tone was cool.

“You can go on up to the office. I’ll show you.”

“Thank you. It must be nice,” Shelby continued as they walked to the back of the shop. Here rustic wooden cases and shelves held pottery and textiles. “Working around all these pretty things.”

“You go right up the stairs here, it’s the first door you come to. It’s open.”

“Thanks again.”

She went up the sturdy stairs, turned into a room backed with three narrow windows that opened up to a view of the Ridge and the rise of the hills.

Here was art and pretty things as well, a sweet chair with curvy legs done in deep blue, and a wonderful old desk refinished so the oak shone gold. A vase of red roses and baby’s breath stood on it, along with a computer and a phone.

It took her only a moment to focus in on the woman behind the desk—and understand the abrupt change in the clerk’s demeanor.

“Why, hello, Melody. I had no idea you worked here.”

“I manage the gallery. My grandmama bought it just about a year ago and asked me to get it in shape for her.”

“Well, from what I see, you’ve done a wonderful job of it.”

“Thank you. You have to do what you can for family, don’t you? And look at you.” She rose then, a curvy woman in a fitted dress of rosy pink. Her blond hair fell in a long, soft wave to her shoulders, sweeping around a heart-shaped face with poreless skin glowing from an expert hand

with bronzer or a good self-tanner.

Shelby knew Melody would never expose her face to the sun and risk lines and spots.

Her eyes, a chilly blue, flicked over Shelby as she walked over, moved in for a cheek bump.

"You haven't changed a bit, have you! My goodness, this humidity that's moving in must play havoc with your hair."

"It helps to have easy access to good salon products." Yours could use a root touch-up, she thought, as no one made her hackles prickle faster than Melody Bunker.

"I'm sure it does. I heard you were back. It's just tragic about your husband, Shelby. Just tragic. You have all my sympathy."

"Thank you, Melody."

"And back where you started now, aren't you? Living back with your mama, aren't you? Oh, please, have a seat." Melody leaned a hip back on the desk, holding the higher ground, the position of power. "And how are you, Shelby?"

"I'm fine. I'm happy to be home again. How's your mama, Melody?"

"Oh, she's doing fine. We're going to Memphis in a couple weeks, having a few days, doing some shopping, staying at the Peabody, of course."

"Of course."

"You know how hard it is to find decent clothes around here, so we try to get into Memphis every season. I have to admit, I never thought to see you back in the Ridge, but being a widow, you must need the comfort of family."

"They are a comfort."

"But I sure was surprised when Kelly came up and said you were downstairs and asking about work, what with all the talk about how well off you were, landing yourself a rich husband. And you have a daughter, don't you?"

Those blue eyes sparkled now, but it wasn't with friendship or camaraderie. "Some say that helped with the landing."

"I'm sure they do, as some will say all manner of unattractive things just to hear their own voice. I'd like to work," Shelby said simply.

"I'd sure like to help you out, Shelby, but working here at The Artful Ridge takes certain requirements. I don't suppose you've ever worked a cash register in your life."

Melody knew very well she had, at the salon.

"I ran one since I was fourteen, weekends and summers at my grandmother's salon. I was assistant manager of the bookstore in college—University of Memphis, if you can't recall. That was a few years ago, but I'm sure I could get references if you need them. I know how to work a register, a computer, I know most of the basic softwares."

"A family beauty parlor and a college bookstore don't give you much of a foundation for an upscale showplace of arts and crafts. And do you know how to sell? Working a bookstore in college? Why, that sort of thing sells itself, doesn't it? We carry a superior range of art, a lot of it exclusive to us. We're a landmark in this town now. In the county, come to that. And we've got a reputation."

"I'm sure the reputation's earned, considering what you showcase here, and how you display it. Though I'd have taken those cane-back chairs from the front and put them at that burl wood table in the back, done something interesting on the table with the pottery dishes and some wineglasses, some of the textiles."

"Oh, would you?"

She only smiled at the frigid tone. "I would, but that's me. And I can say so because you don't

have any intention of giving me a job.”

“I wouldn’t think of it.”

With a nod, Shelby rose. “That’s your loss, Melody, because I’d have been an asset to your grandmother’s business here. I appreciate the time.”

“Why don’t you go over to Vi’s? I’m sure your grandmother could find you work there, suited to your skills and experience. She has to need someone sweeping up and washing out the sinks.”

“You think that’s beneath me?” Shelby angled her head. “I’m not surprised, Melody, not at all surprised. You haven’t changed since high school, and still holding a grudge because they put that Homecoming crown on my head instead of yours. That’s awful sad. It’s just awful sad your life hasn’t gotten any richer or more satisfying since high school.”

She walked out, head up, started down.

“I was second-runner-up Miss Tennessee!”

Shelby glanced back, smiled at Melody, who stood, hands on hips, at the top of the stairs. “Bless your heart,” she said, and continued down, and straight out.

She wanted to shake. She wasn’t sure if it was anger or humiliation, but she wanted to shake. Walk it off, she ordered herself, and crossed the street.

Her first instinct was to go to the salon, vent it all out, but she turned sharply, headed for the bar and grill.

Maybe Tansy could use another waitress at Bootlegger’s.

Running on that anger and humiliation, she banged on the door. Maybe they didn’t open for another half hour, but somebody, by God, was in there.

On her second series of bangings, the door opened. The tough-looking guy in a T-shirt with cut-off sleeves that showed off arms with muscles carved like a mountain range gave her one hard look out of eyes black as onyx.

“We’re not open until eleven-thirty.”

“I know that. It says so clear enough. I’m looking for Tansy.”

“Why would that be?”

“That would be my business, so . . .” She broke off, bore down on herself. “I’m sorry—I apologize. I’m upset and I’m being rude. I’m Shelby, a friend of Tansy’s. I’d like to talk to her a minute if she’s around.”

“Shelby. I’m Derrick.”

“Oh, Tansy’s husband. It’s nice to meet you, Derrick, and I really am sorry for being rude. I’ve embarrassed myself.”

“Bygones. It’s clear you’re upset. Come on in.”

A couple of waitstaff did setups on the tables. In the relative quiet Shelby heard kitchen noises, raised voices.

“Why don’t you have a seat at the bar? I’ll get Tansy.”

“Thank you. I won’t take much time.”

She sat, tried to fall back on the yoga breathing she’d practiced when she’d taken classes in Atlanta. It didn’t help.

Tansy came in, all smiles. “I’m so glad you came by. We didn’t really have time to talk last night.”

“I was rude to your Derrick.”

“She wasn’t that rude, and she’s already apologized twice. Want a drink?” he asked her.

“I—”

“How about a Coke?” Tansy said.

“God, yes. Thanks. I’m repeating myself, but I’m sorry. I just had a little altercation with Melody

Bunker.”

Tansy slid onto a stool. “Want something stronger than a Coke?”

“I’m tempted, but no thanks. I went over there to see if I could get a part-time job. I wish I didn’t like the place so much. It’s just wonderful, and has such a good feel about it. Until I went upstairs and talked to Melody. She was as biting as a nest of rattlers, I swear. Wouldn’t you think she’d let go of high school?”

“Her type never lets go of anything. I’m the one who’s sorry. I sent you over there. I didn’t think about Melody—I try not to.”

Tansy sent Derrick a smile when he put a ginger ale in front of her. “Thanks, baby. Melody’s only in there two or three hours a day, and only a few days out of the week. Otherwise she’s off to some club meeting or getting her nails done, or having lunch up at the big restaurant. It’s Roseanne, the assistant manager, who really runs the place.”

“Whoever runs it, Melody would burn it to the ground before she hired me on. Thank you,” she said to Derrick when he set the Coke in front of her. “I’m sure I’m going to like you because you have such good taste in wives. And I love your place. I had the best time here last night. Oh, and congratulations on the baby.”

“That about covers it. I already like you.” He poured himself a fizzy water. “Tansy’s told me about you, and how you’d take up for her when somebody like that bitch across the street picked on her.”

“Derrick, you shouldn’t call her that.”

“She is a bitch,” Shelby said, and drank. “At least I gave her some of her own back. It’s been a while since I’ve given anybody some of their own back. And it felt damn good. Maybe a little too good.”

“You were always good at it.”

“Was I?” Calmer, Shelby smiled, sipped. “It sure came back to me. Smoke was spiraling out of her ears when I left, so that’s something. So, I won’t be working there in the foreseeable future. I wonder if you need any help here. Another waitress, maybe?”

“You want to wait tables?”

“I want a job. No, I need a job,” Shelby amended. “That’s the truth. I need a job. I’m making the rounds today while Tracey Lee’s got my Callie with her Chelsea. If you’re not hiring, that’s all right. I’ve got a list I’m going down.”

“Have you ever done any waitressing?” Derrick asked her.

“I’ve cleared plenty of tables, served plenty of food. I’m not afraid of hard work. I’m only looking for part-time now, but—”

“Waitressing isn’t for you, Shelby,” Tansy began.

“All right. Thanks for listening, and for the Coke.”

“I’m not done. Derrick and I, we’ve been talking about adding some entertainment on Friday nights. We have,” she insisted when Derrick frowned.

“Talked about it, some.”

“Two Saturdays a month we have a live band, and we do good, strong business. We’d add to Friday night’s till with some entertainment. I’ll hire you right now, Shelby, to sing on Friday nights, eight to midnight.”

“Tansy, I appreciate your offering, but I haven’t done anything like that in years.”

“Do you still have your voice?”

“It’s not that . . .”

“We couldn’t pay a lot, at least until we see how it goes. Forty-minute sets, and ten of the twenty

between you'd work the crowd some. Go around the tables. What I want is to try a kind of weekly theme."

"She's got ideas," Derrick muttered, but with a spark of pride.

"I have good ideas." With the ginger ale in one hand, Tansy tapped a finger on the bar. "And this good idea is we'd start off with the forties. Songs from the forties, specialty drinks from then. What did they drink back then? Martinis or boilermakers. I'll figure that out," she said, waving it aside.

"Next week it's the fifties, and we work our way up. It's all nostalgia. We'll draw in a lot of people. I'll get it set up. We'll use a karaoke machine for now. Maybe if we do the expansion, we can get a piano, or we can hire a couple of musicians. For right now, to start, we'll get that karaoke machine, Derrick, because we're going to start doing Karaoke Mondays, too."

"She's got ideas," he said again.

"I got one says people just love hearing themselves sing whether they can't pipe out a single true note. They'll be flocking in here Monday nights. And now Fridays, too. That's what we'll call it—just 'Friday Nights.' I know it's only one night a week, Shelby, but that'll give you room to find some day work if you need it."

"Are you all right with all this?" Shelby asked Derrick.

"She manages the place. I just own it."

"Not this Friday," Tansy continued, steamrolling over them both. "It's too soon, and I have things to put together. Next Friday. You'll want to come in a couple times, rehearse, once I get it set up. We're going to need that expansion, Derrick, once we get this going. You'd better talk to Matt and Griff, get that nailed right soon."

"Yes, ma'am."

"So. Shelby?"

Shelby blew out a breath, drew in another. "All right. I'm in—and if it doesn't work out, no hard feelings. But I'm in, and grateful. I'll be your Friday Nights."



She all but danced over to the salon.

“Why, don’t you look a treat,” Viola said the minute she stepped in. “Sissy, you remember my granddaughter, Shelby.”

That started a winding conversation with the woman in Viola’s chair while Viola removed a forest of enormous rollers and began the styling.

The minute she had an opening, Shelby announced her news.

“Won’t that be something? Tansy and her Derrick, they’re making something out of that place, and there you’ll be. A headliner.”

Shelby laughed, automatically shifting the basket of used rollers out of her grandmother’s way. “It’s only Friday nights, but—”

Sissy interrupted with a story about her daughter starring in the high school musical while Viola poofed her hair to twice its volume.

“I really should get on. I guess Mama’s doing a treatment.”

“Back-to-back facials. Tracey’s got Callie for a while yet, doesn’t she?” Viola asked. “I got a break coming up.”

“I still have a couple of stops to make. I thought I’d see if Mountain Treasures is hiring part-time, or maybe The What-Not Place as Tansy says they do well with tourists and locals.”

“I got some sweet Depression glass teacups there to go with my collection,” Sissy told her.

“It’s on my list. The Artful Ridge isn’t as they’re not hiring, at least not me as long as Melody Bunker has a say in it.”

“Melody’s been jealous of you since you were children.” Knowing her client, Viola sprayed a fierce cloud of holding spray over the mountain of hair. “You be grateful she didn’t hire you, baby girl. If you worked over there, she’d make your days a misery. There, Sissy. Big enough for you?”

“Oh now, Vi, you know I like to make a statement with my hair. God blessed me with plenty of it, so I like putting it to use. It looks just wonderful. Nobody does it up like you. I’m having lunch with my girlfriends,” she told Shelby. “Doing it fancy, up at the hotel.”

“Won’t that be fun?”

It took a few minutes more to scoot Sissy along, then Viola blew out a breath, sat in the chair. “Next time, I swear, I’ll just use a bicycle pump on that hair of hers. Now, how many days a week you thinking of working?”

“I could do three or four—maybe even five with shorter hours if I can work out a deal with Tracey, and maybe ask Mama to fill in with Callie otherwise. Any more than that, I’d have to see about taking her to day care.”

“That’d eat up your paycheck.”

“I was hoping to wait for the fall for it, give her time to settle in, but I may have to do it sooner.

It'll be good for her to be around other kids."

"True enough. Here's what I'm going to say to you. I don't know why you're going over to Mountain Treasures and other places when I can use you right here. You could help with the phones, the book, the stock and supplies, and the customers. And you could help keep things organized as you've got an organized nature. You find something you like better, that's fine. But for right now, I could use you three days a week. Four when we're busy. You could bring Callie in here and there. You spent plenty of your time in the salon when you were her age."

"I did."

"Did it hurt you any?"

"No, I loved it. I've got good memories of playing here, listening to the ladies talk, getting my hair and nails done like a grown-up. I don't want to take advantage, Granny. I don't want you to make work for me."

"It's not taking advantage or making work when I can use you. I can't say you'd be doing me a favor as I'd have to pay you. It makes good sense, unless you just don't want to work here."

"I wish you would," Crystal called over from her station. "It would save the rest of us from having to answer the phone or check the book for walk-ins if Dottie's in the back or it's her time off."

"I could use you three days a week ten to three, and on Saturdays from nine to four when we're hopping." Viola paused, seeing the hesitation on Shelby's face. "If you don't take the job, I'll have to hire somebody else. That's a fact. Crystal?"

"That is a fact. We were just talking about looking for somebody to come in part-time." With the rat-tail comb in her hand, Crystal crossed her heart. "I swear on it."

"We'd need to go over some things as it's been some time since you did any filling in around here," Viola continued, "but you're a bright girl. I expect you'd catch on quick."

Shelby looked over at Crystal. "You're swearing she's not making busywork for me?"

"She sure isn't. Dottie's doing a lot of running between the salon and the treatment rooms, back in the locker and relaxation areas. And Sasha hardly has time for that anymore since she got her license and she's doing face and body treatments. We keep up with it, but it would sure be nice to have somebody doing more of the running."

"All right." Shelby let out a surprised laugh. "I'd love to work here."

"Then you're hired. You can give me the hour you'd have spent going all around seeing about a job, and go in the back there. Towels should be dry by now. You could fold them and bring them out, put them at stations."

Shelby leaned down, pressed her cheek to Viola's. "Thank you, Granny."

"You'll be busy."

"That's just what I want," Shelby said, and got to work.

. . .

BY THE TIME she got home with Callie she'd worked out a doable schedule. She'd barter one day a week with Tracey, pay her for two days when Saturday was called for, and Ada Mae scooped up the other day as her "Gamma and Callie Day."

Whenever it didn't work, she'd take Callie with her.

Friday nights her mother and grandmother would switch off—their idea, she thought, as she pulled in the drive.

She could earn a decent enough living, her child would be well cared for. She couldn't ask for

more.

And as Callie got that glassy-eyed look on the short drive home, Shelby calculated she could get her down for a nap right off, then spend some time looking up songs from the forties, starting her playlist. With Callie half asleep on her shoulder, she started straight upstairs.

She made the turn toward Callie's room, swaying and humming to keep her daughter in the nap zone, then let out a short scream when Griff stepped into the hallway.

Callie jumped in her arms, and rather than a short scream, blasted out a wailing screech.

"Sorry!" Griff dragged the earbuds off. "I didn't hear you. Sorry. Your mother said— Hey, Callie, I'm sorry I scared you."

Clutching Shelby, Callie stared at him, sobbing, then threw herself at him. He had to scramble forward, grab hold. Callie clung, crying on his shoulder.

"It's okay. It's all right." He rubbed her back as he smiled at Shelby. "Your mother wants that new bathroom. I said I'd stop over first chance, make sure on the measurements. Wow, you look really good."

"I'm just going to sit down a minute." She did so, right on the top step. "I didn't see your truck."

"I walked over from Miz Bitsy's. We're just punching out there, so we can start here next week."

"Next week?"

"Yeah." He patted and jiggled as Callie's tears dissolved into sniffles. "We've got a couple of little jobs, but we'll juggle this in. I had music in my ears, so I didn't hear you."

"That's okay. I probably didn't need those last ten years of my life. I'm just going to put her down for her nap."

"I've got it. Over in here, right?"

He stepped into Callie's room. By the time Shelby pushed up, walked across, he had her on the bed, under her light blanket, and was quietly answering the singsong questions she often came up with at nap or bed time.

"Kiss," Callie demanded.

"You got it." He kissed her cheek, stood up, glanced at Shelby. "Is that it?"

"That's it." But she did a come-away motion, and eased out. "It's only that easy because she wore herself out at Chelsea's."

"She smells like cherries."

"Juice box, I imagine."

And her mother smells like a mountain meadow—fresh and sweet and wild all at once. Maybe the word of the day should be "pheromones."

"You really do look good."

"Oh, I've been job hunting, tried to look presentable."

"You went way over presentable into"—he caught himself on "hot"—"excellent. How'd you do on the job hunt?"

"I did great, out of the park with bases loaded."

Jesus, baseball metaphor. He might have to marry her.

"I want a Coke," she decided. "Do you want a Coke?"

"I wouldn't turn one down." Especially since it meant he got a little more time with her. "So what's the job?"

"Now, that's much too direct for around here," she warned him as they started downstairs. "We have to work up to how I went about getting it."

"Sorry, still shedding the Yankee."

"Well, don't shed it all, it works for you. What were you listening to?" She tapped her ears.

“Oh, it’s a pretty eclectic playlist, I guess. I think it was The Black Keys when I cut that ten years off your life. ‘Fever.’”

“At least I lost a decade to a song I like. Now to your question. First, I got my butt kicked and my ego flattened when I tried for a job at The Artful Ridge as my high school rival, at least in her mind, manages it.”

“Melody Bunker. I know her. She hit on me.”

“She did not.” Amazed, she stopped short, gaped up and gave him a chance to look close. Her eyes really were almost purple.

“Did she really?”

“She’d had a couple of drinks, and I was new in town.”

“Are you going to tell me if you hit back?”

“I thought about it,” he said as he walked to the kitchen with her. “She’s great to look at, but there’s that mean streak.”

“Not everyone—particularly those who are male—notice that.”

“I’ve got a pretty good eye for mean. She was with another girl, and there was a lot of . . . How do I put this without saying ‘meow’?”

“You can say it, it fits her. She’s always been catty. And she does have a mean streak, deep and wide. She tried her best to make me feel stupid and useless today, but she didn’t manage it. She’s following after a superior act in that area of mean, and fell short, well short.”

She caught herself, shook her head as she got out Cokes, glasses. “Doesn’t matter, and it was for the best. For more than the best.”

“What did she say to you—or is that too direct?”

“Oh, she started with snide little comments about my hair.”

“You have amazing hair. Magic mermaid hair.”

She laughed. “That’s a first. Magic mermaid hair. I’ll have to use that with Callie. In any case, Mean Melody got in a few jabs about my current circumstance, which I tolerated as I wanted the damn job. She moved on, though, trying to scrape me down to the bone, how I wasn’t qualified, didn’t have enough class, basically, or intelligence, and it was clear I didn’t have a cherry snow cone’s chance in hell of working there, so I landed a few jabs of my own, with, I will say, more subtlety and style.”

“I just bet.”

With a cool, sharp smile, Shelby poured Cokes over ice. “She was so steamed up when I was leaving she shouted out how she’d been second-runner-up Miss Tennessee, which is her spotlight of fame. To that, I ended the encounter with the southern woman’s sweetest and most pitying insult.”

“I know that.” He pointed a finger. “I know that one. You said ‘Bless your heart.’”

“Haven’t you caught on fast?” After topping off the glasses, she handed him one. “I knew that one landed, but I was so fired up, I marched over to the bar and grill. I was going to ask Tansy to hire me on as a waitress. I met Derrick—and doesn’t he look like an action movie star.”

“I hadn’t thought of it.”

“You’d be looking at him as a man does. From a woman’s eyes?” She laughed again, waved a hand in front of her face. “Lucky Tansy—and lucky Derrick because she’s a sweet, smart, sensible woman. So after I apologized for being rude to him, because I was fired up, they didn’t want me for a waitress.”

“Sounds like a rough day on the job hunt.”

“Not at all. They wanted me for Friday nights, to sing. I’m going to be their Friday night entertainment. Or, as Tansy’s calling it, I’m going to be Friday Nights.”

“No kidding? That’s great, Red, seriously great. Everybody says you can sing. Sing something.”

“No.”

“Come on, a couple of bars of anything.”

“Come into Bootlegger’s a week from Friday, and you’ll hear plenty.” After lifting her glass to him, she took a satisfied drink. “Then, because that’s not all, I went in to tell Granny before I hit a couple other possible places for day jobs, and she cornered me into working part-time there. She made me believe she could really use me, so I’m hoping she meant it.”

“In my shorter experience, Miz Vi usually means what she says.”

“It’s true enough, and Crystal swore to it they’d already talked about hiring someone part-time. So, I didn’t just get a job, I got two. I’m employed, gainfully. God, it feels so good.”

“Want to celebrate?” He watched her eyes go from sparkling happy to just a little wary. “Maybe we could get Matt and Emma Kate, go have dinner.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun, it really does, but I need to buckle down, work out a playlist. Tansy wants to change it up every week, so I’ve got some research to do. And there’s Callie, though it’s likely to be more of a weight on me leaving her for hours at a time than for her leaving me.”

“Does she like pizza?”

“Callie? Sure she does. It runs a close second to ice cream on her favorites list.”

“Then I’ll take you both out for pizza one night after work.”

“That’s awful nice of you, Griffin. She’s already got a crush going on you.”

“Mutual.”

She smiled at him, topped off his Coke. “How long have you been in the Ridge now, Griffin?”

“Going on a year.”

“And don’t you have a girl by now? Somebody who looks like you ought to have the single girls flocking.”

“Well, there was Melody for about ten minutes. And there’s Miz Vi, if only she’d reciprocate.”

“Grandpa’d fight you for her.”

“I’d fight dirty.”

“So would he, and he’s very canny. I have to say, I’m surprised Emma Kate—or surely Miz Bitsy—hasn’t tried fixing you up.”

“Tried, didn’t stick.” He shrugged, downed some Coke. “I haven’t been interested in anyone particularly. Up to now.”

“I guess it just takes . . . Oh.” It may have been a long while, but she supposed a woman didn’t forget that look in a man’s eyes, that tone in a man’s voice. Flustered, and under the flustered she couldn’t deny flattered, she took a careful drink. “Oh,” she repeated. “I’ve got to say, Griff, I’m a complicated, twisted-up mess of a thing right now.”

“I fix things, Red. It’s what I do.”

She managed a nervous laugh. “This is a complete overhaul—what you’d call a gut job, I think. And I come as a set.”

“I like the set, and I know I’m hitting on you pretty quick considering. It just seems to me it’s better to be straight-out. You knocked me flat when you walked into Bitsy’s kitchen. I planned to be slow and a lot smoother about it, but hell, Shelby, why?”

That was straight-out and forthright, she thought, and as unnerving as it was flattering. “You really don’t know me.”

“I plan to.”

This time she let out a laugh that was more stupefied. “Just like that.”

“Unless you take a strong dislike to me, and I don’t think you will. I’m likable. I want to take you

out, when you're ready and want to go. Meanwhile, since I'm attached to Matt and he's attached to Emma Kate, we'll be seeing each other. Plus, I really like your kid."

"I can see that. If I thought different, if I thought she was a kind of conduit with you to me, this would be a different conversation. As it is, I don't know just what to say to you."

"Well, you can think about that. I've got to get back, and you've got things to do. Tell your mom I've got the measurements. Once she settles on the tile, the fixtures, we'll get them ordered."

"All right."

"Thanks for the Coke."

"You're welcome." She walked back with him, considering the nerves—those interesting, fluttery nerves she hadn't felt in so long. A mistake, absolutely a mistake to act on them at this point in her life.

"I meant it about the pizza," he said at the door.

"Callie would be thrilled."

"Pick the day, let me know." He frowned outside a moment, his gaze following the car that passed. "Do you know somebody with a gray Honda? Looks like a 2012."

"Can't think of anyone. Why?"

"I keep seeing it. I've seen it around a lot the last few days."

"Well, people do live here."

"Florida plates."

"A tourist, I guess. There's good hiking now while it's still cool, and the wildflowers are popping out everywhere."

"Yeah, probably. Anyway, congratulations on scoring the jobs."

"Thank you."

She watched him walk away—that swagger really was damn appealing. And he'd gotten her blood moving in ways she'd forgotten it could move.

Still, it was best all around if she kept all her attention on Callie, her new work, and climbing her way out of the canyon of debt.

Thinking of debt, she started upstairs. She'd change, work out a new budget, check and see if there was any progress on the house sale, or if there was any more money coming from the consignment shop. Then she could think about a playlist.

That was work, true enough, but it was also fun—smarter to get the hard over with first.

She stopped dead in the doorway of her room.

A gray Honda with Florida plates. She scrambled for her dresser, pulled out the drawer where she'd put all the business cards from Philadelphia.

And there was Ted Privet, Private Investigator. Miami, Florida.

She *had* seen him in the bar and grill. He'd followed her all the way back to the Ridge. Why would he do that? What did it mean?

He was watching her.

She made herself go to the window, look out, search.

She had no choice about the debt coming home with her, but she wouldn't sit still, do nothing, when more of Richard's mess tried to push its way into her life now.

Instead of getting to work, she picked up her phone.

"Forrest? I'm sorry to bother you at work, but I think I have some trouble. I think I could use some help with it."

. . .

HE LISTENED TO HER, didn't interrupt, didn't ask any questions. That only made her more nervous, babbling it all out to her brother while he sat there cool as ice, his eyes on her face telling her nothing.

"Is that it?" he said when she ran down.

"I think so. Yes, that's it, that's all. I guess it's more than enough."

"Do you have the IDs, the ones you found in the bank box?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to need them."

"I'll go get them."

"Sit. I'm not done."

So she sat back down at the kitchen counter, knotted her hands together on it.

"Do you have the gun?"

"I . . . Yes. I made sure it wasn't loaded, and I have it in a box, top of my closet, where Callie can't get to it."

"And any of the cash—from the box?"

"I kept three thousand of it in cash—it's up in my closet, too. I used most of the rest, like I said, to pay off bills. And I put some in the bank here. I opened an account here in the Ridge."

"I want all of it. The IDs, the gun, the cash, the envelopes, anything you have that came out of the box."

"All right, Forrest."

"Now, I'm going to ask you why the fuck, why the fuck, Shelby, you're just telling me all this now?"

"The hole was so deep, and it got deep so fast. First Richard's dead, and I'm trying to think what to do, then the lawyers are telling me there's all this trouble. I start going through the bills. I just never did that, because he locked them up. They were his business—and don't slap at me for it. You weren't there, you didn't live that life, so don't slap at me for it. Then I found out about the house, and everything. I had to deal with it. I found the key, and I *had* to know. Then when I found the bank box, and what was in it . . . I don't know who I married, who I lived with, who fathered my child."

She took a long breath. "And I couldn't let that matter, couldn't let that take the rest over. What matters is now, and dealing with it until I'm clear of it. Keeping Callie clear of it. I don't know why this detective followed me here. I don't have anything. I don't know anything."

"I'll deal with that."

"I'll thank you for it."

"I might've slapped at you some, Shelby. But just to wake you up. You're my sister, goddamn it. We're your family."

She linked her fingers together again, to hold herself in. "You think I've forgotten that, and you're wrong. If you think I don't value that, you're stupid."

"What should I think?" he countered.

"That I did what I thought was right. I couldn't come back until I'd started climbing out of that hole, Forrest. I wouldn't. Maybe you think that's just pride, just stupid, but I couldn't come back and put all of it on my family."

"You couldn't ask for a hand, a hand to reach down and help you up out of it?"

"Well, Jesus God, Forrest, aren't I doing just that? But I had to get up far enough to reach a hand. That's what I'm doing now."

He pushed up, paced around the room, stopped at the window for a while, looking out in silence.

“All right. Maybe I see your side of that. I don’t have to say you’re right to see it. Go ahead, get me everything you have.”

“What are you going to do? It’s still my business, Forrest.”

“I’m going to have a talk with this Florida PI, let him know I don’t take kindly to him stalking my sister. Then I’m going to do what I can to find out who the hell you were married to.”

“I think he stole that money he had stashed in the bank box, or he swindled it. Dear God, Forrest, if I have to pay all that back—”

“You won’t. You took what you took legally. Whatever he did, it’s pretty damn clear there’s nothing left to pay anybody back. One more thing. You’re going to tell all of this to the rest of the family. You’re going to get this out.”

“Gilly’s about to have a baby.”

“No excuses, Shelby. You’re going to sit down tonight, after Callie’s in bed, and tell everyone. I’ll make sure they’re all here. You want them to get word some private investigator from out of state’s asking questions about their daughter, their sister?”

Because she saw the sense of it, she pressed her fingers to her eyes. “No. You’re right. I’ll tell them. You have to take my side, Forrest, when Mama and Daddy start talking about helping me pay off this debt. I won’t have it.”

“That’s fair enough.” He came over, put his hands on her shoulders. “I am on your side, you idiot.”

She dipped her forehead to his chest. “I can’t wish the years away without wishing Callie away, but I can wish I’d been stronger standing up to him. It feels like every time I found my footing, something changed and I lost it again.”

“It sounds to me like he was good at making sure people didn’t find their footing around him. Go on, get all the things from the box. Let me get going on this.”

. . .

IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG to track down the private investigator, not when the man had opted to hide in plain sight. He’d registered under his own name at the hotel—though he’d spread the word he was a freelance travel writer.

Forrest considered confronting him there, but he thought he’d give Privet a taste of his own medicine. Once he was off duty and in his own truck, he did some cruising until he spotted the Honda parked outside The Artful Ridge.

Forrest parked the truck, got out and strolled by the shop. Sure enough, the man he’d spent an hour or so running stood talking with Melody.

He’d get an earful about Shelby from that source, no question. With his target sighted, he went back to his truck, waited.

He watched Privet come out, cross over to the bar and grill. Doubtful he’d find the same well of information in there, but if he was any good—and from the run it seemed he wasn’t bad—he’d pull out some.

Making the rounds, Forrest concluded as, fifteen minutes later, Privet came out of the bar and grill, walked down and into the salon.

Following Shelby’s path from earlier in the day, which meant Privet had trailed her through the morning.

That put a knot in Forrest’s craw.

This stop took longer, but when Forrest did another stroll by, he noted that Privet sat in a chair

getting a haircut. At least he put some money in the local pot while trying to mine information.

Forrest settled back in his truck, patient, waited for Privet to come out, get back in his car.

He pulled out after him, paced him easily in the light town traffic. Privet took the fork toward Shelby and home. When the Honda drove straight by, Forrest calculated, turned off—did a three-quarter turn to face the road again.

He dug out his Kojak light, fixed it to the roof, and waited.

When Privet drove by a second time, eased to the side of the road a few yards down from the house, Forrest pulled out, hit the light so Privet would see it in his rearview.

He eased up behind the Honda, walked up to the passenger window—already rolled down.

Privet had a map out, and a frustrated expression on his face.

“I hope there’s no problem, Officer, and that you can help me. I think I made a wrong turn somewhere. I’m looking for—”

“Don’t waste my time. I believe you know who I am, and I sure as hell know who you are, Mr. Privet. I want your hands on the wheel where I can see them. Now,” Forrest said, setting his hand on the butt of his weapon, “I know you’re licensed to carry, and if I don’t see both your hands on the wheel, we’re going to have some trouble here.”

“I’m not looking for trouble.” Privet held his hands up, placed them carefully on the wheel. “I’m just doing my job.”

“I’m doing mine. You went to see my sister up North, and entered her home on false pretenses.”

“She asked me in.”

“You cornered a woman with a small child in her home, then you followed her across several state lines where you’ve spied on her, followed her.”

“I’m a private investigator, Deputy. My license is in my—”

“I said I know who you are.”

“Deputy Pomeroy, I have a client who—”

“If Richard Foxworth swindled your client, that’s nothing to do with my sister. Foxworth’s dead, so your client’s out of luck there. If you spent ten minutes with Shelby and think she had anything to do with it, you’re a damn fool.”

“Matherson. He used the name David Matherson.”

“Whatever name he used, whatever name he came into this world with, he’s dead. Personally, I hope the sharks had a good meal off him. Now, if it’s true you’re not looking for trouble, you’re going to stop following my sister, stop asking about her around town. I expect I could go into The Artful Ridge, the bar and grill and my granny’s place and they’d all tell me how when you were in there somehow the conversation came around to Shelby. That stops. I catch you at it again, I’m taking you in. Around here we call what you’re doing stalking, and we got a law against it.”

“In my business it’s called doing the job.”

Forrest leaned conversationally on the bottom of the window. “Let me ask you something, Mr. Privet. You think if I was to arrest you right here and now, and take you in, the judge around here is going to say there’s no problem with you sitting here—with those binoculars on the seat beside you?”

“I’m an amateur ornithologist.”

“Name me five birds indigenous to the Smokies.” Forrest waited two beats while Privet scowled. “See, you could say that bird, it won’t fly. I tell my boss, and we tell Judge Harris—who’s a third cousin, twice removed—that you’ve been sitting here watching my family home and my sister, been following her and her little girl around town, been asking questions about my widowed sister with her fatherless child, you think he’s going to say, ‘Why, that’s just fine. Live and let’? Or do you think

you'll be spending the night on a jailhouse cot tonight instead of your hotel bed?"

"My client isn't the only one Matherson swindled. And there's a matter of nearly thirty million in jewelry he stole out of Miami."

"I believe you. I believe he was a fucking bastard, and I know he did a number on my sister I won't forget. I'm not going to let you do the same."

"Deputy, do you know what the finder's fee is on twenty-eight million?"

"It's going to be zero," Forrest said equably, "if you're looking for it through my sister. You stay away from her, Mr. Privet, or you'll have plenty of the trouble you don't want to have, because if I catch you at it, I'll make sure of that trouble. You can tell your client we're all sorry for his bad luck. If I were you, I'd head back to Florida and do just that. Tonight. But it's your choice."

Forrest straightened up again. "We clear on that?"

"We're clear on that. I've got one question."

"Ask it."

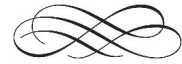
"How could your sister live with Matherson for years and not know what he was?"

"Let me ask one back. Is your client a reasonably intelligent individual?"

"I'd say he is."

"How did he manage to get himself swindled? You're going to want to move along now, and you don't want to drive back down this road again. That's literal and metaphorical."

Forrest walked back to his truck, waited until Privet drove away. Then he drove himself the short distance to his family home, parked so he'd be there when Shelby told the family her story.



Confessions and truth telling exhausted the body and the brain. When Shelby dragged herself out of bed in the morning, she realized she'd start her day already worn down.

It was hateful to disappoint the people who'd raised you. She thought of Callie, wondered if one day she'd do something stupid and wake up with this same dragging sensation.

Odds were pretty good on that, so Shelby vowed to remember this morning, and to try to give her daughter a break when the time came.

She found Callie, still luckily too young to do something really stupid, sitting in bed having a cheerful conversation with Fifi. So Shelby dived in for a morning snuggle that pulled her mood up a notch or two.

She got them both dressed, then took Callie downstairs.

She put on the coffee, decided she'd make up some of the ground she'd lost with her parents the night before by making French toast—and the poached eggs her father favored.

By the time her mother came down, she had Callie settled in her booster with some sliced banana and strawberries, with breakfast well on the way.

"Morning, Mama."

"Morning. All bright and early, I see. 'Morning, my sunbeam," she said to Callie, and crossed over for a kiss.

"We get to have eggy bread, Gamma."

"Do we? Why, that's a special morning treat."

"Nearly done," Shelby told her. "I'm poaching some eggs for Daddy. Do you want any?"

"Not this morning, thank you."

When Ada Mae walked over to pour coffee, Shelby turned, wrapped her arms around her mother from behind. "You're still mad," she murmured.

"Of course I'm still mad. Mad doesn't turn off and on like a light."

"Still pretty mad at me."

Ada Mae sighed. "That part's on a dimmer switch. It's easing down some."

"I'm so sorry, Mama."

"I know you are." Ada Mae patted Shelby's hand. "I know. And I'm trying to come around to it being the situation you were in, and not that you didn't trust your family to help you."

"It was never that. Never. I just . . . I got myself into it, didn't I? Somebody raised me to face my own troubles and deal with them."

"Seems we did a fine job there. But not as fine a one on teaching you troubles shared are lessened."

"I was ashamed."

Now Ada Mae turned, took Shelby's face firmly in her hands. "You're never, *never* to be

ashamed with me.” She glanced over to where Callie was busy with her sliced fruit. “I could say a lot more, and likely will when there aren’t little pitchers with big ears close by.”

“Pitchers don’t have ears, Gamma! That’s silly.”

“It is, isn’t it? Why don’t I fix you a piece of this eggy bread your mama’s made up.”

Clayton came down, dressed for the day in one of his habitual white shirts tucked tidily into his khakis. He walked to Shelby, gave her a knuckle rap on the head, then kissed it.

“Looks like a weekend breakfast in the middle of the week.” He got out a mug. “Sucking up?” he asked Shelby.

“I am.”

“Good job.”

. . .

SHE DID HER BARTER DAY with Tracey and took the girls to the park so Emma Kate could come by, have a little picnic with them on her lunch hour and finally meet Callie.

“When I was a little girl, Emma Kate was my very best friend, like you and Chelsea.”

“Did you have tea parties?” Callie asked Emma Kate.

“We did, and picnics just like this.”

“You can come to Gamma’s house for a tea party.”

“I would absolutely love to.”

“Gamma saved Mama’s tea set so we can use it.”

“Oh, the one with the violets and little pink roses?”

“Uh-huh.” Callie’s eyes rounded owlishly. “We have to be careful not to break it ’cause it’s deliquit.”

“Delicate,” Shelby corrected.

“Okay. We’re going to swing now. Let’s go swing, Chelsea!”

“She’s beautiful, Shelby. Beautiful and bright.”

“She’s all of that. She’s my very best thing. Emma Kate, do you have some time after work? There’s some things I still need to tell you. Just you.”

“All right.” Since she’d been expecting this—or hoping for it—Emma Kate already had a plan. “We could take a hike up to the Outlook like we used to. I’m off at four today, so I could meet you at the trailhead at maybe four-fifteen.”

“That’d be perfect.”

Emma Kate watched Callie run around the swings with Chelsea. “If I had somebody like that depending on me, there’s a lot I’d do I wouldn’t do otherwise.”

“And a lot you don’t do you would do otherwise.”

“Mama! Mama! Push us. Push us, Mama! I want to go high!”

“Takes after you,” Emma Kate commented. “You could never swing high enough.”

With a laugh, Shelby stood up. “I’m sticking closer to ground level these days.”

As she got up to help push the girls on the swing, Emma Kate thought that was a real shame.

. . .

SHE MANAGED TO SQUEEZE OUT some time to start a playlist, to pump a fist in the air when the consignment shop reported the sale of two cocktail dresses, an evening gown and a handbag. She adjusted her spreadsheet, calculated that she might be able to pay off another credit card with one more good sale.

She organized herself for the next day, her first day working at the salon, then pulled out her old hiking boots—ones she'd kept tucked away in her closet so Richard couldn't insist she toss them out.

She dropped Callie off at Clay's for a visit with Jackson as arranged and watched her daughter happily exploring her cousin's little backyard fort before driving to the trailhead.

More she'd missed, she thought as she parked and got out. The quiet that let you hear birds calling and the breeze singing through the trees. The sharp smell of pine on air fresh and just cool enough. She hooked on her light pack—something else she'd tucked away from Richard.

She'd been taught from childhood to always carry water and some basics even on a short, easy hike. Cell service could be spotty—at least it had been the last time she'd taken this trail—but she'd tucked her phone in her pocket like always.

She didn't want to be more than a call or text away from her daughter.

She'd bring Callie here, she thought, take her along the trail, point out the wildflowers, the trees, maybe spot a deer or a scurrying rabbit.

Teach her how to identify bear scat, she thought, smiling as she calculated Callie was just the right age to find that idea thrillingly disgusting.

She looked up at the clouds that skimmed over the tops of the higher hills. She might take her daughter on an overnight. Pitch a tent, show her the pleasure of sleeping out under the stars on a good, clear night, and telling stories around a campfire.

This was the true legacy, wasn't it? The years traveling from place to place, the time in Atlanta, in Philadelphia, that was some other world altogether. If Callie chose one of those worlds, or another entirely, she'd have these roots to return to whenever she wanted.

She'd always have family in the Ridge, and a place to come home to.

Shelby turned when she heard the car, looked back, looked out to take in the view of the town rising and falling with the hills. And despite knowing she'd have to go through yet another painful confession, smiled when Emma Kate parked beside her.

"I almost forgot how beautiful it is here, just right here, with the town on one side, the trail on the other, so you can choose what you want and just go."

"Matt and I hiked up to Sweetwater Cave the first time he came back with me. I wanted to see what he was made of."

"That one's a quad killer. How'd he do?"

"I'm still keeping him around, aren't I? You've still got those hiking boots?"

"Broke in just right."

"So you always said. Finally traded mine in last year. I try to get in a hike once or twice a week. Matt, he joined the gym over in Gatlinburg as he's one for weights and machines. He's making noises about finding a place to build one in the Ridge so he doesn't have to drive all that way. Me, I'd rather just take the trail, and maybe fit in one of the yoga classes your granny's got going on Saturdays at the day spa."

"She didn't say anything about that."

"She's got a lot going. We'd better get going, too, if we're going to hike up to the Outlook."

"Our favorite spot to talk about boys and parents and what annoyed us."

"Is that what we're doing now?" Emma Kate asked as they began to walk.

"In a way, I guess. I've come clean, you could say, with my family. You always were my family, too, so I'm going to come clean with you."

"Are you running from the law?"

With a laugh, and because it felt right, Shelby took Emma Kate's hand, gave their arms a swing.

“Not the law, but it feels like I’ve been running from everything else. I’ve stopped now.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I’ve told you some. Now I’m going to tell you the rest. It started after Richard died. It all started before, but you could say it all fell on top of me after.”

She filled in pieces she’d left out, backtracking when Emma Kate blurted out questions. The climb steepened, winding up, making her legs ache in a good way. She caught sight of the rich feathers of a bluebird winging through some wild dogwood with its buds just peeking open, waiting, just waiting, to burst out full white.

The air cooled as they climbed, and still she felt the good, light sweat of the physical challenge on her skin.

It was easier, she realized, to say it all here, out in the open, where the hills carried her words away.

“First, I’m still not used to having somebody I know millions of dollars in debt—and it’s not your debt, damn it, Shelby.”

“I signed the loan papers on the house, at least I guess I did.”

“Guess?”

“I don’t remember signing any loan, but he’d push papers in front of me now and then, ‘Sign this, it’s nothing.’ I think half the time he just signed my name himself. I could maybe have gotten out of it if I’d gone through the court process or just tossed it all in and declared bankruptcy. I wasn’t going to do that. When the house sells, and it will, that’ll take the big weight off. And until it does, I’m chipping away.”

“Selling clothes?”

“I’ve made nearly fifteen thousand on clothes so far—not counting the fur coat I took back with the tags still on it—and I might make that much again before it’s done. He had a hell of a lot of suits, and I had things I never even wore. It was a different world, Emma Kate.”

“But your engagement ring was a fake.”

“I guess he didn’t see the point in putting a real diamond on my finger. He never loved me, I see that now. I was useful to him. I’m not altogether sure how, but I must’ve been useful.”

“Finding that safe-deposit box. That hardly seems possible.”

Looking back, she could see she’d been tilting at windmills. But . . . “I was on a mission. You know how it is.”

“I know how you are when you’re on a mission.” As the sun changed angles, Emma Kate adjusted the bill of her cap. “All that cash in there, and that doesn’t even get to the other identification.”

“He couldn’t have come by it legal. I’ve had some moments over that, but I didn’t steal it, or swindle it, and I’ve got Callie to consider. If it comes down to having to pay that back sometime, I’ll deal with it. For now, I’ve got some tucked away in the bank, and when I can see my way clear, I’m going to use it to get us a little house.”

“What about this private detective?”

“He’s wasting his time with me. I have to figure he’ll come to that on his own, or Forrest persuaded him.”

“Forrest can be persuasive.”

“He’s still mad at me, at least a little. Are you still?”

“It’s hard to be when I’m more fascinated.”

They walked in silence, along the familiar trail.

“Was the furniture really that ugly?”

Amused her friend would zoom in on that, Shelby laughed. “Uglier. I wish I’d taken pictures. It was hard and slick, and dark and angular. I always felt like I was visiting in that house, and couldn’t wait to get out of it. He never made the first payment, Emma Kate. By the time he died, the bank had already sent out notices I hadn’t seen.”

She paused to open her water bottle. “I’m thinking now he was in trouble. Something in Atlanta, maybe. So he wrangled that big house up North without telling me that, either. Set it all up, then told me we were moving, he had some business opportunities. I went along. I guess that’s one way I was useful. I went along. Looking back, it’s hard to imagine how many times I did.

“I don’t even know who he was. I can’t say for sure I even knew his name. I don’t know now what he did, how he made the money he had. I just know none of it was real—not my marriage, not the life we lived.”

She stopped at the Outlook, felt her heart lift.

“This is what’s real.”

She could see for miles, the roll and rise of that deep, secret green, the dips of the valleys cupped between the rises—delicate as her old tea set. And the carpeted peaks swimming into the clouds so full of mystery and silence.

The light had gone soft as the afternoon wound down. She thought of how it looked at sunset, all brushed with gold, little tips of fire red as the mountains went to gray.

“I know, too, I took this for granted. All of it. I never will again.”

They sat on an outcropping of rock, as they had countless times over the years. Emma Kate pulled a bag of sunflower seeds out of her pack.

“It used to be gummy bears,” Shelby commented.

“I used to be twelve. I could go for some gummy bears,” she decided.

Smiling, Shelby opened her own pack, pulled out a bag. “I let Callie have them now and again. Whenever I’d open a bag of them, I’d think of you.”

“Something about gummies.” Emma Kate opened the bag, dived in. “You know, your family would help you with some of the debt—and I wouldn’t do that, either,” she said before Shelby could speak.

“Thanks. It helps you understand the why of that. I’m going to make a good life here. I know I can. Maybe I had to leave so I could come back, see what was real for me, and what wasn’t.”

“And you’ll sing for your supper after all.”

“That’s the icing. I really like Tansy’s Derrick.”

“He’s a winner. And what a face.”

“He sure is pretty. But—”

“What a body,” they said together, and laughed until they lost their breath.

“Now we’re sitting here.” Shelby let out a sigh, looked out over the spread of green. “Just like we used to and still talking about boys.”

“A puzzle that can never be truly solved.”

“So worth talking about. And both of us are doing—or for me about to do—what we used to wish for. Emma Kate Addison, RN. Do you love it?”

“I do. I really do. Hell, I never worked so hard in my life as I did to get that RN. I figured I’d work in a big hospital. And I did. I liked it, I liked it a lot.”

She looked back at Shelby. “The thing I didn’t know is I’d like working at the clinic even more, and I do. So maybe I had to go off awhile to see that.”

“Is Matt your icing?”

“He’s definitely icing.” Emma Kate grinned as she popped another gummy bear in her mouth.

“And at least one layer of cake.”

“You going to marry him?”

“I don’t plan on marrying anybody else. Not in a rush about it, even if Mama wishes I would be. Things are really good as they are for now. I heard they’re going to do that big master bath for your mama.”

“She’s got sample books and magazine pictures. Daddy pretends he thinks it’s crazy, but he’s getting a kick out of it.”

Shelby took a sip of water, then took her time carefully screwing the cap back in place. “Griffin was over measuring the other day.”

“They’re looking forward to the demo. They’re both like little boys about the demo stage.”

“Hmm.” Wondering if she should bring it up—and out—Shelby looked out, caught a glint of a curving stream in a splash of sunlight. Talking about boys here, she thought, was tradition, after all.

“The thing is, while he was over at Mama’s, Griffin pretty much came straight out and said he was interested. In me.”

On a snort, Emma Kate popped another gummy bear. “I saw that one coming.”

“Because he makes moves on women a lot?”

“He makes moves like any normal guy, but no. Because he looked like he’d been struck by lightning when you walked into my mother’s kitchen that first day.”

“He did? I didn’t notice that. Shouldn’t I have noticed that?”

“You were too busy feeling guilty and awkward. What did you say to him?”

“I just fumbled around some. I can’t really be thinking about things like that.”

“But you are thinking about things like that.”

“I shouldn’t be. Richard just died. And that’s not even official.”

“Richard—or whatever the hell his name was—is gone.” As even the thought of him pissed her off, Emma Kate mimed balling something up, flicked it out toward the drop. “You’re here. Your marriage was unhappy, and basically a sham—you said so yourself. There’s no required mourning period here, Shelby.”

“I’m not mourning at all. It doesn’t seem right.”

“Aren’t you tired of doing what you tell yourself seems right? You’ve done that for about four years now, and it looks like it landed you in a mess.”

“I don’t even know him. Griffin, I mean.”

“I know who you meant, and that’s why they invented this thing we call dating. You go out somewhere, have conversations, discover what interests you might share and if you’re attracted to each other. What about sex?”

“Richard didn’t seem interested the last few months before— Oh, you meant with Griffin. God, Emma Kate.” Laughing, Shelby reached for gummy bears. “We haven’t even gone on that invention called dating. I can’t just have sex with him.”

“I don’t know why not. You’re both free, healthy and of age.”

“And look what jumping into sex with someone I barely knew got me last time.”

“I can promise you, Griff’s no Whatever-His-Name-Was.”

“I don’t think I know how to date anymore.”

“You’ll ease into it. The four of us can go out and do something.”

“Maybe. Griff wants to take us out for pizza, and I made the mistake of saying something about it to Callie. She’s asked me about it twice since.”

“There you go.” Problem solved to Emma Kate’s mind, she slapped Shelby on the leg. “You let him take the two of you for pizza, the four of us will have dinner or something. Then you can try a

solo.”

“My life’s a pure hot mess yet, Emma Kate. I shouldn’t be dating anyone.”

“Honey, when you’re single, going out with a good-looking guy *is* living. Go have pizza,” she advised, “and see where it goes from there.”

“You’re going to get sick of hearing it, but I missed you so much. I missed this right here. Sitting in this spot, talking to you about anything and everything, and eating gummy bears.”

“It’s the good life.”

“It’s the best.” And caught up in it, she grabbed Emma Kate’s hand. “Let’s make a vow. When we’re eighty or so, if we can’t make the hike, we’ll get a couple of young studs to cart us up here so we can sit, talk about anything and everything and eat gummy bears.”

“Now, that’s the Shelby Pomeroy I remember.” Emma Kate swiped a finger over her heart. “That’s a vow. But they have to be hot young studs.”

“I thought that was understood.”

. . .

SHE MOVED INTO A ROUTINE, a contented one, working on her song list, practicing, weaving herself back into the fabric of the Ridge with her work at the salon.

She found it strange and wonderful how quickly it all came back, the voices, the rhythm, the easy gossip, the sights of the town and the mountains coming to life with spring.

As promised, demolition began, so mornings before she left for work or errands, the house was filled with men’s voices, hammering, drilling.

She got used to seeing Griff and Matt—and maybe she was thinking about it, a little. Off and on. It was hard not to think about a man when he showed up at your house every day with a tool belt slung around his hips, and that look in his eyes.

“Sounded good this morning.”

She stopped on her way to get her Callie bag when Griff stepped out into the hallway from her old bedroom.

“Sorry, what?”

“You. You sounded good. Singing in the shower.”

“Oh. It’s a handy rehearsal hall.”

“You’ve got pipes, Red. What was the song?”

“I . . .” She had to think back. “‘Stormy Weather.’ It’s the forties.”

“Sexy in any decade. Hey, Little Red.”

He crouched down when Callie bolted up the stairs. “Mama’s going to work at Granny’s. I’m going to Chelsea’s ’cause Gamma works today, too.”

“Sounds like fun all around.”

“Can we have pizza?”

“Callie—”

“Deal’s a deal,” Griff interrupted. “I could go for some pizza tonight. Tonight work for you?” he asked Shelby.

“Well, I . . .”

“Mama, I want pizza with Grrr—iff.” To seal it, Callie climbed into his arms, then turned her head toward her mother, smiled.

“Who could say no to all that? That would be nice, thanks.”

“Six work for you?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“Oh, well, car seat. It’s easier if we meet you there.”

“Right. Six o’clock. Have we got a date?” he asked Callie.

“We gotta date,” she said, and kissed him. “Let’s go, Mama. Let’s go to Chelsea’s.”

“Right behind you. Thank you, really,” Shelby said when Callie started down again. “You made her day.”

“It’s making mine. See you later.”

When he walked back into the work space, Matt raised his eyebrows. “Moving in on the local talent?”

“One step at a time.”

“She’s a looker. Got herself a very complicated life, bro.”

“Yeah. Good thing I’ve got tools.” He picked up the nail gun. “And know how to use them.”

He thought about her throughout the day. He couldn’t think of a woman who’d intrigued him more—the contrast of the sad, cautious eyes and the quick smile when she forgot to be careful. The seamless way she handled the kid. The way she looked in snug jeans.

It all worked for him.

He almost thought it was too bad the job was moving along so smoothly. A few glitches and he’d have more time to see her for a few minutes every day.

But Ada Mae was no Bitsy. When she decided on a tile, on a color, on a fixture, she stuck.

He had time to go home, clean up, change. A man didn’t take two pretty females out for pizza smelling of job sweat and sawdust. It would be an early evening, he calculated, with a three-year-old along. Which was probably for the best. He could put in a couple of hours on his own job.

In fact, he thought he might move his focus to the bedroom. A man didn’t bring a pretty female home to bed when that bed was an air mattress on the floor.

He fully intended to bring Shelby home to bed. When she and the room were ready for it.

He drove into town, snagged a parking spot on the street just a few doors down from Pizzateria. And deemed his timing perfect when Shelby got out of her minivan two spots up.

He strolled up as she lifted Callie out of the car seat.

“Give you a hand?”

“Oh, I’ve got it. Thank you.”

“Hey.” He heard the tears in her voice even before she turned with Callie in her arms and he saw them welling in her eyes. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Oh, it’s just—”

“Mama’s happy. She has happy tears,” Callie explained.

“You’re happy?”

“Yes. Very.”

“The combination of me and pizza doesn’t usually bring women to tears.”

“It’s not that. I was just on the phone. We were a little early as Callie was so anxious. And the realtor called. The house up North, it’s sold.” One of the tears spilled down her cheek before she could brush it away.

“Happy tears,” Callie announced. “Hug Mama, Griff.”

“Sure.”

Before she could evade, he had both Shelby and Callie wrapped in a hug.

He felt her hold stiff for a moment, then just melt.

“It’s just such a relief. It’s like a mountain fell off my shoulders.”

“Good.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “We’re definitely celebrating. Right, Callie? Happy pizza.”

“We don’t like the house. We’re glad it’s not ours now.”

“That’s right. That’s right.” Shelby took a breath, leaned in just one more moment, then straightened. “We don’t like the house, not for us. Now somebody who does like it has it. Very happy pizza. Thank you, Griffin.”

“You need a minute?”

“No. No, I’m good.”

“Then give me the girl.” He hefted Callie into his arms. “And let’s get this party started.”



The kid was a charmer, entertained and engaged him—and flattered him by insisting on sitting next to him in the booth.

He might have had a moment or two wishing the mother would flirt as overtly as the daughter, but a man couldn't have everything.

It was a nice break to his day, between the job and the project.

When the manager came out, pulled Shelby from her seat for a hug, he examined his reaction.

Not jealousy, not exactly, but a kind of inner “Careful there, buddy” as he waited to see just what was what.

“I kept missing you.” Johnny Foster, a man with a sly smile and an easy manner, kept his hands on Shelby's shoulders to take a long look. “But here you are now. Didn't realize you knew Griff.” Johnny slung an arm over Shelby's shoulders as he turned to Griff. “Shelby and I go back.”

“My cousin Johnny, here, and my brother Clay used to look for trouble together.”

“And found it as often as possible.”

“You're cousins?”

“Third, fourth, what is it?” Johnny wondered.

“Third, I think, once or twice removed.”

“Kissing cousins,” he said, and gave her one, lightly. “And you're Callie, and aren't you as pretty as a strawberry float. It's nice meeting you, cousin.”

“I'm on a date with Griff. We're going to have pizza.”

“This is the place for it. We're going to find some time and catch up,” he said to Shelby. “All right?”

“All right. Clay said you were manager here now.”

“Yeah. Who'd have thought? Y'all get your order in?”

“Just a minute ago.”

“You watch over there, Callie.” He pointed to the counter where a man in a white apron ladled sauce on dough. “I'll be making your pizza myself, special. And I've got some tricks. Meant to tell you, Griff, whatever y'all did with the furnace worked like a charm. Hasn't given us any trouble since.”

“Good to hear.”

“Pizza coming up.”

Shelby slid back into the booth. “It sounds like you and Matt are fixing something somewhere all over the Ridge.”

“That's the plan. The guy who can fix your furnace when the temperatures dive, or your toilet on a Sunday morning when you've got people coming to dinner? He's a popular guy.”

She laughed. “And who doesn't like being popular? Busy, too. How do you manage to make

yourself popular and do all the work on the old Tripplehorn place?”

“Being popular’s the job. The house is the project. I do better with the job when I’ve got a good project going.”

“Mama, look!” Callie bounced in her seat. “The cousin man’s doing tricks.”

“And he’s learned some new ones,” Shelby commented as Johnny tossed up dough, did a quick spin, caught it.

“Looks like we’re having magic pizza.”

Wide-eyed, Callie turned to Griff. “Magic pizza?”

“Pretty sure. Don’t you see that magic dust flying?”

With eyes like blue saucers now, she looked back at Johnny, gasped. “It sparkles!”

The power of a kid’s imagination, Griff thought. “You bet. When you eat magic pizza, it turns you into a fairy princess in your dreams.”

“It does?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. Of course, you’ve got to eat it, then when your mother says it’s bedtime, you’ve got to go right to bed, and wish for it.”

“I will. But you can’t be a fairy princess ’cause you’re a boy. That’s silly.”

“That’s why I’m the prince who slays the fangbeast.”

“Princes slay dragons!”

“I don’t get that.” Playing it up, he let out a sad sigh, shook his head—caught Shelby smiling at him from across the table. “I like dragons. You might be able to squeeze in another wish and get yourself your own dragon. You could fly on him over your kingdom.”

“I like dragons, too. I’m going to fly on mine. Her name’s Lulu.”

“Can’t think of a better name for a dragon.”

“You’ve got a way,” Shelby murmured, and Griff grinned over at her.

“Oh, I’ve got lots of ways.”

“I just bet you do.”

He decided it was the best hour of his day, sitting in the noisy pizzeria, entertaining a little girl and making her mother laugh. He didn’t see why it wasn’t something he couldn’t work into his regular schedule.

Everybody could use some magic pizza now and then.

“This was so nice,” Shelby said when he walked them back to her car. “You sure made Callie’s first date one to remember.”

“We’ll have to have a second. Are you going to go out with me again, Callie?”

“Okay. I like ice cream.”

“That’s a real coincidence—I’m starting to think we’re made for each other. I like ice cream, too.”

She gave him what he could only term a femme fatale smile from under her lashes. “You can take me on a date with ice cream.”

“Now look what you started.” Amused, Shelby hauled Callie up into the car seat.

“How about Saturday?”

Busy strapping Callie in, Shelby glanced back. “What?”

“How about an ice cream date on Saturday?”

“Okay!” Callie bounced in her seat.

“I have to work,” Shelby began.

“Me, too. After work.”

“Well, I . . . I guess. Are you sure?”

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't. Don't forget to make your wish, Callie."

"I'm going to be a fairy princess and ride my dragon."

"Callie, what do you say to Griffin?"

"Thank you for the date." In joyful innocence, she held out her arms. "Kiss."

"You got it."

He leaned in, kissed her. Laughing, she rubbed his cheek.

"I like your scratchies. They tickle. Kiss Mama now."

"Sure."

He figured she'd offer a cheek, and didn't see why he had to settle. A man could move fast without seeming to, especially when he'd thought it through.

He set his hands on her hips, glided them up her back with his eyes on hers. He watched hers widen in surprise—but not protest. So he went with it.

He dipped down, took her mouth with his as if they had all the time in the world. As if they weren't standing on the sidewalk of High Street, seen by anyone who passed by or glanced out a window.

It wasn't hard to forget where they were when her body melted against his, with her lips, warm and soft, yielding.

Her mind just emptied, every thought—past, present, future—flooding away as sensation flooded in and swamped her. Her body went limp even as it leaped to life. Her head spun in long, lazy circles as if she'd had just a sip too much of good wine.

She smelled soap and skin and the hyacinths in the whiskey barrel across the sidewalk. And heard what she realized later was the hum of pleasure in her own throat.

He let her go as smoothly as he'd taken her. His eyes stayed on hers again, watchful.

"I thought so," he murmured.

"I . . . just . . ." She realized she couldn't quite feel her feet, had to fight the urge to look down to make sure they were still there. "Have to go."

"See you later."

"I . . . Fingers on noses, Callie."

Callie put her fingers on her nose. "Bye, Griff. Bye!"

He waved as Shelby closed the door, hooked his thumbs in his pockets when she walked around to the driver's side. And couldn't stop the grin when she staggered, just a little.

He waved again when, after some fumbling, she started the engine, pulled away.

Yeah, definitely the best hour of his day. He couldn't wait to do it again.

. . .

SHE DROVE HOME with extra care. She really did feel as if she'd had a bottle of wine instead of a glass of Coke with her pizza. And that hum kept wanting to come back to her throat, a kind of echo to the butterflies dancing around in her belly.

Callie started nodding off on the short drive home, the excitement of the day taking its toll. But she perked up again, a little on the hyper side, when Shelby parked.

She'd let her daughter run down again, she thought. It wouldn't take long. And she had to be coherent, put all this business aside. She didn't have time for flutterings or hummings.

Shelby didn't have to do much more than listen as Callie frantically relayed the details of her date to her grandparents.

"And we're gonna have an ice cream date on Saturday."

"Is that so? Well, this sounds pretty serious." Ada Mae shot Shelby a speculative look. "Maybe your granddaddy should ask this boy his intentions."

"And his prospects," Clayton added.

"I'm their chaperone," Shelby said cheerfully. "Oh, I saw Johnny Foster. Didn't have much time to talk to him as they were busy. He's the one who tossed the dough. He made the magic pizza, right, Callie?"

"Uh-huh, and Griff said I can ride a dragon, and he's going to kill the . . . what is it, Mama?"

"I think it was a fangbeast."

"He's gonna kill it dead, and then we'll get married."

"That must've been some pizza," Clayton commented.

"You can be the king, Granddaddy, and Gamma's the queen." She ran in circles around the room, twirling, jumping. "And Clancy can come, too." She threw her arms around the old dog. "And I'm going to wear a beautiful dress, then it says kiss the bride. It tickles when Griff kisses, doesn't it, Mama?"

"I—"

"Does it?" Now Ada Mae wore a smug smile.

"Uh-huh. When is it Saturday, Mama?"

"Soon enough." Shelby caught Callie on the fly, gave her a spin. "Now we're going up. You need your bath before you go dreaming and getting married to handsome princes."

"Okay."

"Go on up, put your clothes in your hamper. I'll be two seconds. She had the best time," Shelby said when Callie ran for the stairs.

"How about you?"

"It was nice. He's so sweet with her. But what I wanted to tell you both is right before dinner, I got a call. The house sold."

"The house?" Ada Mae looked blank for a moment, then plopped down in a chair as her eyes filled. "Oh, Shelby, the house up North. I'm so glad. I'm so glad of that."

"Happy tears." Shelby pulled out one of the tissues always in her pocket. "I did the same. It's such a burden lifted." She turned into her father when he stepped over, folded her into his arms, rocked her side to side. "I thought I knew how much it weighed, since I've been carrying it. But now that it's lifted, it was heavier than I thought."

"We can help you with the rest of it. Your mama and I talked it over, and—"

"No, Daddy. No. Thank you so much. I love you." She laid her hands on his cheeks. "I'm doing it. It's going to take a while, but I'm doing it, and doing it feels good. It balances out, some, all the times I just let things go, stopped asking questions, let somebody else take care of everything."

She leaned against him, smiled at her mother. "And the worst of it's behind me now. I can deal with what's ahead. I'm so grateful to know if it gets too heavy again, I can ask."

"Don't ever forget that again."

"I swear it. I've got to get my baby in the tub. I had a good day," she said as she pulled back, hauled up her bag. "I had a real good day."

Once she'd tucked Callie in, she sat down with her spreadsheet. She should probably wait until settlement, but she thought she had every right to be optimistic. When she balanced the sheet with the sale, she shut her eyes, just breathed.

It was still a painful debt, but oh God, she'd cut it down to size.

The worst, she thought again, was over. And what was ahead?

She lay back on the bed, called Emma Kate.

“How was pizza?”

“It was magic, or so Griff convinced Callie, so she went to bed with a big smile and the anticipation of being a fairy princess riding a dragon. Before she and Griff get married with all due pomp and ceremony.”

“He’s got a way with kids. I think he’s got a lot of little boy left in there.”

“He kissed me.”

“Was that magic, too?” Emma Kate asked without missing a beat.

“My brain’s still soft. Don’t tell Matt my brain went soft. He’ll tell Griffin, and I’ll feel like an idiot. I don’t know if it’s because it’s been so long since I’ve had a serious kiss, or if he’s just that damn good at it.”

“I’ve heard he’s damn good at it.”

Shelby smiled, curled up. “Did your brain go soft the first time Matt kissed you?”

“It liquefied and leaked out of my ears. Which sounds disgusting, but was anything but.”

“I feel so good, so good I’d forgotten how it feels to feel so good. I just had to call you. I sold the house, and got kissed brainless on High Street.”

“You— Oh, Shelby, that’s great! On both counts, but shedding that house. I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m starting to see my way clear, Emma Kate. I’m really starting to see a clear path. Some more bumps to get over, but I see the clear.”

And part of the clear was being curled up on her bed talking to her best friend.

. . .

THE GOOD DAY ROLLED into a good week. She could savor the sensation of being happy and productive, of earning her way.

She mopped floors, filled dispensers, booked appointments, rang up sales, listened to gossip. She commiserated when Crystal complained about her boyfriend, comforted Vonnie when the masseuse’s grandmother passed peacefully in her sleep.

She set up chairs and tables in the little back garden area of the day spa, potted up some flowers.

After checking out the preschool where Chelsea would go come fall, she enrolled Callie. And felt the pride and the pang of what she knew would be the first of many layers of separation.

She had ice cream with Griff and discovered the second kiss could be as powerful as the first. But she hedged when he asked her out to dinner.

“It’s just my time’s so budgeted right now. I’ve got a routine going at the salon, so I’m easier there. But until I sing Friday night, see how that goes, I’m using up my free time rehearsing and planning for the next week.”

“After Friday.” He laid out the elements that would heat the tile floor of the new bathroom. “Because it’s going to go great.”

“I hope so. Maybe you could come by Bootlegger’s on Friday for a set.”

He sat back on his haunches. “Red, I wouldn’t miss it. I like listening to you rehearse in the shower.”

“I’m heading out right now to rehearse in place before the bar and grill opens. I hope Tansy’s right about people wanting to hear somebody sing old songs while they’re eating their pork chops or scooping up nachos.”

She pressed a hand on her belly. “We’re going to find out.”

“Nervous?”

"About the singing? No. I don't get nervous about singing, it feels too good. About the draw not justifying what they pay me. I'm nervous about that. I've got to get on. It's looking good in here."

"It's coming along." He smiled at her. "Let's make the word of the day 'gradation.' One step at a time."

"Mmm," she said, understanding he wasn't just talking about a new bathroom.

. . .

SHE SQUEEZED IN A LAST REHEARSAL Friday morning, and ordered herself not to think about what she could do with the songs if she had a couple of live musicians.

Still, she thought she put a little of her own spin on the old classic "As Time Goes By."

"Play it, Sam," Derrick said from behind the bar.

"Of all the gin joints in all the world."

"Are you an old-movie fan?"

"My daddy is, so we had to be. And who doesn't love *Casablanca*? How'd that sound to you, Derrick?"

"It sounded like Tansy had it right. We're going to rack them, stack them and pack them on Friday Nights." Restacking glasses freshly cleaned from the night before, he cocked an eyebrow at her. "How do you feel about it?"

"Hopeful." She stepped down off the tiny stage. "I just want to say, if it doesn't pull in a big draw, if it just doesn't work, it's not a problem."

"Are you setting up to fail, Shelby?"

She cocked her head, walked toward the bar. "Forget what I just said. We're going to kick ass so high here tonight, butts'll be landing on the moon, and you're going to be obliged to give me a raise."

"Don't get carried away. Want a Coke?"

"Wish I had time for one, but I have to head over to the salon." To be sure she wasn't already late, she tipped her phone out of her pocket to check the time.

"Tonight should bring people in, just to see," she said. "There's me, the girl who wasn't there for a while, and all the hyping Tansy's done. Flyers everywhere, and I'm plastered all over your Facebook page. Hell, my family's big enough to be a crowd, and a lot of them will be here. That's something."

"Kick ass high."

"Kick ass high," she agreed. "I'll see you tonight."

She walked out, distracted, still rehearsing in her head. She barely noticed the woman who fell into step beside her until she spoke.

"Shelby Foxworth?"

"Sorry." She'd gotten used to "Pomeroy" again in such a short time she nearly said no. "Yes. Hello."

She stopped, smiled and searched her memory banks. But the stunning brunette with the cold brown eyes and the perfect red lips didn't ring any bells.

"I'm Shelby. I'm sorry, I don't recognize you. Who are you?"

"I'm Natalie Sinclair. I'm Jake Brimley's wife. You knew him as Richard Foxworth."

The half-smile stayed on Shelby's face as the words sounded like a foreign language to her ears. "What? What did you say?"

Something feline moved into the woman's eyes. "We really need to talk, somewhere more

private. I saw a cute little park not far. Why don't we go there?"

"I don't understand. I don't know any Jake Brimley."

"Changing a name doesn't change who you are." Natalie reached into a pale blue handbag, drew out a photograph. "Look familiar?"

In the picture the brunette was cheek to cheek with Richard. His hair was longer than he'd worn it, a bit lighter. Something was different about his nose, Shelby thought.

But it was Richard smiling out at her.

"You—I'm sorry—are you saying you were married to Richard?"

"No. Wasn't I clear? Let me say it again, in case you have trouble understanding. I was, and am, married to Jake Brimley. Richard Foxworth never existed."

"But I—"

"It's taken me quite a while to track you down, Shelby. Let's have a chat."

Brimley was not one of the names she'd found in the bank box. My God, had he had another? Another name. Another wife.

"I need to make a call. I'm going to be late for work."

"Go right ahead. It's a quaint little town, isn't it? If you go for gun racks and camo."

And didn't she sound just like Richard? "There's also art." Shelby bit off the words. "Music, tradition, history."

"No call to get testy about it."

"People who consider us hicks are generally self-important snobs from somewhere else."

"Ouch." Looking amused, Natalie gave a quick shudder. "Struck a nerve."

Rather than try to explain what was going on in a call, Shelby texted her grandmother, apologized, let her know she'd be a little late.

"Some people like quaint. I'm a city girl." Natalie gestured toward the crosswalk, began to walk in gorgeous heeled sandals of pale gold. "So was Jake. But you didn't meet Jake here."

"I met Richard in Memphis." Everything seemed just a little blurry. "I was singing with a band during my summer break from college."

"And he just swept you away. He was good at that. Exciting, charming, sexy. I'll bet he took you to Paris, a little café on the Left Bank. You'd stay at the George Cinq. He bought you white roses."

A raw, ugly sickness roiled in her stomach—and must have shown on her face.

"Men like Jake have patterns." Natalie patted Shelby's arm.

"I don't understand. How can you be married to him? I mean, he's dead, but how could you have been married to him? We were together for over four years. We had a child together."

"Yes, that was a surprise. But I can see how the family unit could work for him. I had the poor judgment to marry him—whirlwind to Vegas. Sound familiar? And I had the good sense not to divorce him when he left me in the lurch."

It dropped on her, a single crushing weight. "I was never married to him. That's what this means. That's what you're saying."

"Since he was still legally married to me, no, you weren't ever married to him."

"And he knew."

"Of course he knew." Now she laughed. "What a bad boy! Of course, that's part of the appeal. Such a bad, bad boy, my Jake."

The park held quiet. No kids on the swings or teeter-totter, none running over the green, climbing on the jungle gym.

Natalie sat on a bench, crossed her legs, patted the space beside her.

"I wasn't sure if you realized that part and played along. It seems he duped you. But then, that's

what he does.” For an instant something that might have been sorrow flickered over Natalie’s face. “Or did.”

“I can’t think.” Shelby lowered to the bench. “Why would he do this? How could he do this? Oh my God, are there any more? Did he do this to another woman?”

“I couldn’t say.” Natalie gave an easy shrug. “But since he swung pretty quick from me to you, I don’t think there’s another wife in between. And that’s the time I’m interested in.”

“I don’t understand.” Suddenly breathless, Shelby sat back, pushed both hands through her hair, held it back a moment. “I can’t understand any of this. I was never married,” she said slowly. “It was all fake, just like the ring.”

“You lived pretty well for a while, didn’t you?” Natalie angled to her, aimed a look of contempt. “Paris, Prague, London, Aruba, Saint Bart’s, Rome.”

“How do you know all that? How do you know where I went with him?”

“I made it my business to know. You had a luxury condo in Atlanta, country clubs and Valentino dresses. Then the mansion in Villanova. You can’t claim he didn’t give you plenty. Seems to me you had a good deal.”

“A good deal? A good *deal*?” Not breathless now, not when insult and fury rolled through. “He lied to me, right from the start. He made me his whore without my knowing. I thought I loved him. At first, I thought I loved him enough to leave my family and everything I knew and thought I’d wanted.”

“Your mistake, but you were compensated. Plucked you out of this little hick town, didn’t he? Oh, *excuse* me, this art-and-culture-ridden town. Dropped you right in the lap for a few years, so don’t whine, Shelby. It’s unattractive.”

“What’s the matter with you? You come here, tell me all this. Maybe you’re the liar.”

“Check it out, be my fucking guest. But you know I’m not lying. Jake had a way of making women fall for him, and do what he wanted.”

“Did you love him?”

“I liked the hell out of him, and we had a damn good time. That was enough, would’ve been enough if he hadn’t hung me out to dry. I made an investment in him, you could say. And I paid a high price. I want my payoff.”

“What payoff?”

“Twenty-eight million.”

“Twenty-eight million what? Dollars? Are you crazy? He didn’t have anywhere near that kind of money.”

“Oh, he had it. I know because I helped him get it. Just shy of thirty million in sparkly diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and rare stamps. Where is the take, Shelby? I’ll settle for half.”

“Do I look like I have diamonds and emeralds and all that? He left me in debt up to my eyeballs. That’s the price I’m paying for believing him. What did you pay?”

“Four years, two months and twenty-three days in a cell in Dade County, Florida.”

“You—you were in prison? For what?”

“For fraud, since I rolled like an acrobat on Jake and Mickey. That’s Mickey O’Hara, the third member of our happy little band. Mickey’s got twenty years to go, last I heard.”

Smile sharp and derisive, she ticked her finger at Shelby. “You don’t want Mickey O’Hara coming after you, Shelby. Take my word on that.”

“You hired that private investigator to hound me.”

“I can’t say I did. I do my own investigating—it’s one of my skills. Half, Shelby, and I’m gone. I earned every penny of it.”

"I don't have half of *anything* to give you." Shelby lurched to her feet. "Are you saying Richard stole millions of dollars? That the detective from Florida was telling me the truth?"

"It's what we do, sweetheart. Or in his case, what he did. Find the mark. Rich, lonely widows worked best for Jake. He could turn them into putty in a matter of days. Easy to get them to 'invest' in a land deal—that was his specialty. But the big one, the biggest of our career, the one that went wrong, that was jewels and stamps, and she had some beauties. If you expect me to buy that you knew nothing about nothing, you're not selling it."

"I'm not selling a damn thing. If he had all that, why am I paying off his debts?"

"He always was a bit of a hoarder. And those jewels were hot. The stamps? You'd need to find just the right collector for them. When it went south, Jake could take off with them, but if he'd tried to sell them, even breaking the jewelry down to the stones, they'd have tracked him. Something like that, it's best to give it a few years, lay low."

"Lay low," Shelby murmured.

"That was the plan. Four or five years, we figured, before we could liquidate and retire. Or semi-retire, as who wants to give up all the fun? You were his cover, that's clear. But you're going to have to go a ways to convince me you're stupid enough to know nothing."

"I was stupid enough to believe him, and that's what I'm going to be living with."

"I'll give you some time to think about it. Even if you're the driven snow, Shelby, you lived with the man for more than four years. You think about it hard enough, you'll figure out something. Consider half of close to thirty million—maybe a little more now—motivation."

It was Shelby's turn for contempt. "I don't want half of anything you stole."

"Your choice. Turn your part in, take the finder's fee if you're delicate. It'd be fat enough to pay off some of the debt you're swimming in. Like I said, I get what's mine, I'm gone. If you want to stay in this little nowhere town, working in your grandmother's beauty parlor for peanuts, singing on Friday nights in a bar for rubes? Your choice. I get what's mine, you keep what's yours. You've got that pretty little girl to think about."

"You go near my daughter, you think about going near my daughter, I'll take you apart."

Natalie just looked over the side of her shoulder, lips curved. "Do you think you can?"

Shelby didn't think; she acted. She reached down, hauled Natalie to her feet by fisting a hand on the front of her blouse. "I can, and I will."

"That's what caught Jake's eye. He liked some fire, even in a mark. You can relax. I'm not interested in little girls or in going back in a cell. Fifty-fifty, Shelby. If I bring Mickey in on this, you'll get nothing but pain and heartache. He's not as civilized a negotiator as I am."

She shoved Shelby's hand off her blouse. "Think about it. I'll be in touch."

Because her legs wanted to shake, Shelby sat on the bench again when Natalie strolled away.

Twenty-eight million? Stolen jewelry and stamps? Bigamy? Who in God's name had she married? Or thought she married?

Maybe it was all a lie. But what would be the point?

But she'd check, check all of it.

She pushed to her feet, pulled out her phone as she walked to call Tracey and check on Callie.

By the time she got to the salon she was fired up again.

"I'm sorry, Granny."

"What kept you? And put the wrath of God in your eyes?"

Shelby shoved her purse under the front counter. "I need to talk to you and Mama, soon as you're both free. I'm sorry, Mrs. Hallister, how are you doing today?"

The woman in Viola's chair—that Hallister boy's grandmother—smiled. "I'm doing right well. I

came in for a touch-up, and here Vi's talked me into highlights. Let's just see if Mr. Hallister notices."

"It's nice, brightening things up for spring. Granny, I've just got to make a quick call, then I'll check supplies."

"Towels should be ready to fold."

"I'll see to that."

Over the shop talk they exchanged a look. Viola nodded, and held up a hand behind the chair back. Five minutes.

Shelby went back into the laundry and supply room, and called her brother Forrest.



She couldn't think about it. Callie was safe, and Tracey would keep her that way. She didn't know one damn thing about any stolen jewelry, and wouldn't know a rare stamp if someone stuck it to her forehead. If this Natalie person thought she did, she'd just have to live with the disappointment.

But it upset her how easily she could believe Richard—or Jake, or whatever his name was—had been a thief, a liar.

But never her husband, she thought, as she folded and stacked towels. In a terrible way, now that the weight had settled in, she took comfort from that.

She'd do her work, smiling and chatting with customers, restocking supplies. Then she'd go home, have dinner with her little girl before heading to the bar and grill to give Tansy and Derrick their money's worth.

She wouldn't let anyone down again, including herself.

Forrest found her at the end of the day while she swept the little courtyard.

"Did you find her?" Shelby demanded.

"No. Nobody by that name or description in the hotel, the lodge, in any of the cabins, the B&Bs. She's not staying in the Ridge. And I've got nothing so far about a Natalie Sinclair doing time for fraud in Dade County."

"It's probably not her real name, either."

"Probably not, but a good-looking brunette's bound to stick in somebody's memory if she's staying in the Ridge, or poking around. We'll take a look further out if she comes back, if she bothers you again."

"I'm not worried about that."

"Then start. You tell Mama?"

"I told her, and Granny, and they'll tell the rest of the family. I'm not taking chances, Forrest, but I don't know anything about these jewels or stamps she says she's after."

"You may know more than you think. Don't get your claws out," he said as she whipped around to him. "Christ's sake, Shelby, I don't think you had anything to do with it. But along the way he might've said something, done something, you overheard something that didn't click at the time. Now this is all planted in your head, maybe something will click. That's all."

Tired, she rubbed a spot between her eyebrows where a headache wanted to brew. "She put me on edge."

"Imagine that."

Shelby let out a short laugh. "Is it crazy for me to be glad somewhere down deep finding out I was never married to him?"

"I'd say it's about as sensible as it gets."

“Okay then, I’m going to be sensible. I’m finished up here, so I’m going home. Mama picked Callie up already from Chelsea’s. I’m going to be with my girl awhile, make sure she has a good supper. Then I’m going to change and fix up so I look like somebody who should be singing on a Friday night.”

“I’ll follow you home. Safe’s better than sorry every time,” he said before she could object.

“Okay, thanks.”

Did she know something, something buried deep? Shelby wondered as she drove home with Forrest cruising behind her. It was true enough she could look back now, see little signs Richard was up to something. The phone calls that ended when she walked in or walked by, the locked doors and drawers. The dismissal of any question she had about what he did, where he went.

She’d thought affair, and more than once. But until now she’d never really considered thievery—not in a major sort of way, whatever that detective had claimed. And millions of dollars in jewelry?

That was about as major as it got.

And now that she knew? She shook her head as she pulled into the drive. She had nothing. Just nothing.

She gathered her things, waved to Forrest. And when the first thing she heard when she opened the front door was Callie’s laughter, she let everything else go.

After hugs and kisses and an excited retelling of her day with Chelsea, Callie settled down with a coloring book while Shelby helped her mother in the kitchen.

“You’ve got pretty white tulips up in your room,” Ada Mae said.

“Oh, Mama, my favorite! Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. They came about an hour ago. From Griffin.” Ada Mae slid her gaze and smile over. “I think you have a beau, Shelby Anne.”

“No, I— That was awful nice of him. Sweet of him.”

“He’s got a sweetness, and not so sugary it makes your teeth ache. Such a nice young man.”

“I’m not looking for a beau, Mama, or a young man.”

“It’s always seemed to me things are more exciting when you’re not looking and you find them.”

“Mama, I’ve not only got Callie to think about, and what’s already in my lap, but what just fell into it this morning.”

“Life’s still got to be lived, baby girl. And a nice young man who thinks to send flowers adds a pretty touch.”

. . .

IT DID. She couldn’t deny it as she glanced over at the white tulips. Her favorite flower, she mused, so he’d obviously asked someone who knew her. She thought about it while she changed into a simple, classic-cut black dress.

Whether she looked for it or not, Griffin was giving her some romance, and it had been a very, very long time since anyone had.

And she bet he knew the flowers made her think of the way he’d kissed her—twice now. She couldn’t blame him for that—and found she didn’t blame herself for thinking she wouldn’t mind being kissed again.

Soon.

She put on earrings. She’d thought to find something stage-flashy, but had opted for simple, like the dress, and pinned her hair back at the sides, let it fall in mad curls down her back.

“What do you think, Callie?” She did a model’s turn for her daughter. “How do I look?”

“Bee-utiful Mama.”

“Bee-utiful Callie.”

“I wanna go with you. Please, please!”

“Oh, I wish you could.” She crouched down, stroked Callie’s hair as her daughter pouted. “But they don’t let kids come.”

“Why?”

“It’s like the law.”

“Uncle Forrest is a lawman.”

Laughing, Shelby cuddled her girl. “A lawman.”

“Uh-huh. He said. He can take me.”

“Not tonight, baby, but I’ll tell you what. I’ll bring you with me to a rehearsal next week sometime. It’ll be like a special show just for you.”

“Can I wear my party dress?”

“I don’t see why not. Tonight, Granny and Grandpa are coming to be with you, and won’t you have fun?” And after the first set, her parents would come back, switch off.

It was good to know her family would be there.

“Let’s go down now. I’ve got to get going.”

. . .

THE PLACE WAS PACKED. She’d expected a crowd this first night as people were curious, or in the case of family and friends, supportive. Whatever brought them in, it felt good, damn good, to know she’d earned her keep this first time out.

She’d said hey and thanks for the good wishes countless times before she made it to the table, right in the front, where Griff sat.

“You look amazing.”

“Thanks, that was the aim.”

“Dead on.”

“Thank you for the flowers, Griffin. They’re just beautiful.”

“Glad you liked them. Emma Kate and Matt are on their way, or nearly, and I had to fight off a dozen people to keep their chairs. That’s close to literal with some giant Tansy called Big Bud.”

“Big Bud? Is he here?” She did a quick scan, spotted him with his mighty bulk squeezed into a side booth chowing down on ribs while a skinny girl she didn’t recognize sat across from him poking at whatever was on her plate and looking bored.

“We went to high school together. I heard he’s a long-haul trucker these days, but . . .”

She trailed off as her gaze passed over Arlo Kattery, then backtracked to meet his eyes.

He hadn’t changed much, she thought, and those pale eyes of his still had the power to give her the creeps when they stared.

He kicked back in a chair at a table shared with a couple of men she thought she recognized as the same two he’d always hung out with.

She hoped they wouldn’t stay long, and take Arlo and his snake-stare around to Shady’s, where they usually spent their beer money.

“What’s the matter?” Griff asked.

“Oh, nothing, just somebody else from back some years. I expected some would come in tonight, curious to see if I rise or fall.”

“Sensation,” Griff said. “That’s the word of the day, since you’ll be one.”

She turned back to him, forgetting Arlo. “Aren’t you clever with your words?”

“The word of the day has to fit. This one does. I was supposed to let you know Tansy’s got your parents, Clay and Gilly there.” He gestured to a table at his right with a big RESERVED card on it. “Nobody argued with her on that one. Not even Big Bud.”

“Oh, Big Bud always did idolize Clay. He’s all right, Griff, just . . . insistent now and then. Daddy’s just waiting on Mama to finish primping, so they’ll be here soon. I’m really glad you’re here now.”

“Where else would I be?”

She hesitated, then sat. She had plenty of time. “Griffin, you’re really not going to pay any mind to what I said about my life being a hot mess and all the rest?”

“It doesn’t look like such a mess to me.”

“You’re not in it. And I found out more today, worse today. I can’t talk about it right now, but it’s twisted up something terrible.”

He brushed a hand over the back of hers. “I’ll help you straighten it out.”

“Because that’s what you do?”

“That, and because I’ve got a thing for you that just keeps getting bigger. And you’ve got one for me.”

“You’re sure of that?”

He only smiled. “I’m looking at you, Red.”

“I’ve got no business having a thing for you,” she muttered. Then as she had on Callie’s laugh, she let it go. “But maybe I do.” Her smile was pure temptation as she rose. “Just maybe I do.” She trailed a fingertip down his arm, felt the low vibration. She’d forgotten how heady that small, simple power could be. “You enjoy the show now.”

She went back into the kitchen, which was utter chaos, slipped into the broom closet of an office to take a breath.

Tansy rushed in. “Oh sweet God, Shelby, we’re slammed. Derrick’s pitching in behind the bar so we can keep up. How are you? Are you ready? I’m half sick with nerves.” She pressed a hand to her belly. “And you look cucumber cool. You’re not nervous?”

“Not about this. There’s so much else I have to be nervous about, so this? It’s like sliding into an old pair of slippers. I’ll do good for you, Tansy.”

“I know you will. I’m going out in just a few minutes, quiet them down and announce you.”

She pulled a ragged strip of paper from her pocket. “My checklist. I do better with one. Okay. The machine’s all set up just the way you wanted, and you know what to do there.”

“I do.”

“If anything goes wrong with it—”

“I’ll wing it,” Shelby assured her. “Thanks for saving that table for my parents.”

“Are you kidding? Of course we saved them a front-row seat—absolutely top of the checklist. And it stays reserved when they leave until your grandparents get here. I’ve got to go check on a few things, then we’ll go for it. You need anything?”

“I’ve got it all.”

Since she wanted it to be easy, natural, she went out early, chatted with a few people she knew at the bar. Got herself a bottle of water.

She knew her mother tended to get worked up before she performed—or always had—so she didn’t go to her parents’ table but sent them a smile. And another for Matt and Emma Kate. One more for Griff as Tansy stepped onto the little stage.

When Tansy spoke into the mic the clattering, scraping and voices quieted some. “Welcome to

our first Friday Nights. We're traveling on back to the forties tonight at Bootlegger's, so sit back and enjoy those martinis and highballs while we bring you tonight's entertainment. Most of y'all know Shelby, and most have heard her sing. Those who haven't are in for a treat. Derrick and I are pleased and proud to have her here, on our stage, tonight. Now y'all give a Rendezvous Ridge welcome to our own Shelby Pomeroy."

Shelby walked onto the stage, faced the room, the applause. "I want to thank y'all for coming out tonight. I'm so glad to be back in the Ridge, hearing familiar voices, breathing that good mountain air. This first number puts me in mind of what it was like to be away."

She started with "I'll Be Seeing You."

And here she felt like herself. Shelby Pomeroy doing her best thing.

"She's just great," Griff murmured. "Sensation."

"Always was. You've got stars in your eyes." Emma Kate patted his arm.

"That's okay, I can see fine through them. They just brighten things up."

She sailed through the first set, pleased to see people come in, crowd at the bar or at tables. When she took her break Clay walked straight up to her, lifted her off her feet.

"So proud of you," he whispered in her ear.

"It felt good. Really good."

"Wish we could stay, but I've got to get Gilly home."

"She okay?"

"Just tired. It's the first night in a month she's made it past nine." He laughed, squeezed Shelby again. "Come on over before we leave."

She glanced over, saw Matt and Griff pushing the tables together so her family, her friends made one unit.

Maybe she'd had a rough start to the day, she thought, but it was turning into a perfect night.

She spent some time with them, then went back to the bar for more water.

It didn't hurt her feelings when she noticed Arlo and his friends leaving. She'd lose that mild discomfort from having him stare at her.

He'd often stared at her, just like that, when they were teenagers. And, she recalled, had tried to get her to take a ride on his motorcycle or sneak off for a beer.

She'd never done either.

And she found it downright creepy that years later, he'd still just stare at her, unblinking as a lizard.

Griff slipped up to the bar beside her, and made her think of much more pleasant companionship.

"Go out with me tomorrow night."

"Oh, I—"

"Give a guy a break, Shelby. I really want some time with you. Just you."

She turned, looked straight into his eyes—bold, green, clever. Absolutely nothing about those eyes made her uncomfortable.

"I think I want that, too, but I don't feel right leaving Callie two nights running, and asking my parents to sit her again."

"Okay. Pick a night next week. Any night, and anywhere you want to go."

"Ah . . . Tuesday would probably be best."

"Tuesday. Where do you want to go?"

"I really want to see your house."

"You do?"

She broke out in a smile. "I really do, and I've been trying to figure how to invite myself for a

tour.”

“Consider it done.”

“I could bring dinner.”

“I’ll take care of it. Seven?”

“If we made it seven-thirty, I could give Callie her bath first.”

“Seven-thirty.”

“I need to check with Mama first, but I expect she’ll be fine with it. And you should listen to what else has come out before we make any sort of date.”

“It’s already a date.” He kissed her lightly before he walked away.

She thought that quick gesture had been a statement, a kind of stamp. And couldn’t quite figure out if she minded that or not. She put it in the back of her mind as she went back on stage for her next set.

She saw Forrest come in with her grandparents, take the empty seats.

But she didn’t notice the brunette until halfway through her set. Shelby’s heart jumped, but she kept the song going when their eyes met.

Had she been there all along, tucked into a table at the back, barely visible in the shadows?

Shelby looked away, tried to catch Forrest’s eye, but he’d gone up to the bar, wasn’t looking in her direction.

The brunette rose, stood a moment, sipping from a martini glass. Then she set it down, put on a dark jacket. She added a smile, kissed her fingertip, flicked it in Shelby’s direction, then strolled out.

She finished out her set—what else could she do? Then made a beeline for Forrest.

“She was here.”

He didn’t have to ask who. “Where?”

“In the back.”

“Who?” Griff demanded.

“She left,” Shelby continued. “Easy fifteen minutes ago. She’s gone, but she was here.”

“Who?” Griff demanded again.

“It’s hard to explain.” Shelby pasted on a smile, turned and waved when someone called her name. “I have to work. Maybe you could fill them in some, Forrest. I couldn’t get your attention when I saw her, but I swear she was here.”

“Who?” Griff demanded for the third time when Shelby walked over to another table.

“I’ll tell you about it, but I’m going to take a little look around outside.”

“I’ll go with you.” When Matt started to rise, Griff shook his head. “Keep the table. We’ll be back.”

“What’s all this?” Viola leaned over.

“Nothing to worry about. I’ll explain when I get back.” Forrest gave her shoulder a rub, then made his way out with Griff.

“What the fuck, Forrest? What woman? And why did she put that look in Shelby’s eyes?”

“What look?”

“Half scared, half pissed.”

Forrest paused at the door. “You read her pretty well.”

“I’m making a study of it. Get used to it.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s down-to-the-ground so.”

Forrest’s eyes narrowed as he nodded. “I have to think about that. Meanwhile, we’re looking for a hot brunette, about thirty, round about five-six, brown eyes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s looking like she was married to the guy Shelby thought she was married to.”

“What? Thought? What?”

“And she’s bad business—so was the asshole Shelby likely wasn’t married to after all. A lot worse than I figured, and I figured bad enough.”

“Was Shelby married or not?”

“It’s hard to say.”

“How can it be hard to say?” Frustrated, and temper building under it, Griff threw up his hands. “It’s yes or no.”

Forrest scanned the street, the cars parked along the curb, the light traffic passing by. “Why are people from the North always in such a damn hurry? A story takes time to tell properly. I’ll do that while we walk around back, see what we see. Have you put your hands on my sister?”

“Not so much. Not yet. But I’m going to, so get used to that, too.”

“Does she want your hands on her?”

“You should know me well enough by now, damn it, Forrest. They don’t go on her unless she wants them on her.”

“I know you well enough by now, Griff, but it’s my sister here, so that takes more. And it’s my sister who’s been fucked over right, left, sideways. So that’s more yet.”

He told the story as they walked around the side of the building, made their way toward the back and the parking lot.

“And you think this woman’s telling it straight?”

“She’s telling enough of it straight so I know the bastard Shelby was with was a liar and a thief. I’ll be doing some looking for something on this millions in jewelry and stamps she claims they stole or conned somebody out of.”

His eyes, shadowed in the dim light, scanned the cars. “If they hadn’t bussed the brunette’s table, I could’ve gotten prints off it, gotten her name, her real one.”

“If she’s telling the truth about being married to Foxworth, he was using Shelby all along.” Griff stuffed his hands in his pockets, paced away. “And Callie . . .”

“Callie’s going to be fine either way. Shelby will see to that. But I’d like to have a conversation with this woman who’s dogging her.”

“Brunette, right? Hot, brown-eyed brunette.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t think you’re going to have any conversations with her. Better come over here.” Griff took a deep breath as Forrest hurried toward him. “Looks like we found her.”

She sat, slumped in the driver’s seat of a silver BMW, eyes wide and staring. Blood still seeped from the tiny black hole in her forehead.

“Well, shit. Well, shit,” Forrest repeated. “Don’t touch the car.”

“I’m not touching a goddamn thing,” he said as Forrest pulled out his phone. “I didn’t hear a shot.”

Forrest took a picture from the side, one from the front. “Small caliber, and see how it’s burned around the entry wound? Held it right against her. Right up against her forehead, pulled the trigger. Somebody might’ve heard a pop, but it wouldn’t be all that loud. I’ve got to call my boss.”

“Shelby?”

Like Griff, Forrest looked back toward the bar and grill. “Let’s just wait on that a little bit. Just wait on it. We need to secure this area. And shit, we’re going to have to start talking to people inside the bar and grill. Sheriff?”

Forrest adjusted his stance, re-angled the phone. “Yes, sir. I got a body here in the parking lot of Bootlegger’s Bar and Grill. Yes, sir, that sure would be a dead one.” He glanced at Griff as he spoke, nearly smiled. “I’m certain of that as I’m looking right at her and the small-caliber bullet wound, close-contact, in her forehead. I got that.”

On a sigh, Forrest shoved his phone in his pocket. “Sure wish I’d finished that beer because it’s going to be a long, dry night now.” He studied the body another moment, then turned to Griff. “I’m deputizing you.”

“What?”

“You’re a competent individual, Griff, and you sure keep your head when you find a dead body, as you’ve just proven. Don’t shake easy, do you?”

“It’s my first dead body.”

“And you didn’t scream like a girl.” Laying a bolstering hand on Griff’s shoulder, Forrest gave it a friendly pat. “Plus, I happen to know you didn’t kill her since you were inside with me.”

“Yay.”

“She’s still warm, so she hasn’t been dead long. I got some things I need in my truck, and I need you to stay here. Right here.”

“I can do that.” Because, he thought, as Forrest walked off to his truck, what else could he do?

He tried to think it through. The woman had been inside, then she’d gone out, gotten in her car. The driver’s-side window was down.

Warm enough night. Had she put it down for the air, or because somebody had walked up to the car? Did a woman alone in a parking lot outside a bar roll down the window for a stranger?

Maybe, but it seemed less likely than rolling it down for someone she knew.

But . . .

“Why’s her window down?” he asked Forrest. “From what you told me, she doesn’t know anybody around here. She’s got to have some basic street smarts, so who’d she roll the window down for?”

“Deputized two minutes and already thinking like a cop. Makes me proud of my own character assessment. Put these on.”

Griff looked at the gloves. “Oh, man.”

“Don’t want you to handle anything—probably—but just in case. Use your phone, take some notes for me.”

“Why? Don’t you have backup coming or something?”

“They’ll be coming. This woman came at my sister. I want a leg up. Get the make, model, license plate. Go on and get a picture of the plate. She’s got a high-end rental here. We’ll find out where she got it.”

He shone his light in the car. “Purse is still in here, sitting on the passenger seat. Closed. Keys in the ignition, engine off.”

“She’d have had to turn the key to get the window down. Strange town, she’d’ve locked the car up, right?”

“Son, if you ever give up carpentry and such, I’d take you on.” Forrest opened the passenger door, crouched, opened the purse. “She’s got herself a pretty little Baby Glock here.”

Now Griff leaned over Forrest’s shoulder. “She had a gun in her purse?”

“It’s Tennessee, Griff. Half the women in that bar are carrying. Loaded, clean. I’d say it hasn’t been fired recently. Got a Florida driver’s license under the name Madeline Elizabeth Proctor, and that’s not the name she gave Shelby. Miami address. Got her DOB as eight twenty-two ’eighty-five. Got some lipstick—looks pretty new—got herself a folding combat knife.”

“Jesus.”

“Nice one, too. Blackhawk. Visa and American Express cards, same name. We got two hundred and . . . thirty-two dollars in cash. And a key card for a room at the Lodge at Buckberry Creek in Gatlinburg. Fancy.”

“Didn’t want to get roused.” When Forrest glanced over, Griff shrugged. “She had to know Shelby had a cop for a brother. Go at Shelby, she’s going to have a cop rousing her. Plus plenty of family circling the wagons. So she doesn’t stay at the local hotel, which is pretty fancy, too. She puts some distance between herself and the Ridge, gives Shelby a phony name.”

“See why I deputized you? So, what do you figure happened here?”

“Seriously?”

“Dead woman in the car, Griff.” Curious, Forrest straightened up, rolled his shoulders. “It’s pretty serious, all in all.”

“Well, I’d guess she came tonight to mess with Shelby’s head. Keep herself right in the front of Shelby’s mind. Once Shelby spotted her, she could go. She came out, got in her car, most likely to drive back to Gatlinburg. Somebody came over to the car, to the driver’s side. I’m leaning toward she recognized whoever it was, and felt easy enough to lower the window instead of driving off or getting her own gun. After she rolled down the window . . .”

Griff mimed putting a gun to his forehead, made a trigger with his thumb.

“That’s my way of thinking, too. If I didn’t know my mama would call you instead of me when the porches need scraping and painting, I’d talk you into joining the sheriff’s department.”

“Not on a bet. I don’t like guns.”

“You’d get over it.” He looked over as a cruiser pulled in. “Shit, should’ve known he’d send Barrow first off. Guy’s affable enough, but slow as a lame turtle. Go on back in, Griff, round up Derrick and fill him in.”

“You want me to fill Derrick in?”

“Save some time. He’s a competent individual himself, and he’s been working the bar most of the night. Could be he saw somebody who didn’t strike him quite right.”

“Whoever did this is long gone.”

“Yeah, for right now, anyway. You’re a lot quicker than Barrow, Griff. ’Course, that doesn’t take much.”

“What we got here, Forrest? Hey, Griff, how’s it going? Sheriff said— Holy shitfire!” Barrow said when he saw the body. “Is she dead?”

“I’d say that’s affirmative, Woody.” Forrest rolled his eyes at Griff.

Griff went inside to find Derrick and fill him in.



Shelby sat in the tiny office holding the Coke Tansy had pushed on her with both hands. She didn't think she could actually swallow.

O. C. Hardigan had been sheriff for as long as she could remember. He'd always scared her a little, but she figured that was the badge more than the man. Not that she'd ever been in any trouble—any real trouble. He'd gone full gray since she'd left the Ridge, so his buzz cut looked like a shorn-off Brillo Pad. His square-jawed face was fleshier than it had been, and he carried a more generous paunch.

He smelled of peppermint over tobacco.

She knew he was being gentle with her, and appreciated it.

He'd said Forrest had given him a full report on her encounter with the victim—he called the woman “the victim”—but had Shelby go through it all again.

“And you'd never seen her, been contacted by her, talked to her before this morning?”

“No, sir.”

“And your . . . The man you knew as Richard Foxworth, he never mentioned anyone named Natalie Sinclair or Madeline Proctor?”

“No, sir, not that I remember.”

“And this private investigator—this Ted Privet. He never said her name to you?”

“No, Sheriff, I'm sure of that.”

“How about this Mickey O'Hara she talked about?”

“I never heard about him before, either. Not until she talked about him.”

“All righty, then. What time was it would you say when you saw her tonight?”

“I think it had to be about ten-thirty. Maybe ten twenty-five. I was more than halfway through the third set, and I started right about ten. She was all the way in the back, the far right corner.” She held her hand up to demonstrate. “My right, that is. I didn't see her before that, but the light's dim back there.”

She made herself take a drink. “After I saw her, she got up. Not in a hurry. It was like, all right, now you've seen me, now I made my point and I can go. She had a martini glass, but I don't know who was working that table. It had to be at least fifteen more minutes before I finished the set and could tell Forrest. Might've been a few minutes more, but no more than twenty. I had four songs left after the one I was doing when I saw her. And the talk between songs, well, I keep that short. So fifteen minutes, likely no more than seventeen.”

“Did you see anyone follow her out?”

“I didn't, but I was looking for Forrest once she got up and started out. I wasn't watching the door.”

“I bet you saw a lot of familiar faces in the crowd tonight.”

"I did. It was so nice to see everyone." She thought of Arlo. "Mostly."

"A lot of unfamiliar ones, too."

"Tansy did a lot of marketing. She had flyers all over. I heard we had a lot of people in tonight who're staying at the hotel and the lodge and so on, even campers who came in tonight. Something new, you know?"

"Wish I could've been here myself. We're going to make a point of it, the wife and me, next time. Now, did anybody strike you, Shelby? Somebody who just didn't look right?"

"I didn't notice. Arlo Kattery was here with the two he always hung around with, but they left at the start of the second set."

"Arlo's mostly for Shady's, or one of the roadhouses."

"He didn't do anything but sit, have a few beers, then go on. I'm just thinking of him because he never looked right to me."

"Never has been."

"I guess for most of it I was pulling on the familiar faces more, and the couples. A lot of the songs I did tonight, well, they're romantic, so I played to that. It couldn't have been anybody from the Ridge, Sheriff. Nobody even knew her."

He patted her hand. "Don't you worry now. We'll figure it out. If you think of anything else, anything at all, you tell me about it. Or you tell Forrest if that's easier for you."

"I don't know what to think. I don't know what to think about any of it."

Out in the restaurant, Griff had done about all he could do. He'd helped organize people so the deputies could take statements, or just names. He'd helped Derrick serve out coffee, soft drinks, water, as another deputy interviewed the staff in the kitchen.

He'd gone out once for air, had seen the police lights around the BMW, and timed it inadvertently so that he watched them loading the bagged body into the coroner's wagon.

An experience, he decided, he'd be happy never to repeat.

The second time he made rounds with coffee, Forrest pulled him aside.

"Shelby's going to be out in a minute or so. I need to keep my hands in this thing here. I'm trusting you with my sister, Griff, because I can."

"I'll look out for her."

"I know you will. She pushed Emma Kate to go home, and that's likely for the best. She'll get out of here quicker without another female to stroke her and ask for details. Get her home."

"You can count on it."

"I know I can. Coroner'll know for certain once he digs the bullet out of her, but eyeballing, he figures a .25."

"Do you know who she is yet? Real name?"

Distracted, Forrest shook his head. "We've got her prints now. I'll be running them myself tonight. There's Shelby now. Give me a second with her, then get her out. She argues, carry her out."

"If I do, don't shoot me."

"Not this time." Forrest walked over, took Shelby by the shoulders as he studied her face, then just drew her in, held her.

Whatever he said had her shaking her head, again and again, as she burrowed into him. Then she sagged a little, shrugged. When Forrest let her go she started toward Griff.

He met her halfway.

"Forrest says you need to drive me home. I'm sorry he's being so fussy."

"Whatever Forrest says, I'm driving you home. Men aren't fussy—that's a girlie word. We're

logical and protective.”

“Sounds fussy to me, but thank you.”

“Let’s go.”

“I should find Tansy first, or Derrick, or—”

“They’re busy.” He didn’t go as far as carrying her, but he took her hand, pulled her firmly away from the building and the hard lights. “We’ll take your van.”

“How are you going to get home if—”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll need the van. I’ll drive.” He held out his hand for the keys.

“All right. My brain’s too rattled to argue. Nobody knew her around here. People around here don’t just walk up to a strange woman and shoot her in the head, for God’s sake.”

“Which should tell you whoever did isn’t from around here.”

She looked up at him with considerable relief. “That’s what I said to the sheriff.”

“She brought trouble with her, Shelby. That’s how it reads to me.”

“It has to be that O’Hara person.” The one, Shelby remembered, the brunette had warned her about. “She said he was in prison, but she lied about her own name, so who knows what else she lied about. If it was him, and if she was telling the truth about Richard, about all those millions, it’s not safe to be around me.”

“A lot of ifs there. I’ll add some.” He shot her a glance, sorrier than he could say that the sparkle she’d emitted when she sang had dulled. “If this O’Hara’s around and did this, and if he thinks maybe you know something about those millions, it would be pretty stupid to hurt you.”

He waited until she got in the van, then settled behind the wheel.

“And if he’s such a badass, why didn’t she drive away, get the gun in her purse. Why just sit there?”

“I don’t know.” She let her head drop back on the seat. “I thought things couldn’t get crazier. After Richard died and the roof caved in, I thought, This is as bad as it can get. Then it got worse. Then I thought, All right now, that’s as bad as it gets and we’ll work our way through it. Then she came here and it’s worse again. And now this.”

“You’ve had a streak of bad luck.”

“I guess you could put it that way.”

“Luck changes. Yours already has.” At an easy speed, he followed the wind of the road. “You sold the house, you’re carving away the debt. You packed the house tonight and had them in the palm of your hand.”

“You think so?”

“I was in the house,” he said. “And you’ve got a date with me coming. I’m a damn good catch.”

She didn’t think she had a smile in her, but he found it for her. “Are you?”

“Damn right. Just ask my mother. Hell, ask yours.”

“You don’t lack in the confidence department, do you, Griffin?”

“I know who I am,” he told her as he pulled up at her house.

“How the hell are you getting home?” She pushed fingers against that headache spot between her eyes. “I didn’t even think. You can take the van, and I could get Daddy to drive me over and pick it up in the morning.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

He got out, came around. She’d opened the door before he got to it, but he took her hand when she got out.

“You don’t have to walk me to the door.”

“It’s just one of the many things that make me such a good catch.”

The door opened as they came up the walk.

"Oh, baby girl."

"I'm all right, Mama."

"Of course you are. Come on in here, Griffin." Ada Mae scooped Shelby up in a hug. "Your granny and grandpa came by, told us everything. Forrest, is he still over there?"

"Yeah, he's still there."

"Good. Don't you worry about Callie. I checked on her five minutes ago, and she's sound asleep. Why don't I make you something to eat?"

"I couldn't, Mama."

"Let me look at the girl." Clayton stepped up, tipped up Shelby's face. "You're pale and you're tired."

"I guess I am."

"If you can't sleep, I'll give you a little something. But you give it a try first."

"I will. I guess I'll go on up. Daddy, Griff left his truck back at the bar and grill so he could bring me home. Thank you, Griff." She turned, touched her lips to his cheek.

"I'm going to see you settled and tucked in." Ada Mae put an arm around Shelby's waist.

"Thank you, Griff, for seeing to my baby girl. You're a good boy."

"But am I a good catch?"

At Shelby's tired laugh, Ada Mae gave a puzzled smile. "Best in the whole pool. Come on now, my baby."

Clayton waited until they were up the stairs. "You got time for a beer and some details, Griff?"

"If you'd make that a Coke or ginger ale, I've got time. I plan to bunk on your couch there anyway."

"I can get you back to your truck."

"I'd feel better bunking right here tonight. I don't think there's going to be any trouble, but I'd feel better right here."

"All right, then. We'll have a Coke and a talk. Then I'll get you a pillow and blanket."

An hour later, Griff stretched out on the couch—a pretty comfortable couch. God knew he'd slept on a lot worse. He stared up at the ceiling awhile, thinking of Shelby, letting some of the songs she'd sung that night replay in his head.

At some point he'd let the whole business play around, like the songs, in his head. It's how he solved most problems. Let all the pieces roll around, try fitting some together, taking them apart again until a picture formed.

Right now the only clear picture was Shelby.

She was in plenty of trouble, no doubt about it. Maybe he couldn't resist a damsel in distress. Not that he'd use that term out loud. Besides, if a woman liked the term, if she was the sort who just wanted to sit around doing nothing while he rescued her, well, she'd bore the crap out of him in short order. And that would be right before she irritated him so he never wanted to deal with her again.

So it probably wasn't the damsel-in-distress thing, now that he thought about it. Turn that around into a smart, strong woman who just needed some help. Add in the way she looked, the way she sounded. The way she was.

He'd be a moron if he didn't want the whole package.

He was no moron.

He let his eyes close, ordered his mind to go drifting. Drifting, he dropped, slept light and restless until, on the edge of dreams, he heard something that brought him to full alert again.

An old house settling? he asked himself as he strained to hear.

No. That was creaking boards and footsteps. He slid off the couch, moved quietly in the direction of the sound. And, braced to attack, slapped on the lights.

Shelby clamped a hand over her own mouth to muffle the scream.

“Sorry! Jesus, sorry,” Griff began.

She waved her free hand, shook her head, then leaned back against the wall. Slowly, she dropped her other hand. “Well, what’s another ten years? What are you doing here?”

“I’m bunking on the living room couch.”

“Oh.” Now she dragged her fingers through her hair in a way that made all those wild curls go just a bit madder—and tightened every muscle in his body. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep, so I came down to make some tea or something.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want some tea or something?” On a thoughtful frown, she cocked her head. “Do you want some scrambled eggs?”

“Oh yeah.”

He followed her back to the kitchen. She wore cotton pajama bottoms—bright blue with yellow flowers all over them—and a yellow T-shirt.

He could’ve lapped her up like ice cream.

She put the kettle on, got out a skillet.

“I can’t turn my mind off,” she began. “But if I asked Daddy for a sleeping pill, Mama’d start fussing again.”

“They love you a lot.”

“I’m lucky they do.” She put a pat of butter in the skillet, let it melt while she beat some eggs. “I thought when the woman told me all those things this morning, the client of that detective was probably the person they all stole from.”

“It’s a good guess.”

“Now I wonder, was this woman the client? Did he find me, follow me here, all of that, for her? She said no when I asked her, but she’s—she *was*—a liar. So maybe she had him follow me so she could come and push me for something I don’t know.”

“That’s another good guess, but if you’re wondering did he kill her? Why would he?”

“I can’t come up with something for that except maybe she double-crossed him somewhere. He talked about finder’s fees on this theft I didn’t believe with Forrest. I mean, I didn’t believe Richard had stolen all that.”

“I know what you meant.”

“I believe it now, and I think she and Richard were good at that sort of thing. Stealing and double-crossing. Or maybe they were lovers—the woman and the detective—and she betrayed him.”

“I don’t think so.”

Frowning again, she popped some bread in the toaster. “Why not?”

“I think if you add in love or sex, or both, it’s—murder—it’s more personal. You’ve got to fight first, right?”

She considered that. “I guess I would.”

“Most would,” Griff decided. “You’ve got to want to tell the other person what they did to you. You want, I’d think, some physical contact. This struck me as pretty damn cold.”

“You really found her?”

“Forrest was looking left, I was looking right. That’s all.”

"You stayed so calm. At least it seems you did. You looked calm when you came back in. I couldn't tell anything was wrong by the way you looked. I think most people would've panicked."

"I try to avoid panic because it leads to chaos, which leads to accidents. You get hurt that way. That happened to me when I was seventeen, climbing back out of Annie Roebuck's bedroom window."

"Climbing out?"

His smile was quick and crooked. "Climbing in was a breeze."

"Was she expecting you?"

"Oh yeah. She was the focus of my hormonal obsession for six and a half crazed and blissful months, and I was hers. We went at it like rabbits on crack—and the fact that her parents were asleep right across the hall only enhanced the insanity. Until the night we were lying there momentarily in our postcoital coma and she reached over for her bottle of water, knocked over the lamp. It crashed like a bomb."

"Uh-oh."

"Uh-fucking-oh," he concurred. "We hear her father call her name. I'm scrambling up, trying to get into my pants, my heart's a jackhammer, I'm sweating bullets. Yeah, you laugh," he said when she did. "At the time it was a nightmare of Elm Street proportions. Annie's calling back, telling him she's all right, just knocked something over, and hissing at me to get out, get out, get out, she can't remember if she locked the door. So I'm out the window half dressed, panicked, and I lose my footing."

"Another uh-oh."

"And a big ouch with it. I fell mostly in the azaleas, but still managed to break my wrist. I *see* the pain, like this bright white light, as I'm tearing ass for cover. If I hadn't panicked, I'd've climbed on down as smooth as I had every other time, and wouldn't have had to fake falling on my way to the john once I got home so my father could take me to the ER and have my wrist set."

She set a plate of eggs with a side of toast in front of him. And had to quell the oddest urge to just wrap around him and snuggle as she did with Callie.

"I really hope you didn't make all that up just to take my mind off things."

"I didn't have to, but I'd hoped it would take your mind off things."

"What became of Annie?"

"She became a newscaster. Worked local for a while in Baltimore. She's in New York now. We e-mail now and again. She got married a couple summers back. Nice guy." He sampled the eggs.

"Good eggs."

"Scrambled eggs always taste best at three in the morning. Was she your first? Annie?"

"Well, ah—"

"No, don't answer that. I put you on the spot. My first was when I was just shy of seventeen. It was his first, too. July Parker."

"July?"

"Born on the first of the month. He was a sweet boy, and we fumbled our way through it."

With the smile her eyes went a little blurry as she looked back. "It was sweet, like July, in its way, but it didn't tempt me to repeat it all again, not till the summer before college. That wasn't so much better, and he wasn't so sweet as July. I decided to concentrate on my singing, the band, college. Then Richard just bowled me over, and that was that."

"What happened to July?"

"He's a park ranger. Lives in Pigeon Forge now. Mama tells me bits and pieces. He's not married yet, but he's with a nice girl. I expect you're considering having sex with me at some point."

He didn't lose his balance on the segue. "It's more planning on it."

"Well, now you have the outline of my experience in that area. Fumbling—sweetly. Disappointment, and Richard. And with Richard none of it was real. None of it was true."

"It's no problem, Red. I'll show you the ropes."

She laughed. "You do swagger."

"Sorry?"

"You're a swaggering man, Griffin, walking and talking." She finished her eggs, took her plate to the sink to rinse. "If I ever work my way up to your plan, I can't promise it'll be good, or there'll be any postcoital comas, but it'll be true. That counts for something. 'Night."

"Good night."

And he sat a long while in the quiet kitchen wishing Richard Foxworth hadn't gone out in that boat. Wishing he'd at least lived through the squall so they'd have a chance to face each other.

So he could kick the bastard's ass.

. . .

"HER LEGAL NAME was Melinda Warren." Forrest stood in what had once been Shelby's bedroom and watched Griff sand the seams on drywall. "Age thirty-one, born Springbrook, Illinois. Did time for fraud, so that much was true. And that was her first real stint, though she did some time in juvie once upon a time, got pulled in here and there on suspicion—theft, fraud, forgery. Nothing stuck until this last one. And married sure enough to one Jake Brimley, in Las Vegas, about seven years back. No divorce on record."

"And you're sure Jake Brimley was Richard Foxworth?"

"Working on that. The coroner was right about the slug—.25 caliber. Contact shot. Something like that, it'd rattle around in her skull like a marble in a pan."

"Nice." Still sanding, Griff glanced around. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Well, you found her, so I'm respecting your vested interest."

"You're a funny guy, Pomeroy."

"I've got knees being slapped all over the county. Other than respecting your vested interest, I came by here to tell Shelby, but she and everybody else is someplace else. You're the only one here."

"I am now," Griff confirmed. "Matt's out getting supplies for what we'll be doing here Monday. Plus, I'm better at drywall work than he is. He's not very patient at it."

"And you are."

Griff adjusted the Baltimore Orioles fielder's cap he wore to help keep the dust out of his eyes. "It just takes time, and sooner or later it's smooth as glass. Shelby's at the salon," he added. "Your mother took Callie to the flower place to buy some plants for something she's calling a fairy garden. Her friend Suzannah's coming by with Chelsea later so the girls can dig in the dirt. Your father's at the clinic."

Forrest took a slug from the bottle of Mountain Dew he carried. "You're well informed about my family, Griffin."

"I slept on the couch downstairs last night."

Forrest nodded. "Another reason I'm telling you all this. If I'm not looking out for my family, I know you are. It's appreciated."

"They matter." Griff ran his fingers down the seam and, satisfied, moved to the next.

"I had time this morning to speak to Clay about all this, and other things. We're wondering, as brothers might, if you're just looking to bang our sister."

“Jesus, Forrest.” And Griff beat his head lightly against the wall.

“It’s a reasonable question.”

“Not when I’m standing here with a sanding block and you’ve got a gun.”

“I won’t shoot you. This time.”

Griff glanced back, measured his friend’s easy smile. “Comforting. I’m looking to spend some time with your sister and see what happens next. My impression is the dead fake husband messed her mind up pretty good in the area you’re concerned about.”

“I’m not surprised to hear it. I’m going to get back to work.”

“What about the other guy? This O’Hara?”

Forrest smiled again. “And there’s the final reason I’m telling you all this. You keep up. Name’s not O’Hara. James—Jimmy—Harlow. He went down with the brunette, a harder knock. According to the tune she sang at the time, they’d been working a con on a rich widow name of Lydia Redd Montville. Big—real big—money there on her own side and her dead husband’s. Foxworth—we’ll just stick with that for now—romanced her. He had bona fides said he was a wealthy entrepreneur with interests in art and import/export.”

He took another swig from his bottle, gestured with it. “The brunette posed as his assistant, Harlow as his security. They worked the mark for two months or so, defrauded her out of close to a million. But they wanted more. She was known for her jewelry, and her late husband for his stamp collection. Had a vault full of both of them. According to the brunette, this was going to be their big score. Retirement time.”

“Isn’t that always the way?”

“Widow’s son started asking too many questions on the deals Foxworth aimed her toward, so they decided to get it done, get out. Things went wrong.”

“Things always do on the last score, right? You’re jinxing it right off the jump.”

“Seems like it. The widow was supposed to be away for few days at a spa thing—which turned out to be she was having a little tune-up. Plastic surgery.”

“Because she had a younger lover, and didn’t want to tell him she was getting nipped and tucked.”

“It plays true. So they’re in her big house, getting into the vault. Going to clean her out and book it. The son brings her home, where she plans to sit out the bruises, I expect. And they’re red-handed in the cookie jar.”

“Some cookies.”

“It appears either Foxworth or Harlow shoots the son, the brunette comes out of the bedroom, knocks the widow out—she claims to keep Harlow from shooting her, too, though he claims it was Foxworth doing the shooting.”

“Rats ratting on rats. Duplicity,” Griff decided. “It’s a suitable word of the day.”

“That’s a fine one.”

“What happened next?”

“What happened next is—and both Warren and Harlow agree on this end of it—Foxworth grabs the bag they’d put the jewelry and stamps in, and they scat, leaving the son and widow a bloody mess.”

“Panic.” Meticulously, Griff tested the next seam. “It’s a gateway to accidents.”

“The widow comes to, calls an ambulance for the son. It was touch and go there, but he pulled through. Neither of them can say for sure who fired the weapon. It all happened fast, and the son was in a coma for near to three weeks, and never did get anything but spotty memory back of the whole event.”

“What about the bad guys?”

“They split up, with plans to meet at a motel on the way to the Keys where there’s supposed to be a private plane waiting to take them to Saint Kitts.”

“I always wanted to go there. I take it not all the bad guys made it to the tropics.”

“No, they didn’t. The brunette and Harlow show up at the motel. Foxworth didn’t. But the cops did.”

“Because Foxworth tipped them off.”

“Now you’re stepping on my finish. They sure did get an anonymous call from a drop phone, and it’s smart money to bet it was Foxworth.”

Griff snagged the Mountain Dew from Forrest, took a long gulp before handing it back. “Honor among thieves is bullshit.”

“The shittiest bull in the field. To top it, Harlow had a diamond ring in his pocket worth about a hundred grand. Pretty clear Foxworth planted it on him just to sweeten the . . . duplicity.”

“Nice use of the word.”

“I’ve got some skills. He’d done time before, Harlow, but nothing violent. He swears he didn’t shoot anybody, and that the brunette had a clear eye line on who did, but she made the deal first, and they stuck with it. She got four years, he got twenty-five. And Foxworth walked away with millions.”

“That’d piss you off.”

“Wouldn’t it just?”

“But if Harlow’s doing twenty-five years—”

“Should be, but he’s out.”

Slowly, Griff lowered the sanding block. “How the hell did that happen?”

“The prison authorities and the State of Florida wonder the same. He escaped right before Christmas.”

“Happy fucking holidays.” Rolling it around, Griff took off his cap, shook off the dust, settled it on again. “He’s got to be the prime suspect on this murder. Why didn’t you tell me straight off?”

“I wanted to see if you’d get around to asking. I already sent his mug shot to your phone, though all three of them had a hand with disguises. He’s a big guy, formidable.”

“Like Big Bud?”

Tickled, Forrest laughed. “No, I said big. Not massive. You take a look at the picture I sent, and if you see anybody who puts you in mind of it, stay clear and call me.”

“You got that. Forrest, you said he never got busted for violent crimes, but the brunette told Shelby different. That he was violent.”

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Keep an eye on my sister, Griff.”

“Both of them.”

Forrest started out. “That’s tedious work you’re doing there.”

Griff shrugged. “It’s just work,” he said, and went back to sanding.



Shelby stood by the counter in Emma Kate's trim little kitchen and watched her friend slide a lasagna casserole into the oven. She didn't have long, but wanted to squeeze through the small window of time to see Emma Kate and her apartment.

"I'm going to get laid good and proper tonight." With a wicked grin, Emma Kate set the timer on the oven. "Spinach lasagna's Matt's favorite, and I picked up a nice wine on the way home from the clinic. Anything with spinach might not be my idea of a romantic dinner for two, but it sure is his. I'll reap the benefits."

"It's nice what you have with him. I can see how well you fit together. And I really like your place here."

"I do, too."

Turning from the stove, she could see through the doorway—Matt had taken off the door and stored it—to the old butcher block table he'd refinished, and where they'd have their romantic spinach lasagna.

"Of course, when Matt and Griff sit around, it's how they'd take out this wall here, or do such and that with the backsplash. I guess one of these days I'm going to let Matt have his way with building a place from the ground up. He talks about it a lot."

"Do you want that?"

"He's gone native on me, Shelby. Wants a tucked-away place in the hills, in the woods, like Griff has. I guess I can see it, too. Quiet and ours. Maybe I'll learn to garden. But for right now, it's sure easy to step out the door, walk a few minutes and be at the clinic."

"Oh, but wouldn't it be fun to build a house from scratch? Deciding just where you want this room or that room, where the windows would go, and what kind?"

"The three of you could have endless conversations on that," Emma Kate decided. "I start getting nervous once it goes beyond what color paint for the walls. In an apartment like this, everything's pretty well set."

"Do you want to sample the wine?"

"Better not. I can't stay long. I just wanted to see you and your apartment. Pretty well set or not, it's really you, Emma Kate, bright and fun," she said as she wandered out of the kitchen to the living room with its deep-cushioned red sofa, crazy-patterned pillows tossed over it. The framed posters of big, bold flowers added more color, more charm.

"Some of it's Matt. That jade plant's from a cutting he got from his grandmother. He babies it like his firstborn. It's kind of sweet."

She gave Shelby a rub on the arm. "I was giving you some time, but I'm starting to see you don't want to talk about last night, or any of it."

"Not really, but I should tell you her name wasn't Natalie or Madeline. She was Melinda Warren,

and the man she said I should be afraid of if he found me is James Harlow. He escaped from prison, Emma Kate, right around Christmas.”

She took out her phone. “Here’s the picture of him Forrest sent me, so you should be careful if you see him. Forrest said he’s probably changed his hair, maybe looks some different. He’s six-feet-three and weighs in at two-twenty, so he can’t change much of that.”

“I’ll keep my eye out. This is a mug shot, isn’t it?”

“I think it is.”

Taking another look, Emma Kate shook her head. “Wouldn’t you think he’d look threatening or hard or mean in a mug shot? What he looks is sort of affable. Like some guy who played football in high school and now he teaches social studies and coaches.”

“I think being able to look affable is how they all manage to swindle and steal.”

“I guess you’re right. And they think he killed her?”

“Who else?” Shelby had asked herself just that—who else?—a dozen times or more. And never came up with a single alternative.

“I guess they’re talking to everybody who was there last night, and asking around town. Forrest said they’re trying to get in touch with the detective who talked to me, but they haven’t gotten ahold of him yet.”

“It’s the weekend.”

“I suppose. She—this Melinda Warren—was telling the truth about being married.”

“To Richard?” This time Emma Kate laid a hand on Shelby’s arm, left it there.

“It’s most likely. They have to go through some paperwork and background and all to be certain the man she married was the same man I thought I married. But . . . Hell, Emma Kate, it’s not most likely, it just is.”

“Shelby . . . I’m sorry if you are.”

This, too, Shelby had asked herself a dozen times. Was she hurt? Was she sad? Was she angry?

The answer had been a little bit of all, but more of simple relief.

“I’m glad of it.” Comforted, she laid her hand over Emma Kate’s. “As awful as that is, I’m glad of it.”

“I don’t think it’s awful. Smart and sensible, that’s what it is.” And turning her hand, she linked her fingers with Shelby’s. “I’m glad of it, too.”

“He thought I was stupid, but what I was, was pliable.”

After giving Emma Kate’s hand a squeeze, Shelby dropped her own to wander around the small, bright space.

“It’s infuriating to look back at it now. It’s . . . and you know I use the word sparingly, but it suits what’s in me over this. It’s fucking galling, Emma Kate.”

“I bet it is.”

“At the time I thought it was the right thing, the thing to keep my family together. But we weren’t a family. I thought, once I swallowed hard on it, that was done now. It’s not done. Not until they find this Harlow person. I don’t know if they’ll ever find that woman’s jewelry and her stamps. I can’t think what Richard might’ve done with them.”

“That’s not your problem, Shelby.”

“I think it is.” She walked to a window, looked out at Emma Kate’s view of the Ridge. The long, steep curve of road, with buildings ticking their way down it as they hugged the sidewalk.

Flowers in barrels and pots, heading-toward-summer flowers in hot reds and bold blues replacing the pastels of spring.

Hikers with their backpacks, she noted, and some locals warming the benches outside her

grandmother's salon, the barbershop.

She could just see the well, just a corner of it, and the young family who stood reading its plaque. A couple of young boys made her smile as they raced after a spotted dog who'd snapped his leash and was running, tongue out, hell for leather.

It was a good view of what was what in the Ridge.

For a minute or so more, she had to take herself beyond that curving street with its hills and shops and flowers. Take it back into what still clouded over it.

"If the police could find all that, or what Richard did with it—or most of it—I wouldn't have to worry or wonder. Then it would be good and done."

"What does worry and wonder get you?"

"Not a damn thing." She turned back, smiled at the practicality that steadied her. "So I'm not thinking about it every minute of the day. Maybe if I don't think about it, something'll pop into my head."

"That happens for me when I vacuum. I hate running the vacuum."

"You always did."

"Always did, so my mind wanders around. Things do pop in."

"I'm hoping. Now I've got to get home. Mama had Callie and her friend plant a fairy garden, and I want to see it. Remember when Mama had us plant one?"

"I do. Every spring, even when we were teenagers. I'll have to try my hand at it if we ever build that from-the-ground-up house."

"You could do a miniature windowsill fairy garden right there, using your big front window."

"Now see, I'd never have thought of that. Now you did, and I'm going to end up buying little pots and plants. Wouldn't that look sweet?"

"Guaranteed."

"I could . . . Hold on." Emma Kate picked up her phone when it signaled. "Matt's texting me he'll be home in about a half hour. Which means closer to an hour, as he must be finishing up helping Griff on the house, then they'll have to talk about it awhile. Ruminating."

"Ruminating can take some time. I've got a date with Griff Tuesday."

Emma Kate's eyebrows winged up. "Is that so? And you don't mention it until you're heading out the door?"

"I'm not sure what to think about it yet, but I want to see his house. I always wanted to see what someone with some vision could do with that place."

Those eyebrows stayed raised. "And seeing the house is your sole purpose of this date?"

"It's a factor. Honestly, truly, I don't know what I'm going to do about what's moving along between us."

"Here's a thought." Lips bowing up some, Emma Kate lifted the index finger of both hands. "Why not try something I don't think you've put up front for the last few years. What do you want to do?"

"When you put it like that?" Shelby's laugh was quick and easy. "Part of me—maybe the most part of me—just wants to jump him, and the realistic part is saying, Slow down, girl."

"Which one's going to win?"

"I just don't know. He sure wasn't on my list, and I've still got a lot to tick off there."

"I'm calling you Wednesday morning to see if you ticked off 'sex with Griff.'"

Now Shelby raised her eyebrows, shot out a finger. "That's not on the list."

"Add it on," Emma Kate suggested.

Maybe she would, for some point down the road. But for now, she was spending the rest of the

weekend with her daughter.

. . .

BY MONDAY THERE WAS still no word on Jimmy Harlow, no sign anyone matching his description had been around the Ridge, or asked about the brunette at her hotel in Gatlinburg.

Shelby decided to be optimistic, decided it was best to think he'd done what he'd come to do, had exacted his revenge on Melinda Warren, and moved on.

She parked outside the salon with time to spare, so walked down to the bar and grill. Optimism was her choice. It didn't have to be everyone's.

Tansy answered her knock.

"Shelby." Tansy immediately enfolded her in a hug. "I've been thinking about you all weekend."

"I'm so sorry about all this, Tansy."

"Everyone's sorry about it. Come on in and sit down."

"I have to get to work, but I wanted to see you first, and tell you I understand if you and Derrick want to cancel Friday Nights."

"Why would we do that?"

"It wasn't the sort of encore any of us had hoped for on our debut."

"It didn't have anything to do with us, with you, with the bar and grill. Derrick talked to the sheriff personally just yesterday. They're looking at it as a vengeance killing, old business that came here with her."

"I'm part of that old business."

"Not to my way of thinking. It's . . ." On a whoosh sound, she levered onto a stool. "I still get a little queasy and light-headed in the morning."

"And here I am hammering at you. Let me get you a cool cloth."

"I'd do better with a ginger ale."

Quickly, Shelby went behind the bar, poured ginger ale over a lot of crushed ice. "Sip it slow," she ordered, then got a clean bar rag, soaked it with cold water, twisted it until it held cool without dripping.

When she came back around, lifted Tansy's hair and laid the cloth on the back of her neck, Tansy made a long, long *Ahhhh*.

"That really does feel better."

"Worked for me when I was carrying Callie."

"It comes on most mornings, but usually passes before long. Every once in a while it hangs on, comes back a time or two. Just the icks, you know?"

"I do. It doesn't seem right something so wonderful should make a woman feel sick, but the prize at the end of it's worth it."

"I tell myself that every morning when I'm hanging over the toilet." She sighed again when Shelby turned the cloth over, laid the cooler side against her skin.

"It's passing already. I'm going to remember that trick."

Reaching back, she patted Shelby's arm. "Thank you."

"Do you want a couple crackers? I can get some from the kitchen."

"No, it really is passing. Now you sit down here and take my brand of cool-cloth treatment."

After tugging Shelby around, Tansy looked straight into her eyes. "That Warren person? She was an awful woman, and from what I've been told, didn't give a good damn about anybody but herself. She didn't deserve to die for it, but she was an awful woman. Whoever killed her was awful, too.

You didn't even know those people, Shelby."

"I knew Richard—or thought I did."

Obviously feeling herself again, Tansy hissed and flicked that away. "And Derrick's got a cousin over in Memphis deals drugs for a living. That doesn't make us part of it. Are you too upset to sing on Friday? I understand it if you are. We lost a waitress over it."

"Damn it. I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be. Her mama had a cat fit, said she might as well work at Shady's Bar as here with people getting shot. As if it happened every week. She was a whiner anyway," she added with a wave of her hand, "and Lorna's not sorry to see her go, so neither am I."

"I'm not upset about it, not like that. If you and Derrick want me, I'm here. I've already started the playlist."

"New flyers out today, then. We set a record on Friday."

"You did?"

"Topped our best night when we had the Rough Riders from Nashville, by fifty-three dollars and six cents. You e-mail me the playlist when you're finished, and I'll make sure the machine's set. And how's your mama and all the rest?"

"Dealing. I'd better get to work before Granny docks my pay."

She walked in right on time and went straight to work. She gave the garden patio a sweep, watered the pots, opened the umbrellas so clients could sit in the shade if they chose.

Back inside, she folded towels that hadn't been seen to while she listened to the chatter of the first customers. When she stepped out she saw her grandmother had come in, already had someone in her chair. Crystal gossiped happily with the woman she was shampooing.

And Melody Bunker and Jolene Newton sat in the pedicure chairs with their feet in bubbling water.

She hadn't run into Jolene at all since she'd been back, hadn't seen Melody since that day in The Artful Ridge. She wouldn't have minded keeping it that way. But since she hadn't been raised to be rude, she stopped by the chairs on her way to check the front treatment rooms.

"Hey, Jolene. How're you doing?"

"Why, Shelby, I swear!" She set her glossy magazine in her lap, gave her head a toss that had her long, high ponytail bobbing. "You haven't changed one single, tiny bit, even after all you've been through. Are you getting nails today, too?"

"No, I work here."

"Is that right?" Jolene widened her hazel eyes as if this was fresh news. "Oh now, I think I did know that. You told me that, didn't you, Melody, that Shelby was working at Vi's again, just like back in high school?"

"I believe I did." Without looking up, Melody flipped a page in her own magazine. "I see you took my advice, Shelby, and found work you're suited for."

"Thank you for that. I forgot how much I enjoy being here. Y'all enjoy your pedicures." She walked to the desk to answer the phone, booked an appointment, then slipped through to check the front rooms.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Melody and Jolene with their heads together, heard Jolene's high-pitched giggle. The same as it was in high school.

She ignored it, and then, reminding herself she had a lot more important matters to concern her.

By the time she swung through the salon again, Maybeline and Lorilee—mother and daughter—were both perched on low stools doing the scrub portion of the pedicures.

So they'd gone for the deluxe, Shelby thought, and walked down to make sure the paraffin was

turned on warm. She checked the locker rooms, hauled out used robes, ran through the rest of her morning checklist.

She had a friendly conversation with a woman from Ohio, one giving herself a day off from a hiking adventure with her fiancé, and offered to take a lunch order as the woman had booked a full day.

“You could eat out in the garden if you want. It’s such a pretty day.”

“That would be wonderful. I don’t suppose I could get a glass of wine.”

“I can make that happen,” Shelby told her, and produced a couple of menus. “You just let me know what you want, and one of us will go get it for you. About one-fifteen? You’ll be between your Aromatherapy Wrap and your Vitamin Glo Facial.”

“I feel so pampered.”

“That’s what we’re here for.”

“I love this place. Honestly, I just booked the day here so I wouldn’t have to hike three days running. But it’s all so terrific, and everybody’s so nice. Could I get this Field Green Salad with the grilled chicken—the house dressing on the side. And a glass of Chardonnay would just make my day.”

“You just consider it made.”

“Is the woman out front, the owner, is that your mother? You look like her.”

“My grandmother. My mama’s doing your facial later.”

“Your grandmother? You’re kidding me.”

Shelby laughed, delighted. “I’m going to tell her you said that, and you’ll have made her day. Now, can I get you anything else?”

“Not a thing.” The woman burrowed down in one of the chairs. “I’m just going to sit here and relax.”

“You do that. Sasha will come get you in about ten minutes for your wrap.”

She walked back into the salon with a smile on her face, went straight to the desk to place the order for a one-o’clock pickup. She started to turn to her grandmother when Jolene hailed her.

“That’s pretty polish,” Shelby said, nodding toward the toes Jolene was having painted glossy pink.

“It puts me in mind of my mama’s peonies. I forgot to say before, and my goodness haven’t you been busy in here, I heard you were singing on Fridays down at the bar and grill. I was sorry I couldn’t make it in to hear you, then I heard about what happened and wasn’t sorry I wasn’t there on Friday. I think I’d have had a heart attack or something finding out some woman got shot right outside.”

She patted a hand to her heart as if even now it was in danger.

“I heard you knew her, too, is that right?”

Shelby gave Melody a glance. “I know you consider Melody a reliable source of information—and that Melody’s confident you’ll push whatever buttons, turn whatever knobs she tells you to.”

“Why, Shelby, I was just asking—”

“What Melody told you to ask. The answer is no, I can’t say I knew her.”

“Your *husband* did,” Melody said. “But that’s right, he wasn’t your husband at all, was he?”

“Apparently not.”

“You must feel just awful, being deceived like that.” Jolene picked up the theme. “Why, I’d just about *die* if I’d lived with a man all those years, had a child with him, and found out he had another wife all along.”

“I’m still breathing. I guess I’m not as sensitive as you.”

She started to step back.

"You're not doing anything important," Melody began. "I'd like a glass of sparkling water, with ice."

"I'll get that for you," Maybeline began, but Melody shot her a hard look. "You're busy painting my toes. Shelby can get it, can't you, Shelby?"

"I can. Would you like something, Jolene?"

Jolene had the grace to flush. "I wouldn't mind some ice water, if it's no trouble."

"None at all."

She turned, went to the back, into the tiny kitchen. She'd stew about it later, she promised herself, but for now, she'd get the damn water.

She brought out the glasses, handed one to Jolene.

"Thank you, Shelby."

"You're welcome."

When she held out the glass to Melody, Melody knocked it with her hand so water sloshed over the rim.

"Now look what you did!"

"I'll get you a towel."

"These capri pants are silk, and now they've got water spots. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to get you a towel."

"You probably did it on purpose because I didn't want the likes of you working in my store."

"Your grandmother's store, last I heard. And believe me, if I'd done it on purpose, I'd've poured the whole glass in your lap. Do you want that towel, Melody?"

"I don't want anything from your kind."

Shelby knew the place had gone quiet. Even the whirl of dryers had shut off. Every ear in the place was cocked. So she smiled. "Why, Melody, you're just as spiteful and full of self-importance as you were back in high school. It must be a burden carrying all that around inside you. I'm sorry for you."

"Sorry for me? Sorry for *me*?"

Melody flung the magazine away so it landed with a thwack on the floor. "You're the one came crawling back to the Ridge with her tail between her legs. And what did you bring with you?"

Her voice pitched louder as temper rose in hot spots on her cheeks.

"I brought my daughter and not much else. You're awful flushed, Melody. I think you need this water."

"You don't tell me what I need. I tell *you*. I'm the customer. You just work here, sweeping up. You don't even have the marginal skills to polish nails or use a curling iron."

"Marginal." Shelby heard Maybeline breathe the word, saw out of the corner of her eye the longtime employee carefully cap the coral enamel with only half of Melody's toes painted.

"Melody," Jolene began, gnawing her lip at the stony stare on Maybeline's face.

But Melody only slapped Jolene's hand aside. "You'd better show some respect after where you've come from, and what's gone on since you came back here? Whose fault is it some woman got shot right in our town Friday night?"

"I'd say the person who pulled the trigger's at fault on that."

"It wouldn't have happened here if you weren't here, and everybody knows it. Nobody decent around here wants you around. You're the one who ran off with some *criminal*. And don't tell me you thought you were married to him. Like as not you cheated people just like he did, and when he

died and left you in a fix, back here you come with your bastard child.”

“Be careful there, Melody,” Shelby said as Jolene let out a shocked hiss. “Be real careful there.”

“I’ll say what I think, and what most everybody around here thinks, too. I’ll say what I like.”

“Not in here you won’t.” Viola stepped up, gripped Shelby’s arm hard, took the glass of water she still held—and had been about to heave—out of her hand. “I’ve just spared you from a soaking or worse, as I expect Shelby was about to do what I’d like to do myself, and that’s haul you up out of that chair and slap your head clean around, you rude, ugly-minded, pitiful girl.”

“You don’t dare speak to me that way! Just who do you think you are?”

“I’m Viola MacNee Donahue, and this is *my* place. I’ll speak to you just as you deserve, and the good Lord knows somebody should’ve spoken to you long before this. I’m going to tell you, tell you both, to get your lazy, spiteful asses out of my chairs and out of my place. You get up and you get out, and you don’t come back in here.”

“We haven’t finished yet,” Melody began.

“You’re finished, done and finished altogether. No charge for today. Now get the hell out of my salon. Neither of you are going to walk in that door again.”

“Oh, but Miz Vi! Crystal’s doing my hair for my wedding.” Tears spurted into Jolene’s eyes. “I’ve got the whole day before booked here.”

“Not anymore.”

“Don’t worry about it, Jolene.” Melody grabbed the magazine forgotten in Jolene’s lap, tossed it across the room. “You can just pay Crystal to come to you.”

“She couldn’t pay me enough,” Crystal piped up.

“Oh, but Crystal—”

“Shame on you, Jolene.” Crystal bent down, picked up the magazine. “We’ve come to expect that kind of ugly from Melody, but shame on you.”

“We don’t need you,” Melody snapped at Crystal as Jolene blubbered. “Barely a step up from the trailer trash in the holler. We don’t need this place, either. I only come in here to be civic-minded and support local businesses. There are plenty of other places to go with more class.”

“You never did learn class,” Viola commented as Melody grabbed up her shoes. “That’s a shame, considering your grandmother. She’s going to be awful disappointed in you when I call her and tell her how you behaved in my place, what you said to my own granddaughter. What you said about my great-granddaughter. That takes you back a peg,” she added when some of the angry color faded from Melody’s cheeks. “You must’ve forgotten I’ve known your grandmother for over forty years. We’ve got a lot of respect for each other.”

“Tell her what you want.”

“Oh, I will. Now get your second-runner-up’s ass out of my salon.”

Melody sailed out while Jolene scrambled up. “Oh, Melody, wait! Oh, Miz Vi!”

“She’s your choice of companion, Jolene. Maybe it’s time you grew up some. Go on now, get.” She ran sobbing out the door.

After one still moment, several people—staff and customers—began to applaud.

“I swear, Vi.” The woman in Viola’s chair gave herself a half spin in it. “I’ve always said coming to Vi’s is more entertaining than watching the soap operas.”

Since it was there, Shelby took the water back, downed it. “I’m sorry, Granny. I wasn’t going to slap her. I was going to haul her out of the chair and punch her right in the face. Nobody talks that way about my baby.”

“Or mine.” Viola gave Shelby a one-armed hug.

“Are you really going to call her grandmother?”

"I won't have to. You better believe she's calling Flo right now, giving her an earful. Flo loves that girl, but she knows her, too. I'll be getting a call inside the next half hour. Maybeline, Lorilee, you take your usual commission for the pedis out of the till."

"No, ma'am," they said, almost in unison.

"There's no need for it," Maybeline added. "Viola, don't you make me mad and say another word about it. That girl's lucky I didn't stab her with the cuticle scissors. Shelby, she was talking trash about you for the last half hour. I'm not sorry to see the last of her in here. She always shorts my tip."

"Jolene's not so bad when she comes in on her own," Lorilee put in. "But together they're downright mean."

"All right, then." With a glint of pride along with the dregs of temper, she nodded. "I'm treating everybody to lunch."

"Lunch!" Shelby checked the time, sighed in relief. "I've got to go down to the Pizzeria, get a customer a salad and sneak out a glass of wine. I can get the rest if y'all put an order together."

"We'll have ourselves a party," Crystal declared. "Second-runner-up's ass." She hooted out a laugh. "Miz Vi, I swear I love you to distraction and back again. Twice."

"Me, too." Shelby pressed her cheek to Viola's. "Me, too."

. . .

THE MURDER and Melody's eviction from Viola's competed for the richest juice squeezed from the local grapevine. While it was true there hadn't been a murder in the Ridge for three years, coming up on four, when Barlow Keith shot his brother-in-law—and winged two bystanders—in a dispute over a pool game at Shady's Bar, nobody knew the woman currently in a cold drawer at the annex of the funeral parlor that served as the coroner's office.

Everybody knew Melody and Viola, so that story took the lead with most.

The incident got a fresh boost on Tuesday morning, when the word went around that Florence Piedmont had dressed her granddaughter down and ordered her to apologize to both Shelby and Viola.

The Ridge waited with bated breath to see if Melody complied.

"I don't want her apology." Shelby stacked fresh towels at the shampoo stations. "She wouldn't mean it, so what's the point?"

"Her offering, meaning it or not, and you accepting it, makes her grandmother feel better." For once Viola sat in the chair while Crystal touched up her roots.

"I guess I can pretend to accept a pretend apology, if it comes."

"It may take a few days, but it'll come. The girl knows where her bread's buttered the thickest. We're slow in here today. Why don't you let Maybeline give you a nice pedicure? It'd be nice to have pretty toes for your date with Griffin tonight."

Crystal and Maybeline, currently the only others in the salon, both slid their gazes toward Shelby.

"I don't know as he's going to notice my toes, one way or the other."

"A man who's interested in a woman notices everything at the start of it."

"That's the truth," Crystal agreed. "It's after they've got you awhile they wouldn't notice if you grew an extra set of toes and painted them every color in the rainbow. Especially if there's a game on the TV and a beer in their hand."

"We've got some really pretty spring colors," Maybeline put in. "There's Blues in the Night. It's just about the color of your eyes. I've got three manis this morning, and only one pedi scheduled all

day. I'd love to do you one, Shelby."

"If there's time, that'd be nice. Thank you, Maybeline."

"What are you going to wear? On your date with Griff," Crystal asked.

"I don't know. Really, I'm mostly going over to see his house. I've always loved that old place, and wonder what he's doing with it."

"Since he's fixing you dinner, you should wear something pretty."

Shelby turned to her grandmother. "He's fixing me dinner? How do you know that?"

"Because he dropped by to see me Sunday afternoon, and asked, casual-like, if there was something you especially liked to eat, or something you didn't especially like."

"I thought he'd just pick something up." Now she didn't know whether to be flattered or nervous. "What's he making?"

"I think that ought to be his surprise. You should wear a pretty dress. Nothing fancy, just pretty. You've got good legs, girl. Good long legs. You got them from me."

"And pretty underthings."

"Crystal!" Maybeline flushed, and giggled like a girl.

"A woman ought to wear pretty underthings every day anyway, but especially on a date. It's confidence-building, I think. And it's always best to be prepared."

"If I want to get Jackson heated up, all I have to do is put on a black bra and panties."

"Oh, Granny." Undone, Shelby buried her face in her hands.

"I wasn't able to get him heated up, you wouldn't be here. Seems to me your mama says your daddy favors midnight blue when it comes to lingerie."

"I'm going in the back to check on things."

"What things?" Viola wanted to know.

"Anything that doesn't involve my parents and grandparents getting heated up."

She moved fast, but still heard the quick female laughter follow her.

. . .

SHE HAD TOENAILS painted a deep violet blue, and at Callie's insistence wore a dress the color of daffodils. And because she couldn't get it out of her mind, she wore under it a white bra with tiny yellow rosebuds worked into the edging lace, and matching panties.

Not that anyone was going to see them, but maybe they would build confidence.

Once she was dressed, Callie clung to her leg. "I want to go on a date with Griff, too."

Since she'd expected something along those lines, she had a counteroffer ready. "Why don't we take Griff on a date, maybe on Sunday afternoon? We could take him on a picnic. We could make fried chicken and lemonade."

"And cupcakes."

"Absolutely cupcakes." She hauled Callie up before she walked out of the bedroom. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Uh-huh. When's Sunday afternoon?"

"Just a few days away."

"Don't you look pretty!" Ada Mae exclaimed. "Doesn't your mama look pretty, Callie?"

"Uh-huh. She's going on a date with Griff, and we're going to take him on a date for a picnic on Sunday afternoon."

"Why, that sounds like the best time. I don't know if the bubble maker your granddaddy's setting up in the backyard's going to be as much fun as all that."

“Bubble maker?”

“Why don’t you go out and see?”

“I’m going to make bubbles, Mama. Bye.” She kissed Shelby’s cheek, wiggled down and took off like a rocket, calling for her grandfather.

“I sure appreciate you watching her again, Mama.”

“We love every minute of it. I think your daddy’s as excited about bubbles as she is. You have a good time tonight. You got a condom in your purse?”

“Oh, Mama.”

Ada Mae just pulled one out of her pants pocket. “In case. You put this in your purse, and I’ll have one less thing to worry about.”

“Mama, I’m just going to see his house and have dinner.”

“Things happen, and a smart woman’s prepared when they do. Be a smart woman now, Shelby.”

“Yes, ma’am. I won’t be late.”

“You stay as long as you want.”

With the condom tucked in her purse, Shelby started out. She’d just opened the van door when Forrest pulled up.

“Where are you off to in a yellow dress?”

“I’m just having dinner with Griff.”

“Where?”

She rolled her eyes. “At his house because I want to see it, and I’ll be late if you’re going to give me the third degree.”

“He’ll wait. The sheriff cleared me to let you know. Richard wasn’t Jake Brimley, either.”

Her pulse jumped. She actually felt the leap in her throat. “What do you mean?”

“Jake Brimley, with the Social Security number he used, died at the age of three in 2001. Richard created the identification, or paid to have it created.”

“You mean . . . he used that name, but he wasn’t that person?”

“That’s right.”

“Who was he then? God’s sake, how many names can one man have?”

“I can’t say—I don’t know,” Forrest corrected. “We’re working on it. I’ll do what I can to find out, Shelby. I figure you’d want to know, one way or the other.”

“I would. I don’t know how I can put it all away until I know. Did you find anything else out about the murder?”

“As a matter of fact, we had someone come in today. She was in the parking lot—in the backseat of a car with another individual. An individual not her husband. While they were busy doing things that put a layer of steam on the windows, she heard a loud pop. The timing’s right for it to be the shot. She surfaced from her activities long enough to notice someone get into a car, drive off just a few seconds later.”

“God, she saw the killer?”

“Not really. She thinks male, but she wasn’t wearing her glasses at the time, so didn’t get a good look. We wouldn’t have that much if her conscience hadn’t gotten over on her guilt. What we’ve got is probably male, getting into a dark car, possibly an SUV. No make, model or license, but she thinks black or dark blue, and shiny. Struck her like a new car, but she can’t say for certain.”

“What about the man she was with? Didn’t he see anything?”

“I didn’t say she was with a man.”

“Oh.”

“Which is part of her problem with coming forward. We’ll just say the other individual was very

busy below window level at the time, and didn't see anything."

"All right. And Harlow?"

"Nothing there yet. You be careful driving over there to Griff's, Shelby. Text me when you get there."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Forrest."

"If you don't want me calling when you might be . . . busy, text me when you get there. I'm going to see if I can mooch leftovers."

"They're out back," she called out as he strolled toward the house. "Daddy's got Callie a bubble maker."

"Yeah? I believe I'll get me a beer and get in on that. Text me."



She stopped at the head of the short lane that led back to the old Tripplehorn place, freshened her lip gloss, took a critical look in the visor mirror.

All right, no more dark circles, and not all the color in her face came from the little pot of cream blush her grandmother had urged her to sample.

Her hair, windblown as it was, added a casual touch. Wasn't it best to stay casual? she asked herself.

And took a breath.

She hadn't been on a date—a real one, and whatever she'd said, this was a bona fide date—since she'd flown off to Vegas with Richard, to get married.

Or so she'd believed.

She'd dated plenty before that, of course, she reminded herself, through high school and into college. But it was all so vague and blurry with the enormity of the in between the then and now.

And he was fixing her dinner, which made it a sort of *serious* date, didn't it? She made herself think through the enormity, back to the blur. She couldn't think of a single time a man had fixed her dinner.

Maybe it didn't make it serious. Maybe once you got past the high school and college years, it was just something people, adult people, did now and then.

And she was making far too much of it either way.

She made the turn, bumped her way down the narrow drive—obviously something he hadn't bothered to fix yet—then just stopped the car again and looked.

She'd always loved the charm of the old place, the way it tucked into the green, spread a bit toward a sheltered stream.

She only found it more charming now.

He'd cleaned up the exterior, and what a difference. She thought he'd likely power-washed the old stone—repointed it, too, so it stood in various shades of brown and gold on its roll of a rise among the trees.

And he put in spanking new windows, added a set of doors in place of the broken windows on what she assumed must be the master bedroom due to the addition of a covered porch with bronze-colored iron rails.

He'd left most of the wonderful old trees, the maples and oaks, their green deepening toward that deep summer shade, and put in a couple of dogwoods, bloomed off now and still tenderly green. Clearing out the scrub and weeds along the foundation had to have been hard, sweaty, even miserable work. Whatever time he'd put in had paid off as young azaleas and rhododendrons swept color at the stone's skirts, while older ones, wild ones, splashed more back in the green shadows.

He was doing some sort of terracing on the far side, following the rise of the land with partially

finished stone walls that mimicked the tones of the house. She imagined it finished, and filled with native shrubs and flowers.

Too charmed to be nervous now, she left her van beside his truck, gathered the potted mountain laurel she'd picked up as a host gift and walked to the wide front porch.

She admired the set of Adirondack chairs painted deep forest green, the rough wood table—a stump he must've planed down and sealed—between them. Even as she raised a hand to knock, he opened the door.

"Heard you drive up."

"I'm already in love with the place. It must've taken you a lot of sweaty days to reclaim the land around the house, all that old scrub and the briars."

"Sort of hated to kill the briars. They added a little 'Sleeping Beauty' to the place. You look great."

He looked pretty great himself, freshly shaven, from the looks of it, with a shirt of softly faded blue rolled up to his elbows.

He took her hand to draw her in.

"I'm glad to see you're not averse to plants, so you should be able to find a spot for these."

"Thanks. I'll just—"

"Oh my God."

The shock in her tone had him looking frantically for something like one of the monstrously huge wolf spiders he'd spent weeks banishing from the house.

But when she pulled free, turned a circle, her smile simply glowed. "This is wonderful. Griffin, this is wonderful!"

He'd opened up walls so what had been a dark, narrow hallway was a wide foyer that spilled naturally into a front room with a fireplace he'd refaced in native stone. The early evening light flowed through the uncurtained windows onto a gleaming deep-toned oak floor.

"I don't use this space much yet, so I just tossed an old couch and a couple chairs into it. Haven't figured out what color to paint it, so . . . I haven't."

"It's about the space," she said, and wandered it. "I peeked in the old windows so many times, even broke in once on a dare and walked all through. Are these the original floors?"

"Yeah." Every square foot of them pleased him. "They took some work, but original's best if you can keep it. I used original trim where I could, copied it where I couldn't."

"And the ceiling medallion. I had dreams about that for weeks after I came in. The little faces around the circle."

"Nice and spooky. I haven't found the right light to go there." Like Shelby, he looked up at the plaster medallion. "It has to hit me."

"It should look old. There shouldn't be anything in here that looks shiny and new. Well, the kitchen and bathrooms, that's one thing, but the rest . . . And I'm telling you your business when you obviously know just what to do. I want to see it all."

"I haven't gotten to all of it yet. Some spaces I'd start, realize I wasn't in the right mood. Keep going and you end up doing something wrong, or at least half-assed."

He should paint this room a warm, rich gold—not bright and not too dark, but like warm, rich old gold. And leave the windows undraped to show off the gorgeous trim, and . . .

And she had to stop decorating it for him in her head.

"You're not doing all this yourself, are you?"

"No." He took her hand again, started to lead her toward the back of the house. "Matt's been a slave—will work for beer—when he has the time. Forrest, too. Clay's pitched in a couple times. My

father's been down, given me a week or two when he can manage it. And my brother. My mom helped clearing the brush, and said I owe her more for that than fourteen hours of labor.

"Half bath here," he added when she laughed.

She poked inside. "Look at that sink. It's just like an old washbasin on a stand. Like it could've been here all along. And that antique bronze finish on the fixtures and the lights goes so well. You've got a nice sense, Griff, of color, too. Keeping it warm and natural. The house doesn't want bold and flashy.

"What's this over here?"

"Tools and materials, mostly." He thought, What the hell? and opened the old pocket door.

"Such wonderful high ceilings," she said, obviously not put off by stacks of tools and lumber, big tubs of drywall mud, and plenty of dust. "And another ceiling medallion. I guess you know they say the original Mr. Tripplehorn was six-feet-six, and built the place to accommodate his size. Does the fireplace work?"

"Not now. It needs work, and probably a gas insert in here, something that doesn't look like a gas insert. Refacing the brick, or maybe redoing it in slate or granite. It's crap and crumbling."

"What's it going to be?"

"Maybe a library. It feels like a house like this should have one."

Because he saw it in his head, he gestured. "Built-ins flanking the fireplace, a library ladder, that kind of thing. Big leather couch, maybe a stained glass ceiling fixture, if I find the right one. One of these days," he said with a shrug. "A couple of other rooms down here I'm still thinking about. I didn't want to open everything up. Open concept's one thing, losing all the original quirks and charm's another."

"You've got the best of both. You could do a pretty sitting room here, or first-floor office, guest room." She studied another empty room. "It's such a nice view through the windows there of the trees, and just that little bend of the creek. If you put your office here, you could float the desk in the center of the room so you could see out, but not have your back to the door. Then you could— And there I go again."

"You can keep going. It's a good idea."

"Well, I was going to be a singing sensation, but interior design was my fallback. I took a couple classes in college."

"Seriously? Why didn't I know that?"

"It was a long time ago."

"I'm going to use you. But right now, I'm going to get you some wine."

"I wouldn't mind a glass." Just one, she thought, with plenty of time to burn off before she got in the van again. "Something smells really good. I didn't expect you to—"

She broke off in wonder.

Everything just opened up. Where she remembered seeing a warren of rooms, a dingy dining room separated by walls and a door from a small and even dingier kitchen, what she'd supposed had been maids' and cooks' quarters was now one wonderful space that brought the hills, the trees, the creek inside through a wall of glass doors.

"I guess I went a little shiny and bold in here."

"No, no, not bold. Beautiful. Look at the size of that farm sink. And I love how you glass-fronted so many of the cabinets."

"Even if most of them are still empty."

"You'll fill them in time. I'd haunt the flea markets and yard sales, find me some old crockery. Maybe old teapots or cups and display them in those over there. And . . ."

She stopped herself before she decorated his house from top to bottom.

"It's such a nice flow into the dining area here and the, I guess, lounge area there. You could live in this one space. So much counter space. What is this?"

"Slate."

"It's just perfect, isn't it? So handsome. My mama would cry for that cooktop. I love the lights, that pale amber tone against the bronze. You designed all this?"

"I got input from my dad, from Matt, from a couple engineers I know. An architect. When you grow up with a contractor, you tend to make contacts."

"Still, it's your work. It feels like you. Honestly, I've never seen a more beautiful kitchen, and one that fits so well into this house. You have all the convenience, but the character's right here. You could entertain half the Ridge in here. It must be a joy to cook in."

"I don't cook much." He tugged on his ear. "Your basics mostly. But I figured if I ever had a place, did my own kitchen rehab, I'd go for the gold and see if I could reach it. Kitchen's the heart of the house."

"It is, and this one's big and beautiful."

"You haven't seen the best part."

He handed her a glass of wine, picked up his own, then walked to the wall of doors. When he opened them, they folded back like an accordion, tucked away, and brought the outside in.

"Oh, that *is* the best part. That's fantastic. Warm nights, sunny mornings, you can just leave them open. And for parties."

She stepped out, sighed.

"Still a lot to do out here yet. I've barely hit this part of the workable grounds."

"You can't beat the view."

And now with her, he looked out over the still scrubby yard to the great green domes. They rose, soft and misty, with the quieting light.

"You can't. Any season," he added. "A couple months ago I looked out at snow, and it stayed white or silver gray up in the higher elevations into April. And last fall? I've never seen color like that, and we get some pretty jazzy foliage in Maryland. But the miles of it. Just miles of it rolling up into the sky? Every day for weeks, it just dazzled."

He loved it, she realized, and more, understood it. The old Tripplehorn place was lucky he'd settled in.

"You can hear the creek bubbling," she said, and found the sound more romantic than violins. "You could have a big cutting garden out here, plant things that draw butterflies and hummingbirds. And there's enough sun you could have herbs planted right outside your kitchen—for when you do cook."

"Maybe you could help me figure that out."

"I have very strong opinions about such things." She lifted her face to the breeze. "You should plant some blooming weepers, and get yourself a big wind chime for that old oak over there. Something that gives a deep, masculine tone, and a couple bird feeders—but up off the top porch or the bears could come calling."

"I'd rather they didn't. I've seen a couple sort of lumber along in the woods—when I've looked out. That's close enough for me when it comes to bears."

"I envy you this place, Griff. The feel of it, the look of it, the potential of it and the history. I like that someone I know has it, and more, knows just what to do with it. I didn't realize you were this good."

"Is that right?"

She laughed, shook her head as she turned to him. “What I mean is, I knew you were good at your work. I’ve seen it, and I’m seeing what you and Matt are doing for Mama. But this isn’t just changing something, or making it better, prettier or more functional. It’s bringing something back to life so many others left for dead.”

“I came to see the property on a whim, and fell in love at first sight.”

“I think it’s been sitting here pining all these years, so it must love you back.”

“I don’t know what smells so good, but I hope it’ll hold just a bit more. I’d love to just sit out here awhile.”

“It’ll hold. Give me a second.”

“What are we having?” she asked as he went in to turn off the burner.

“I hope it’s going to be penne in a spicy tomato sauce with black olives and basil.”

She smiled as he walked back out to her. “And how did you know that’s one of my favorite pasta dishes?”

“I’m psychic?”

“I don’t think so. It was sweet of you to find out what I like and go to the trouble.”

“You can tell me I’m sweet after you eat it, in case it’s terrible.” Which, he could admit, was a genuine concern. “I didn’t make the cannolis, so they’ll be fine.”

“We’re having cannolis?”

“Which I didn’t make, and I didn’t make the loaf of Italian bread. And the salad’s from a bag o’ salad. I hit the wall on the pasta.”

“You’re the first man to make me dinner, and it sounds perfect.”

“What?”

“It sounds just perfect.”

“No, the other.” He circled a finger in the air, signaling a rewind. “I’m the first man to make you dinner?”

“Well, my daddy, of course, and Grandpa’s done some heroic grilling over the years.”

“I . . . If I’d known this was a first, I’d have bought fancy plates or something.”

“I don’t want fancy plates. I’ve had fancy plates. Food tastes the same on them as it does on everyday.”

He considered a moment. “I’ve got two reliables when I want to cook and impress a woman. One’s your basic steak on the grill, massive baked potato and the ever popular bag o’ salad. The other, when I seriously want to impress, is this chicken thing in wine. I’m pretty good at that one.”

“Why aren’t we having a chicken thing in wine?”

“Because I didn’t want to go for the usual with you. And I didn’t do this when you first got here because I wanted to give you time to settle in first.”

He took the wineglass from her, set it down, put his own beside it, then drew her in.

He thought she smelled like the mountain sunset. Fresh, breezy, with shimmering edges. He combed his fingers through the long, luxurious length of her hair, all those tumbling curls.

And reminded himself to go slow, go easy, as he laid his lips on hers.

He drew back. “That was just in case you thought I forgot to kiss you hello.”

“I didn’t think—can’t. Don’t— Oh, damn. Damn.”

The next thing he knew she surged against him. She knocked him back on his heels, kicked every rational thought out of his head, and flashed a wire in his blood in one fell swoop.

He stumbled back two steps before he regained his balance, wrapped around her to keep them both from pitching off the porch. And barely stopped himself from yanking the dress up and over her head.

She was an earthquake, an explosion of reckless heat shooting bolts of fire everywhere. His brain fogged in the ash and smoke.

He whipped her around, slapped her back to the post. Now that his hands were free, he used them, shooting them under the skirt of her dress, running them over her hips, over the heat, down again.

She quivered, moaned against his mouth, then nearly snapped the last thin thread of control by rocking her hips against him.

He had to pull back. "Wait."

She had a good grip on his hair, and pulled his mouth back to hers. "Why?"

He got lost again, for a moment, for a lifetime. "Wait," he repeated, then rested his forehead on hers. "Breathe."

"I am breathing."

"No, me. I meant me." He took that breath, then another. "Okay."

She obviously took that as a green light as she pulled him back again.

"No, I mean . . ." He solved his dilemma by gathering her up, holding her close. Jesus, did she have to be so long and soft and slim right this minute? "Okay. We'll take a breath. We'll just take a couple breaths."

He had steady hands, he thought. Rock steady. Freaking surgeon-steady hands. So why were they unsteady now?

He gripped her shoulders with them, drew back an arm's length. Just look at her, he thought, those big, dazzling eyes, nearly purple in the softening light.

He reminded himself how rough she'd had it, how rough she had it still.

"Maybe we should . . . I don't want to rush you."

Something sparked in those twilight eyes, and caused his throat to go dry as dust. "Did it feel like you were rushing me?"

"I don't know. Maybe. The thing is, if we don't take a minute, a breath, a . . . something, we're going to end up naked on the porch."

"All right."

"Okay, so . . ." He dropped his hands, took a cautious half step back. "We'll take a minute."

"I mean it's all right if we end up naked on the porch."

He lost his breath again. "You're killing me, Red."

"I know I've had what we could call a drawn-out dry spell, but I'm pretty clear on the signs and signals when a man wants me. And if I wasn't, you made it pretty clear you wanted me that one day in my mama's kitchen over a Coke."

"If I didn't want you I'd be an idiot, and my own mother's proud to say she didn't raise any."

"I want you back, so that seems good news all around."

"That's . . . yes, incredibly good news—and I got those signs and signals just fine, too. The thing is, considering the circumstances, the plan was to soften you up some with dinner here, and get you to go out with me a couple more times, then get you into bed."

She leaned back on the post, nodded. Something he recognized as amusement moved into her eyes. "And I'm guessing you like having plans, personally and professionally?"

"Things work better, usually, when you do."

"You don't like surprises?"

"I'm fine with them." Merry Christmas, Happy Birthday. Let's get naked on the porch. Oh God.

"I'm good with them," he managed.

"But maybe it takes you a minute to adjust to a surprise."

“Apparently.”

Now she smiled, slow and easy.

Twilight eyes, magic mermaid hair, a long, long-stemmed rose of a body.

Yeah, she was killing him.

“Would you like to hear my plan?” she asked. “It’s sort of spur of the moment, but I think it’s workable.”

“I’m all ears.”

“My plan is we just skip over all the softening up with dinner and going out a couple more times. We come back around to that if we both want, after we get naked on the porch.”

“You’re nothing but a surprise. But no.”

She sighed. “You’re a hard nut to crack, Griffin.”

“I mean no naked on the porch. We can do better this time.”

“There’s better than naked on the porch?”

“This time.” This first time, he thought. This first surprising time. “I haven’t shown you the second floor.”

She angled her head, and her smile deepened. “No, you haven’t.”

“I’d like to.” He held out a hand. “I’d really like to.”

She put her hand in his. “I’d like to, but I might be a little rusty.”

“Not from where I’m standing,” he said as they walked back into the kitchen. “But don’t worry, I’ll walk you through it.”

She paused, tapped the purse she’d set on the counter. “Isn’t it interesting how my mama gave me a condom to tuck in here before I left tonight?”

“Oh. Man.” He scrubbed his free hand over his face. “I’d thank her for the thought, but it’d be embarrassing. Anyway, I’ve got that covered. Ha.”

“All right, then.”

“We can take the back stairs.”

“I forgot there were back stairs.” Delighted, she turned with him. “Don’t you love a house with back stairs?”

“I love this one. I’m going to update them, but they’re sturdy enough.” He flipped on a light—a single bare bulb. “Update that, too.”

“Won’t that be wonderful, but right now it’s all shadowy and spooky. I like how it angles off here so you can go right or left.”

“We’re going left.”

“How many bedrooms up here?”

“There were seven on the second floor. I’m making it five. It’s down to six now, once I decided to put the master in the front.”

“With that wonderful covered veranda.”

“Right. And the third floor’s more a maze of small rooms and odd angles. Something to deal with later.”

She felt so calm. She hadn’t expected to feel so calm, she realized, as they walked the wide, shadowy hallway. So easy about it all. Excited, yes, God, yes, but not jumpy. And not the least bit shy.

Something about him, she thought, just smoothed away the jitters.

“Oh! Double doors. It’s elegant and still simple enough to fit the rest.”

“It’s not finished,” he began, then opened the doors, flipped on the light.

“Oh, but it’s wonderful. It’s going to be wonderful. Look how the evening light pours in those

doors, and the fireplace—the black granite. It's powerful. It's a statement."

"Haven't decided on the wall color." He nodded toward a wall where he'd painted wide strips of varying tones. "I found the iron chandelier at a flea market. Refinished it, rewired it. I'm looking for other lighting to complement it, but right now I'm just using some family castoffs. Bed's new though. Well, the mattress is new. I found the bed a couple weeks ago. Flea market again."

She ran her hand along the curved footboard. Smooth, she thought, sturdy and simple. "It's beautiful."

"Chestnut. Pretty wood. It just needed some work."

"Almost everything does. What did you use before?"

"Sleeping bag on an air mattress. But with my plan to get you up here, I figured I'd better get an actual bed. Glad I didn't wait on that."

"I'm glad you didn't." She turned to him. "I'm glad we didn't."

He moved over, opened the veranda doors to let in the evening air, then flicked a switch to turn on the fire before he turned off the light.

"That work for you?"

"More than works. It's perfect."

He went to her, circled her waist. "You're where you want to be?"

"Exactly." With a little bit of wonder, she brushed a hand through his hair. "You're a surprise, too, because I didn't expect to be here with anyone, not for a long time." She lifted her arms, circled his neck.

A long kiss this time, slow and long and deep. Like the first time, and like the first time, her body melted like a candle in the sun.

All these feelings, she thought, all these shivery little sensations. She'd forgotten more than she remembered, she realized, about being one of two.

She let herself flow with it, just flow and float like a dandelion puff on a summer breeze. There was a storm coming, oh, she could feel it building in her, but the soft and quiet came first.

She brought her hands to his face when he changed the angle of the kiss. And shivered with anticipation as she felt him lower the zipper on the back of her dress.

He traced a finger up her spine, down. The light touch had her arching toward him, purring in her throat before he brought his hands to the straps of the dress, brushed them off her shoulders.

The dress slid down and away.

"Pretty," he murmured, and ran that finger, erotically rough with callus, along the lacy edge of her bra.

"My heart's beating so fast."

"I can feel it."

"Yours." She laid a hand on his heart, relieved when she felt it beat fast and hard under her palm. "Yours, too."

She started to unbutton his shirt, let out a breathless laugh when her fingers didn't seem to work right. "I'm shaking inside. Outside, too."

He lifted his hands to help her, but she brushed them away.

"No, I want to do it. You'll just have to tolerate some fumbling. I want . . ." She felt him quiver as she finally managed to open his shirt, lay her hands on flesh. And look up into his eyes. "I want everything."

She broke him, snapped the last link on the chain of control. She gasped when he hefted her up, dropped her back on the bed. Covered her.

She was willow slim, and part of him fretted over hurting her. But even that dropped into the dark

when she bowed up, gripping his hips, holding him against her center to center.

The sun bled away to dust, and a whippoorwill began its call for its mate.

The storm broke in her, a hot, whirling tempest. Greed rose with it, for more.

He had muscles like iron despite that rangy, swaggering build. His back rippled with them. Oh God, the feel of them under her hands. The weight of him pressing her down into the bed.

And hard hands, rough, impatient hands, all over her body. Not awakening needs—awakening seemed too tame a word.

It felt more like resurrection.

When his mouth closed over her breast, a scrape of teeth, a flick of tongue, and his hand slid between her legs, the orgasm tore through her, left her shocked and shuddering in its wake.

He didn't stop, didn't pause, but drove her up again.

And she was a pebble in a catapult, flying. Helpless and quaking. Her body was his now, open, and he took it, gave her more so sensations tangled together, needs became a single throbbing ache.

Then he was inside her, and pleasure ran through her in a flood.

She rode with him, beat for beat, her heart racing as his raced. Her sunset hair spread wild over the sheets, and her skin glowed in the smoky light of dusk.

"Shelby. Look at me." His body screamed for release, for that last leap. But he wanted to see her eyes. "Look at me."

She opened them, dark and dazed, looked into his.

"It's everything," he said, and let go.



Shelby's first coherent thought when the haze cleared from her mind was: So *this* is what it's like.

She felt heavy and light and limp, hulled out and filled up again all at once. She thought she could run a marathon, or sleep for a week.

Most of all she felt utterly and completely alive.

Griff lay flat-out on top of her, and that was just fine. She liked the weight of him even now, the sensation of his skin against hers, everything still hot and damp like after a strong summer storm.

In pretty contrast, the breeze fluttering through the open doors cooled her cheeks, made her smile. Everything made her smile. If she wasn't careful, she'd burst into song.

"Gonna move in a minute," he mumbled.

"You're fine. It's fine. Everything's just really, really fine."

He turned his head enough to brush his lips over the side of her throat. "I was a little rougher than I meant to be."

"To my way of thinking you were just rough enough. I can't figure if I've ever felt this used up or if I've just forgotten the feeling. You're sure thorough, Griffin. You sure do good work."

"Well, anything worth doing." He levered up to look down at her in the flickering of the fire. "You weren't rusty, by the way."

Pleased, languid with it, she touched his cheek. "I forgot to worry about it."

"I wondered what you'd look like, lying here like this. It's better, even better, than I imagined."

"Right this minute, everything's better than I imagined. That might be due to that long dry spell, but I'm giving you credit for it."

"I'll take it. It's cooling down. You're going to get cold."

"I don't feel cold."

"Yet. And I haven't fed you." He dropped a kiss on her lips. "I need to finish off dinner. But first . . ."

He rolled, and as he did, scooped her up. Her heart did a stuttering roll as he just lifted her right up as he stood.

Muscles like iron, she remembered. He was stronger than he looked.

"We should take a shower."

"We should?"

"Definitely." He grinned as he carried her. "You're going to love the bathroom."

She did. She loved the generous space, the oversized claw-foot tub, the earthy tones of the tile work. Most of all she loved the enormous shower with its multiple jets—and what could be done in all that heat and steam by two inventive and agile people.

By the time they were in the kitchen again she felt fresh and new and so happy she wished she'd

learned to tap-dance.

"I need to let my parents know I'm going to be a little later than I said."

"Go ahead. Though since your mother gave you a condom on your way out the door, I don't think they'll be surprised."

She sent a quick text, asked if Callie had gone to bed without any trouble. Then as Griff had the heat going under the sauce again, and water on for the pasta, she channeled some of the giddiness into a quick additional text to Emma Kate.

Been at Griff's for two hours. We haven't eaten yet. Bet you can guess why. I'm just going to say WOW until I talk to you in person. Make that WOW twice. Shelby.

"What can I do?" she asked Griff.

"You can have that glass of wine we never really got to."

"All right." She picked up her phone at the signal. "It's just Mama saying Callie's sleeping like an angel and to have a good time. Oh, I forgot to tell you, Callie was a little put out she wasn't going on a date with you. I said we'd ask you on a date."

"Oh yeah?" He glanced back as he pulled the salad out of the refrigerator.

"Why don't I take care of that? Do you have a salad set so I can toss it?"

"Huh?"

"A couple of forks, then."

"I got those. What kind of date am I going to be asked to go on?"

"A picnic." She took the forks, the bottled Italian dressing, smiled back at him.

"Is that a cold fried chicken and potato salad picnic or an imaginary tea party picnic? That would determine the dress code."

"The first. I know a place. It's not a far drive, and a short hike after that. I was thinking Sunday afternoon, if that's all right."

"Two pretty redheads and food? I'm already there."

"She's awful fond of you, Griffin."

"It's mutual."

"I know that, it shows. I just want to say, she's had a lot of adjustments to make in a short time, and—"

"Looking for trouble, Red?"

"It kind of goes with the territory. You've got a kindness in you, Griff. That shows, too. I just want to say whatever happens with us, I hope you'll . . . well, I hope you'll still take her on a date now and again."

"I'm lucky to know four generations of Donahue/Pomeroy women. I'm crazy about every one of them, and not looking for that to change. Sass and strength, it runs right through all of you."

"I'm still hunting up pieces of mine."

"That's bullshit."

He said it so casually it took her a minute to look up, blink.

"Most people I know, and I might be one of them, would've been crushed flat finding themselves millions of dollars in debt, and through none of their own doing."

He'd have heard the details, she thought. That's how things worked. "I went along with—"

"I'm going to repeat myself. Bullshit. What you did was be young and impulsive and fall for the wrong man. As wrong as it gets, from where I'm standing."

"I can't say you're standing in the wrong place on that."

"Then instead of staying crushed when you find out fully how wrong, find yourself on your own with a kid and buried under a mountain of debt, you pushed up the weight and started hacking away

at it. And that little girl? She's happy and confident because you made sure of it. I admire the hell out of you."

Staggered, she stared at him. "Well. Well, I don't know what to say to that."

"Plus you're really hot"—he dumped pasta in the boiling water—"which is no small appeal."

That made her laugh, go back to tossing the salad.

"You could answer a question for me, though, one that's bugged me awhile."

"I can try."

"Why'd you stick? You weren't happy, and it doesn't take much to deduce he wasn't much of a hands-on father with Callie. Why'd you stick?"

A fair question, she decided, under the circumstances. "I thought about divorce, more than once. And if I'd known all I know now . . . but I didn't. And I didn't want to fail. You know my granny was just sixteen when she married my granddaddy?"

"No." It shocked the sensibilities. "I had to figure young, but that's a baby."

"They'll be married fifty years before much longer. Half a century, and you have to figure they had some rough times in there. Her mama was but fifteen, and she and my great-granddaddy were together for thirty-eight years before he was killed when a semi crashed into his truck and three others one night, the winter of 1971. My own mama was still shy of eighteen when she married Daddy."

"Women in your family stick."

"The men, too. Oh, there's been some divorces, and some of them bitter, cousins and aunts and so on scattered through. But I can trace a direct line back, seven generations of women I know of, and not one of them raised a child in a broken home. I didn't want to be the first."

She shrugged, picked up her wine again, determined to lighten the mood. "Now, it's true enough my great-great-granny on my mama's side had three husbands. The first died fighting a blood feud with the Nash clan. He was only about eighteen when—so it's said—Harlan Nash bushwhacked him and shot him in the back, leaving my great-great-granny with three children and another on the way. She married her first husband's third cousin, and had time to make two children with him before he died of a fever. Then she up and married a big Irishman named Finias O'Riley. She was about twenty-two, and bore him six more children."

"Wait, I'm doing the math. Twelve kids? She had twelve kids?"

"She did, and unlike a lot of women of her time and place, lived to the age of ninety-one. She outlived five of her children, which must have been a burden, and lost her Finias, who was sheriff around here, so Forrest comes by his tendency natural, when she was eighty-two and he eighty-eight. My great-granny, who lives in Tampa, Florida, with her oldest daughter, would say she— Her name was Loretta, but they called her Bunny always."

"Prophetic, considering."

With a snicker, Shelby lifted her glass again. "They say she might've married again, as she had a gentleman caller, a widower who'd bring her flowers every week, but he died before she'd made up her mind. I'd like to think I could draw a gentleman caller at that age."

"I'll bring you flowers."

"Then if I don't see you on my doorstep in sixty years, I'm going to be disappointed."

. . .

IT RELIEVED HIM that dinner was not only edible, but actually tasty. She entertained him with the story of Melody's eviction from the salon. He'd already heard a couple of versions, but hearing it

from her, could visualize it perfectly.

“What’s her problem anyway?”

“She’s been a bully since I’ve known her. Spoiled, superior, with that mean streak you mentioned yourself. Her mama doted on her, and does still. Pushed her into all the beauty pageants, even as a little thing. And she won most of them, then sashayed all around being important.”

“Sashayed. Not a word you hear every day.”

“It suits. She almost always got what she wanted whenever she wanted it. Can’t say she’s shown any gratitude for it. She’s hated me for as long as I can remember.”

“Probably because she knew if you’d entered those pageants, you’d have beaten her little beauty-queen ass.”

“I don’t know about that, but I beat her out of some of what she wanted. Simple as that.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, silly things—or they are now. A boy she wanted when we were about fourteen, and he liked me. She got Arlo Kattery to beat him up—I know she did, but Arlo wouldn’t say. I made captain of our cheerleading squad—all through high school—and she wanted that. Grandpa fixed up this old clunker of a Chevy so I didn’t have to walk home after practice. She spray-painted ‘slut’ and worse all over it. I know it was her, because when I called her on it, Jolene looked so damn guilty. Same as she looked guilty the night of the Homecoming dance when I got voted queen and the windshield of that old Chevy was busted up, and the tires slashed.”

“She’s sounding more pathological than annoying now.”

“She’s just mean. I guess some people are, and if they never pay a real price for it, they just get meaner. She doesn’t worry me, especially since she’s banned from the salon and day spa.

“You made a wonderful meal, Griffin. Maybe you are a good catch.”

“I’m telling you.”

“I’m going to help you put this kitchen back to rights, then I need to get on.”

He traced a finger down her arm. “No way you could stay?”

He had those wonderful green eyes, those rough, skilled, thorough hands, and a way of kissing her that just put sparkles into her blood.

“It’s tempting, because that porch is still out there. It’s a lot more tempting than I thought it would be. But I wouldn’t feel right, not going home tonight to Callie.”

“Maybe I could have a pizza date with Callie between now and the picnic.”

“Oh, that’d be nice, but I’ve got such a busy week. I need to rehearse, and—”

“I wasn’t asking you.” Still he leaned over, kissed her. “Any problem with me taking Little Red for pizza?”

“I . . . I guess not. She’d really like it.” She rose, carried the plates to the sink. “Are you sure you want to take this on, Griffin?”

“Callie, or you?”

“We’re a set.”

“Nice set.”

He distracted her with talk of plans for the house while they loaded the dishwasher. He liked running his ideas and plans by someone who understood them, saw the potential.

“The one thing you need, and before much longer, is a porch swing. You can’t have a beautiful front porch like that and not have a front porch swing.”

“Front porch swing, check. Back porch?”

“An old bench, maybe a rocking chair. You could sit and rock and look out at the gardens you worked so hard planting.”

“I’m planting gardens?”

“With a wisteria arbor in my imagination, those pretty weepers.” She dried her hands after wiping up his cooktop. “I had a wonderful time. I don’t just mean . . . well, I wouldn’t want to leave out the tour of the second floor.”

He slid his arms around her waist. “I’ve still got a lot to show you.”

She let herself melt in, just sink into the kiss. And pulled back with real regret. “I really have to go.”

“Okay, but you’re going to come back for the rest of that tour.”

“I don’t think I could resist it.”

She picked up her purse; he plucked keys out of a dish on the counter.

“Oh, are you going out?” she asked as they walked to the front door.

“Sure. I’m following you home.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’m not being silly. I’m following you home. Argue if you want, I’m still doing it. The woman who threatened you was shot less than a week ago right outside where you were working. You’re not driving home alone after dark.”

“I can’t stop you from trailing me all the way home, then doubling back, but it’s silly.”

“Either way.” He tugged her back for a kiss, then walked to his truck while she walked to her van.

Silly, she thought again, but sweet, too. He was just racking up all sorts of points.

Lord, she hadn’t thought of the point system in years. She and Emma Kate had devised it in high school. Amusing herself, she began counting up Griff’s.

Good-looking, scale of one to ten. She’d definitely give him a ten, she decided, and didn’t think she was pushing the mark.

Conversation skills. Another ten there. He knew how to talk, how to listen.

Humor. Another winner. She made the turn onto the road, watched his headlights follow.

Considerate. Maybe even a little too much, such as wasting his time following her home on roads she’d traveled all her life.

Good kisser. Right off the scale. She rolled her window down, let the air cool the heat just thinking of it brought on. She could honestly say she’d never been kissed better.

What were the rest of the requirements for the perfect boyfriend? She must have them written down somewhere. They’d made them up before either one of them had had sex, so that hadn’t been on the list.

The adult Shelby list would include it, and he’d top that scale, too.

She took the back roads, automatically skirting the town, taking the winding path, with Griff’s headlights not far behind.

And all right, they made her smile. It wasn’t such a bad thing to let someone look after her, just a little. As long as she remembered she needed to be in charge of her own life, and Callie’s.

She pulled into the drive, noted her parents’ bedroom lights were still on. When she got out, she thought she’d wave Griff off, but he was already getting out of his truck.

“You don’t have to walk me to the door.”

“Sure I do. That’s how it’s done. And if I don’t walk you to the door, how am I going to kiss you good night?”

“I like the second part. The first time I was kissed at this front door, I was fifteen, and Silas Nash—a descendant of the infamous Nash clan—gave me one that had me floating through the door and dreaming of him half the night.”

"I can beat that," Griff said after a moment. "I can beat some teenager named Silas."

"He's getting his law degree from the University of Tennessee College of Law."

"I can definitely beat a lawyer," Griff claimed, and to Shelby's mind, proved it.

"I guess I'm going to float upstairs and dream about you."

"All night." He gathered her hair into his fist, kissed her again until the world spun around her. "I'm not settling for half."

"Good night, Griffin."

"Night."

He waited until the door shut, walked back to the truck. He'd do some dreaming of his own tonight, he thought. The woman had him wrapped. Everything about her struck home for him.

He glanced up, imagined her going in to check on Callie. And thinking of him, she'd better be thinking of him, when she undressed for bed.

He'd sure as hell be thinking of her.

He pulled out, and as she had, took the back roads.

No hurry, a lot to think about. Plans to make.

He had a pizza date with a pretty little girl to think about, and a picnic with her and her mother to look forward to.

Maybe he'd pick up a bottle of champagne, give the picnic a classy, unexpected edge.

He glanced in the rearview at the headlights behind him, and since he'd been dawdling, picked up the speed a little.

Apparently not enough, he thought, as the headlights beamed closer. He waited for the truck—he could see it was a truck now—to pass since it was in such a damn hurry.

Instead it rammed him from behind hard enough to slap him against the steering wheel and back.

Instinctively he hit the gas. He thought of the phone he'd put, as always, in the cup holder, but didn't want to risk taking a hand off the wheel.

And the truck rammed him again faster, harder, sending him into a skid that had his tires smoking over the rough shoulder. Griff fought his truck back, but the next hit, right at the curve, sent him careening off the road, skidding over the shoulder and into the oak tree green with spring.

He heard the crunch, had a moment to think, Shit! Shit! before the airbag deployed. Still the impact slammed his head against the side window. He saw stars, and the red eyes of the truck's taillights as it stopped, idled, then punched it to round the curve.

"Not hurt," he mumbled, but the stars, and they had jagged, pointy edges, circled his vision. "Not too bad, nothing broken."

Except his truck.

He groped for the phone, watched his vision waver like he'd stuck his head underwater.

Don't pass out, he ordered himself.

In the dash light he managed to find the name he wanted, and pressed Dial.

"Where's my sister?" Forrest asked.

"Home. I'm not. I've got trouble. In case I pass out, I'm on Black Bear Road, about two miles from my place. You know that turn where the big oak stands?"

"Yeah."

"My truck's in that tree. Somebody ran me off the road. I could use a cop."

"Sounds like you could use a tow truck. You hurt?"

"I don't know." Jagged, pointy stars circling. "Hit my head. Bleeding some."

"Stay there. I'm on my way."

"Truck's in the tree. Where am I going?"

But Forrest had already hung up.

He sat for a moment, trying to get a fix in his mind on the truck that had run him off the road.

Chevy, yeah a Chevy, he thought. Half-ton pickup. Older model. Maybe four, five years.

Something fixed on the front grille, like a . . . plow?

It hurt his head to think, so he stopped, fumbled off his seat belt, and discovered when he fought open the door and shifted, everything hurt a little.

The best he could do right now was sit on the side of the seat, breathe in the cool night air. He swiped at the wet on his face, saw blood smeared on his hand.

Fuck.

He'd have a bandanna in the glove box, but he wasn't going to try to get to it, not right at the moment.

Nothing broken, he reminded himself. He'd broken his arm once when he was eight and the tree branch he'd been swinging on snapped. And his wrist at seventeen jumping out of Annie's window.

So he knew what a broken bone felt like.

Just banged up, shook up and rattled around some.

But his truck—and goddamn he loved his truck—was a different matter.

He made himself stand to make sure he could. A little bit dizzy, but not bad. Bracing himself, he walked around to check out the damage.

"Shit! Fuck. Fucking shit!" Furious it was as bad as he feared, he shoved a hand through his hair. And saw stars again as he smacked against the wound.

The grille was toast, and the way the hood had accorded, he thought the same there. And Christ knew what that meant for essentials under the damn hood.

He was no mechanic, but he was pretty sure he had a bent axle to top it off.

He'd hit hard, hard enough to spiderweb the windshield.

His feet crunched on broken glass as he circled around to get both the bandanna and a flashlight out of the cab. Flares, he thought. He should've pulled out the emergency flares straight off.

Before he could get anything, headlights cut through the dark.

Forrest pulled a police cruiser behind the wrecked truck. He got out, sized up Griff with one long look, then looked over to study the truck.

"Your head's bleeding, son."

"I know it. Son of a bitch." He kicked the rear tire, which he regretted as the quick violence pinged something in the back of his neck.

He did *not* have whiplash. He would *not* have whiplash.

"You been drinking, Griff?"

"I had two glasses of wine all night, and the second one a good hour before this. I got run off the damn road, Forrest. Fucker came up behind me, rammed me, kept doing it until he caught me on this curve and sent me into the tree."

"What fucker?"

"I don't know what the hell fucker." He pressed the heel of his hand—ouch!—to the throbbing wound because he was tired of blood running into his eye. "Half-ton Chevy, four, maybe five years old. Some sort of plow or farm tool—something hooked to the grille. Red, I think it was red. The truck. Plow was yellow, mostly. I think."

"Okay, why don't we sit you down a minute? I've got a first aid kit in the cruiser. Be best to stop that bleeding."

"I'll just lean here." And he leaned back against the tipped back of his truck. "Ah, something else . . ." He dug for it as Forrest went back to the cruiser. "He slowed down after I crashed. Just

for a couple seconds, like he wanted to make sure I hit good and proper. Saw his taillights, and . . . bumper sticker! Some kind of bumper sticker on the— What hand is this?”

He lifted his left, studied it for a moment before he could remember right from left.

“Left, the left side of the tailgate.”

Griff closed his eyes, found that eased a degree or two of the throbbing. “He wasn’t drunk. It was purposeful. I’m not sure when he pulled up behind me, but it wasn’t long after I left Shelby at your parents’ front door.”

“You followed her home?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t going to have her driving around after dark with what happened.”

“Um-hm.” Forrest set up flares; Griff closed his eyes again.

“I think the truck’s totaled, or nearly. I’ve only had it three years. I’ve put a lot of miles on it, sure, but it had plenty more in it.”

“We’ll have my granddaddy take a look once it’s towed in. You’re lucid,” Forrest added as he walked over with the first aid kit. “You haven’t puked yet.”

“I’m not going to puke.”

“If that changes, aim away from me. How’s the vision?”

“It wavered some at first. Steady now. Ow, fuck!”

“Don’t be a pussy,” Forrest said mildly, and continued to clean the laceration with an alcohol swab.

“You’d be a pussy, too, if I was being sadistic Nurse Sally.”

“I can’t see how bad it is until it’s cleaned up some. Nurse Emma Kate’s on her way.”

“What? No. Why?”

“Because if she says you’re going to the ER in Gatlinburg, that’s where you’re going. And since I have to deal with this mess you’re in, she and Matt can haul you there.”

“You called them.”

“I did. I’ll call for the tow after I have a look at what’s what myself. Anything else you can tell me about the truck?”

“Other than whoever was driving it was—is—a lunatic?”

“You didn’t see the lunatic, at all?”

“An impression—I’d say a guy—but I was pretty busy trying not to end up like I ended up. Or worse.” Griff said nothing for a moment, studied his friend as Forrest fixed a couple butterfly bandages along the gash. “You know who it is, from what I gave you already.”

“I’ve got an impression. That’s for me to deal with, Griff.”

“The hell it is. It’s my truck, my head.”

“My job. I expect that’s Matt and Emma Kate coming now. You piss anybody off lately?”

“You’re the closest I’ve come to pissing anyone off lately, since I’m sleeping with your sister.”

Forrest stopped what he was doing, eyes sharply narrowed. “Is that so?”

“I figure it’s a good time to let you know since you’re being all official and I’m already bleeding. I’m crazy about her. Flat-out.”

“It’s a fast leap from nice to meet you to crazy about.”

“She’s a lightning bolt.” Griff stabbed a thumb at his own heart. “Bam.”

Before Forrest could speak again, Emma Kate was running from the car, a medical bag in her hand. “What happened? Let me look at you.”

She pulled out a penlight, shined it. “Follow the light with your eyes.”

“I’m okay.”

“Shut up. Tell me your full name and today’s date.”

“Franklin Delano Roosevelt. December seven, 1941. A day that’ll live in infamy.”

“Smart-ass. How many fingers?”

“Eleven minus nine. I’m okay, Emma Kate.”

“I’ll tell you if you’re okay after I go over you in an exam room at the clinic.”

“I don’t need—”

“Shut up,” she said again, then hugged him. “Nothing against your triage, Forrest, but I’m going to take those bandages off at the clinic, get a look at that cut myself. It might need stitches.”

“Nuh-uh,” Griff said.

Matt stood, hands on hips, studying the truck. “Fucker trashed your ride, man. Forrest just said somebody ran you off the road. Who was it?”

“Ask Forrest. I think he knows from what I saw of the other truck.”

“I’ll be looking into it. For now, take him on into the clinic, look him over. I’ll have it towed to my granddaddy’s shop. You can come get what you need from it in the morning.”

“My tools—”

“Are still going to be there in the morning. I need to call this in, but I’ve got your statement clear enough, and I’ll call you if I need anything else. Nothing for you to do here, Griff, but be pissed off.”

He argued but, outnumbered, ended up dragged to Matt’s truck.

“He knows who did it and won’t say.” Bitterness coated Griff’s throat.

“Because he knows you might be an easy guy most of the time, in this case you’d go straight for the ass-kicking.” Matt shook his head. “Wouldn’t blame you. But you’re banged up already—disadvantage—and it’ll be almost as satisfying if whoever did this spends time in a cell.”

“He could spend time in a cell after I kick his ass.”

“It was deliberate?” Emma Kate asked. “You’re sure?”

“Oh, hell yeah.”

“What were you doing on that road?”

“Coming back from seeing Shelby got home.” Griff suddenly sat straight up. “Heading back from Shelby’s house, and the other truck pulled up behind me—not long after I started back home. Because he was either sitting on her house or mine. Either sitting on hers or followed us from mine, waited his chance.”

“You’re thinking they came after you because they couldn’t get to her?” Matt said.

“I’m thinking whoever did it isn’t just a lunatic. I’m thinking worse. A lot worse.”



Shelby started out the morning singing in the shower. She felt the spring to her step and didn't care who saw it or guessed the reason why.

She got dressed, helped Callie dress.

"You get to go to Granny's today."

"To Granny's house?"

"That's right. It's her day off, and she asked especially if you'd come over and stay with her. Won't that be fun?"

"Granny has cookies, and Bear."

Bear was the big yellow dog who'd race and play with a little girl all day—and sleep in the sun when nobody was around to play with.

"I know. And Grandpa's going to be there for a while, too. Your Gamma's going to take you over on her way to work. I've got some paperwork of my own to get to this morning. Then I'll come get you when I'm finished work today."

With Callie babbling about everything she had to take to Granny's, everything she had to do at Granny's, they walked into the kitchen.

Shelby's parents broke off their conversation immediately, and the quick look they exchanged set off Shelby's radar.

"Is something wrong?"

"What could be wrong?" Ada Mae said brightly. "Callie Rose, it's such a pretty morning, I decided we're going to have our breakfast on the back porch, like a picnic."

"I like picnics. I'm taking Griff on a picnic date."

"I heard about that. This can be like practice. I've got these pretty strawberries all cut up, and some cheesy eggs already scrambled. Let's take this on outside."

"Mama wants a picnic, too."

"She'll be right along."

Shelby stood where she was while Ada Mae scooted Callie out onto the porch.

"Something's wrong. Oh God, Daddy, did someone else get shot?"

"No. It's nothing like that. And I want to tell you right off, he's all right."

"He— Griff? It's Griffin." As her heart took a hard bump, she grabbed her father's hands. He'd stay steady, she knew, no matter what. "If it was Clay or Forrest, Mama'd be a mess. What happened to Griff?"

"He got a little banged up, is all. It's nothing serious, Shelby, you know I'd tell you if it were. Somebody ran his truck off the road, and into the big oak on Black Bear Road last night."

"Banged up how? Who did it? Why?"

"Sit down, take a breath." Turning, Clayton opened the refrigerator, took out a Coke. "He's got

some abrasions from the seat belt, the air bag. And got a pretty good knock on the head. Emma Kate took him into the clinic last night, gave him a going-over, and I'm going to do the same myself later this morning. But if Emma Kate said he didn't need a doctor or the hospital, we can trust that."

"All right, I will, but I want to see for myself, too."

"You can do that," he continued in his calm way, "after you take that breath."

"It must've happened when he was driving home from here. He wouldn't have been on the road if he hadn't insisted on following me back here, making sure I got home all right. I want to go over and see for myself, if you could keep Callie."

"Don't worry about Callie. He's not out at the house. He stayed the night at Emma Kate's as she wouldn't have him stay on his own."

"Good." She did manage that breath now. "That's good."

"But I expect he's on his way to the police station by now. Forrest and Nobby—you remember my second cousin Nobby—they went down the holler last night, and brought Arlo Kattery in."

"Arlo? He ran Griff off the road?" She pressed her fingers to her eyes. "Drunk, I expect, and driving crazy."

"I don't know as that's the way it was. You go on down. It's best you hear it straight-out, than the bits and pieces I have. And you tell Griffin he's got an exam at ten o'clock or he's not clear to drive or so much as touch a power tool."

"I will. Callie—"

"She's just fine. Go on."

"Thank you, Daddy."

When she ran out, leaving the Coke unopened on the counter, Clayton knew his little girl was at least halfway in love. With a sigh, he picked up the can, opened it for himself. It was smarter than a shot of whiskey at seven-thirty in the morning.

. . .

GRIFF STRODE INTO the station house, eyes—including the left one, where angry bruising had come to the surface overnight—hot. He arrowed straight to Forrest.

"I want to talk to the son of a bitch."

Forrest stopped tapping at his keyboard, pulled the phone from between his shoulder and ear. "I'll get back to you," he said, and clicked off.

"You'd best simmer down some first."

"I'm not in a simmer-down mood. I don't even know Arlo Kattery, never spoke a word to him in my life. I want to know why he deliberately ran me off the road."

"Forrest?" The sheriff spoke up from his office doorway. "Why don't you go ahead, let Griff go back and have his say," he said when Forrest hesitated. "In his place, I'd want mine."

"All right, thanks. Nobby, you think you could call back that fella at the lab, finish that conversation?"

"I sure can. That eye doesn't look too bad there, Griff." Nobby, a twenty-year vet, gave Griff's face a considering look. "Seen a lot worse. You get some raw red meat on it, won't be so bad."

"I'll do that."

As Griff turned toward the back, Shelby came flying in.

"Oh, Griff!"

"Now, Shelby honey, I was just telling him it wasn't that bad."

"It's not." Griff picked up Nobby's theme and ran with it. "I'm okay. It doesn't hurt." Ached like

a son of a bitch, but didn't hurt.

"Daddy said it was Arlo Kattery. I don't know why the man has a license if he's still driving drunk like he did when we were teenagers."

"We don't know as he was drunk when he ran Griff off the road."

"He must've been. Why else would he do something like this?"

Forrest exchanged a look with the sheriff, nodded slightly.

"Why don't we go back and ask him? He was half drunk when Nobby and I went and got him, and tried to say he'd been home all night. The plow was still on his truck. Arlo gets paid to plow some of the private roads outside of town," he explained to Griff. "Hardly much reason for a snowplow on his truck in May. White paint on it, too. And yellow paint, like the plow, on the back of Griff's truck. Nobby and I informed him of those facts, so he claimed somebody stole his truck, put the plow on it."

"Bullshit."

"Knee deep in it," Forrest said with a nod to Griff. "Not too much use arguing with a man half drunk, and chasing his tequila with a joint, so we just hauled him in. And we left him last night to sleep on the fact we'd be charging him with attempted murder this morning."

"Oh my God." Shelby shut her eyes.

"That's the reaction we want from him. Attempted murder's a stretch," Forrest commented, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "But he'll surely go down for hit-and-run, reckless endangerment and so on."

"We can tie quite a few and-so-ons onto the package," Hardigan said.

"Yeah, I expect so. He's going to do a few years however it slices out. We've just been letting it sink in. The sheriff here, if I'm reading him correctly, thinks what's sunk in may come rising up if he's faced with the pair of you."

"That's a fine read, Deputy."

"All right, then. Let's see what we see. Y'all don't mention lawyer, all right? He hasn't gotten there yet in his pea brain."

Forrest led the way back through a steel door and the three cells.

In the center one, Arlo Kattery sprawled on a bunk.

She'd gotten a look at him that night at Bootlegger's—him and his pale-eyed stare. What she saw now didn't look much different than the last time she'd seen him in full light years before. Straw-colored hair shorn short, face grizzly with the pale blond scruff. Those small snake eyes—closed now—long neck with a tattoo of barbed wire circling it.

On the short side, and stocky, with scarred knuckles from countless fights—most of which he'd instigated.

Forrest let out a shrill whistle that made her jump, and had Arlo's eyes popping open.

"Wake up, darling. You've got company."

Eyes so pale blue they seemed almost colorless, skimmed over Griff, landed on her, slanted away again.

"Didn't ask for no company. You best let me out of here, Pomeroy, or your ass is in the fire."

"Looks to me like it's your ass smoking, Arlo. All Griff wants to know—and it's a reasonable request—is why you rammed his truck and forced him into that old oak tree."

"Wasn't me. Told you that already."

"Half-ton Chevy pickup, dark red, yellow plow on the front, bumper sticker on the bottom left of the tailgate." Griff stared at him while he spoke, saw Arlo's jaw twitch.

"Plenty fit that bill around here."

"Nope, not with the details. Funny bumper sticker, too. It's got a target on it full of bullet holes, and it says: 'If you can read this, you're in range.'" Forrest shook his head. "That's sure a knee-slapper, Arlo. Add that paint transfer, and it's all wrapped up. Nobby's out there right now talking to those forensic people over in the lab. Might take a little time, but they can match that yellow paint to your plow, that white paint to Griff's truck."

"That lab stuff is bullshit. More bullshit like all the rest of this."

"Juries set store by it, especially in capital cases, like attempted murder."

"I didn't kill nobody." Arlo surged up now. "He's standing right there, isn't he?"

"That's where 'attempted' comes in, Arlo. Tried and failed."

"I wasn't trying to kill nobody."

"Huh." Forrest nodded as if considering that, then shook his head. "Nope. Don't see a jury buying that one. See, we do what we call 'accident reconstructions.' And it's going to show that you deliberately and repeatedly rammed Griff's truck. Took some skill, so you won't be able to try for diminished capacity, saying you were drunk. That wouldn't buy you much time off anyway. I figure you're going down for about twenty here."

"No fucking way."

"Every fucking way," Griff disagreed. "Forrest, hum a tune and close your ears while I tell this asshole I'll swear on a mountain of Bibles in front of God and country that I saw him behind the wheel. I'll swear I counted the bullet holes in that idiotic bumper sticker and got his license plate."

"That's a fucking lie. I had the plates covered with burlap."

"You truly are a moron, Arlo," Forrest murmured.

"He's a fucking liar." Incensed, Arlo jabbed a finger between the bars. "He's fucking lying."

"You tried to kill me," Griff reminded him.

"I didn't try to kill nobody. It wasn't even supposed to be you. Was supposed to be her."

"You want to say that again, son?" Forrest's voice was quiet as the hiss of a snake, but Griff had already shoved forward, reached through the bars to grab Arlo's shirt, yanked him so his head smacked the bars.

"Now, Griff, I can't let you do that."

But Forrest made no move to stop him as Griff repeated the action.

"All right, that'll do. For now." Forrest gripped Griff's shoulder. "We don't want him getting off on some technicality, do we? Step back now."

"Why?" Shelby hadn't moved, not at the words, not at the vicious look Arlo had given her when he said them, not at the sudden violence. "Why would you want to hurt me? I've never done anything to you."

"Always thought you were too good for me, looking down your nose and turning your back to me. Ran off with the first rich guy you could rope in, didn't you? Heard that didn't work out so well."

"You'd've hurt me because I wouldn't go out with you back in high school? I've got a child. I've got a little girl, and I'm her only parent now. You'd have risked making my baby an orphan because I wouldn't go out with you?"

"Wasn't going to make nobody no orphan. Just going to scare you, is all. I was only going to teach you a lesson, put a scare into you. Wasn't my idea, anyway."

"Whose idea was it, Arlo?"

For the first time a hint of canniness came into Arlo's eyes. He shifted them from Forrest, back to Shelby, back to Forrest. "I got things I could say, but I want that immunization thing. I don't do no twenty years for what wasn't my idea."

"You give me a name, I'll consider that. You don't, I'm going to push for twenty-five. That's my sister, you idiot fuck. One thing you should know about right enough, is family. You tell me who started this ball rolling, or I'll make sure you go down for all of it, and hard."

"I gotta have some guarantee—"

"You get nothing."

"He'll get more than nothing," Griff said. "I'll find a way to get to you. I'll find a way. And when I do, you'll wish you'd had a chance to do twenty years."

"I never touched her, did I? Never laid a goddamn hand on her. Just going to scare her some anyway. She gave me a thousand dollars, said she'd give me a thousand more after I gave you a good scare, taught you a good lesson. Just going to give you a nudge off the road, is all, but you passed me going the other way. By the time I got turned around and going, I seen you head down to the old Tripplehorn place."

"You followed me."

"I had to wait, figured, fine, I'd teach you that lesson you had coming when you drove out again. Better when it was dark, right? But then he drives out behind you and I couldn't get to you. Didn't see why I should've wasted my whole night for nothing. Figured pushing him off would give you a scare."

"Northern boys, they're good enough for you, looks like. You jumped right in the sack with this one, but you never would give me so much as a long look. I seen him take your clothes off."

"You were watching." Too angry to be sickened, Shelby stepped closer. She knew, she knew just who'd paid him. "Did Melody Bunker tell you to spy on me, too?"

"She gave me a thousand dollars, said I'd get another. Didn't tell me how to go about it, just to get it done. Miss High-and-Mighty's real peeved at you, real peeved. She come right to my trailer in the holler, give me cash money. That's how peeved she is you got her kicked out of the beauty salon."

"I hope you got a good look, Arlo, and you take that with you to Bledsoe County and the cell you'll be occupying there. And when you do, you think about this, Arlo. I never thought along the lines of being too good for you. I just didn't like you."

She turned, started out. Forrest signaled for Griff to go with her.

"Hold on, Red."

"I can't hold on. I can barely breathe. I swear, if you hadn't rapped his head I'd have done it myself. He went after you because he couldn't get to me quick enough. He could've killed you."

"He didn't."

"If you hadn't followed me home—"

"I did." He took her by the shoulders. He didn't want the what-ifs playing in her mind, or his, not then and there. "He's locked up, Shelby. He'll stay that way."

"All this because Melody got her pride handed to her, and got it handed to her because she earned it. She knows full well what he might've done. She gave him money and an excuse to do it."

"I'd lay odds before the morning's up, she's in a cell right along with him."

"Those are good odds," Forrest said as he came out. "Just hold on a minute. Nobby, you think you could sit with that moron Arlo for a bit? I got him writing it all out."

"Sure can. He confess?"

"And then some. Sheriff, I need to run this by you, and then we're going to need a warrant. That's going to be pretty sticky as we're going to need it for Melody Bunker, for soliciting a crime, conspiracy to do bodily harm."

"Well, hell, Forrest." On a long, windy sigh, Hardigan rubbed the back of his neck. "Are you

damn sure on it?"

"I'll tell you how Arlo says it went."

"He wasn't lying," Griff put in. "He didn't pull her name out of his ass. She gave him money for it, and he probably didn't have a chance to spend it yet."

"We'll be going out to his trailer," Forrest began, then glanced around. "Where's Shelby?"

"She . . . she was right here. Oh hell. Oh hell no."

"Melody. My sister's got a hell of a temper if you flip the right switch. Sheriff?" Forrest said as Griff was already bolting out the door.

"Yeah, go on with him. Just what we need to tie a ribbon on this day. Your sister tossing Florence Piedmont's granddaughter out some window."

. . .

SHE DIDN'T PLAN on tossing Melody out a window, primarily because she hadn't thought of it. She didn't have a clear idea what she intended to do, but the one thing she was clear on, she didn't intend to do nothing.

Ignoring the *bitch* hadn't worked, sarcasm hadn't worked, straight talk hadn't worked.

So she'd find something that did, and finish this off once and for all.

The Piedmont house sat on a long, sloping rise of lush green with terraced walls of white brick showing off a bounty of graceful trees, perfectly trimmed shrubs.

From its vantage it could look down at the Ridge, out at the hills, down into folds of valleys. It stood elegantly, as it had since before the War Between the States, laced with verandas flowing out from the snow-white facade. Gardens swept along its feet in rivers of color.

It was a house she'd always admired. Now she shot toward it like an arrow from a bow.

She knew Melody lived in the carriage house, aimed for it once she'd crested the rise. Ears buzzing with temper, she slammed out of the van, strode past Melody's car, and would have marched straight to the door if someone hadn't hailed her.

"Why, it's Shelby Anne Pomeroy!"

She recognized the housekeeper, a longtime member of the big house—and Maybeline's sister—and struggled to rein in her fury enough to smile in return.

"It's wonderful to see you, Miz Pattie. How is everything for you?"

"It's just fine." The woman, tall, thin, her salt-and-pepper hair in a tidy and tight cap of curls, walked over. She carried a basket half full of early roses. "Such a pretty spring we're having this year, even if the heat's already starting to rise. I'm so glad you're back home to enjoy it. I am sorry about your husband."

"Thank you. Miz Pattie, I really need to speak to Melody."

"Why, she's having breakfast on the back veranda with Mrs. Piedmont and Miz Jolene. I expect this has something to do with the trouble at Miz Vi's. I got an earful on it from Maybeline, and Lorilee, too."

"Yes, it's something like that."

"Then you go right around. I hope you girls can settle this."

"Settling it's why I'm here. Thank you."

She let the fury come back, bubble up as she took the walkway, crossed the velvety green lawn, as she heard female voices and smelled those early roses.

And there was Melody, sitting at a table draped with white, decked with pretty china and juices sparkling in glass pitchers.

"I am *not* going to apologize, Grandmama, so there's no point hounding me on it. I didn't say a thing that wasn't true, and I won't lower myself to crawling to *those* people just so Jolene can have her trashy hairdresser back."

"Crystal isn't trashy, Melody, and we shouldn't have—"

"You just stop it, Jolene, and stop that whining, too. I'm sick to death of it. If anything, that little slut and her interfering grandmother should—"

She spotted Shelby, pushed to her feet as Shelby came up the slope like a highballing train. Melody's eyes widened as she saw Forrest and Griff running full out behind her.

"You get out of here. You're not welcome here!"

"I say who's welcome here," Florence said in a snap.

"If she is, I'm not."

Melody started to turn away, but Shelby grabbed her arm, spun her around. "You paid him. You paid Arlo Kattery to try to hurt me."

"Get your hand off me. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're a liar on top of it." Before she knew it was her clear intention, Shelby bunched a hand into a fist, and used it.

She heard shouting through the buzzing in her ears, saw through the red mist that blurred her vision Melody's eyes go glassy.

The next thing she knew someone clamped her arms down from the back, lifted her off her feet. She kicked out, because she wasn't done. She wasn't nearly done, but the arms only tightened.

"Stop it. Come on, Red, pull it in now. You gave her a good shot."

"It's not enough. It's not enough for what she did."

Melody sat on her ass, where she'd gone down on the graceful veranda. "She hit me! Y'all saw how she attacked me." Sobbing, she held a hand to her jaw. "I want to press charges."

"Fine," Forrest told her. "I think the ones against you are going to be a lot weightier."

"I didn't do anything. I don't know what she's talking about. Grandmama, it hurts."

"Jolene, stop waving your hands around like you're going to take flight and go get an ice pack." Florence, who'd gotten to her feet, sat again, heavily. "I need an explanation. I need to know why this girl would come here, with these wild accusations, and strike my granddaughter."

"I'll say it," Shelby said before Forrest could. "Let me go, Griffin. I won't do anything. I apologize to you, Mrs. Piedmont. Not to her, but to you, I apologize. This is your home, and I should never have come here this way. I was too mad to think straight."

"Grandmama, make her go away. She belongs in *jail*."

"Be quiet now, Melody. It'll only hurt to talk. Why did you come here like this?"

"Because she went a lot further than saying ugly things, or slashing tires or making up lies. This time, she paid Arlo Kattery a thousand dollars, and promised a thousand more, if he put a scare into me, if he taught me a lesson."

"I never did any such thing. Why, I wouldn't lower myself to speak to Arlo Kattery or any of his kin. He's a liar and so are you."

"I said be quiet, Melody Louisa! Why would you say Melody did this?"

"Because Arlo ran Griffin off the road last night, wrecked his truck. Look at him, Mrs. Piedmont. He's hurt because he made sure I got home safe, and because he did, Arlo couldn't get to me and do what she'd paid him to do. He got to Griff instead. She went down to the holler, down to Arlo's trailer, and paid him to do it."

"She's crazy. A liar."

"Oh my God." Jolene stood just outside the French doors, a blue ice pack in her hand. "Oh my

God, Melody, I didn't think you meant it. I never thought you meant it."

"You shut up, you hear! Don't you dare say another word, Jolene, not one more word."

"I won't shut up. I won't. My God, Melody, this isn't just playing, just gossip or poking some fun. I didn't think she meant it, I swear to God, I never thought she meant it."

"You hold your tongue, Melody. Meant what, Jolene?" Florence demanded. "Stop blubbering now and say it straight-out."

"She said, after Miz Vi banned us, she said she knew how to get back at Shelby. She knew how to teach her a lesson she wouldn't forget, and how Arlo would likely do it for free, but she'd sweeten that pot."

"Liar!" Scrambling up, Melody launched herself at Jolene, fingers curled to scratch.

She might've done considerable damage if Jolene, in shocked defense, hadn't thrown the ice bag at her.

The lucky shot knocked Melody back a step, and gave Forrest time to pull her back.

"You'd best listen to your grandmama, and hold your tongue. Jolene, let's hear the rest."

"What is *wrong* with you? What is the matter with you, Melody? I just don't know."

"You'd better shut your mouth, Jolene, or you'll be sorry."

"Jolene!" Florence's voice cut through Jolene's fresh weeping. "You tell Deputy Pomeroy the rest of what you know, and right now. If you don't be quiet, Melody, I swear to God Almighty, I'll slap you myself."

"Oh, Miz Florence. I told what she said, and I promise, I *swear*, I didn't believe she meant to do anything. I was so upset, and crying, and I just said to stop it, stop it, Melody, and went on about who was going to do my hair for the wedding because Crystal, she knows just how I want it done, and it's my wedding day, Miz Florence. I just was so upset, and Melody didn't say any more. But she'd said what I told you. I didn't think she could—"

"You traitorous bitch. She was part of it." Melody threw out a hand, pointed. "She was part of it."

"I wasn't, but maybe you can't believe that, Shelby, since I've been part of things. But never to really hurt somebody. I'm tired of it. I'm so tired of all of it."

She sat, began to weep into her hands.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Piedmont, but I'm going to have to take these ladies into the station house and sort this out."

Her back straight as a poker, Florence nodded. "Yes, I can see that. Jolene, you stop that crying now and go on with Deputy Pomeroy. Melody, go with the deputy."

"I don't want to go with him. It's all just some story that lowlife made up, and Jolene's lying. She's just lying."

"I'm not lying!"

And that started the two of them shouting at each other until Forrest broke in. "I'd advise the two of you to be quiet. Melody, you can come along on your own, or I'm going to haul you."

"You take your hands off me this minute!" The threat had her struggling against his hold. "I don't go anywhere I don't want to go."

And her grandmother surged to her feet.

"Melody Louisa Bunker, if you don't go along with Deputy Pomeroy and stop resisting, you have my oath I'll do nothing to help you. I'll make certain your mama doesn't do a thing to help you."

"You don't mean that."

"By God, I do. You go with Forrest, and you go now, or I wash my hands of it, and you."

"I'll go. But now I know you're just as hateful as the rest."

“I’ll take Melody,” Forrest said to Griff. “Best if you take Shelby and Jolene. You’re still deputized.”

“Hell. All right. Jolene?”

“I’m coming. I won’t give you any trouble. Shelby, I’m so sorry about all this. I’m just—”

“It’s probably best, too, if everybody stays quiet on the ride in,” Griff suggested, and got an easy smile from Forrest.

“Like I said, you ever want a career change. Melody, you walk to my cruiser under your own power, or I’ll cuff you.”

“Oh, I’m coming. You’ll be out of a job before this day’s over. I’m going to make sure of it.”

Before he led Melody away, Forrest glanced at Florence. “I’m sorry about this, Mrs. Piedmont. I’m sorry for this trouble for you and your family.”

“I know it.” When she looked at Griff there might have been a gleam of tears in her eyes, but her back remained poker straight. “I’m more sorry about this than I can say.”



Jolene wasn't quiet on the ride in, but cried in wild, gulping sobs all the way. With ears ringing, Griff decided all he really wanted in the world at that moment was to get back to work and sanity.

The only route he saw there was herding Shelby and Jolene into the station house.

Sheriff Hardigan looked at Griff, at the two women—Shelby, eyes hot, Jolene, eyes spewing tears. Stepping forward, he dug a large white handkerchief out of his pocket, pushed it into Jolene's hands.

He said, in a tone that miraculously blended cheer and sympathy, "Well now, what's all this?"

"Forrest is right behind us," Griff began.

"I'm probably under arrest." After slapping her hands on her hips, Shelby looked directly, defiantly into Hardigan's eyes. "I punched Melody Bunker in the face."

"Hmm," was Hardigan's response before he focused on Jolene.

"I didn't know she meant to do it!" Hysteria bubbled up through the hitching sobs. "I swear, I didn't. I thought she was just being mad and saying things. I didn't think she meant to really get Arlo to scare Shelby or hurt her. I swear I'm that upset about all of it."

"I can see that. Why don't you come on in and tell me about it. You got her?" he said to Griff, arched his eyebrows at Shelby.

"I guess."

"Deputized?" Shelby gave him one hard look as Hardigan led Jolene into his office.

"That's just Forrest being Forrest." But he was relieved when Forrest himself walked in with a cold-eyed Melody.

"Jolene?"

"Sheriff's talking to her."

"Good enough. You got her?"

At the repeated question, Griff winced. "Yeah, yeah."

Forrest escorted Melody into the back break room, walked out again. "Nobby, I need you to sit on her for a couple minutes while I sort some of this out."

"No problem there."

When Forrest turned to his sister, she held out her hands, wrists together.

"Stop that shit."

"Maybe you want your deputy to do it." When she turned with the same gesture to Griff, he just took her face in his hands.

"Cut it out. Now."

She bristled a moment, but he didn't let go, kept his eyes level on hers until she hissed out a breath. "I'm not mad at either of you—too much—and I'm sick about what happened to you, Griff."

I'm just all-around mad. Am I under arrest?"

"It's not going to come to that," Forrest said. "Even if she pushes it, she's in a hell of a lot more trouble. She earned the punch."

"She surely did."

"Hell of a right cross you got there, Red."

"Thank you. Clay taught me, but it's the first time I actually put it into practice. What do I do now?"

"You leave this to me and the sheriff—like you should have before you stormed the damn castle. Not that I'm ever going to blame you for the punch—and go on to work, or home, or whatever business you got going."

"I can just go?"

"That's right. And if she pushes the assault charge, we'll deal with it. But I believe she's going to be persuaded to let that alone."

"All right." She could hardly stay mad at her brother if he wasn't going to arrest her. "I'm sorry for my part in this morning."

"No, you're not."

"No, I'm not. Not yet. But I might work around to it."

She walked out, paused when Griff walked out with her.

"None of this was my fault, and I'm pretty sick of taking responsibility for what I didn't do. But —"

"There's no but," he interrupted.

She shook her head. "But, there's no question I brought you trouble. I wouldn't blame you for stepping back. I'll be sorry and disappointed if you do, but I wouldn't blame you."

His answer was to take her face in his hands again, and this time to take her mouth as well. Long, serious and slow.

"That should settle that. I'm going to go see your dad now so I can get cleared and get the hell back to work."

She smiled a little. "The black eye looks kind of rakish."

"Just what I was going for. I'll see you later. It's been a hell of an interesting morning so far."

She supposed he could put it that way, she thought as she walked to the salon. But she'd dearly love a couple of boring mornings.

She figured word of some of the interesting morning—and the incident the night before that had generated it—would have reached the salon by now.

The way conversation stopped, eyes turned to her when she walked in told her she'd gauged correctly.

"How is that boy? How bad's he hurt?" Viola demanded.

"He's going to see Daddy now, but I don't think it's too awful. He's got cuts and bruises."

"I heard they hauled Arlo Kattery in for hit-and-run," Crystal put in. "And Lorilee here saw you driving hell-bent toward the big house a little while ago."

"You might as well say what Melody's got to do with all this," Viola told her. "Everybody's going to find out anyway."

"She paid him, she paid Arlo to do it."

After the collective gasp, Shelby dropped into a chair. She was early for work anyway, and God, interesting mornings were exhausting.

"Wait one minute." Eyes narrowed, Viola swiveled the chair so Shelby faced her. "You're saying Melody paid that Kattery boy to run Griffin Lott off the road? Why in hell would she do that?"

"She paid him to go after me, but Griff was in the way, so he went for him."

"After . . . after *you*? But that . . . Why—" Realization struck, chilled her blood so some of it drained out of her face. "Because I kicked her out of here."

"It's not on you, Granny, and it's not on me. It's not on either of us. Any of us."

"God knows she's spoiled as rotten fruit, and always had a bright streak of mean in her, but I'd never have expected her to try something like this."

"She gave Arlo a thousand down, with a thousand more when it was done."

Viola nodded. The color that came back into her face was high and hot. "Is she arrested?"

"They've got her at the station house, talking about it."

"They don't lock her up, I'm going to know why."

"I don't know what's going to happen, but it's going to be ugly, that's certain. And everybody might as well know the rest. I went up to the big house and I punched her in the face. I just saw red and punched her, knocked her flat. I'd do it again if I could."

More gasps even as Viola grinned. She leaned over, gave Shelby a hard hug. "That's my girl."

"I wish I'd seen you do it." Maybeline folded her arms. "It's not Christian to say so, but I wish I'd seen you do it, and taken a picture with my phone."

"Aunt Pattie says she gets hoity-toity and orders her around something fierce when Miz Piedmont's not around." Lorilee nodded sagely. "So I wish I'd seen it, too, but I'd've taken a video."

She walked over, gave Shelby a hug. "So don't you fret about it, Shelby. I know more people than I can count who'd've paid good money to see you knock that girl on . . . on her second-runner-up's ass. Right, Miz Vi?"

"Couldn't be righter, Lorilee."

"I won't fret." She patted Lorilee's hand. "But I'm going to start work early, if that's okay. Deal with towels and supplies and such. Clear my head some."

"You go on."

Crystal waited until Shelby went in the back. "What do you suppose Mrs. Piedmont's going to do about all this?"

"I guess we'll wait and see."

They didn't have to wait long.

In the mid-afternoon lull—when stay-at-home mothers picked up their kids from school, or greeted them at the door, before those who worked outside the home could run in for an after-work cut and color or massage—Florence Piedmont stepped into Vi's.

Once again, the salon hushed like a church. Florence, all dignity in a navy blue dress and sensible shoes, nodded at Shelby, who manned the front counter, then Viola.

"Viola, do you have a few minutes to speak with me? Privately. You and Shelby."

"Of course we do. Shelby, do we have anyone in the Relaxation Room?"

"Ah . . . we shouldn't have. We have three coming in for treatments in about an hour, and two in treatments right now."

"That's fine, then. We'll go on back here, Florence, where it's nice and quiet. Crystal, when my three-thirty comes in, you set her up with a magazine."

"I appreciate the time, Viola."

"You'd make it for me." Viola led the way back, through the locker area. "We've known each other a lot of years."

"We have, a lot of years. How is your mama, Vi?"

"Feisty as ever. And how's yours?"

"Slowing down some. But she dearly loves living in Florida. My brother Samuel looks in on her every day."

"He always had a sweet heart. You have a seat now."

"Thank you, Vi, I could use one. I'll tell the truth and say I'm tired to the bone."

"We have some nice peach tea, Mrs. Piedmont. Hot or cold," Shelby added. "Could I get you some?"

"I would love some hot peach tea, thank you, if it's no trouble."

"Not a bit. Granny?"

"That'd be nice, darling, thank you."

"This is a lovely room, Viola. So peaceful and calming. You always had a clever mind, and a way of turning what worked in it into something fine."

"That's a nice thing to hear. Everybody needs somewhere peaceful and calming now and again."

"We could all use more of it, to my mind. What color paint have you got on these walls?"

"It's called Twilight Gold. Pretty name."

"It is. Peaceful," she said again, like a sigh. "Viola, Shelby, I'm going to start by saying I'm going to speak to Griffin Lott when I leave here. But I wanted to speak to the two of you first. I should've asked if Ada Mae could take a minute."

"She's doing a facial. It's all right, Flo. We'll tell her what you want to say to her."

"I want to apologize to all of you. To your daddy, too, Shelby, your daughter, your brothers. To Jackson, Viola."

"Mrs. Piedmont, ma'am, you don't have anything to apologize for."

"I ask you to accept an apology from me."

"Of course." Shelby carried over the tea, in its pretty cups.

"Thank you. Would you sit, too? I've just come from the police station. Melody has admitted to going to Arlo Kattery, to giving him money to cause you trouble, Shelby. I'm not sure she'd have admitted it this soon, but they had three people already who saw her driving up to his trailer in the holler. And though it pains me to say it, I wouldn't get her a lawyer until she told the truth."

Saying nothing, Viola just reached out, took Florence's hand.

"I don't know what she thought would happen, or why she'd do something so mean, so reckless. I don't know why she's always been so jealous of you, Shelby. When you were voted head cheerleader back in high school, she had hysterics, begged me to make a big donation to the athletic department if they'd take you down, put her up. And when you were Homecoming queen over her, she came home and cut her dress to ribbons."

Florence sighed. "She's angry most of the time, it seems. I'd hoped by putting her in charge of The Artful Ridge, having her live in the carriage house, she'd be happier, start being more responsible. But I know, I see now, I indulged her too much all along. And her mama did even more."

"She's my grandchild, my first granddaughter, and I love her."

"Of course you do."

"I overlooked too much over the years, but I won't overlook this. She caused someone true harm, and it could have been much worse. She did it for spite. She'll pay a price for that spite. I have no right to ask, and none to expect, but she's my granddaughter, so I will ask. The sheriff indicated, if you and Griffin Lott are amenable, if you agree, instead of going to jail . . ."

For the first time Florence's hand shook, so she set the teacup down carefully in its saucer.

"She could serve six months in a rehabilitation center, a private one, where she would have therapy for her various issues. She would be required to work there—chores, I suppose. Cleaning,

gardening, laundry, that sort of thing. Then, if deemed ready, she would serve another six months' community service in a halfway house, with a year's probation to follow that.

"I won't pretend it's prison," Florence continued. "But she would be restricted, get therapy I feel she desperately needs, and be required to follow set rules. She would lose her freedom, and that's a kind of prison. And if she refuses to abide by the terms, the rules, then she would face prison. Her mother will try to fight me on this, but her father . . . I've already spoken to my son-in-law. We spoke at some length, and he will back me on this."

Steadier, Florence picked up her tea again. "It's your granddaughter and mine, Vi. Who would have thought we'd come here?"

Once again Viola took her hand. "Life's full of hard bumps and slick twists. We do the best we can to drive it, start to finish."

"Some days, best isn't near to good enough. You'll want time to think about this, Shelby."

"It's not that . . . it's Griff she hurt, or hurt through what Arlo did."

"It's you she meant to."

"All I want, I swear to you, Mrs. Piedmont, is for her to leave me and mine alone. I have a child to think of. I have a life to try to rebuild with my little girl, and I just want Melody to leave us be. If Griffin's all right with what you said, I would be. He's the one who ended up being hurt, whatever she meant."

"I'll speak to him, and we'll all abide by his decision. I'm sick at heart he was hurt this way, that someone in my family would have caused it. I wonder, Viola, if you know from Jackson how much damage there is to the boy's truck."

"What Jackson told me just a bit ago on the phone, it's a loss."

"Oh, Granny."

"Well, most anything can be fixed, but Jack says it wouldn't be fixed right enough, and expects the insurance company to agree and total it out."

"I'll make it right. You have my word on it."

"I never had any doubt on that, Flo."

"I know you're both busy, and I thank you so much for taking this time, and for your understanding. For your kindness."

"I'm going to walk you out," Viola said, sliding an arm around Florence's waist as they both rose. "And I'm going to give you a brochure so you can think about coming back for a nice hot stone massage or a Restore Youth Facial."

Shelby heard Florence laugh as they walked out. "It's a late hour for restoring youth, isn't it, Viola?"

"It's never too late an hour, Flo. Never too late an hour."

. . .

IT SEEMED TO Shelby the best thing to do was keep her head down and take each day as it came. She'd been far too much front and center on the gossip stage since her return to the Ridge. Experience told her some other news or interest would come along soon enough.

She felt just fine being front and center Friday night, performing doo-wop and rock and fifties ballads. The crowd seemed to feel just fine about it, too, and nobody got shot.

And since Callie was having a sleepover at Granny's, topping Friday night off in Griff's bed felt even more than fine.

Before and after her Saturday job, she hit her spreadsheet hard, meticulously paying bills, doing

careful math.

And shaking her clasped hands at the ceiling when she paid off another credit card.

Three down, nine to go.

Straight after Sunday breakfast, she stood at the stove frying up chicken and listening to Callie squeal with delight while she played with the much-loved bubble maker.

Ada Mae came in, hugged Shelby from behind. "That's the best sound in the world."

"I know it. She's so happy, Mama, it turns my heart inside out."

"And how about you?"

"I'm about as happy as a little girl with a bubble machine."

"You were in fine voice Friday night, baby girl. And so pretty up there in that blue dress."

"I'm going to have fun with the sixties. I've been playing around some for next week. Tansy told me they're going ahead for sure with that expansion. That'll be exciting."

"Good thing Griff and Matt are all but done here. I love my new bathroom like Callie loves her bubble maker."

To demonstrate, Ada Mae did a neat pirouette and had Shelby grinning.

"They're handy men. A handy man's worth his weight in gold. You must've had a nice time after."

Heat rose up the back of Shelby's neck. "I did. Mama, you didn't wait up, did you?"

"It's not a matter of waiting up. You have a child under your roof—whether she's fourteen or forty—you hear that car pull up the drive. And don't even think about saying you're sorry. It put a smile on my face thinking about you being with a good man. He puts a smile on your face, too."

She knew just where her mother was going. "He does. I can admit I didn't see myself having a nice time with *any* man for a long time yet. As it is, it's a pretty surprise. Still, I can't think past next week, not yet."

"That's all right. You take your time, give him a good test-drive."

"Mama!"

"You think your generation invented sex? And you're doing the sixties next week? That generation likely figured the same. Speaking of test-driving, I heard Florence Piedmont bought Griff a new truck."

"He said she wouldn't take no, turned it around so it felt like he'd be insulting her if he refused. Grandpa's going to strip the wrecked one for parts, and Griff's having the new truck painted with the logo."

She paused as she drained some of the chicken.

"Did we do the right thing, Mama? Letting Melody get off with going to that rehabilitation center, anger management therapy and the like?"

"Next thing to a country club, I expect, and that just chafes my thighs. But down under it, I think it was the right thing. I don't know as she'll be coming back here, at least not for some time. I do know Miz Florence isn't holding her job."

"Oh."

"And I expect you could have that job, if you wanted it."

"I . . . No. I think I like just how things are. I like working at Granny's, I like the girls and the work and the customers. I like knowing if something came up, nobody'd be upset if I had to take off to deal with it. And I do know, for certain, I wouldn't want Melody's old office, her old job, her old anything. Just . . . bad juju. You know what I mean, Mama?"

"I do. You've got your granny's hand with fried chicken, girl. If you don't want to look past next week yet, you'd better be careful. Chicken like that could drive a man to propose marriage."

"I think I'm safe there."

And safe, Shelby thought, was where she needed to be.

At noon when Griff pulled up in his rental truck, she had the hamper loaded and ready, and Callie in her yellow dress with a ribbon in her hair. She'd opted for jeans and her old hiking boots.

Callie rushed out before Griff got to the door, and launched herself at him.

"You look like a picnic, Little Red."

"I got a bow." Callie reached back to where the yellow ribbon trailed.

"I see that. Pretty as they come, and so's your mom. Here, let me take that."

"You've already got her. We'll take my van since I know where we're going. I've got the blankets in there already."

"I've just got to get a couple things out of the truck."

He strapped Callie in her car seat—expertly, Shelby noted. You didn't have to show the man something twice. He walked to his rental truck, came back with a tote bag. "Contributions," he said, and put them in the van with the hamper.

"I'm hoping this spot is as pretty as I remember. It's been a while."

She drove toward town, then veered off on a back road, just skimming by the holler while Callie chattered like a magpie. As she took the rise, navigated the switchbacks, it all came back to her. The sights, the smells.

The color.

Winding through the greens, the browns, yellow trillium and crested iris splashed, while the delicate trumpets of columbine played in dappled sunlight. There, or there, mountain laurel brightened the shadows, and lady's slippers danced.

"Pretty. It's pretty country," Griff said when Callie shifted to conversation with the ever-present Fifi.

"It won't be long till the wild rhododendrons pop out. I just love the green of it. The endless, rising green of it, and how the color from wildflowers comes and goes."

She passed a little farmhouse where a boy about Callie's age rolled on the scrubby grass with a yellow dog.

"See the puppy! Mama, when can I have a puppy?"

"Her newest obsession," Shelby said under her breath. "Once we get our own house, we'll think about that. We're almost to our picnic spot," she added, hoping to block the litany of follow-up questions.

She turned onto a narrow dirt road, bumped carefully along it. "This belongs to that little farm we just passed. Daddy's delivered three babies in that house—might be more now since I've been gone—and made house calls for the grandmother until she passed. The family lets us use this road, and have picnics or hike back here. They set great store by my daddy."

"So do I, since he cleared me to work."

"Your eye's looking some better."

"I kissed it better, Mama, when I had my pizza date with Griff. Are we there yet?"

"We're as far as we can drive." She angled into the pull-off. "It's not very far to walk. About a quarter-mile. It's a little steep, though, and likely a little rough."

"We're up for it."

He settled the logistics by hauling Callie up on his shoulders, taking the hamper. "Bag and blankets for you," he told Shelby. "It's so quiet here."

He spotted a bold red cardinal watching them from a perch on a hawthorn tree.

"That's not even the best part."

"Nobody's going to come out with a shotgun?"

"I asked Daddy to check if it was okay, and the family's fine about it. We leave the land as we found it, that's all. Though they might have discouraged revenueurs that way, back in the Prohibition days. Plenty ran whiskey out of the hills and the hollers. My people among them—both sides."

"Bootleggers." It made him grin.

"It'd be hard to find a handful of people with native roots who didn't have bootleggers on the family tree."

"It was a dumbass law."

"Dumbass," Callie repeated, predictably.

"Sorry."

"It's not the first time. That's a grown-up word, Callie."

"I like grown-up words." When she screamed, Griff shoved the hamper at Shelby, started to whip Callie down.

"A bunny! I saw a bunny rabbit!"

"Jesus—jeez," Griff corrected. "You scared the . . . heck out of me, Little Red."

"Catch the bunny rabbit, Griff! Catch it."

"I didn't bring my bunny rabbit catching tools." With his heart still hammering, he took the hamper back, continued the climb.

When he topped the rise, he saw every step of the climb had been worth it.

"Okay, wow."

"It's just like I remembered. The stream, the trees, especially that big old black walnut. And just enough opening up so you can see some of the hills and valleys."

"You're in charge of all the picnic spots, from this day forward."

"Hard to top this one, unless it's at your place."

When he put Callie down, she bulletted straight for the stream.

"Callie, don't go close to the edge," Shelby began, but Griff grabbed her hand and pulled her to the stream.

"Cool." He crouched down beside Callie. "Look at all the little waterfalls. The shiny rocks."

"I wanna go swimming!"

"It's not deep enough for swimming, baby, but you can take your shoes and socks off, put your feet in. You can go wading."

"Kay. I can go wading, Griff!"

Callie plopped down, attacked her shoes while Shelby spread blankets beside the stream with its tumbling water, mossy logs, thickening ferns.

"Not worried about her getting the dress wet?" Griff asked.

"I've got a change for her in the bag. I'd like to know a little girl who wouldn't want to splash in this stream."

"You're a pretty cool mom."

While Callie stepped in to splash and squeal, Griff pulled the bottle, wrapped in its frozen cozy, out of his bag.

"Champagne?" After a surprised laugh, Shelby shook her head. "That's going to put my fried chicken to shame."

"I'll be the judge of that."

She drank champagne, had the satisfaction of seeing Griff devour her chicken. She let Callie run off some energy chasing butterflies or going back for another splash.

And relaxed, as she realized she hadn't, not really, since the morning she'd faced Arlo Kattery with bars between them.

And he'd have that view, she thought, through bars, for a long, long time.

But she had this—the green and the blue, the chirp and twitter of birds, the sun streaming through the trees to play shadows on the ground as her little girl played in the stream.

"You're definitely hired," Griff told her when he went back for another piece of chicken, another scoop of potato salad.

"Sitting here, it seems like nothing's wrong in the world."

"That's why we need places like this."

She reached out, trailed her fingers over the healing cut on his forehead. "Forrest said they still haven't caught that Harlow person, and it makes me think he did what he came to do, and he's long gone from here."

"Makes the most sense."

"Then why'd you follow me home at two in the morning on Friday night?"

"Because that makes sense to me, too. When are you going to let me follow you home again?"

Oh, she'd just been hoping he'd ask. "I guess I could see if Mama's okay watching Callie one night this week."

"Why don't we go to the movies, then back to my place for a while?"

She smiled, thinking she had this, too. A movie date with a man who made her belly flutter. "Why don't we? Callie, if you don't eat your picnic lunch, there won't be a cupcake in your future."

Shelby marked it as a perfect Sunday afternoon, and driving back with Callie fighting sleep in the back, wondered how she could prolong it.

Maybe she'd see if Griff wanted to sit out on the porch while Callie napped. Or she could see if Emma Kate and Matt wanted to come over, and they could do up some burgers on the grill for supper later.

"I guess you've got things to do at your house."

"There's never a lack of things to do at my place. Why? Do you have something else in mind?"

"I was thinking, if you wanted to stay awhile, I'd see if Emma Kate and Matt wanted to come by later on. Have some wine, and grill some burgers."

"More food? How could I say no?"

"I'll see if it's all right with Mama and Daddy, then . . ."

She trailed off as she pulled up to the house, saw her mother already running out.

"Oh God, what could've happened now?" She shoved out of the van. "Mama."

"I was just about to text you. Gilly went into labor."

"Oh, just now?"

"It's been a few hours, but they didn't say until they were heading in to the hospital. Daddy—my daddy's got Jackson already. Daddy—your daddy—and I are heading into Gatlinburg to the hospital right now, and Forrest is bringing your granny. Clay says she's moving fast. Oh, I don't know why babies always put me in a tailspin."

"It's exciting, and it's happy."

"You should go," Griff said. "You should be there."

"Oh, I don't want to put two preschoolers on my grandfather on his own."

"I'll take her. I've got Callie."

"Oh, well, I—"

"I wanna go with Griff! Please, Mama, please. Griff, I wanna go to your house. Can I go to your house and play?"

"That would be the nicest thing," Ada Mae said. "Shelby couldn't be here when Jackson was born. It would sure mean a lot to us, Griff."

“Done.”

“Yay! Yay!”

Shelby looked at her daughter’s shining face. “But it could be hours.”

“Not if Clay’s any judge. Clayton, you come on now!” Ada Mae shouted. “I’m not going to miss my grandbaby’s birth because you’re dawdling. Griff, thank you so much. Callie, you be good for Griff now, or I’ll know the reason why. Clayton Zachariah Pomeroy!” Ada Mae marched back toward the house.

“Are you sure? Because—”

“We’re sure, right, Callie?”

“Right! Let’s go, Griff.” Thrilled, she rubbed both her hands over his cheeks. “Let’s go to your house now.”

“Let me just . . .” Think what to do, Shelby mused. “I’ll just run in, get some things for her to play with.”

“I’ve got scissors and sticks for her to run with, and all those matches.”

“Aren’t you the funny one? Give me two minutes. And, well, you’d best just take my van in case you have to go somewhere with her. If I can borrow this truck.”

“It’s a rental. What do I care?”

“All right, then, all right. Two minutes. No, it’ll take me five. Five minutes.”

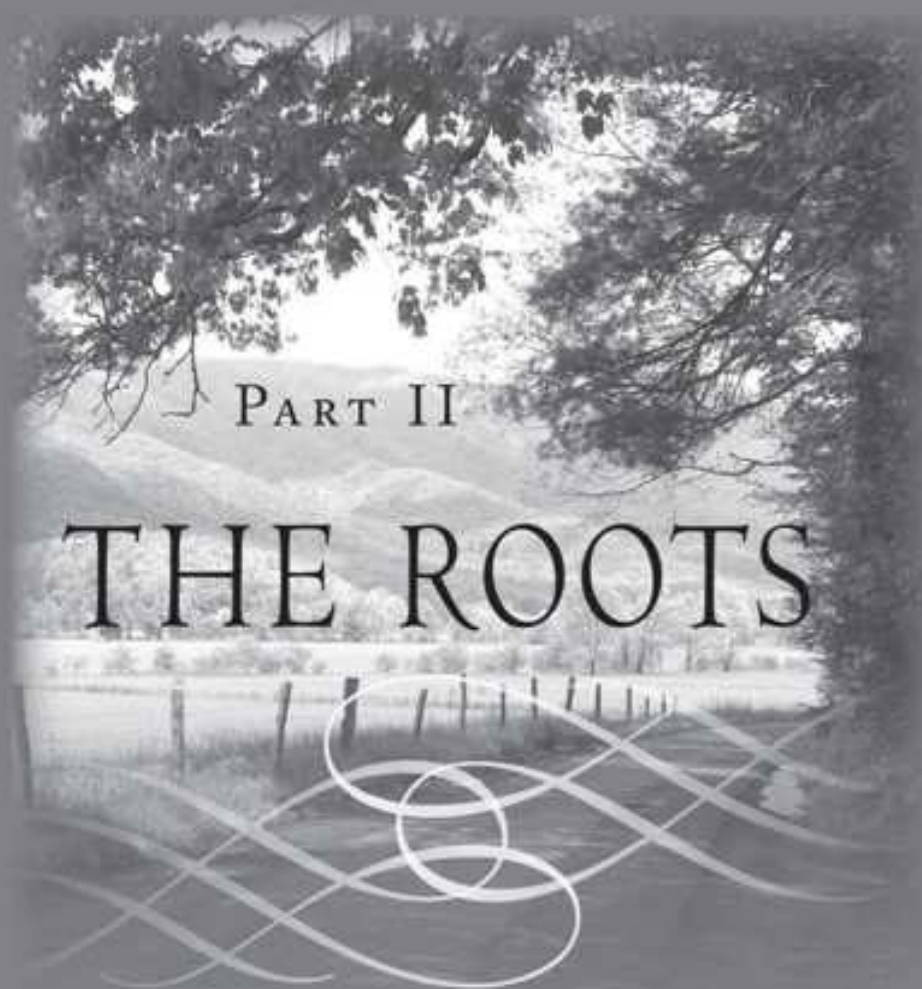
She raced toward the house as her mother came out dragging her father.

“Ada Mae, I’m a doctor, and I’m telling you, there’s plenty of time.”

“Oh, don’t doctor me. You tell me about plenty of time when you’ve given birth. We’re going, Shelby!”

“I’ll be behind you in five minutes. I know how to get there.”

Griff leaned back against the van beside Callie’s window. “We’re going to have some fun, Little Red.”



PART II

THE ROOTS

We're too unseparate. And going home
From company means coming
to our senses.

ROBERT FROST



They did have fun.

Griff fashioned a monster face out of cardboard and, donning it, chased a thrilled Callie around the front yard. She brought him down with the magic wand he cobbled together from some tubing and more cardboard.

As the restored prince, he answered the first text from Shelby.

At the hospital now—everything's going well. Okay there?

He considered for a moment.

We're great. We're heading out now to find some traffic to play in.

He took Callie in for a Coke, and judged by her wide, shiny eyes Coke wasn't something on her usual beverage menu. It took a solid half hour to run off her Coke high. Breathless and wiser, he loaded the kid back in the van and took her for a quick drive for a pack of juice boxes.

That had to be a better option.

He spotted the sign **Pups For Sale**, decided a stop there would entertain her for a while, and pulled up in front of the compact rancher next to the little market.

Following the arrow on the sign, he took the gravel path around the back.

In a kennel, clean and dry, three cream-colored pups and one brown pup came instantly to life, yipping, racing toward the fencing, wagging chubby bodies.

Callie didn't squeal and rush toward them as he'd expected.

She gasped, then pressed both hands to her mouth.

Then she turned her head, tipped her face up to Griff's. And her eyes were full of wonder and love and immeasurable joy.

He thought, *Oh shit, what have I done?*

Then she threw her arms around his legs, squeezed. "Puppies! I *love* you, Griff. Thank you, thank you."

"Well, ah, listen . . . I thought we'd just—"

While he fumbled, she tipped her face up again, all but blinded him with her shining joy before she broke off to, at last, rush the fence.

A woman, a baby on her hip, a red kerchief tied around her hair, stepped out of the back door of the rancher.

"Afternoon," she said while the baby eyed him suspiciously.

"Hey. We were just at the market, and I thought she'd get a kick out of seeing the pups."

"Why, sure. You want to go in, honey? They're as friendly as they can be. Three months old now," she continued as she opened the gate for Callie. "Had a litter of eight. Mama's our Lab-retriever mix Georgie, and the daddy's my cousin's chocolate Lab."

Callie ran in, dropped, and was immediately buried in puppies.

"That's a happy sound, isn't it?" the woman said as Callie's giggles mixed with the yips and fake growls.

"Yeah . . . but—"

"They're a good mix with kids, Daddy," she said with a smile as she juggled the baby. "Gentle and loyal and playful."

"Oh, I'm not her father. Her mother's sister-in-law's having a baby, pretty much now, so I'm watching Callie for a while."

"Griff! Griff, come see. Come see the puppies."

"Yeah, okay."

"You go on, take your time. She's got a good way with them. Lot of kids her age want to pull tails and ears or cart a pup around in a choke hold, but it looks like she knows how to be gentle and playful. They're going to go fast now," she added, as the baby decided Griff passed muster and offered a wide, drooling grin. "I just put the sign up this morning. The first four were already spoken for. I don't sell them till they're full weaned, had their shots and the vet clears them."

"I'm not really . . . I mean, I thought about getting a dog. Later. Once I've got my place more under control."

The woman narrowed her eyes. "You're the one bought the old Tripplehorn place. The one who works with Emma Kate's boyfriend. Emma Kate and Doc Pomeroy delivered Lucas here right in the exam room at the clinic. I went in for my checkup, and he got in a powerful hurry then and there. Wasn't time to head to the hospital. Is that Shelby Pomeroy's little girl?"

"Yeah."

"I should've figured from the hair. You decide you want one of the pups, I'll do half price, seeing as the little girl's granddaddy and your partner's lady helped bring my boy into the world."

"Oh, well . . . that's—"

"Griff, come play with the puppies!"

"You go on. I'll be around."

He took the brown dog.

He drew the line at Callie's helpful name suggestions. He would not name his dog Fifi in honor of her best stuffed friend. Or Donkey in honor of Shrek's best pal.

He hit on Snickers because of the chocolate, then had to go back to the market and buy one so Callie got the connection. He had to buy puppy food, a dish, a leash, a collar, dog treats.

By the time they loaded up again, with the puppy exploring the inside of the van, Griff's ears were ringing.

Shelby's next text came through as he lifted Callie out of the van, and she and the pup took off running.

Gilly's doing great. She'll be pushing soon. Nearly there. Let me know how it's going if you're done playing in traffic.

He started to text about the puppy, even though it all felt a little bit like a dream, then opted against.

Playing in traffic made us hungry. We want a snack so we're going to hunt up strangers with candy. Go Gilly.

Babies come in their own time, and Beau Sawyer Pomeroy came into the world at seven-eleven—a lucky hour, according to his daddy—at a healthy seven pounds and twelve ounces. Shelby took time to admire him—the spitting image of her brother—dig out more tissues for her mother, and hug the proud parents.

She sent another quick text: *It's a boy! Beau Sawyer's beautiful, Mama and Daddy happy*

and well. On my way back soon.

By the time she managed to say all her goodbyes and navigate traffic out of Gatlinburg, the sun sat low. She considered stopping to text again, see if Griff wanted her to pick up any food, but decided surely they'd eaten something by now.

She pulled up beside her van, thought, What a day.

When no one answered her knock, she had a moment of concern, ordered it away. Easing the door open, she called out, then cocked her ear at the familiar sounds.

Shrek.

Shaking her head, she started back toward the great room.

Shrek and Donkey argued on the big screen. On the sofa, her little girl lay sprawled over Griff. Both of them were sound asleep.

She nearly screamed when something wet and cold hit her ankle. Looking down, she saw a fat brown puppy who immediately attached its teeth and interest to the laces of her hiking boots.

"Oh, no you don't." She picked up the pup, gave it a long look. "Just where did you come from?"

"Right down the road," Griff said, opening sleepy eyes.

"Whose dog is it?"

"I guess it's my dog. It just sort of happened. Snickers."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"His name. Snickers. Chocolate Lab—golden retriever mix."

"He couldn't be cuter." Amused, charmed, she cuddled the pup in while he lapped lovingly at her chin. "Did you look at the size of his feet?"

"No. Not especially."

"You're going to have one big dog here." She smiled as Snickers switched to her cheek, wiggled happily in her arms. "Which one wore you out? Callie or the dog?"

"I think we wore each other out. Baby world okay?"

"It's perfect. Beau Sawyer, if you didn't get my last text. Healthy, beautiful, and the family's all beaming. I can't thank you enough, Griff, for keeping Callie so I could be there. It meant the world to me."

"We had fun. What time is it?"

"It's about eight-thirty."

"Okay, we probably crashed about twenty minutes ago."

"Did you get something to eat? I should've—"

"There was chicken left from the picnic," he interrupted. "And I did some mac and cheese because you can't go wrong. Had some frozen peas I mostly use as an ice bag, but they worked."

He stroked Callie's back as he spoke, as he shifted. She rolled over like a bundle of rags.

"She's out."

"It's been a happy day for her. Me, too." She set the dog down, and he bounced to Griff, went for the laces. Griff scooped the pup up in one arm, looked around and found the chew rope he'd made out of old cord. "Try this," he suggested, and set the dog down with it.

"Did she talk you into that dog?"

"She didn't have to say a word." He glanced back where Callie slept, butt hiked in the air, one arm wrapped around Fifi. "It's all in the eyes. I planned to get one, more like in the fall. Get a little more done around here first. So I just shifted up the timeline. Plus, he was on sale. Do you want some food? There's still some mac and cheese. The chicken's just a fond memory."

"No, thanks. We ate here and there at the hospital. I need to get her home and in bed."

“Maybe you could stay.”

Tempting, so tempting when his arms slid around her.

“I’d like that, and suspect Callie would, too. But not yet, Griff. Not quite yet.”

She could prolong the moment, her mouth on his. Then her head on his shoulder. “It’s been a good day.”

“Red letter.”

He picked Callie up. She lay boneless over his shoulder while Shelby gathered the hamper, the bag. The dog raced out the door ahead of them, ran circles around the yard while Griff fixed Callie in her seat.

He watched them drive off with the western sky taking on the color of her hair. Then there was quiet.

He liked the quiet, he reminded himself, or he’d never have bought a place so far out of town. But it felt *seriously* quiet after hours of a little girl’s chatter.

He looked down to where Snickers was busy attacking his laces.

“Cut that out.” He had only to shake his foot. “Let’s make the rounds.”

They made the rounds again twice more before midnight. He’d worked too hard on the floors he’d refinished to have them ruined by a puppy.

Considering sleeping arrangements, he fashioned a temporary dog bed out of a box, some old towels, and tied another towel into a puppy-like shape. Snickers wasn’t immediately sold, but the excitement of the day did its work. With the pup as conked as Callie had been, Griff considered it a job well done, and dropped into bed himself.

He didn’t know what woke him. The clock read two-twelve, and when he checked by the flashlight app of his phone, Snickers remained curled in a ball in his box.

Though he opted to let sleeping dogs lie, something felt off. Off enough for him to walk quietly out of the bedroom. Listen.

Old houses groaned and creaked, he thought—he knew it well. And still he eased open a door, picked up a pipe wrench. Flipping on lights as he went, he started downstairs.

And there, just that . . . a faint click. A door closing.

He moved quickly now, straight toward the back and the glass doors.

He hit the lights, hit the outside floods.

He’d be spotlighted, but if anyone was out there, so would they.

He saw nothing, no movement.

Had he locked the back doors? He didn’t think so, as he rarely thought to. And with taking the pup in and out, he likely hadn’t.

He stepped out on the back porch, filtering out the night sounds, the breeze, the mournful call of an owl, the faint echo of a dog barking somewhere across the ridge.

He heard an engine turn over, the crunch of tires on gravel.

He stood for a while, looking out into the dark.

Someone had been in his house, he was damn sure of it.

He went in, locked the door—though it occurred to him since it was all glass, it wouldn’t take much if someone wanted in.

He scanned the area, looking for anything out of place.

His gaze passed over the laptop he’d left on the kitchen island, tracked back.

He’d left the top up—almost always did. But it was down now.

And when he walked over, put a hand on it, it felt slightly warm.

He lifted the lid, began to poke around. He was no computer geek, but he knew enough to get

by.

It didn't take long to discover someone had hacked in, downloaded his files. Bank, bills, e-mails, the works.

"What the fuck?"

He spent the next twenty minutes cursing and changing all his passwords, all his codes and user names. Anything he could think of.

What he couldn't think of was what someone would want with his data.

He spent more time sending out an e-mail blast—friends, family, business contacts, anyone on his list—telling them his data had been compromised and not to respond to anything from his old e-mail address.

After checking every door and window, he took the laptop with him upstairs.

Better security, he thought, on his data, on his house, had just bumped up to top priority.

An hour after he'd woken, he tried to settle down again, listening to every creak, every rattle of wind. Just as he started to drift off, the dog woke and began to whimper.

"Yeah, it figures." He shoved up, pulled on pants again. "Might as well make the rounds, Snickers."

When he did, the beam of his flashlight picked up a clear footprint in the soft ground beside the gravel of his drive.

. . .

"YOUR BLACK EYE'S just fading, and you had a break-in?"

Matt dealt with touching up the paint while Griff installed the last of the trim in Ada Mae's new master bath.

"More of a walk-in. Pain in the ass having to change passwords, send out notifications, then spend damn near an hour in the police station this morning with the report. Doesn't make sense, and I'd've put it down to house-settling noises if it hadn't been for the laptop being closed."

"You're sure you left it open?"

"Sure enough. Plus it was warm, and I hadn't used it in hours. Then the footprint. It wasn't mine, Matt. Size twelve here, but this was bigger. And I heard a car."

"What did the cops say?"

"That's another reason I'm late getting here. I went back with Forrest, and he took a look around, took pictures of the footprint, for all the good that'll do. It wasn't straight vandalism. I'd already figured if it had been, to look for someone in Arlo Kattery's family or one of his pals."

"Well, it's not like you're rolling in it, but you're pretty well set. Somebody figured, hey, this guy bought this big old place, and he's driving a new truck."

"Because that asshole wrecked my old one."

"Still." Matt shook Snickers from his boot laces, gave the tennis ball Griff had dug up a little kick to send the pup chasing it. "It sounds like somebody figured they could siphon off from your accounts, something like that."

"They're out of luck on that now. Pisses me off, somebody walking into my house like that. Looks like getting a dog was . . . fortuitous. Word of the day."

"Fortuitous my ass." Matt grinned, gave the ball another gentle kick. "How many times have you cleaned up after him so far?"

"A couple." Maybe five or six. "But he's getting it. He's going to be a good job dog. He doesn't freak at the nail gun. And he's going to get big. A big dog puts off people who want to walk into your house at two in the fucking morning. You ought to get one, then he'd have a pal."

“Living in an apartment, remember?” Matt climbed onto the stepladder with brush and bucket. “I’m thinking about maybe starting a house, though.”

“You’ve been thinking about maybe starting a house since we got here.”

“I’m thinking more since I’m going to ask Emma Kate to marry me.”

“If you’re going to do that, you should . . . What?” Griff nearly bobbled the nail gun as he came straight up on his knees. “When? Wow.”

“Yeah, I know.” With a slightly dazed look in his eyes, Matt grinned. “While you were dealing with the cops this morning, I was watching Emma Kate get ready for work. She’s making green smoothies, and—”

“Don’t mention your famous green smoothies.”

“If you’d drink one every morning, you’d reap the benefits.”

“I don’t understand people who eat kale, much less drink it. You decided you wanted to marry her because of green smoothies?”

Matt pushed up the brim of his ball cap, and now dazed became dreamy. “I looked at her. She’s barefoot, and a little grumpy, hadn’t done her makeup yet. She’s wearing khakis and a blue top, and the sun’s shining through the window. I thought, This is what I want, every morning.”

“Grumpy Emma Kate and green smoothies?”

“Every morning. I can’t see past a time I don’t want just that. So I thought you’d go with me after work to buy a ring. I’m going to ask her tonight.”

“Tonight?” That was enough to bring Griff fully to his feet. “You’re serious? Don’t you want a setup?”

“I’ll get some flowers. The ring’s the setup. I don’t know her size, but—”

“Make a template. Go back home, dig out one of her rings, make a template to take to the ring place.”

“I should’ve thought of that.”

“What are you going to say?”

“I don’t know.” Matt shifted on the ladder. “I love you, will you marry me?”

“You gotta do better than that, man.”

“You’re making me nervous.”

“We’ll think about it. Go make the template.”

“Now?”

“Yeah, now. I’ve got to take the dog out anyway before he pees on the new tile. We’re taking a break.” All in with the plan, Griff gave his partner a punch on the shoulder. “Jesus, Matt, you’re getting married.”

“If she says yes.”

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want me and green smoothies every day.” Matt stepped down from the ladder. “I feel a little sick.”

“Knock it off. Go, make the template.” Griff grabbed the dog, who’d begun to sniff in a way that warned Griff peeing was imminent. “I’ve got to take him out. Take action. It’s the only way to get what you want.”

“I’m taking action.”

. . .

SHELBY SQUEEZED IN A REHEARSAL. She felt good about her mix of music—from the Beatles to

Johnny Cash to Motown. Of course, if she had an actual accompanist, she'd have slowed down the pace of "Ring of Fire," done it as a sexy, aching ballad.

Maybe down the road, she thought as she finished up her morning stint at the salon. She took lunch orders from some of the spa patrons, then rounded up some from the staff.

As she tucked away her list, grabbed her bag, Jolene stepped cautiously inside.

"I'm sorry. Miz Vi? Miz Vi, can I come in for just a quick minute? Not for service or anything. I — I talked to Reverend Beardsly, and he said I should come, and speak to you, if you'd let me."

"All right, Jolene." Giving Jolene a nod, Viola pulled the last of the foil from her customer's hair. "Dottie, will you shampoo Sherrilyn for me?"

"Sure will, Miss Vi." Dottie and Sherrilyn exchanged wide-eyed looks. Neither of them wanted to miss the show.

"Do you want to go in my office, Jolene?"

"No, ma'am, Miz Vi. I'd like to say what I need to say right out here, in front of everybody." Her face went pink as she spoke, her eyes damp, but to the relief of some, the disappointment of others, she didn't blubber.

"I want to say to you, Miz Vi, and to you, too, Shelby . . . I — I want to say first I'm so awfully sorry. I want to apologize, to say I'm so sorry for how I acted here the last time. And . . ."

Her voice trembled, tears brimmed, but she held up a hand as she took a couple of deep breaths. "I'm sorry for the other times I was rude or mean to your face or behind your back. All of them, Shelby, right back to fifth grade. I want to say, I'm ashamed of it, all of it, looking at it now in the clear. I so wanted Melody to be my friend, and I did things I've got no excuse for."

A couple of tears spilled over, but Jolene twisted her fingers together and kept going. "I knew about what she did to your car, Shelby, back in high school? I didn't know before she did it, and I didn't do it. I swear I'd tell you now if I had."

"I believe you."

"But I knew after, and I didn't say anything. I knew and I pretended I thought it was funny, and how you deserved it. I just wanted her to be my friend, but I know she never was, not really. I know that now, and it makes it worse. What she said that day in here, to you, Shelby, about you, about your baby girl, I should've stood up. It made me sick inside what she said, but I didn't stand up and say that was wrong. I hope saying it now is a start to what Reverend Beardsly says is making amends. I was only thinking of me, and I'm sorry."

She sniffled, heeled away tears from her cheeks. "I didn't know she went to Arlo that way. I should've known, and I can't say, not for sure, if somewhere deep down I did. I didn't look deep down because I didn't want to. And I don't know, not for sure, if I'd have stood up even then. That's shameful, not to know if I would have stood up."

"You did stand up," Shelby reminded her. "When you found out what happened to Griff."

"I was that shocked and upset. Seeing Griff's face all cut and bruised, hearing what happened. I couldn't . . . I couldn't be quiet, not then."

"Jolene, I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to look me in the eye." Viola waited for Jolene to blink her eyes clear. "Do you know anything about somebody going into Griffin's house last night, middle of the night?"

"Oh my gosh! Oh no, ma'am, Miz Vi."

"What happened?" Shelby demanded. "What—" And broke off when Viola held up a finger.

"I promise, Miz Vi. I *swear*." Jolene crossed her hands over her heart. "It couldn't have been Melody. She's already in that place, in Memphis. I went to see Miz Florence just this morning, to make my amends to her, and she told me. Did somebody hurt him again? Did somebody rob him?"

"No." Viola looked over at Shelby. "No. Looks to be not much of anything, and I expect all of us here know if it was one of the Kattery clan, they'd have busted the place up if they could."

Viola fisted a hand on her hip. "Is there anything else you have to say, Jolene?"

"I guess not. Just I'm sorry. I'm going to try to be a better person."

"You never had much gumption," Viola observed. "Here's the first time I've seen you show any, and you did a good job of it. I'm going to say, I'm lifting my ban on you, and you're free to come in here when you like."

"Oh, Miz Vi. Thank you, Miz Vi. I . . . I won't come in if you'd rather I didn't, Shelby."

"I hope I can accept an apology the same as my grandmother."

"I want to give one to your mama, too. She wasn't here, but . . . I want to just the same."

"She's busy right now, but you can tell her later on."

"Then I will."

"It's up to Crystal if she wants to do your hair for your wedding," Viola added.

"Oh, Miz Vi. Oh, Crystal, would you? Losing you's almost as bad as losing my fiancé. And I really do love him."

"Of course I will. You made me real proud today, Jolene."

On a sob, Jolene rushed over, flung herself at Crystal.

"There you are now. I'm going to take you back, get you a nice cold drink."

"I was so scared to come in. I was so scared."

"That just makes me even prouder." Crystal beamed a smile at Viola, and led Jolene into the back.

"Dottie, get that shampoo done now. Show's over."

Shelby turned straight to her grandmother. "Granny, what happened at Griff's?"

"What I said. Somebody went in there. He says, what I got he says," she corrected, "is they went into his laptop computer. That's all I know. You oughta ask him."

"I will. I've got to get these lunch orders in." She glanced toward the back. "Some of us have to get knocked hard to come back. I know how that is. This might be the making of her."

"She's a flighty one, and likely always will be. But I respect a well-given apology. You go on now, or those customers will be shouting us down for their lunch order. I ought to think about putting in a little café."

It wouldn't have surprised Shelby in the least. But for now, she dashed out.

She wanted to call Griff, but couldn't spare the time as she rushed to Sid and Sadie, gathered up the orders, made a beeline for the Pizzeria, did the same. Loaded, she hurried back toward the salon.

And nearly slammed into a man studying one of the area maps.

"I'm so sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going."

He smiled down at her. "Neither was I. You've got a healthy appetite."

It took her a moment, then she laughed. "Delivery service."

"Then you must know the area."

"Born and bred here, so, yes, I do. Are you lost?"

"Not exactly. I'm visiting the area for a few days. I wanted to try the Rendezvous Trail, hit Miller's Waterfall, Bonnie Jean Overlook, Dob's Creek. I came into town thinking I'd get a takeaway lunch, and I've gotten turned around."

"I can help you with that." She angled around to look at the map. "If you take this road, the one we're on, straight out of town, go on past the big hotel and take the left fork. See that?"

"Yeah." Peering down, he nodded slowly. "Okay."

She guided him through, suggested Sid and Sadie for his packed lunch.

“I sure do appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, and you enjoy your time here in the Ridge.”

“I will.”

When she hurried off again, he folded the map and slid it into his pocket, along with the keys he’d lifted neatly out of her purse.



At the end of the day, Shelby dumped her purse out for the second time.

"I swear they were in here. I always put them in this side pocket so I don't have to hunt for them."

"Crystal's checking the back again," Viola told her as she herself hunted under mani tables and around pedi chairs. "You ought to go look in the van again. You may have dropped them this morning."

"All right, I will. But I can *see* myself tucking them in the pocket this morning. But I do it every time, so maybe I'm seeing another time."

"I'll call Sid and the Pizzeria again. You had such a bunch of bags, honey, you might've tipped them out while you were gathering them all up."

"Thanks, Granny. I've got a spare key to the van at home, but it worries me to lose that set. It's got keys to the van, to Mama's, to the bar and grill, to here. If they don't turn up, everybody's going to have to change locks. I don't know how I could've been so careless."

She shoved her hair back as the phone on the counter with the contents of her purse rang. "It's the Pizzeria. Hi, it's Shelby. Did you— Oh, thank you! Yes, I'll run right up and get them. Thanks so much."

"Now you can stop worrying about people changing out their locks," Vi said.

"It's such a relief." With it, the tight band around her chest loosened. "I must've dropped them picking up lunch, just like you said. Johnny said one of the waiters found them under the front counter. I guess I dropped them, and they got kicked under without anyone noticing. I'm sorry for all this trouble."

"Don't you worry. I'll let the girls know."

"I'm going to be late picking up Callie." Shelby dumped everything back into her bag. She'd sort it out later. "I'm taking Jackson tomorrow—did I tell you? It'll give Clay a full free day to visit with Gilly and the new baby, get the house ready for them to come home. He mentioned Jackson could use a haircut, so I'll bring him and Callie in, if that's all right."

"I love seeing my babies. You come on in anytime. We'll work them in—and maybe give Callie a princess mani if there's time."

"I'll see you then." She kissed Viola on the cheek, and once again dashed out.

She picked Callie up, then, knowing her parents were having a date night—and wasn't that sweet?—decided on impulse to drive to Griff's. Callie could play with the pup for a bit, and Griff could give her the details on the trouble he'd had.

It didn't occur to her until she'd made the turn into his drive that she should've texted or called ahead. Drop-bys were risky, and potentially rude.

She couldn't change her mind, not with Callie so excited, but she had an apology ready when she

stopped beside Griff's truck.

He was out with the dog, turned, grinned, even as Snickers raced toward the van.

"How's that for timing? I just got home."

She lifted Callie out, had no more than set her down when her girl dropped to the ground to hug the wildly wiggling dog.

"Hey. I've dropped to second place pretty quick." Griff crouched down. "None of that for me?"

"Griff." With a flirty smile, Callie lifted her arms. She kissed his cheek, giggled, rubbed his stubble. "Tickly."

"I didn't know pretty ladies were coming."

"I should've called. Just coming by, it's presumptuous."

"Presume." With Callie on his hip, he leaned in before Shelby could think if she wanted to avoid, and kissed her. "Anytime."

"Shrek kisses Fiona, and then she's her real self."

"That's right. Are you your real self, Red?"

"Last I checked. How's this going?" A little unnerved, she lowered to give Snickers her attention.

"Not bad today. He handled the job. We finished it."

"Finished?" She looked up as the dog licked everywhere he could reach. "At Mama's? Oh my goodness, she's just going to go crazy. Daddy was getting her straight from the salon and taking her into Gatlinburg to visit Gilly and the baby, then for dinner and a movie. She doesn't know you finished."

"She'll know when she gets home." He set Callie down. "Do me a favor, Little Red. Run around with Snickers some. He needs the exercise."

"Come on, Snickers! You need cersize."

"I'm thinking cold beer. You want in?"

"I better not, but you go ahead. You've earned it working so late getting that bathroom done."

He thought about the trip to Gatlinburg, the ring. But he'd given his blood oath not to say a thing until the deed was done. "Ah, well . . ."

"I only came by for a minute, to give Callie the treat, and to ask you what happened last night. I heard something about it at the salon."

"Word doesn't travel around here, it just hangs in the air at all times. I don't know exactly." He glanced toward the house, found the anger still wanted to rise. "Somebody was in the house, downloaded my files from my laptop."

"Why in the world— Oh, I bet you do your banking and all that online."

"You win. It's all good. Everything's changed up, secured. But it's weird. Easier, right, to break in during the day, strip the damn place. But to sneak in one night with a flash drive? It's just weird. Talked myself into a real security system, though. In addition to the fierce and deadly guard dog."

Shelby looked over to where Snickers stumbled and rolled. "He is all that. It's probably smart getting one out here, though we just don't have much trouble. Except we have had recently, haven't we? Sometimes I feel like I brought trouble with me."

"Don't."

She tried to shake it off. "You go get your beer. I'm going to let her run off some energy with Snickers, if that's all right, then I have to get her home, get her fed."

"We can throw together something here."

"I'd like to, so would Callie, but I have a dozen things to do yet. And I'm running late myself as I lost my keys and spent near to an hour hunting for them."

"You put them in that side pocket of the purse thing."

She lifted her eyebrows. "You're observant."

"You do it every time."

"Well, I guess I missed, as they ended up under the counter at the Pizzeria. I don't know how they did. I know I didn't get them out when I was in there, but that's where they were."

"Did you have your purse with you all day?"

"Of course—well, not *with* me," she amended. "I can't cart it around while I'm working."

"Let's go check your laptop."

"What? Why?" She nearly laughed but sudden nerves got in the way. "You can't think somebody stole my keys right out of my bag, then put them under the pizza counter."

"Let's just go check your laptop. It's probably nothing. Callie can run around the backyard with Snickers. I'll stop and pick up some dinner."

"I was going to do up some of Mama's leftover ham from their Sunday dinner with some mashed potatoes and butter beans."

"Yeah? I'm all in for that if there's enough."

"There's always enough." A smart cook knew how to make sure of it, and she'd enjoy spending time with him. But . . . "You don't really think somebody got my keys. That's just crazy."

"We'll just check it out."

Because crazy or not, he did think it.

He locked up first, for what good it did, and followed them around the winding back roads—gave the oak tree a narrow stare as he rounded the curve.

He thought of Matt, wondered if his friend had done the deed yet. He decided not quite, because once he had, Shelby would surely get a call or text from Emma Kate.

He hoped it was soon. He could keep a secret, but they made him itchy.

He glanced over at Snickers, riding as any self-respecting dog would, with his head out the window, his tongue happily lolling. As impulses went, the dog was a good one.

It didn't take long to establish Callie in the backyard. Her kid heaven included her prized bubble maker, a puppy and the old family dog.

"Just look at Clancy, running around like a puppy himself. I think Snickers has taken five years off him with this visit."

"She's still got a couple more pups over there."

"I think the one's enough right now. I'll go get my laptop so you can relax. Why don't I get you that beer first?"

"I'll take it."

While he waited, Griff considered the what-ifs. If her computer had been compromised, as his had, it could mean the Ridge had some sort of cyber thief trolling. That might make the most sense.

But it struck him as odd that both his and hers would be targets, and pretty much back-to-back. That played as more personal, more direct, to his mind.

He let the possibilities roll around in his head as he stood at the kitchen door, watching the two dogs play tug-of-war with his homemade toy while Callie danced around them in a flood of bubbles.

Moving to the Ridge hadn't been an impulse like the puppy. He'd thought long and hard about it, considered the angles, the pros, the cons. But the decision had been, like the pup, a good one.

It was a good life here. Quieter than Baltimore, but he liked the quiet. Some culture shock here and there, but he knew how to adapt and adjust.

And wasn't it interesting—or fortuitous—that months after he'd settled in down here, Shelby had come home? He might just make tomorrow's word "serendipity."

"Oh, Griffin!"

“What?” He spun around. “Somebody was in your comp, too?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look. The Master Suite.” She said it with a flourish, with capital letters. “It’s wonderful, it’s *gorgeous*. I knew it would be. I saw it happening, but finished, it’s— I’m going to have a whole box of tissues handy because Mama’s going to cry buckets of joy and delight when she sees it. It’s all just perfect, just what she wanted. And you left it sparkling clean.”

“Just part of the service.”

“You put flowers in there.”

“Also part of the service for exceptional clients.”

“Your exceptional client’s going to cry happy tears and take a soak in that big tub the minute she gets home. When I can afford a house, you’re hired.”

“I’ll put you on the list. Let’s have a look at that.”

“All right.”

She put the laptop on the counter, booted it up.

“Have you downloaded or uploaded anything today?”

“Clay sent a couple more pictures of the baby this morning in an e-mail, but that’s all.”

“Let’s see.” He tapped a few keys, brought up her history first. “Did you go into any of these documents, go to any of these places this afternoon?”

“No.” She lifted a hand, rubbed at her throat. “No, I haven’t touched it since this morning, and then only to check my mail.”

“Shelby, somebody went to these places and into these docs. And you can see here, the data’s been uploaded onto another drive. Copied to another drive.”

“Just like yours was.”

“Yeah, just like mine.” Those clever green eyes sharpened with temper. “You should call your brother.”

“Yes. God. Would you do that? I need to see if— I have to check my banking.”

“You do that now. I’ll make the call.” He stepped back, put in a call to Forrest.

“Everything’s still there.” Her voice trembled with relief. “It’s all still there.”

“Forrest is on his way. You’re going to want to change your passwords. But . . .”

She looked up from doing just that. “But what?”

“It just seems to me if somebody was going to pull money out of your account, he’d have done it. I changed mine minutes after whoever this was hit my comp, but he’s had hours to wipe you out, if that’s the reason.”

“What other reason is there?”

“Information, maybe. E-mails, accounts, sites we frequent, calendars. Most of my life’s on my computer. We’re . . . involved, right, you and me?”

“I— I guess we are.” It felt strange to say it out loud.

“And both our computers are hacked into, about twelve hours apart. Maybe you should take a look around your room, check if anything’s out of place or missing. I’ve got my eye on Callie.”

With a nod, she hurried off.

He glanced out the back door again. All was right with that world. A pretty little girl, rainbow bubbles, a couple of happy dogs, all backdropped by the smoky green hills.

But outside that picture, something was very wrong.

. . .

IT TOOK A LITTLE TIME; she wanted to be thorough. But she found nothing out of place.

“Nothing.” She came back in, waited for Griff to turn from his station at the door. “Everything’s just as it should be. But I checked the computer in Daddy’s office here, and I think someone was on there, too. It doesn’t look like they took anything, but there were searches on it when I know no one was home.”

“Okay. Why don’t you sit down a minute?”

“I’ve got to get dinner going. Callie needs to eat.”

“How about a beer?”

She shook her head, then sighed. “I wouldn’t mind a glass of wine. My nerves are shot. I can’t begin to say how tired I am of my nerves being shot.”

“It doesn’t show. This work?” He picked up a bottle of red from the counter with a blue glass stopper.

“It would.”

“I’ll get it.”

He reached up for a wineglass while she dug out potatoes for peeling.

“Something more personal, you said.” She let the homey task soothe her, tried to think objectively. “My first thought goes to Melody, but I honestly can’t see her thinking of something like this. It’s too complicated.”

“Not Melody. She goes for violence or vandalism.”

She peeled a potato, quickly. “You’re thinking of the murder, but that’s violence. That’s as violent as it gets.”

“I’m thinking connections, and how one thing fits with another.”

“Richard.” Her hands stilled briefly as she looked up. “Richard’s been the root of about all the trouble I’ve had, and the trouble you’ve had comes through me.”

“Not through you, Red.”

“Through me,” she corrected. “I’m not taking blame. I spent too much time taking blame for things I didn’t do, things I couldn’t stop, but facts are facts. Connections,” she repeated, and started on the next potato.

“Okay. If we look at connections—” Griff broke off as he heard the front door open. “That’ll be Forrest. Let’s leave it to the professional.”

“I couldn’t be happier to do just that.”

Forrest walked in, took a beer from the fridge. “Spell it out for me.”

“Somebody got to my keys, and used them to get into the house, then into my laptop like they did Griff’s. I can’t find anything else taken, and I keep some cash money, just a little, in my top drawer.”

“Which is the first place a burglar’s going to look. Move it. Tampon box is a pretty safe place.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, but he obviously wasn’t after cash or valuables.”

“Information’s valuable. Where were your keys?”

“In my purse.”

“Come on, Shelby, don’t be a jerk about it.”

“All right, all right.” She drew in a breath, picked up the wine. Settled down a bit, she went back to peeling as she related the key hunt.

“I know I had them when I got to rehearsal. I took them out of the ignition. I used the key Derrick gave me, because I can rehearse early sometimes, before anyone gets in. That’s what I did today. I was in and out before anyone came in, so I used them to lock up again when I left, put them in the side pocket of my purse, like always. I always put them there. I’m not careless.”

“Never were. She’s always been an organized soul,” Forrest said to Griff. “You may not get the

rhyme or reason why she puts something where she puts it, but she knows where she put it.”

“Saves time. I went into the salon, and I put my purse behind the counter. Nobody would go after my keys who works there, Forrest. I know all the girls there, and most of the customers now. I mean, the regulars. We get tourists and such, but it would be next to impossible for one of them to go behind the counter, dig in my purse, come up with my keys without somebody noticing. We weren’t all that busy today.”

“So it stayed there, behind the counter, until you got it back out to go home, and couldn’t find the keys?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I took it with me to get the lunch orders. So I had it with me when I went to Sid and Sadie, then to the Pizzeria, where they somehow ended up under the front counter. I just figured I’d dropped them out somehow.”

“Which is what you were supposed to think, and would have kept thinking if our honorary deputy wasn’t on the ball.”

“It wasn’t hard to figure it out,” Griff put in.

“I wouldn’t have,” Shelby corrected. “I wouldn’t have given it another thought.”

“Did you bump into anybody, get bumped into, while you were picking up the orders?” Forrest asked her.

“No.” Brow furrowed, she took herself back through the route, as she had over and over again while she’d searched for the keys.

“I hit the lunch places just after the rush, because Jolene came in to apologize, and that took some time. I guess somebody could’ve gotten their hand in my bag, but it seems like I’d’ve known it. I did nearly bump into somebody,” she remembered. “I was hurrying back because I was running behind, and nearly bumped into this man looking for the best route up Rendezvous Trail.”

“Mmm-hmm. He asked you about that, asked for directions?”

“Yes. He was visiting the area and wanted . . .” She shut her eyes. “Oh my God, I’m an idiot. Yes, he asked me for directions, and I showed him on his map, and I had my hands full with the lunch bags. I went right in after, set down the orders, put my purse away, then went around handing them out. It’s the only time somebody could’ve gotten in my purse. When it was hanging right on my own damn shoulder.”

“What did he look like?” Griff demanded, then glanced at Forrest. “Sorry.”

“No need. That’s the next question.”

“He was tall. I had to look up. Ah . . . give me a second.” She carted the potatoes to the sink, washed them off, laid them on the cutting board to quarter them. “White, maybe early forties. He had sunglasses on. So did I—it was a bright day. He had on a baseball cap.”

“Color? Logo?”

“I think it was tan. I don’t remember if it had a logo or anything. He had dark hair—not black, but dark brown, longish. Kind of curled up over his ears. A little gray in the mustache and beard. Very trim, short beard. He looked . . . like a college professor who played football.”

“Big guy, then?”

“Yeah. Big, solid build. Not fat or flabby.” She put the potatoes on to boil.

Nodding, Forrest took out his phone, scrolled through. “How about this?”

She looked at the phone, and the photo of James Harlow. “No, he was a little older than this.”

“Gray in the beard?”

“That, and . . . He had that professor look to him.”

“Take another look, try to see him with the beard, the longer hair. Do a Woolly Willy.”

“I used to have one of those,” Griff commented, and studied the image over Shelby’s shoulder.

"I just don't . . . He had thicker eyebrows—dark like his hair, and . . . Oh God, I *am* an idiot."

"I'm happy to call my sister an idiot at any time. It's part of my job, but you're not on this."

"I was standing on the sidewalk, talking to Jimmy Harlow, close as I am to you now, and I didn't even think, never had a twinge about it. Even when he was stealing the keys out of my purse."

"It's what he does," Forrest reminded her. "He changed his appearance, and he caught you when you were distracted, asked a common type of question. Got you going over the map so he could pick your pocket, and when he was done with the keys, he made sure you'd find them in a logical place. You'd have put it down to rush and accident, and never checked your laptop."

"What was he after? What's he looking for?"

Forrest cocked a brow at Griff. "What do you think, son?"

"I think he was looking to see if between us we've got millions of dollars tucked away, or know where to find it."

"Why you?" Shelby demanded. "I understand why he'd think I might know. Even believe I had to know."

"We've been spending a lot of time together since you got back."

"I know you're sleeping with my sister," Forrest commented. "Your euphemisms are wasted on me. You move back to the Ridge, and pretty quick you hook up with this one," he said to Shelby, "who relocated here not that many months ago. A person, especially one who lives on the grift, is bound to wonder if the two of you don't go back a ways further."

"He killed Melinda Warren, so it's just him now." Griff considered. "He'd get it all, but he has to find the jewelry, the stamps first. You're his only link to it, Red."

"I don't know where it is, or if Richard sold it and blew the money, buried it or put it in some Swiss bank account. And this Jimmy Harlow wouldn't find anything otherwise on my computer. Or yours, Griffin."

"We can hope that'll be enough for him," Forrest said, "but we're not going to count on it. I'm going to contact the sheriff, run all this by him. What's for supper?"

"Ham, mashed potatoes, butter beans."

"Sounds good. That your dog out there, Griff? The pup you got from Rachel Bell over your way?"

"Yeah. Snickers."

"He's starting to dig in my mama's delphiniums. She'll skin you both for it."

"Oh shit." Griff bulleted outside, calling for the dog.

Forrest grinned, leaned back on the counter. "I don't much like thinking about my sister having sex."

"Then I advise you not to think about it."

"Doing my best not to. Some people," he continued, "it takes you a while to warm up to, then maybe you make a friendship, or maybe you don't. Other people, something just clicks, almost like you think, Hey, I remember you. From where, who the hell knows, but there's that click. You know what I'm saying?"

"I guess I do."

"With Griff, something clicked. Took a little while with Matt, but I think we'd have gotten around to it. It was Griff who shortened the time it took."

Taking his phone off his belt, Forrest keyed in a number. "What I'm saying is, he's a friend, and a good one, and knowing the kind of man he is, I'm adding on he's a lot more what you deserve than the last one."

"Yeah, Sheriff, hope I'm not disturbing your supper," Forrest began, and wandered away as he

made his report.

. . .

AFTER DINNER, which turned out just fine despite the fact that her mind hadn't been on the cooking, she shooed Griff out with Callie to chase the lightning bugs. The early ones blinked their yellow lights against the dark, setting the stage for the multitudes who'd light up the hills and forests in June.

Summer was surely on the way, and the snow-caked winter of the North faded until it became distant and almost otherworldly. Something over nearly as soon as it began.

She thought how much she wanted it to be over, but despite lightning bugs, a sweet fairy garden, the deepening green of the hills, something cold had followed her home. Her little girl might be dancing with the lights out in the yard, safe under the eye of the man she was . . . involved with. Her brother would be off now, looking into that something cold. So it was here, a shadow dogging her, and she couldn't pretend otherwise.

She had run off looking for adventure, love, an exciting future, and had come home disillusioned and riddled with debt. But there was more, and worse, and she'd have to face that down, too.

She wished she had the damn millions. She'd wrap them up in shiny paper, tie them with a bow and hand them over to this Jimmy Harlow without a single regret.

Just go away, she thought. Just leave me to take a good hold on the life I can see having now.

She couldn't think what Richard had done with all those jewels and stamps, or the money he'd gotten from them if he liquidated them. How could she know when she'd never known him? He'd worn a disguise throughout their marriage just as truly as Jimmy Harlow had worn one that afternoon.

She'd never seen through it. Maybe a shadow, a shape now and then, but never the whole man.

She knew what Richard had seen now when he'd looked at her. A dupe—a mark, that's what they called people like her. Something useful, maybe valuable for a time, and once used, once the value had been mined, something carelessly discarded.

She was working her way out of debt, wasn't she? She'd taken control, taken action. She'd figure out a way to take control, to take action in what was happening now.

She wouldn't live her life being haunted by the actions of a man who'd used her, who'd lied to her, who'd been a stranger to her.

She put away the last of the dishes, decided, hell yes, she'd have another glass of wine. She'd let Callie have a little longer before bath and bed, a little longer to dance with the lights. And tomorrow she'd start working on a way to clear her life of the past, all of it, once and for all.

She poured the wine, started for the door when her phone signaled.

She pulled it out, checked the text from Emma Kate.

I'm getting married! Holy crap! Didn't know I wanted to until he asked. I've got a ring on my finger, and I'm crazy happy. I need to talk to you tomorrow—too busy now. Sending this from the bathroom before I get busy again. OMG and WTF! I'm getting married. Gotta go.

Shelby read it a second time, felt her smile getting bigger, brighter. Her best friend was dancing in the light, too.

So happy for you! she texted back. *Crazy happy for you. Stay busy—I can be jealous there as I don't know the next time I'll be able to get busy. We'll talk tomorrow. I want every detail. I love you—tell Matt he's the luckiest man in the world.*

She sent the text, then stepped out to do a little dancing of her own.



She met Emma Kate at the park so she could let Callie and Jackson play.
“Doc gave me an hour, bless his heart. He knew how much I wanted to talk to you. Look!”

Emma Kate shot out her hand, and the princess-cut diamond winked in the sun.

“It’s beautiful. It’s perfect.”

“He got channel set—see how it’s set in some, instead of poking out?”

“Yes. I just love it, Emma Kate.”

“He said he did that so I wouldn’t get it caught on things, working with patients. I love that he thought of that. And he got my exact size, too. He made a template from one of my rings—that was Griff’s idea.”

“I got a little of that when I told Griff after I got your text. He never gave me the tiniest hint that he’d gone with Matt to buy you a ring.”

“Matt says Griff’s a vault when you ask him to be.”

“I want to hear all of it. Oops, wait.” She hurried over to Jackson, who’d taken a little spill. After she brushed him off, kissed his knee, she dug out one of the trucks in her bag so he could roll it around in the sandbox.

“He’ll do all right for a while. Callie likes to boss him around some, but that’s the way it is when you’re the oldest.”

“We talked about kids, having them. We want to wait a little, but in another year or two . . . God, married, kids.” Laughing, she pressed both hands to her heart, bumped her shoulders up and down. “I can’t believe it.”

“You want it.”

“With Matt, I do. Yesterday he texted me how he had to work a little late, but he’d stop and get dinner to bring home. He brought wine, too, and flowers. I guess I should’ve known something was coming, but it was just nice not having to think about either of us cooking anything, and having a nice bottle of wine, and flowers on the table. I’m babbling on about needing to get into the salon, do something with my hair, and he says how I’m beautiful. How everything about me is beautiful.

“I figured he just wanted to get lucky.”

“Emma Kate.”

“It’s not like he never tells me, but it was the *way*. I’m thinking, I had such a long day, but it was so nice not to have to think about fixing anything, and I felt good, after a couple glasses of wine. So maybe we’d both get lucky.”

Pressing her hand to her heart again, she sighed. “That surely happened, but before . . . Before, he reached over for my hand, and he just looked at me. I swear, Shelby, we’ve been together for nearly three years now, but my heart skipped a beat. It really did, and it skipped another when he

said how he loves me. How I make everything in his life make sense, and being with me, having a life with me, is all he wants.

“He actually got down on one knee.”

“That’s so sweet. Emma Kate, you got a storybook.”

“It feels like it right now, and I never expected it, and never thought I’d feel the way I did when he took out that ring.”

“Tell me what he said. How did he ask?”

“He said—he said just this: ‘Marry me, Emma Kate. Spend your life with me.’” Emma Kate’s eyes filled; her voice broke. “‘Build a life with me.’”

“Oh.” Shelby pulled out tissues for both of them. “That’s just right.”

“I know. Just right. So I said yes. Yes, I’ll marry you. Yes, I’ll spend my life with you. Yes, I’ll build a life with you. And he put the ring on, and it fit. I started crying I was so happy, like right now.”

She sighed, laid her head on Shelby’s shoulder. “I wanted to talk to you last night, but—”

“You were busy.”

“Really, really busy.”

Callie walked up, patted Emma Kate’s wet cheeks with both hands. “Happy tears?”

“Yes, they are, darling. Happy, happy tears. I’m going to marry Matt, and it makes me really happy.”

“I’m going to marry Griff.”

“Are you?”

“Uh-huh. I *love* him.”

“I know just how you feel.” Swaying side to side, she cuddled Callie. “Just exactly how. You know what, Callie? I think you should be my flower girl.”

Callie’s eyes popped wide. In a reverent whisper, she said, “Mama!”

Afraid she’d start tearing up again, Shelby popped Jackson and his sandy truck onto her lap. “My goodness, Callie, that’s such an honor. You’ve never been a flower girl.”

“I’ve never been a bride, so it’s perfect,” Emma Kate decided.

“Can I get a new dress and sparkly shoes?”

“We’re *both* going to get a new dress and sparkly shoes. And your mama, too. You’ll be my maid of honor, won’t you, Shelby?”

“You know I will.” Beyond happy, Shelby threw her arms around Emma Kate, sandwiched the kids between them. “You know I will. And I’m going to give you the best bridal shower ever seen in the entire state of Tennessee—just like we planned when we were girls. Have you picked a date?”

“If my mama had her way it would be tomorrow, or two years from tomorrow so she could fuss me into insanity while she devises a scheme to hold the wedding in the governor’s mansion, at the very least.”

“You’re her only girl.” As she was her own mother’s, Shelby thought with a pang. “A mother’s bound to be excited over her only girl’s wedding.”

“Mama was born excited. She’s already talking dresses and colors and venues and guest lists. Matt and I talked about having a small, civilized wedding in the fall, but now that Mama’s got the bit between her teeth, we’ve surrendered to a big wedding, and next April. So I’ll be a spring bride.”

“What could be prettier? Oh, let’s have an engagement party, Emma Kate. Everybody likes a party.”

“I wanna party,” Callie chimed in.

“Of course you do. You want a party, right, Jackson?”

“I get presents?”

“It’s not a party without presents.”

“Mama’s ahead of you. I couldn’t hold her to a backyard barbecue. She wants a dress-up party, so she’s already wrangling to use the hotel. I’m letting her have her way because I’m getting mine on everything else. I’m firm on it. And I’m counting on you to help me rein her in.”

“I’m your girl. How about we give y’all a push on the swings?” she asked the kids.

“I want to go high!” Callie made a beeline for the swing.

“No point in swinging unless you go high.” Shelby hefted Jackson onto her hip. “We’ll give them a push, bride-to-be, and we can talk wedding dresses.”

“One of my current favorite subjects.”

. . .

SHELBY DIDN’T TELL Emma Kate about the keys, the laptop. She wouldn’t spoil the brightness of the moment. But she gnawed on it.

Once she had the kids fed and down for a nap—say hallelujah—she sat down with her laptop. Business first, she ordered herself, meticulously paid bills, adjusted her spreadsheet, calculated how close she’d come to paying off the next credit card.

Considerable to go on that yet.

The sales from the consignment shop had started to dwindle—not unexpected—and she reminded herself just how big a hole they’d helped fill in.

And she tried not to think just how mortifying it was to know some stranger had copied all her troubles—the e-mails, the lawyer and tax correspondence, the spreadsheet, the painful chipping away at bills.

Couldn’t let it matter, she told herself. She’d think of the upside there. Poring over her personal miseries ought to tell Jimmy Harlow if she had access to millions, she wouldn’t be squeezing out nickels and dimes to pay off debt.

He’d go away, wouldn’t he? Surely he knew he risked capture and being tossed back in prison if he stayed too close.

But then, millions of dollars made a shiny incentive.

Payback made a darker one. She understood that. She’d felt that ugly tug herself over the past months.

Take action, she thought, and began to make a list.

She culled through pictures she kept in a file. Would Harlow do the same? Was he studying her years with Richard through her photographs? And why hadn’t she deleted them—those images of Richard, of the two of them, in Paris, in Trinidad, in New York and Madrid? All those places.

All those places, she thought again.

Had he taken the property he’d stolen, stashed it on those travels with her? Another bank box, an airport locker, holding onto it or selling it off a piece at a time?

She had the photographs to tell her where they’d gone, when they’d gone.

Then Atlanta, where they’d settled. Or she had, she thought now. He’d still had all those “business trips.” And she’d packed the baby up from time to time when he insisted they fly off somewhere for a holiday.

“Where did he go when I wasn’t with him?” she wondered. “And why did he take a wife and baby he had no real interest in along other times?”

She got up, walked around the kitchen, opened the door for air, walked around again.

As cover, of course. That's all they'd ever been to him. Just another disguise. How much had he scammed or stolen on those trips with her and Callie? She could barely think of it.

But she would think of it.

She sat again, using the photographs to add to her list. Tried to put herself back in time, in those places. But God, sometimes she'd been so tired, so stressed, trying to deal with an infant in a strange place, a place where she didn't know the language or the geography.

She pored over what she had, making notes, trying to remember people he'd introduced her to, or had her arrange cocktail parties for. Wealthy people, she thought now. But then, she'd thought they were wealthy.

Had they been marks? Had they been associates?

Likely some of both.

She jumped up when she heard footsteps and, heart pounding, swung around to pull the chef's knife from the block.

"Shelby? Shelby Anne?"

"Mama." On an unsteady breath, she shoved the knife back in the block, put on a smile as her mother walked in.

"There you are. Where are my babies?"

"They're napping, after a hard day at the park. They'll be up soon, though, probably wanting a snack."

"I'm going to take care of that. Look here, I got new pictures when I went in to the hospital to see the baby this morning." She took out her phone, cuddled close to Shelby as they scrolled through. "He's just handsome as a prince. Got his daddy's chin, you see that? I went by Clay's and made sure everything's as it should be, because they're letting Gilly bring Beau home tomorrow."

"That's wonderful. She'll love being home with Jackson and the baby."

"She'd walk out of there now if we'd let her, but she's settled for tomorrow. I found the cutest stuffed hound dog and put it in Beau's crib, got some nice fresh flowers for the bedroom for Gilly. That nursery's as sweet as an ice cream cone. And I got two facials in at the salon. Later on I'm going to make up some spaghetti—Gilly favors my spaghetti—and get it over there so nobody has to think about dinner tomorrow."

"You're not just the best mama, you're the best mama-in-law."

"Gilly's one of the lights of my life. Right now I'm going to spend the rest of the day with my two other grandbabies. And you go on, go on out and do something fun."

"Mama, you've driven over to Gatlinburg and back I don't know how many times the last two days, fussed over at Clay's, and plan to cook them a meal so they don't have to. And you went in to work."

"That's right." All but sparkling with joy, Ada Mae got the pitcher of tea from the fridge. "And now I'm going to enjoy the rest of my day. Oh, I also went shopping. I got the sweetest little baby clothes for that boy. And picked up a big brother toy for Jackson, and a little something for Callie."

"The best Gamma, too. Mama, you spoil them all."

"I do a fine job of it." She poured two glasses of tea over ice, snipped some mint from the pot on her windowsill. "I don't know when I've ever felt so good. Nothing like a brand-new baby. And I've got a master suite straight out of a magazine. I swear I'd've slept in that big tub last night if I could. I've got my own baby girl and hers home with me. My chicks are happy and home, my husband still takes me on dates. I've got everything I could want."

She handed Shelby a glass, kissed her cheek. "Now you go get yours."

"Get my what?"

“Your everything. I’d start that off by asking that clever and handsome young man out on a date. Then I’d go buy myself something pretty to wear on it.”

Shelby thought of her spreadsheet. “I’ve got plenty to wear.”

“Something new now and then perks a girl up. You work hard, Shelby. I know you’ve got bills, and I know you’ve been sitting there at that computer worrying about them. I raised you to be smart and responsible, but I’m telling you—” Ada Mae fisted her hands on her hips, just as her own mother was wont to do. “Your mama’s telling you to go out and buy yourself a new dress. Something you’re buying yourself with money you earned. See if that doesn’t lift you up some. And then let Griff lift you a little more. I’m going to have Suzannah bring Chelsea over later, and those girls are having themselves a slumber party here tonight. You do the same.”

“I should have a slumber party?”

After a hooting laugh, Ada Mae drank some tea. “That’s what we’ll call it in polite company. Go on, buy a dress, go over to the salon and get prettied up, and go take Griffin’s breath away.”

“You know I love you, Mama.”

“You’d better.”

“But I don’t think I tell you often enough what a wonderful woman you are. Even beyond Mama, Mama-in-law and Gamma.”

“Now, that’s just put the sprinkles on the icing of the chocolate cupcake of my day.” She gave Shelby a squeeze.

“Let me put things away. I wasn’t just paying bills, and I’m doing all right with that, so don’t worry. I was trying to figure things out, I guess, looking at pictures of my time with Richard. Trying to remember all the places we went, and when and why.”

“You sure did travel, so that’s something you have that can’t be taken away. I loved getting postcards or letters or e-mails from you when you were in those foreign places.”

“I don’t suppose you saved any of them.”

“For heaven’s sake, of course I did. I have them all in a box.”

“Mama, you are wonderful. Can I have them? I’ll give them back to you once I’ve looked through.”

“There on the shelf in my sitting room closet. Blue box with white tulips on it. It’s labeled.”

“Thank you, Mama.” She added another squeeze. “Thank you.”

. . .

SHE DID BUY A DRESS, just a simple summer dress the color of the mint her mother added to tea. And Ada Mae was right. It gave her incredible satisfaction to know she bought the dress with money she’d earned.

It only took a couple of questions to find out where Griff was working that day, and she found both him and Matt, sweaty and stripped to the waist (oh my!), building a deck on a house just outside the town proper.

“Hey.” Griff swiped at his face with an already damp bandanna. “Don’t touch me, I’m past disgusting. In fact, you ought to stay downwind.”

“I have brothers,” she said simply, and bent to greet the happy Snickers. “Congratulations, Matt. Consider yourself hugged.”

“Thanks. Emma Kate said you guys met in the park this morning, and you’re maid of honor. Meet the best man.”

“Well, Best Man, you and I have a lot of consulting to do. Meanwhile, I have a favor to ask.”

"Name it." Griff grabbed a jug, gulped down straight from it whatever was inside.

"Mama's got plans for the children, and I have some . . . research I want to do. I was wondering if I could do it at your place. I'd fix you dinner as payment for the quiet spot to work."

"Sure. I get the best of that deal. I've been locking up since . . . so . . ." He dug in his pocket for his keys, pulled one off the ring. "This'll get you in."

"I really appreciate this. Matt, the four of us are going to need to get together soon. Weddings require considerable strategy. I know Miz Bitsy's leading the charge on the engagement party—"

"Don't scare me when I'm working with power tools."

"We'll handle Miz Bitsy," Shelby assured him. "Emma Kate and I have been planning our weddings since we were ten. Of course, what she wants now may not include a silver princess carriage pulled by six white horses."

"Really scaring me."

"But, I have the basics, and I can help work Miz Bitsy around."

"Will you put that in writing?" he asked, and took the jug from Griff. "Maybe in blood. I don't care whose blood."

"It's a solemn promise. But I need to hear what you want, too. I'm awful good at coordinating things."

"Emma Kate said the same. I'm counting on you."

"You can, so we'll get together soon, all right?"

"How about my place, Saturday night?" Griff asked. "We'll throw something on the grill and strategize. If you don't want to ask your parents to watch Little Red, bring her along," he added, anticipating. "We can always hang her in a closet, stick her in a drawer."

"Let me work on that. I'd better get going, and let you get back to work. Pretend I gave you another hug, Matt. You've made my very best friend happier than I've ever seen her. So I'm inclined to love you a lot."

"I'm getting married," Matt said when Shelby left.

"That's right, pal. Hold on a minute." He set down the nail gun he'd just picked up, jogged after Shelby. "Hey. I didn't get a pretend hug."

"No, you didn't, but that's because I'm going to give you a lot more than that later. No pretending."

"Oh yeah?"

"On the instructions of my mama."

"I really like your mama."

"So do I. Bye now."

"We'll probably knock off around four, four-thirty," he called out.

"I'll be there."

"Nice to know," Griff said quietly, then grinned down at Snickers, who'd followed him and his boot laces. "Really nice to know."

. . .

SHE WENT BY THE MARKET FIRST, as she'd decided on what she'd fix for dinner when she'd seen Griff at his job site.

She settled down in his kitchen, angling herself so she could see out those wonderful glass doors to the view whenever she looked up.

But once she opened her mother's keepsake box and began reading, she didn't look up often.

She broke to work on dinner, get it in the oven. And think.

It was odd and fascinating to see herself, to review her own perspective through the prism of time. Only a handful of years, really, but a lifetime altogether.

She could see it now, the naiveté, the nearly blank slate she'd been. Richard had seen that, too, and used it very well.

Callie had changed her—she could read that, too, in photographs and letters. What she'd written, how she'd written it, had shifted after Callie was born.

Had her mother been fooled by the bright tone of the letters, the e-mails, the quickly dashed postcards once the daughter had become a mother herself? Shelby doubted it. Even now she could hear the tinny tone under the brightness.

She'd been so unhappy so quickly, all the fierce self-confidence gradually, carefully, she saw now, wiped away. The only true happiness broke through when she wrote of Callie.

No, her mother wouldn't have been fooled. Her mother would have seen, very well, how she'd written less and less of Richard.

But in the first year or so, there had been plenty, and minute details of where they'd traveled, the people she met, the things she saw.

She could follow herself easily from her own words, and begin to see.

She'd think a great deal more, she promised herself. She might never have the answers, but she'd found a bank box from a key in the pocket of a jacket.

So she'd think a great deal more.

She had the counter set for dinner, the wine she'd bought—she'd have to hope for good tips on Friday night—ready when she heard Griff's truck.

She got out a beer, opened it and walked out to meet him.

He looked hot, sweaty and all but edible when he smiled over at her, leaned on his truck, tipped his sunglasses down to look at her over them while the dog ran in circles over the front lawn.

"Now, that's what's been missing from the front porch. A beautiful redhead with a cold beer."

"I figured you'd be ready for one." She walked down the steps. "I have brothers."

"I'm more than ready for one. I'm still not touching you. May turned to August today."

"It often does."

"You should brace yourself for after I get a shower. How's Callie doing?"

"About to have hot dogs on the grill for supper with her cousin and her best friend, and that's after they were all stripped down so they could run around in the sprinkler."

"Sprinkler sounds pretty good. Hot dogs don't sound bad."

"Those'll have to wait for next time."

"When I have a beautiful redhead with a cold beer fixing dinner, I'm not picky."

He walked in the house with her, with the pup rushing to keep up. Griff sniffed the air. "What's cooking? It smells great."

"Meat loaf with baby potatoes and carrots."

"Meat loaf?" He sniffed again. "Seriously?"

"It's a warm day for it, but a manly meal. You looked like meat loaf for supper when I saw you today."

"I haven't had homemade meat loaf since the last time I was in Baltimore and sweet-talked my mother into it. Why don't most women appreciate the loaf of meat?"

"You just answered your own question. I'm just going to go check on it."

"I'll grab that shower. Then brace yourself, Red."

Amused, stirred, she went back to the stove, judged she'd timed it well. Then reconsidered.

Self-confidence, she thought. She remembered what it was like to be confident and bold.

She turned the oven down and went up the back stairs.

Griff chugged the cold beer while cool water rained blissfully down on his head. It felt like pounds of sweat and grime sliding away. It was going to be a nice deck, he thought, but he hadn't been ready for the change in the weather.

Spring had come in so soft and benign, he'd forgotten what a hot, wet hammer summer could pound with in the Smokies.

And today had been just a quick preview of coming attractions.

Once it hit full, he and Matt would start earlier in the day, knock off earlier in the afternoon. And that would give him time to work inside on his own projects. Then there were the plans for the bar and grill once the permits came through.

Then, of course, there was Shelby. He wanted as much time as he could steal with her.

Even as he thought of her, the glass door opened.

She stood, her hair curling wildly over her shoulders, wearing nothing but a knowing smile. With her eyes on his, she took the beer out of his hand, set it on the counter behind her.

"You're going to need both hands," she told him.

"It's a day of miracles," he said, and reached for her.

"It's cool." Tipping her head back, she traced her fingertips up his back. "The water's cool."

"Too cool?"

"No, it's nice. And this is even better." She rose up to her toes, fixed her mouth on his. And there was nothing cool in the kiss.

He thought it a wonder the water didn't go to steam the way she heated his blood. Instant and fierce. Every sweaty hour he'd put in that day, every restless hour of the night he'd spent wanting her, worried for her, spilled away.

Soft skin, eager mouth, greedy hands—in that moment, she gave him everything he needed.

"I've been wanting you since I had you." He couldn't take fast enough. "Going crazy just to touch you again."

"I go crazy when you touch me. Don't stop touching me."

Heat and need and pleasure mixed to hammer in her heart, to shimmer under her skin. The more he gave her, the more she wanted, and reveled in her own appetite.

For him, just him, the hard hands, the tough, workingman's body. His mouth, patient and demanding at once, made her head spin.

He hiked her up by the hips, bringing her off the shower floor. That surprising strength, the hard grip with rough-palmed hands, combined to make her feel vulnerable, desirable, powerful.

Eyes on his, she wrapped her legs around his waist, dug her fingers into his shoulders for purchase.

Then she was crying out as he plunged into her. Shocked and thrilled and quivering for the next mad thrust.

Water striking, seeming to sizzle and spark against tile. Wet flesh slipping, sliding under her hands. And her own breathless gasps.

She felt weightless, wondrous, clinging to him as he whipped them both higher. Clung still as they tumbled into the blissful dark.

"Hold on," he managed, and groped to turn off the water. "Just hold on."

"Mmmm. I feel like I might slide right down the drain."

She sensed movement, stayed wrapped around him even when he dropped them both on the bed.

"I need a minute," he told her.

"Take your time."

"I meant to. But you were all wet and naked. I'll get towels in a minute."

"I bought a new dress."

"Did you?"

"Yeah, and I was going to put it on for dinner, then let you take it off me after. I didn't take my time, either."

The image brought on a small but definite surge of fresh energy. "Do you still have the dress?"

"Hanging in your laundry room."

He trailed a finger down her side. "You could go with your plan, and we'll both take our time."

"I like that idea. What I didn't think to bring was a hair dryer. I don't suppose you have one."

"Nope, sorry."

"Well, between the shower and the humidity and no hair tools, my hair's going to be as big as the moon. I must have bands and clips in my purse."

"I like your hair."

She curled into him. "I like yours. I like how the sun's starting to streak it. You'd pay good money for highlights like that at my granny's."

"Men who eat meat loaf don't have highlights."

She kissed his shoulder. "You do, and I'm getting those towels, and turning dinner back up."

"You turned it down?"

She gave him the slow, flirtatious, under-the-lashes smile Callie often did. "I wanted you in the shower, so dinner's going to take just a little longer than I'd planned."

"I like that you turned it down. I'll get the towels."

He rose, walked back into the bathroom. "What were you researching—or was that a ploy to get me wet and naked?"

"It wasn't a ploy, just a bonus." She smiled, took the towel he offered. "Griffin, my hair's like another person, and that other person also needs a towel."

"Right." He went in for another, and the beer she'd taken and set on the counter.

"So what were you researching?"

"Oh." She'd wrapped the first towel around her body, and now bent from the waist to gather her hair in the second. "You don't want to talk about that. It's all the other things. The Richard things."

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"I do." She straightened, somehow tucking parts of the towel into the whole in a way that fascinated him. "I want to talk to somebody about it who'd have some perspective on it. I thought I'd run all of it by Forrest, maybe tomorrow, even though he's probably thought of half of what I just thought of already, but . . ."

"Put on the new dress, and we'll talk about it while the loaf of meat is cooking."



She turned up the oven, put on the dress, banded back her hair so it wouldn't explode as it dried.

She joined him on the back porch, with wine, and just sat a moment, looking out at the mountains with their soft peaks and ridges rolling up into the sky.

"I was paying bills today when the kids were napping, and I thought about how Jimmy Harlow—it has to be him—would be looking at all my business. The lawyer stuff, the creditors, the accounts I've kept of what I was able to sell. I thought how embarrassing that is, a stranger poking around in all that, and told myself it was worth the embarrassment if it made him realize I don't have anything he wants."

"That's good thinking. Smart, positive."

"Then I was thinking more. He'd see all the photos I have on the laptop. I keep them all in files on there—I transferred them from my old one once I got it back from the authorities. I never got around to going through them all, deleting any from . . . from the time I was with Richard because there was just so much else to do. It occurred to me he'd—Harlow—he'd seen, especially from that first year or so, all the places we went. He could follow right along, like a map."

Griff nodded. "And so could you."

"Yes! That's what I realized. So could I. Griff, I think Richard took me all those places for a reason—I understand now he never did anything without an angle to play. I was like his disguise. I—and then when Callie came along, we—made him a family man. What if he stashed the jewelry or the stamps, or both, in one of those places, or sold some of it off as we went? And I started thinking more, once I started looking through the pictures, he was probably doing his work, too. On his honeymoon—or so I thought—then with his pregnant wife. Such a handy disguise, the pregnant wife."

"I'm going to agree with you, even though I know it has to burn some."

"I'm past the burning. Looking through the pictures, the letters I sent home, I started remembering what he'd always say to me—at least for the first months or year. Whenever we were going to meet somebody, he'd say, 'Just be yourself, Shelby.' How that would charm them. Not to worry, I didn't know anything about art or wine or fashion, that sort of thing. I was never nervous about meeting new people, but I started to be."

"He made you feel awkward, and . . . less."

"He did, and as the 'be yourself' started changing to how I shouldn't try to impress whoever it was because they'd just see through that. I guess I didn't have a lot to say, and that made a good disguise for him."

She sipped the wine, set that part aside for now.

"I thought maybe I could look at articles online, matching them with the time we were in a certain

place. Was there a robbery? A fraud? Even worse? And I had more to use because Mama saved all my letters and postcards. Every one. So I could read through, remind myself what we did, where we went in Paris or Madrid, who we met. I was full of details at first, so swept up in it all.”

“Does anything stick out now, when you look at it from what you know now?”

“A couple of things. Why was he in Memphis? I don’t believe he just stuck a pin in a map. But there he was, and only four days from when he robbed that woman—Lydia Redd Montville—and shot her son.”

“Four days after, according to the brunette, he double-crossed her and Harlow, ran off with the take.”

“That’s right. I think he must have had that take with him, or he’d stashed it. A bank box, maybe. He had his new identity, and he had a fat roll of cash. Or it seemed like it to me. And there I was, just primed to be dazzled and swept up.”

“Do you want my angle on that?”

She drew in a breath. “I guess I do.”

“The cops were looking for Jake Brimley, a man on his own. He had to know his partners would rat him out. He didn’t go into it without a plan in place. The new ID, the seed money, a change in looks. But he needed one more thing. He needed to be a couple.”

“I think that’s true.”

“He wouldn’t want someone like the brunette, someone who could play his game. He’d want innocence, youth, someone malleable and trusting. And ready to be dazzled.”

On that she could only nod, let out a long breath. “I sure fit the bill, right down to the ground.”

“He was a professional manipulator, Shelby. You didn’t stand a chance once he zeroed in on you. He ends up with a young, striking redhead, so he’s not only not traveling alone, he has someone people notice. Notice first, remember last. Where did he take you first?”

“He spent four days in Memphis. I’d never met anyone so charming, and exciting, too, the way he talked about all his travels. Our gig was over, and I planned to come home for a week or so before the next one. But when he said he had to go to New York, for business, and asked me to go with him, I went.”

She let out a half-laugh. “Just like that. It was just going to be a few days—an adventure, I thought. And it was thrilling.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Griff countered.

“We flew on a private plane. I’d never known anyone who’d been on a private plane.”

“No security, no luggage check. You can take anything you want on private, right?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. He almost always flew private. At the time it was just one more thrill. I’d never been anywhere like New York, and he was so sweet and charming and . . . well, he seemed dazzled by me. It wasn’t the money, Griff, though I can’t say I didn’t love that he’d buy me nice clothes and take me to restaurants. It was the sparkle of it, all of it. It was blinding.”

“He made sure of it.”

“Even now it’s hard to believe he didn’t mean the things he said back then. How I was what had been missing from his life. I wanted to be that—I wanted to be what had been missing from his life. So when he asked me not to go back, but to go with him to Dallas—more business—I went. I threw everything away and went with him.”

“Another major city.”

Closing her eyes, she nodded. “Yes. You see that pattern already? We always went to a big city, always stayed for only a few days. Sometimes he’d give me a wad of cash, tell me to go out shopping because he had meetings. Then he’d come back with flowers—white roses. He said how

he lived on the road or in the air right then, but how he was ready—now that he had me—to settle down somewhere.”

“Exactly what you’d want to hear. It was his business to read people, to be what they wanted or expected.”

She sat silent for a moment, appreciating the softening light, the whisper of air in the trees, the bubble of the stream.

“If I’d built a man I’d fall for, at that point in my life, it would have been Richard. The thing is, Griff, in those first few weeks, we crisscrossed the country.”

“Covering his tracks.”

“I think so, and I wonder, did he have places along the way where he left part of the take from that Florida robbery? If he had a bank box in Philadelphia, maybe he had others. Melinda Warren indicated that. He never seemed to run out of cash, so I think maybe he had those boxes to pull from, or he was stealing along the way.”

“Probably both.”

She shifted toward him, angling so they were face-to-face. “I think it was both. Looking through the pictures and letters, I remembered when we were in St. Louis, and I woke up to find him gone. He’d go out for walks—that’s what he said. Thinking time. He didn’t get back until nearly dawn, and he was excited. Just quivering with it. We left that morning. He rented a car and we drove to Kansas City. Just a quick stop, he said. He had a business associate to meet up with. And he pulled this Cartier watch out of his pocket, said he’d picked up a little something for me. A couple years later, I went to put it on, and it was gone. He got angry, said I’d been careless and lost it, but I hadn’t been careless. Anyway, I went on the Internet and I looked back, matching up the dates, and found there’d been a burglary that night in St. Louis. Jewelry again, about a quarter of a million in jewelry. And watches.”

“Steals them in St. Louis, fences them in Kansas City.”

“I guess he figured the watch was my cut—for a while. There were other times. I’m going to see if I can match them up like St. Louis.”

He reached over, gave her arm a rub. “What’ll that tell you?”

“I know I can’t change any of it.” She dropped her gaze to her hands, thought of her notes, her stacks of photos and postcards. “But maybe he did steal in those places, and at least I can give what I know, or think I might know, to the police. It feels like I’d be doing something.”

“You are doing something.”

“Right now I should be putting dinner on the table.” She rose. “I appreciate you listening.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” He walked in with her. “I’ve got a list of my own started.”

“What kind of list?”

“I don’t have the information you do.” He glanced at the memory box, the laptop. “I wouldn’t mind having a look at it. Mine’s pretty much a list of names, events, times. Warren, Harlow and Brimley—as he was known then. Miami robbery, the shooting, the double-cross. You come next. I didn’t realize it was only days after Miami, but had to figure it wasn’t long.”

“It’s like I was as tailor-made for him as I thought he was for me.” She put the meat loaf on a trivet, got out his only platter. Transferring the meat and vegetables, she glanced around as he’d gone quiet.

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to upset you more than all this already does, but I don’t think he just walked into the club where you were playing that night and decided, okay, she’s my cover.”

“What do you think?”

"I think he spent a couple days checking you out. You're a looker, Red, and I bet you were a looker at nineteen, on stage. Your name's right there, so he could look you up, ask a few questions. You're single, unattached."

Thoughtfully, she garnished the platter with curly parsley and rings of red and green peppers. "A bumpkin from a little mountain town in Tennessee."

"You've never been a bumpkin. But there you are—young, fresh, inexperienced, but game. It takes game to get on stage. He checks you out, then he moves in, feels you out. By then he's got a good sense what you're like, what you like. And he makes himself exactly what you like."

"What if I'd said no, no, I can't just run off to New York City with you?"

"He'd have moved on, found somebody who would. I'm sorry."

"No need to be. It's a relief in its way to feel like it was never really about me. It was never really personal. It makes it more of a puzzle to solve."

"Okay. Wow, that looks great."

Pleased, she set the completed platter on the eating counter. "My mama would tell you presentation counts. So even if it doesn't taste good, at least it looks good. Let's hope we have both. Sit down. I'll serve it up, and you can tell me what's next on your list."

"Houston, right?"

"It was Houston for about six months."

"Then Atlanta, Philadelphia, then Hilton Head. You said Richard never did anything without a reason. Why did he want you and Callie to go with him to Hilton Head?"

"You think he might have had some sort of deal going there, and we'd have been cover again." She plated a hefty slice of meat loaf with generous portions of potatoes and carrots. "Oh God, Griff, what if it wasn't an accident? What if the deal went bad, and he was killed? Dumped in the ocean?"

"You're probably never going to know the answer to that one. He put out an SOS, didn't he?"

"Somebody did, but . . . Griff, Forrest said Harlow escaped around Christmas. Richard—that was just a couple days after Christmas."

"Killing Richard wouldn't be a smart way to get to the millions."

"No, you're right. But there could've been a fight, an accident, and you're still right. I'm probably never going to know, at least unless they catch Harlow."

She put a smaller portion on her plate, sat. "It probably happened just the way the police think. He liked taking risks. Driving fast, skiing the fastest slopes, scuba diving, rock climbing, skydiving. He wouldn't have let a squall stop him. But it did. What else?"

"The PI. Maybe he's just what he claimed, but—" After the first bite of meat loaf, Griff stopped. "Wow." Sampled another bite. "Okay, that seals it. I'm keeping you. This meat loaf's better than my mom's—and if you tell her I said that, I'll swear you're a liar."

"I'd never insult another woman's meat loaf. You really like it?"

"Ask me again after I've licked the plate."

"Must be the beer. In the meat loaf."

"There's beer in the meat loaf?"

"An old family recipe."

"Definitely keeping you." He stopped eating long enough to cup a hand at the back of her neck, pull her over for a kiss.

"I haven't made meat loaf in years, so I'm glad it turned out."

"Prizewinning."

"Tell me what you think about that detective."

"Right. I fell into an altered state due to beer-laced meat loaf. So the PI, he tracks you to Philly,

follows you down here. He's either dedicated or he has an agenda. He's licensed and all that, and he swears the brunette wasn't his client. Forrest says he won't name the client."

"I didn't get that much out of Forrest."

Griff shrugged. "We were talking. He's alibied for the night of the murder, so there's no legit cause to hassle him. Yet."

Head cocked, she stabbed a bite of carrot. "You know more."

"Bits and pieces. I know Forrest says the widow and her son both deny hiring the PI. The insurance paid out, and they've put the whole ugly business behind them. The Miami police talked to them, and it looks like they're alibied for the murder, too."

"You're just a well of information."

"He's worried about you—Forrest. Mostly it's negative information, so I guess he didn't want to dump it on you."

"Knowing's better than not."

"Now you know. Most of the rest is pure speculation. We can speculate pretty confidently Harlow's been in the Ridge. It's no big leap to speculate he killed the brunette, if for no other reason than who else, and he had motive since she'd claimed he shot the widow's son—and maybe he did—but since the gun you found in Philadelphia in Richard's safe-deposit box was the one used, it's more logical to—"

"What? What did you say? The gun I found—Richard's gun?"

Griff decided he needed a long drink of wine. "Okay, listen, he—Forrest—just got the information on that today. The Miami cops did the ballistics, verified the gun you found in the bank fired the bullet that wounded the son. I happened to run into him this afternoon, and he told me."

"Richard. Richard shot someone."

"Maybe. Maybe he just grabbed the gun after, but . . . logical speculation. His gun, his shot. Harlow always denied it, and he'd never taken a hit on weapons charges before this."

"She lied. She was in love with Richard—Jake to her. At least in her way she loved him. She lied, even after he betrayed her. It wasn't just the money, the take, that had her tracking me here. She was jealous, angry and jealous that he'd spent those years with me. Had a child with me."

"Most likely." Since he'd come to the same conclusion, Griff nodded. "And more, a lot of people project. You know what I'm saying? She couldn't imagine you being with him and being uninvolved in the rest. She was a liar, a cheat, so by her reasoning, you had to be the same."

"And Jimmy Harlow would think that, too."

"I don't know."

"You're hedging back now," Shelby said when Griff went quiet. "Because you're worried all this upsets me."

"It does upset you."

"It does, but I want to hear what you think. I don't need to be protected against upset, Griffin. I've gotten through worse. Tell me what you think."

"All right. I think it's a pretty sure bet Harlow wasn't in love with Richard, so his thought pattern might be clearer on it than the brunette's. But he's on the list I'm making, in several columns. I'm guessing he's been staying somewhere close. Not as far out as Gatlinburg, like the brunette. Probably not the hotel. One of the campgrounds or cabins, one of the motels."

"So he can watch me."

He paused a minute, but he agreed with her. Knowing was better than not.

"Think about this. He didn't confront you, get in your face, make threats like the woman. He's playing a longer game, I think, so he wanted information. He wants to know who you are. It's more

likely he'll cut his losses once he does. Better to stay free than to be rich—especially when the rich part doesn't look promising.”

“I hope you're right.”

“Playing that longer game, he'd be smarter to take a good look at all the information, just like we are. He'd know Richard better, and it seems like he'd follow the lines if he can connect the dots.”

Just as Griff's thoughts and conclusions helped her connect dots. “We stayed the longest in Atlanta. But he planned to get out, and fast. I think he had a job there, a mark there, and wanted to pull out as soon as that job was done. I barely had time to pack once he told me. He went on ahead.”

“I didn't know that. He went north without you and Callie?”

“About ten days before. I was supposed to pack, and turn over the keys. I thought we'd bought that condo in Atlanta, but we'd rented, so it was just turn over the keys, and fly north. I almost didn't. I almost came home instead, but I thought maybe that's what we needed—that change. Maybe that would help set things right between us again, and he talked about how we'd have a big yard for Callie. And . . . how we'd have another child.”

“Playing you.”

“I see that now. Clear,” she added. “I found in his papers he had a vasectomy right after Callie was born. He made sure there wouldn't be another child.”

“I'm going to say I'm sorry, because that hurt you, and it's a beyond crappy thing to do. But—”

“For the best,” she finished. “I have to be grateful I didn't have another child with him. Playing me is what he did, all along, and in that lightning move to Philadelphia when he must have known I was thinking about leaving. Making it sound like the best thing for Callie nudged me into trying it, going, wanting to make it work.”

“A fresh start.”

“Yes, that's how he made it seem. I said we stayed longest in Atlanta, but I don't think he'd have left anything important there. I can see, looking back, he planned to get out well before he told me, so I think he'd plan to take whatever he had stowed away with him.”

He noted she only pretended to eat now, and wanted to erase it all, all the thoughts, the speculations, the points of view. But that wasn't what she wanted.

“You said he traveled a lot, without you.”

“More and more, especially after we settled in Atlanta. I just wanted to nest a bit, find a routine. It got so he didn't ask, just told me he had a business trip. Sometimes he didn't bother to tell me. I don't know for sure where he went. He may have told me the truth, he may not. But I know where I went with him, so that's a start.”

“You could dump all this on the cops.”

“I suppose I will, but I want to work my way through it first, try to understand it.”

“Good. So do I.”

“Why?”

“You,” he said immediately. “Callie. If you don't get that, I haven't been doing a good job.”

“You like fixing things.”

“I do. People ought to like doing what they're good at. And I like your face. I like your hair.”

He reached out for it, really wanted to take it out of the band she'd pulled it into.

“I like your meat loaf,” he added, polishing off the last of it on his plate. “I like taking Little Red on pizza dates. And I'm sunk when she gives me that flirty smile. So it's more than fixing things, Shelby. You're more than something to fix.”

Saying nothing, she rose to clear the plates.

"I've got those. You cooked. You cooked great."

While he cleared, she opened her laptop, did a search for a photo. "Tell me what you think."

She turned the computer around.

With a considering frown, Griff crossed back, leaned over and studied the photo of her.

Taken at one of the last functions she'd attended in Atlanta, it showed her and Richard in formal dress.

"You look gorgeous, and sad—I thought that the first time I saw you. You're smiling, but there's no light in it. And what happened to your hair? You look gorgeous, like I said, but not so much like Shelby. Where are the curls? Did you sell them?"

She gave him a long look, then tipped her head to his shoulder. "You know what I want to do?"

"What?"

"I want to take a walk around your backyard, watch the sun set, give you all sorts of unasked-for advice about where you should plant things, and put that arbor. Then I want you to take my new dress off me. That'll be easy as I'm not wearing a thing under it."

"Can we do that first?"

She laughed, shook her head. "Let me drive you a little crazy first."

"Already there," he told her as she took his hand to lead him out.

. . .

HE FOLLOWED HER HOME AGAIN, used the drive back for thinking time. Added to thinking time by taking Snickers on a long patrol, then putting a good hour into framing out a closet in one of the other demo'd bedrooms.

One step at a time, he told himself as he put his tools away, cleaned up.

He took the next step by sitting down at his computer and doing his own search for unsolved burglaries and fraud cases in Atlanta during the years Shelby had lived there.

A puzzle to solve, he thought. Never did anything without a reason, Griff reminded himself. So why had the fucker pulled up stakes in Atlanta, and so abruptly?

It might be interesting to find out.

. . .

WHILE GRIFF RAN HIS SEARCHES, Jimmy Harlow worked on a laptop he'd lifted from a trade show in Tampa. The busy hotel and half-drunk conventioners in the hotel bars had been prime picking.

He'd walked out with the laptop—fully loaded and in a nicely padded travel bag—just over two thousand in cash, two iPhones and the keys to a Chevy Suburban he drove directly to a chop shop.

He bought a new ID—it paid to have contacts—and stole a piece-of-shit Ford he drove over the Georgia border to an acquaintance who bought it for five hundred flat.

He lay low for a while, growing a beard, growing out his hair, dying both, building up his cash the old-fashioned way. He picked pockets, pulled some minor burglaries, moved on.

He made his way to Atlanta, taking a winding route, staying in fleabag motels, stealing the occasional car—a skill learned and honed in his youth. In a side trip to New Orleans, he mugged and beat the crap out of a drug dealer who procured for a high school in the Ninth Ward.

He strongly disapproved of selling drugs to minors.

He also picked up a solid Toyota 4Runner outside a bar in Baton Rouge, which he drove to yet another chop shop.

He paid to have it reVINed, repainted, and with the help of another contact, forged the

paperwork to match his new ID.

He watched the news obsessively, used the laptop to scan for the manhunt.

He trimmed his beard, bought easy, casual clothes—and broke them in so none of them looked new. He used self-tanner religiously to rid himself of prison pallor.

He bought maps, even sprang for a decent Canon digital camera, and slapped a few stickers on the truck from state parks, as any tourist might do.

He ate what he wanted, when he wanted. Slept when he was tired, got up and going when he wasn't.

Every day of the years he'd spent in prison he'd dreamed of just that. Freedom. But he'd dreamed of what he'd do with that freedom.

He had no illusion of honor among thieves—he'd been one too long. But betrayals required payback. And payback drove him.

It drove him to Atlanta, where inquiries in the right ears, grease in the right palms, gave him information.

He stole the .25 from a split-level in Marietta, where some idiot had it unsecured in the nightstand, and took the 9mm from a desk drawer in the home office.

Kids in the house, too, he'd thought at the time as he'd done a sweep of a boy's room, a girl's room. Hell, he was saving lives here.

He'd left the kids the Xbox, but had taken the iPads, another laptop, the cash in the freezer, a diamond tennis bracelet, diamond studs, the cash rolled up in the jewelry box and, because they fit, a pair of sturdy hiking boots.

By the time he arrived in Villanova, the woman who'd hooked up with Jake was gone.

He picked the lockbox, took himself on a tour. Jake had done real well for himself, and that burned bitter in his throat.

He contacted the realtor using his drop phone, discovered it was a short sale. So maybe not so well after all.

He spent a few days in the area to get a better sense of things, then worked his way down to Tennessee.

He'd rented a cabin a good ten miles from Rendezvous Ridge—a three-month, under-the-table cash deal with the owner. He was Milo Kestlering here, out of Tallahassee, where he'd been middle management for a wholesale food company. Divorced, no kids.

He had plenty of filler to his new background if he needed it, but the landlord had been happy to take his money.

He had no contacts here, and had to be careful. More careful with cops sniffing around since Melinda's murder.

Stupidity had killed her, in Harlow's opinion. Maybe prison had dulled her edge, but either way, she wasn't a factor anymore.

The redhead now, that was another matter. But he had what he wanted, for now. Enough to keep him busy, for now.

Cut it close at the boyfriend's place, he thought. Pushed it, he admitted. Always better to go in an empty house—but the door was unlocked, and the laptop right there.

Still, he'd gotten the data.

He'd taken a risk walking right up to the redhead on the street, but he'd gotten what he wanted there, too. More, he'd seen no recognition in her eyes when she looked at him.

He wouldn't have figured her for Jake's type, but maybe that had been the point.

Plenty to think about there, but for tonight, he had the numbers right in front of him. He had

pictures, he had e-mails. He had lives spread out on the screen.

He'd figure out what to do with them.

He'd figure out what to do about them.



The wild rhododendrons burst into bloom along the banks of streams, flashed and flamed their way up the slopes. In the high country the starry yellow blossoms of bluebeard lily peeked out from fanning ferns going thick and green.

She took Callie on hikes and hunts to find them when she could, or just to sit and listen to the music of bluebirds and juncos. Once, from a safe distance, she let her girl share the wonder of watching a bear fish in a tumbling stream before he lumbered off into the green.

Callie celebrated her fourth birthday in the backyard of the house where her mother had grown up, with friends her own age, with family, with people who cared about her.

For Shelby it was the shiniest gift in the pile.

There was a chocolate cake shaped like a castle with all the characters from *Shrek* scattered around it, and games, and gifts, balloons and streamers.

"It's the happiest birthday she's ever had."

Viola sat, her great-grandson in her arms, and watched the kids play on one of Callie's treasured gifts. A Slip 'n Slide.

"She's getting old enough to know what's what about a birthday now."

"It's more than that, Granny."

Viola nodded. "It's more than that. Does she ever ask about her father?"

"She doesn't. She hasn't said a word about him since we came home. It's like she's forgotten him, and I don't know if that's right or wrong."

"She's happy. She'll have questions one day, and you'll have to answer them, but she's happy. She sure has a love affair going on with Griff."

Shelby smiled over to where a soaking wet Callie clung to Griff's legs. "She does."

"How about you?"

"I can't deny we've got something going, and since where we are makes *me* happy, I'm not thinking too much where we're going to end up."

"You've lost most of the sad, worried look behind your eyes. You've got my eyes—through me, to Ada Mae, to you, and on to Callie," Viola pointed out. "Don't think I can't read them."

"I'd say the sad's gone, and the worry's lessened. Are you going to give up that baby and give somebody else a chance?"

Viola laid a kiss on Beau's forehead. "Here you go. Sleeping like an angel right through all this noise. Go ahead and take him out in the sun for a few minutes. Not too long now, but I expect some vitamin D's good for him."

It felt wonderful to have a baby in her arms again, to feel the weight and the warmth, to smell the down of his hair. She looked over at her daughter. Such a big girl now, sprouting like a weed. And the yearning pulled and tugged inside her as Beau waved a hand in the air in his sleep.

When Clay, nearly as wet as the kids, walked over, she shook her head. “Don’t you even think about stealing this baby from me. You’re too wet to take him. Besides, I’ve barely had my turn.”

“I figured I wouldn’t get much chance to hold him today.”

“He favors you, Clay.”

“That’s what Mama says.”

“She’s right.”

“I’m after a beer—Gilly’s driving. You want one?”

“I’m sticking with lemonade until this is over.”

Still he put an arm around her shoulders, turned her so they walked to the big tub holding the beer. “Forrest filled me in on what’s going on with you.”

“I don’t want you to worry about any of that. You have a new baby to think about, not to mention Gilly and Jackson.”

He kept his arm around her. He had a way of hugging you in, and always had, Shelby thought, that made her feel cherished. “I’ve got plenty of room for my sister in my thinking-about book. Nobody who looks like this Harlow character’s come by work. I haven’t seen anybody like that around the neighborhood. I know the police are still looking—that’s what they have to do. But he’s most likely gone. Even so.”

He pulled out a beer, popped off the cap. “You be careful, Shelby. I feel better knowing Griff’s looking out for you.”

Instantly the shoulders he’d soothed tightened. “I’ve done a pretty good job looking out for myself.”

After a gulp of beer, Clay tapped a finger to her nose—another life-long habit. “Don’t get your nose out of joint. I like knowing you can take care of yourself. I like it better Griff’s looking out for you, too, so there’s no point getting pissy about it.”

“I’m not getting—” The baby stirred, let out a plaintive cry.

Clay glanced at his watch. “Like clockwork. Feeding time.”

“I’ll take him to Gilly.”

She *wasn’t* pissy, Shelby thought. A little annoyed, yes, and entitled to be. She’d gotten herself into a mess, no question about it, but she’d also put considerable time, effort and creativity into pulling herself and her child out of that mess.

She didn’t want to be “looked after.” It slid too close to what she’d let happen before. Hadn’t she allowed Richard to “look after” her? To make all the decisions, run the show, lead her where he wanted her to go?

It wouldn’t happen again. And she was going to make damn sure she showed her now four-year-old daughter what a woman could do if she worked hard enough, stood straight enough.

If she looked after herself.

. . .

LATER, SHE DEALT with party debris, carting in leftovers, bagging up trash. In the kitchen her mother and grandmother put the kitchen to rights.

“I’m making up a big batch of frozen margaritas,” Ada Mae announced. “Mama and I have a yen for some.”

“I could have a yen for a frozen margarita.”

“Forrest and your daddy will probably stick with beer.” While she worked, Ada Mae peered out the window, nodded. “Looks like they’ve about got the extra chairs and picnic tables put away. I

don't know what Matt and Griff have a yen for, but expect Emma Kate might join our margarita party. You ought to ask what they'd like to have."

"I will."

"Or maybe the four of you want to go on out for a while. Oh, look how sweet Griff is with Callie." Ada Mae stopped to beam out the window now. "He's tying balloons on her wrists."

"She thinks if there's enough of them on her, she'll lift right off the ground."

"And see there? He's lifting her up, letting her pretend she's flying. That man's born to be a daddy. Some are," she said as she got out her big blender. "Your brother Clay, for one. He's so good with his babies. I wish they could've stayed awhile longer, but little Beau needed to go home, and Jackson was ready to fall asleep standing up. Callie, now, she's still got energy enough."

"Chocolate cake, and the excitement. She'll be spinning until bedtime."

"She sure does dote on Griff, and he right back on her. You can tell a man's character by the way he treats children and animals, I say. You've got a winner there, Shelby. One who's going to look after you right."

"Ada Mae," Viola said under her breath, casting her eyes heavenward even as Shelby spoke up.

"I'm looking after me."

"Of course you are, honey! Just look what a bright, sweet child you've raised, and on your own, too. It sure eases my worries seeing you with such a good man—fine-looking, too. We met some of his people when they came down to visit and help him with the old Tripplehorn place. Fine, good people. You should go on out and ask him to Sunday dinner."

Shelby's heart began to throb. She knew what it meant when a southern woman talked about lineage and Sunday dinners.

"Mama, I've only been seeing Griff for a couple months."

"He puts a light in you." Cheerful, oblivious, Ada Mae dumped generous scoops of ice in the blender with the tequila and margarita mix. "Puts one in your baby girl, too. And Lord knows he looks at you like you're the double chocolate cream in the candy box. He's got an easy way with friends and family, *and* has his own business. You don't want to let a man like that slip away."

"Let me help you with that, Ada Mae," Viola said, and hit the switch on the blender to drown out any more words.

Shelby didn't ask him to Sunday dinner, or suggest they go out with Matt and Emma Kate. She told herself she wasn't avoiding him over the next several days—just that she had a lot to see to. Just that she had a point to make that she *could* see to her own.

She did just that with Callie off on a playdate with a new friend, and the afternoon free.

She took time to work on her next playlist—circling back to the second round of the fifties. And with the raise she'd gotten the week before at both jobs, she opted to funnel that extra into a single credit card payment.

If she kept being careful—didn't buy any more new dresses no matter what her mama said—she should have another paid off by her own birthday in November.

That would be the best gift she could ask for.

At the knock on the front door, she closed the laptop, went down to answer.

Griff stood on the porch, smiled at her. "Hey."

"Hey back." She tried to fight off the flutter in her belly, and politely stepped back to let him in—stepped back just enough to avoid a hello kiss.

"Your mother wants shelves in the laundry room."

"She has shelves in the laundry room."

"She wants more."

"That sounds like Mama. I'll show you."

"How's it going?"

"Good. Busy, like I said before. I was just working on the next playlist, and dealing with paperwork. I never seem to dig out from under paperwork. Here you go. See? Shelves."

"Uh-huh." He stepped into the room off the kitchen, scanned the setup. "Decent size. Not much natural light. Plenty of shelves, but— She'd do better with cabinets over the washer and dryer. It's half a mudroom, isn't it?"

Drawn in, despite herself, on the idea of redesign, she frowned at the space. "I guess you could say it is. She and Daddy keep their gardening shoes and such in here, and winter boots, that kind of thing."

"She'd do better taking out those shelves there, putting in a bench with open cubbies under it for shoes and boots. Sit down, take your shoes off. Sit down, put your shoes on."

"It's a better use of it, isn't it? She'd probably like that idea."

"Shelves over that—high enough you wouldn't rap your head on them. A longer folding counter under the window. If it were mine, I'd widen that window, bring in more light. Anyway, longer counter with the sink on the far side instead of the middle, keep the hanging rod over it, but put base cabinets with pull-out shelves under it."

He shrugged. "Or she could just get open corner shelves over there and be done with it. I'll do some measuring."

"All right. I'll leave you to that."

"Do we have a problem?" he asked as he took his tape measure and pencil out of his tool belt, pulled out his notebook.

"A problem? No. Why?"

"Because this is the first time I've seen you since Callie's birthday party, and you're being pretty careful to keep at least a foot away from me."

"I've just had a lot to see to—like I said."

He took some measurements, wrote down some figures. "Don't bullshit me, Shelby. It's insulting."

"I'm not. I really have had a lot to deal with." But he was right, it was insulting. "And maybe I needed to take a breath along with it. That's all."

"Okay." He wrote down something else, then those canny green eyes lifted, zeroed in on hers. "Did I do something that felt like I was putting pressure on you?"

"No, you didn't—you haven't. I just needed to . . . Are you looking out for me, Griffin?"

He wrote down more numbers, did a quick sketch, then lowered the pad to look at her again. "Sure I am."

"I can look after myself." Since it was true, she didn't care how snippy or defensive it sounded. "I need to look after myself. I can't—just won't—get caught up again so I let somebody take over."

She saw it in his eyes, the flash of temper, a surprising spark of heat.

"You know, I'm all about accurate measurements. You screw up there, you screw up everything. If you want to measure yourself by Richard, by what was, that's your baggage, Shelby. I hope you work that out. But if you're going to measure me by him, that's going to piss me off."

"I'm not. Exactly. What the hell else do I have to measure with? Six months ago I thought I was married."

"Well, you weren't."

He said it so flatly she couldn't say why the words made her wince.

"And it seems to me you've done a good job tearing down those walls, starting to build things in

the way it works for you now. If this doesn't work for you, this you and me? That's going to be tough to take because I'm in love with you. But being in love with you doesn't mean I'll stand here and let you compare me to the son of a bitch who lied to you, who used you, who broke your trust and your spirit. I won't stand for that. And I won't be pushed away so you can fucking breathe because I'm looking out for you the same way anybody who gave a rat's ass would."

He shoved the measuring tape back in the pocket of his tool belt. "Work out what you need to work out. I'll get back to your mother."

He walked right by her and away before she could begin to gather herself. He'd never raised his voice—in fact his tone had been so calm it chilled her, and she felt thoroughly thrashed.

He couldn't say those things, couldn't talk to her that way, then just leave. He'd started a fight, that's what he'd done, and then left before she could block or toss a punch of her own.

She didn't have to put up with that.

She marched out of the laundry room—and oh, she intended to have a few choice words for her mama because if this didn't smack of an Ada Mae setup so she'd have time alone with her mama's choice of the man of her daughter's dreams, she didn't know Ada Mae Donahue Pomeroy.

And she damn well did.

Frustratingly, she'd been too slow or Griff had been too quick, because she heard his truck drive off before she made it to the front door.

That was fine, she told herself, pacing back and forth, then stomping up the stairs. That was likely for the best. She'd just get herself calm again before she said her piece. Whatever that piece might be.

Because her cheeks felt hot, she went into the bathroom, splashed cool water on her face. Her brain still felt hot, but that would simmer down, too.

She'd made him seriously angry, and she'd never seen him seriously angry.

Because they'd only been seeing each other a couple of months, she reminded herself. She'd been right to slow things down; she'd been right to take a step or two back.

Then she pressed her face into the towel.

He'd said he was in love with her. And that just filled her up and emptied her out again. It made her want to shake, it made her want to weep. It made her want to hold onto him as if her life depended on it.

She couldn't think about that now, just couldn't. She was too worked up to think about that. And he was too mad to think straight anyway.

She'd go for a walk, that's what she'd do. Go for a walk and clear her hot head. And she'd talk to Emma Kate. She really needed to talk to Emma Kate.

She started downstairs again, a little desperate to get out of the house. When she saw the front door open, she all but ran.

"Now you listen," she began, then stopped dead when she saw Forrest, and the two black-suited men behind him.

"Somebody got your red up," he said easily. And since he'd seen Griff's truck heading into town from this direction, he could deduce who'd gotten her red up.

"I was just . . . going for a walk."

"That's going to have to wait. What we have here is the FBI special agents Boxwood and Landry. They need a conversation."

"Oh. All right. I—"

"Could use something cold," Forrest continued.

"Of course. Y'all go ahead and sit down. I'll be right back."

He'd sent her off to give her a chance to compose herself, so she did her best to follow through. It had to be bad, she thought while she filled glasses with ice and tea, added out of habit sprigs of her mother's mint. It had to be bad to bring the FBI to the house. She set the glasses on a tray, added the little pale blue napkins, started to get out a plate for the frosted cookies her mother served to unexpected company.

The FBI wasn't company, she thought, and picked up the tray as it was.

She heard Forrest talking, something about white-water rafting and how his brother Clay would give them a hell of a ride if they had time for one.

The tall agent rose when she came in, took the tray from her.

"Appreciate it," he said, and she heard Georgia in his voice.

Tall, she noted, lean to the point of gangly, dark skin and eyes, and dark hair cropped close to the scalp.

He set the tray down, held out a hand. "Special Agent Martin Landry. My partner Special Agent Roland Boxwood. We appreciate you speaking with us."

"It's about Richard. It has to be about Richard." She looked from Landry to the other agent.

Boxwood had more girth, more muscle. He was as light as Landry was dark, with Scandinavian blond hair, blue-ice eyes.

"Sit down, Shelby." Forrest took her hand, drew her down on the couch with him. "Our federal friends here flew in from Atlanta today."

"Atlanta," she murmured.

"They've given me the go-ahead to bring you up to date." He gave her leg a quick rub. "I sent what you put together, what Griff put together, what I put together. I boiled that all down and sent it to the police in Miami, in Atlanta, in Philadelphia—and so on. And as the so-ons made a lot of sending, I sent the boiled-down to the FBI."

"You said you were . . . you said that's what you'd do."

"That's right. Now, their boss sent these agents down to talk to you directly."

When she nodded, Landry leaned forward. "Ms. Foxworth—"

"I wasn't ever, I only thought . . . It's Pomeroy. Please."

"Ms. Pomeroy, you sold some watches last February. To Easterfield on Liberty, in Philadelphia."

"Yes. Richard had several watches, so I . . ." She closed her eyes. "They were stolen, weren't they? I should've known, I should've realized. The man who helped me, at the store, he wouldn't have known. He was just helping me. I'll pay back the money. I don't . . ." She didn't have the money. Even if she wiped out the savings she'd kept—the house fund—she didn't have enough. "If I could have a little time, I'll pay back the money."

"Don't worry about that, Shelby."

Fiercely, she shook her head at Forrest. "He stole them, and I sold them. I used the money. It's not right."

"There are other items." Boxwood spoke. He had a gravelly voice that struck Shelby as threatening. "Cuff links, earrings, an antique hair clip."

"I have the hair clip! I didn't think it was worth anything, so I didn't try to sell it. I'll get it."

"Just sit, Shelby." Forrest pressed a hand on her leg. "Just sit for now."

"All of these items—the ones you sold in Pennsylvania," Boxwood continued, "match items reported stolen in burglaries in the Atlanta area from May of 2011 to September of 2014."

"More than one," she said softly. "More than one burglary."

"Numerous other items were reported stolen from these cases. We'd like you to look at photographs."

"Yes, I'll look. Of course. We didn't move to Atlanta until the fall of 2011. We didn't live there in May, but . . . He took trips. I don't know . . ."

"You lived there in April of 2012," Boxwood added.

"Yes. We lived there."

"Can you tell us where you were on April thirteenth of that year?"

"I . . . No. I'm sorry, I don't know. That was over three years ago."

"Think about it," Forrest said easily, though his hand stayed light on her thigh. "That was just a couple days before Easter. It was Good Friday."

"Oh. Easter, and Callie would have been nearly a year old. I got her an outfit, a bonnet and everything. I took her for photographs that Friday. I have them in her album. They had props—little chicks and stuffed bunnies. Baskets and colored eggs. I sent copies to Mama, and to Granny."

"I remember those pictures."

"That was Friday afternoon. I don't remember what time, exactly. It was at this place called Kidography. It was such a clever name. I remember because I took Callie back for other pictures, the photographer—her name was Tate . . . Tate—oh God—Tate Mitchell. I'm sure of it, I'm sure that's the right name. And after, that first time on the Friday before Easter, I changed Callie into play clothes and took her for ice cream as a treat. I'd bribed her with that, told her if she was a good girl I'd take her for ice cream—even that young she knew the word 'ice cream.' We went to Morelli's."

"Best ice cream in Atlanta," Landry said.

"You've been there? Callie loved going there. We went to Morelli's, and I let her spoil her dinner. I remember that, I remember thinking, Oh well, she's not going to want a good dinner now, so it had to be late afternoon."

"What about that evening, that night?" Boxwood prompted.

"Let me think." She pressed her fingers to her eyes. "Let me try to go back and see it. There was traffic—I remember that—and how Callie fell asleep in the car. I was worried, a little, that I wouldn't get home before Richard. He didn't like if he didn't know where I was. I thought about texting him, but I didn't. He didn't like me to call or text him when he was working."

Lowering her hands, she took a settling breath. "We got home, I think it must have been around six or so. Charlene—she did some cooking and light housekeeping for us—but she had the long weekend off. So Charlene wasn't there, and I was glad to have the condo to myself. I liked Charlene fine, I don't mean to say I didn't like her."

"But the place was quiet, just you and your daughter."

She nodded at Landry. "Yes, that's it. Callie was a little cranky, what with the photos, the ice cream, the nap in the car, but I settled her down with Fifi—her stuffed dog—and some blocks. She liked these blocks that made noise. I hurried to put dinner together. I swear I can't remember what I fixed, but I had it together by seven or seven-thirty, and I was relieved. But he was late. Richard. I put it in the warmer, and I got Callie her meal, coaxed her to eat a little, and she did since I'd waited until she'd worked off that ice cream. I gave her a bath, and read her a story, and put her to bed.

"I did text Richard then, just to say his dinner was in the refrigerator, and if I was in bed already, he could heat it up. I was angry, I guess, but tired, too."

She rubbed at her temple, rubbed and rubbed as she tried to see it all again.

"I went to bed not long after Callie was down. I never heard him come in. I saw him in the morning. I looked in, and saw he'd slept in the guest room."

It seemed so personal, where he'd slept, she had to fight off a blush.

"He, ah, used the guest room sometimes if he got in late. I fixed breakfast for Callie, and I put eggs on to boil. We'd dye eggs for Easter later that day. He didn't get up till close to noon, and he

was in a fine mood. I remember that, too, clear now, as he was in such a fine mood, all jokey and excited. He made Callie laugh, I remember. I guess he could see I was a little put out, and he said something—I don't remember what because he always had some excuse. Late meetings, couldn't get away. Whatever it was, then he . . .”

Trailing off, she gripped her hands together, tight, tight. “Oh God, the hair clip. He said, here was a little something for Easter, and he gave me the clip. He said I should go fix my hair, and get Callie dressed up. He was taking his ladies out for lunch. He hardly ever wanted to take Callie anywhere, and she was so happy about it, I set being put out aside. I did exactly what he wanted. I'd gotten used to doing what he wanted. The hair clip.” She pressed her lips together. “He'd stolen it, then he gave it to me, like you give a Milk-Bone to a dog.”

She took a long breath. “I guess you can check on the time of the photos and all, but I can't prove the rest. Somebody probably saw me come in with Callie, but I don't see why they'd remember after so much time. And no one was home. If you think I was with Richard, if you think I was part of what he did, I can't prove I wasn't.”

“That's a lot of detail on a day that long ago,” Boxwood pointed out.

“It was Callie's first Easter, and the first professional photographs. I'd wanted a family photo done, after she was born, but Richard never had time. So this was special. She—Tate—she took one of the two of us, and I sent it to my parents, special. She'd taken her bonnet off—Callie—and her hair'd gone everywhere, like mine would. I hadn't gotten to the salon to have mine straightened the way Richard liked it. It's a favorite photograph of mine.”

She rose, took it from the mantel. “This is the one we had taken that Friday before Easter.”

“She sure looks like her mama,” Landry commented.

“When it comes to Callie,” Forrest put in, “Shelby remembers.”

“I guess that's true. Especially the firsts.” She set the photo on the mantel again, sat back beside Forrest.

“Oh!” Struck, she came half off the sofa before Forrest nudged her back again. “I wrote it in her baby book. I wrote about the photographs, and put one of them in there. I can get it.”

“I don't think that's necessary, for now, Ms. Pomeroy.”

“It's not easy to admit you were stupid,” she said carefully, “that you were duped. I never knew he was stealing, he was cheating people, and I was living in that fancy condo, I had all those clothes, and someone to help with the work because he stole and he cheated. I can't go back and change it. Should I get the hair clip? I know just where it is. You could give it back to whoever he stole it from.”

“We believe he stole the hair clip, one of the watches you sold, and other items valued at approximately sixty-five thousand dollars from Amanda Lucern Bryce, of Buckhead. Her daughter found her on Saturday afternoon, April 14, 2012.”

“Found her?”

“She'd fallen—or been pushed—down the stairs of her home. Her neck was broken in the fall.”

The blood drained out of Shelby's face as she stared at Boxwood. “She's dead? She was killed? Richard . . . He was in such a good mood. He made Callie laugh. I'm sorry, I need a minute.” She rose abruptly on legs that shook. “Excuse me.”

She rushed to the powder room, just leaned over the sink. Her stomach pitched and roiled, but she wouldn't be sick. She would not be sick.

She would fight that off. She only had to breathe. Only had to take a few minutes and breathe, then she could deal with what came next.

“Shelby.” Forrest rapped on the door.

"I just need a minute."

"I'm coming in."

"I need a damn minute," she snapped when he opened the door, then she just walked into his arms. "Oh God, oh God, Forrest. He took us out to lunch. He left that woman lying there, the one he stole from, and he came home and went to bed. Then he took us out to lunch. He ordered champagne. He was *celebrating*. He was celebrating, and he'd left that woman lying there for her daughter to find."

"I know it. I know it, Shelby." He stroked her hair, swayed with her a little. "One day it would've been you. I know that, too."

"How could I have not seen what he was?"

"You didn't. And you're not the only one who didn't. Nobody thinks you were part of this."

"You're my brother, of course you don't think so."

"Nobody," he repeated, and drew her back to look in her eyes. "They have to do what they do. You're going to look at pictures of stolen articles, of people he stole from. You'll tell them whatever you know. That's all you can do so that's what you'll do."

"I want to help. The clothes on my back, Forrest, the clothes I put on my baby. It makes me sick knowing where they came from."

"Tell me where the hair clip is. I'll get it."

"The top right drawer of the vanity in the bathroom I share with Callie. I have a box in there. All my hair clips are in it. It's mother-of-pearl with little blue and white stones. I thought it was fake, Forrest. I never thought—it's a hair clip, so I never gave it a thought."

"Don't worry about it. If you don't want to talk to them anymore now, I'll tell them you're done."

"No, I want to tell them whatever I know. Whatever I know I didn't know. I'll go back in now."

"When you've had enough, you just say."

"I want it over."

She went back, and once again Landry stood.

"I'm sorry," she began.

"Don't apologize. We appreciate your cooperation, Ms. Pomeroy."

She sat, picked up the tea. Too much of the ice had melted, but it was cool enough, and wet enough. "Did he kill other people? Do you know?"

"It's possible."

"He was never violent with me or Callie. If he had been . . . that would have been different. He didn't pay much mind to her at all, and less and less to me. He'd say things, cruel things sometimes, to me, but he was never violent."

Carefully, she set the glass down again. "I never saw what he was. If I had I would never have let him near my baby. I hope you can believe that. Callie's going to be home in about an hour. If we're not done, I need us to go somewhere else, or wait until tomorrow. I don't want her to hear any of this. She just turned four."

"That's not a problem."

"If you could give me another date. If I could figure out something around it, a holiday or a doctor's appointment, something that sticks out, I might be able to tell you what I was doing. What he was doing. I don't know what else I can do to help. I want to help."

"Let's stick with Atlanta for now, work forward." Landry nodded at Boxwood.

"August eighth, same year," Boxwood said.

"My daddy's birthday is August ninth, and Forrest was born on August fifth. We always had a double birthday party, the Saturday or Sunday closest. I wanted to come. I hadn't been home in a

while, and I wanted Callie to visit her family. Richard said no. We had a charity gala to attend on that Saturday, and I couldn't go running off to Daddy. I was his wife, and expected to attend, and act like I belonged. It was at the Ritz-Carlton, in Buckhead."

"Saturday, August eighth, 2012, six figures' worth of jewelry and rare stamps were stolen from the home of Ira and Gloria Hamburg. They had attended a gala at the Ritz that night."

"Like in Florida," Shelby added. "Jewelry and stamps. It must've been like a . . . specialty of his."

"You could say that." Landry sat back. "Tell us about that evening."



She'd known the Hamburgs, a little, had attended a dinner party in their home. Richard had played golf with Ira Hamburg a few times, and she and Richard had hosted them at the country club. They'd socialized at other galas or fund-raisers now and then.

It wasn't hard to remember some of the details of that particular night as she'd pictured her family here, in this house, celebrating birthdays—and had missed them.

She remembered Richard bringing her a glass of champagne at one point and telling her, impatiently, to mingle, for God's sake, and stop sulking. He was going outside for a bit to have a cigar and talk some business with a couple of potential clients.

She couldn't say how long she'd mingled, wandered, put bids on a couple of items in the silent auction as he'd instructed her to do. It could've been as much as an hour, she supposed.

"He was in a good mood when he found me—said he'd been hunting for me, and why didn't we go check on our bids before the auction closed. I thought he'd gotten some business because he was in a better mood, and then he put a big bid on this wine package."

"The Hamburgs live less than a mile from the hotel," Boxwood pointed out.

"I know it."

They asked her about other nights, days, times. Some she could remember, others were lost in a fog. From the photographs, she recognized cuff links, the diamond studs, a three-strand diamond and emerald bracelet Richard had given her once, then accused her of losing when it disappeared from her jewelry box.

Forrest lingered after the FBI stepped out.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No, no, I'm all right. Mama will be back with Callie soon. Just . . . do they believe me? Don't answer as my brother, but as a police officer."

"They believe you. They played a version of good cop/bad cop with Boxwood trying to trip you up here and there, giving you the hard eye. But they both believed you. You were helpful, Shelby. The best thing now is to put it aside. Let the FBI do what they do."

"I sold stolen property."

"You didn't know it was stolen, had no reason to think it had been. We'll work that out."

"How could I not see—how can they believe I didn't know? I swear, if I didn't know I didn't know, I wouldn't believe me."

"The BTK killer had a wife and raised two children, lived in a community, went to church. None of them knew what he was. Some people wear masks well, Shelby, know how to compartmentalize beyond what's normal."

"He wasn't right, was he? I mean, Richard couldn't have been right inside to be able to do all he did."

“The police officer’s telling you he was a sociopath, and a shrink would likely have a lot of fancy terms for what he was. But no, he wasn’t right. That’s done—you’re never going back to that. You’re going to have to deal with some of it, but mostly? You need to look at the here and now, and the future.”

“I’ve been trying to. What was just won’t let go. I keep finding out more.”

“You’re a Pomeroy with MacNee in your blood. You’ll stand up to it. You call me, you hear, if you need me.”

“I will. I don’t know what I’d’ve done if you hadn’t been with me today.”

“That’s just one more thing you never have to worry about again.”

Shelby thought if the whole of the Ridge didn’t know about the FBI, then they soon would. So she told her parents everything as soon as she could.

The very next morning before the first customer came into the salon, she told her grandmother and the rest of the staff.

“I thought y’all should know.”

“Ada Mae called me last night, told me all this,” Viola began. “I’ll tell you what I told her. None of this is your fault, not a bit. And we can look at that storm as the right hand of God making sure you and Callie were well rid of the son of a bitch.”

“I’d rather he wasn’t dead,” Shelby said after a minute. “I’d rather he was alive so I could tell him what I think of him. I hate that he died believing I was nothing. I hate that he died knowing I never had an inkling what he’d done.”

“My sister’s ex kept a woman over in Sweetwater for six years,” Vonnie piped up. “Had an apartment there with her and everything. None of us knew a thing about it—and that man went to the Lutheran church every Sunday he was in town. Coached Little League and belonged to the Elks Club. Lydia might never have known if the woman in Sweetwater hadn’t called her up and told her all of it after *she* found out Lorne had taken up with a third woman.”

Vonnie shrugged. “I guess it’s not the same thing, but I’m just saying, we all thought the world of Lorne until we knew to think different.”

“Thank you, Vonnie. I’m sorry for your sister, but I guess that makes me feel better.”

“We don’t always know somebody the way we think we know them.” Crystal readied her station for her first appointment. “My good friend Bernadette’s cousin down in Fayetteville? Why, her husband embezzled twelve thousand dollars from her daddy’s hardware business before they found out. Bernadette’s cousin stayed with him after, too. And if you ask me, anybody who’d steal from family isn’t worth spit.”

“Hell, that ain’t nothing,” Lorilee fisted her hands on her hips. “I almost married Lucas John Babbott—y’all remember. About ten years back I was ready to walk down the aisle with that man. Something just said, Don’t do it, Lorilee, so I didn’t, but it was close. And I found out he’d inherited his granddaddy’s cabin over by Elkmont. You know what he was doing in it? That man was cooking meth, and now he’s in jail.”

Others picked up the theme, ran with it. Viola stepped over, put an arm around Shelby’s waist. “People ask me, don’t you want to retire, Vi? You and Jack could go traveling, or you could sit on the porch and sip lemonade all day. And I think, Why, I wouldn’t step away from this place for all the tea in China. Where else are you going to get such entertainment—and add to the till while you do?”

She kissed Shelby’s cheek. “You did right telling everybody straight-out.”

“It’s the same as family.”

“It’s just the same. Crystal! I see your nine-o’clock crossing the street. You girls get on to work

now.”

The next day she met Emma Kate for a drink after work—and after she’d spent a solid hour with Bitsy.

“I’m buying. I owe you.”

“I won’t say no.” Shelby pulled out her notebook, opened it. “All right, the engagement party first. It’s all set—time, place, date. I did talk her down on the flowers, and the food. Just gentle suggestions about saving the big guns for the wedding. Why didn’t we make this pretty and elegant, but sometimes elegance is simple. Since you’re going with yellow and orchid for your wedding colors, I steered her away from that, too. Said why didn’t we go for bride white—that’s like you wanted, right?”

“Yes. All white flowers. You got her to agree?”

“I showed her pictures I’d found in magazines and online, and she got so excited. Then, since I’d already talked to the florist and we’d figured it all, I said let’s order these right now! Got her when her enthusiasm was high.”

Pleased and proud, Shelby brushed her palms together. “It’s done.”

“I owe you two drinks.”

“Emma Kate, you owe me so many drinks we can’t count them. We’re down from that orchestra she wanted to hire out of Nashville, to booking Red Hot and Blue—which Tansy suggested, and you liked.”

“Oh my God, we’re not going to have men in white tuxedos playing waltzes? Matt and I both really liked Red Hot and Blue when they’ve played at Bootlegger’s.”

“It’ll rock some, and be a good chance for you and Matt to see if you want them for the wedding, want something else or want to go with a DJ, since you haven’t decided on that.”

Meticulously, Shelby ticked it off her list. “Then I said to your mama how I’d work with the hotel as she needed to be fresh and be mother-of-the-bride-to-be and got her talking about what she’d be wearing, how she wanted her hair. And I’d made up these poster boards of table decorations and flowers and all that.”

Shelby gave her nails an exaggerated buff on her sleeve. “I bowled her over, is what I did, then didn’t give her much chance to waffle on it.”

“Poster boards!”

“I also decided I’m not showing you. You’re going to trust me, and be surprised. The wedding, you’re in on every little detail, but this is going to be a surprise, and I promise you’ll be happy with it.”

“I don’t have to think about it?”

“You don’t have to think about it.”

“If I didn’t love Matt, I might change my mind and marry you. But then he has certain attributes you lack, not to mention between him and Griff they can fix anything. He’s over at Griff’s right now, helping out for a couple hours. I expect it’ll run to three as Matt’s got a head of steam working up on finding the right property and building a house, or doing what Griff’s doing and finding an old place to rehab.”

“Are you ready for all that?”

“Like I trust you to make everything look beautiful, I trust him to figure that out. I’ll have plenty to say about it, but I’ll let him get going on it first.”

“All right, then.” Shelby wiggled her butt back, leaned forward. “Let’s talk weddings.”

They plotted, planned, with Shelby taking notes.

“Put that down for now.” After twenty minutes, Emma Kate waved at the notebook. “It’s starting

to make my head spin.”

“We got a good start here.”

“More than a good start, and it’s time to change the channel. I want to know about you. Have you heard any more from the FBI?”

“No. I keep expecting them to come to the door again, with a warrant for my arrest as accessory after the fact, or something. But they haven’t.”

“If they think you had any part of all that, they don’t deserve to be special agents.”

Forrest said the same, Shelby thought, but it steadied her ground to hear it from her best friend.

“I’m going to go over all the pictures and letters again. I needed to put it away for a couple of days so I could start fresh. Maybe I’ll remember something else, or find something else.”

“What’s the point now, Shelby?”

“Knowing. Just knowing. I don’t expect I’m going to find a treasure map to what he stole in Miami, or any of the others that are still unfound. I’m supposing there are others still unfound. But knowing feels important.”

“I wish you’d let it go, but the girl I grew up with wasn’t ever good at letting things go if they mattered to her.”

“This matters to me. What if I did find something that led to something, that took the police to somewhere else and they found them? At least that woman and her son in Miami would have that.”

“Shelby.” Emma Kate took her hand, squeezed it. “You’re looking for a way to pay them back somehow, like you’re paying off all that debt. And none of it’s yours, none of it. And that’s one of the reasons—I know you—you slapped the brakes on with Griff.”

Shifting, Shelby got busy tidying her notes. “That’s not exactly so.”

“It’s close enough. You looked happy together. You looked good together.”

“I just wanted to slow things down some.”

“You’ve got to move at your own speed, and I’d never say different.”

“I guess he had some things to say about it.”

“Not much, not to me. Not to Matt, either, or I’d’ve gotten it out of Matt. He’s not the vault Griff is, and I know the combination anyway. I expect he might say more tonight, working on the house, having a beer, that sort of thing. I’ll get that out of Matt easy enough.”

“He was awful mad. It’s hard to know how to deal with a man who gets mad so . . . reasonably.”

“I’d hate that!” Emma Kate laughed, sat back. “You can’t win against reasonable, not really.”

“And what makes it harder? He went by the house when I was working—he’d know I was working and Mama had Callie. Mama said how he went out back with Callie and spent nearly an hour with her on the swings, with the puppy.”

“Well! That shows you what kind of dastardly individual you’re dealing with.”

“All right, Emma Kate.” Shelby let out a sigh. “I don’t know what to do about it, exactly. I’ve got a right to be mad about some of the things he said.”

Sipping wine, Emma Kate lifted her eyebrows. “Reasonable things?”

“I guess from where he’s standing, but that doesn’t make them less awful for me.”

“I’m trusting you on this engagement party, and you haven’t let me down yet.”

“And I won’t.”

“That’s why I trust you. Why don’t you trust me?”

“I— Of course I do. I do trust you.”

“Good. Go over there and talk to Griff.”

“Oh, but—”

“Did I say ‘but’ on the party? I did not,” Emma Kate said definitely. “So you trust what I’m

saying to you, and go over and talk to Griff. Matt says he's been stewing for days. I can see you are, too, maybe needed to, but stewing time's over. Go talk it out. One way or the other, both of you are bound to feel better, or at least know where you both stand."

She wasn't going to do it—wasn't it better to just let things sit awhile? But the idea sat in the back of her head, nagging, through dinner, through the bedtime ritual with Callie.

She told herself to settle down, spend the rest of the evening going over the photos and letters again. But she couldn't settle.

She went down where her parents held their own evening ritual of TV and needlework.

"Callie's all tucked in. I wonder if you'd mind if I went out awhile? There's something I'd like to do."

"You go on." Her father gave her an absent smile before he zeroed back in on the ball game. "We're not going anywhere."

"I'm dragging your daddy as far as the front porch when the game's over. We're going to sit and have ourselves a glass of tea and smell the roses rambling up the trellis."

"You enjoy that, and thank you. I won't be very long."

"You take your time," her mother said. "And you put some lipstick on, fluff your hair some. You can't go over to Griff's without your lipstick."

"I didn't say I was going to Griff's."

"A mama knows. You put some lipstick on."

"I won't be long," Shelby repeated, and got out before her mother suggested she change her clothes.

. . .

GRIFF HADN'T SHOWERED off the day, because he'd decided the day wasn't done. Even after Matt left, he kept at it. He broke briefly—let the dog out, fixed a sandwich, let the dog in, but kept focused on the work.

He'd finished the closet, and thanks to Matt, the interior was drywalled, had its second coat of mud. So he focused on the window seat he'd designed for the double windows looking over the backyard. It'd be a nice place to sit—with convenient storage beneath.

He saw the room, finished, pretty clearly. And even if that image irritated him half the time, he would damn well stick with it.

He made a habit of sticking.

Once he had the closet sanded, the window seat finished, the trim finished, all the room really needed was paint and a good clean. Well, some punch out—outlet covers, light switch covers, and he figured—and had wired for—a ceiling fan with a light kit.

Had to find the right one, one that worked with his image of the room.

Maybe he'd play around online tonight, see what he found.

Then there was the small en suite. That he'd tackle next, and probably within the next evening or two as he had the time.

He had music going, heard nothing else until Snickers began to bark. When the dog scrambled out of the room, raced downstairs, Griff pulled out his earbuds.

He picked up his hammer, tested its weight, and started out with it. He heard the knock then—he really needed to do a doorbell—and though he doubted the laptop invader would bother with a knock, he glanced out the landing window.

And saw Shelby's van.

Emotions rolled up, conflicting, contrasting. Pleasure—God, he'd missed just looking at her face. Annoyance. Whose fault was it he hadn't seen her face? Puzzlement, as it wasn't like her to drop by after nine at night. Relief, tremendous, that she had.

He set the hammer down on the steps, walked the rest of the way down, where the dog barked and wagged at the door.

He opened the door and wondered how he managed to keep his heart from just falling at her feet.

"I hope it's all right I came by," she began. "I wanted to talk to you."

And he wanted to pluck her right off the ground, feel her hang onto him while he kissed them both brainless.

"Sure."

"Hey, Snickers. There's a good dog," she soothed as she bent over to rub him. "Look how he's grown already. Maybe we could sit outside. It's such a nice night."

"We can do that. You want a drink or anything?"

"No, don't bother. You're working—you smell like sawdust and sweat, in a good way."

"Just fiddling with a couple things. I could use a break."

He stepped outside, gestured to one of the chairs.

"I know you're mad at me," she began as she sat, and kept rubbing the dog, who plopped his forefeet on her knees. "And you were clear as to why."

"Okay."

"I tried to explain my reasons to you, but I don't think you understand."

"I understand," he countered. "I just don't agree with your reasons."

"You haven't lived my life, Griffin. One that brought federal agents to the door."

"I heard about that, and I heard they were grateful for your cooperation."

"Forrest."

"He wasn't passing on state secrets. Plus, they talked to me."

"They . . ." Her hands stilled; her head whipped around. "They came here?"

"Just for a chat. It's also not a state secret you and I have spent time together since you got back. It wasn't a problem."

Her eyes sparked, flashed. Temper, resentment, frustration—he saw the mix clearly enough.

"Why can't you see it's a problem for me that they'd come here, ask you questions about something you didn't have anything to do with?"

"You haven't lived my life, either, Shelby. They knew about the laptop business, so they followed through. The way I look at it, having the locals and the feds involved in this is only a good thing."

"He killed someone."

"What?"

"They didn't tell you that, and Forrest didn't choose to impart that information in his reports to you?"

"No, and don't be so snotty about it. Your brother's my friend," he continued before she could toss something else at him. "He doesn't report to me. He talks to me."

She *had* been snotty about it, she admitted, but . . . Put it aside, she ordered herself, and say what needed saying.

"Richard killed a woman, in Atlanta. Or she fell down the stairs, it's not altogether clear, while he was stealing from her. He left her there, just left her dead or dying on the floor and walked away. That's who I thought I married, that's who I had a child with, that's who I lived with for nearly five years."

"That's hard on you, and I'm sorry about it. But what he did, who he was, what he was? It doesn't have anything to do with me. It doesn't have anything to do with you and me."

"It has everything to do with me, so that means it has to do with you and me. Why can't you see that?"

"Because this is now." He said it simply. "Because I'm in love with you. Because I can see you have feelings for me. Maybe you're not where I am, and I can't argue about that, but you have feelings. What I see is you pushing them away, and me with them, because a sociopath, a con man, a thief, and apparently a murdering son of a bitch, used you, deceived you, and you're letting yourself feel guilty and responsible for it."

"I have to be responsible for my own choices, my actions and the consequences of them."

"Okay," he said after a moment. "You're right about that. Now, when are you going to stop beating yourself up for them?"

"I can't make another mistake."

"I'm not a mistake." He shoved up at that, had to stride away, pull his control back, grip it. "Don't hang that on me."

"No, no, it's me. It's—"

"It's not you, it's me? That's a classic."

"Oh, just shut up a minute. Just shut up! I do have feelings for you, and they're scaring me. I can't just run with my feelings again because, yes, this is now. Now I have a little girl. I have a life to make for her, for us. I have to know I'm doing right, not just taking what I want for me. I need to take a breath, damn it. I need to settle down and think, not just feel. I hurt people. I hurt my family, and I'm never, never going to do that again. I hurt myself in the long run."

She rose as well, walked to the rail on the other side of the steps from him. Across the lawn, into the trees, scores of lightning bugs put on a show, countless pulses of warm light against the dark.

"I'm not beating myself up, or not much anymore. Or feeling sorry for myself. I'm done with that. I came home, and I brought my girl home, and I'm building that life for us. That feels right. I feel good about that. It would've been enough, Griffin, it would've been more than enough for me. Then you . . . I just . . . There were—are—feelings."

"I planned to go slower. I figured to get you to go out with me and Emma Kate and Matt a few times, over a couple months, maybe. Get used to being around me. Then I'd ask you out. I didn't follow the blueprint."

"You have a blueprint?"

"I always have a blueprint. But the thing about them is, sometimes you see how to improve the whole with a change, or some changes. So you do. I planned to go slower, but . . . Did I push you?"

"No." It was wrong, she admitted, it was unfair and wrong to let him think so. "No, you didn't push me, Griff. You . . . appealed, and you . . ."

She looked out, all those pulses of warm yellow. He'd put a light in her, she thought. Pulses of light against the dark she'd carried.

"How much you appealed caught me off guard. I wanted—want—to be with you. You're the opposite of Richard. And I asked myself if that was why you appealed so much. You're so different from him. Not flashy or showy, just—"

"Dull?"

She glanced over quickly, relieved when she saw him smile. "No, not dull. Real. I needed real more than I can say, and there you were. I have feelings, and they scare me."

"I don't mind that. You take the time you need to work that out. Don't make excuses not to see me—be straight about it."

"I didn't know how. I hadn't figured out how because I didn't want to stop seeing you. I felt I should, for a while, but I didn't want to."

"Has it been a while yet?"

"It feels like it's been a lot longer than a while."

"There's a point of agreement. I've missed the hell out of you, Red."

"You came by to see Callie when I was at work."

"I missed the hell out of her, too. And Callie and I didn't have a fight."

With a nod, Shelby stared out at the dark, the light. "I kept thinking you'd come by to see me, too. You came to Friday Nights, but you stayed away from me."

"You hurt me."

She turned to him quickly. "Oh, Griff—"

"I'm telling you, Shelby, don't stack me up against him, not in any way. It hurts me, and it really pisses me off."

"I'm sorry for that. I can't promise it won't happen again, but I'll work on it."

"That's good enough."

"You hurt me, too, and really pissed me off."

"I'm sorry for that. I can't promise it won't happen again, but I'll work on it."

That made her laugh, and mean it. "I really have missed you something awful. I don't just mean the sex, though I've missed that. I just missed talking to you. But . . ."

"Uh-oh."

"I thought I was in love once before, so fast it was like being swept under a wave. But I wasn't in love, not the way it should count. Maybe you need a little time, too."

"If he'd been who he pretended to be when he took you under that wave, would it have counted?"

"I . . ." She could only lift her hands, let them fall.

"You can't say because he wasn't. He wasn't who you thought he was, so you can't know. Here's what I know. I wanted you the first second I saw you. That was more a holy shit moment than what they'd call love at first sight. Look at her. That's the most beautiful woman I've seen in my life."

She wanted to laugh again, but his words clogged her throat. "Wet and miserable, as I recall."

"And sad and beautiful. Then you and Callie, and you walking home with her, pushing that stroller and all those groceries up those hills. You're so mad—at yourself—so worn out. And she's so sweet. So I wanted you, then I wanted to help you. I fell for Callie first, I'll tell you that straight-out. She had me wrapped up in about two minutes."

"She has a way."

"She's got your way. I'm surprised you don't see it. Anyway, then I heard you sing, and I started falling. I watched you sing, and I fell harder. Then I had you, and that put the cap on it. But what twisted the cap, secured it tight, was—" He stuck his hands in his pockets as he studied her. "Hell, you might not like what twisted the cap tight."

"I want to know. There isn't a woman in the world who wouldn't."

"All right. What twisted the cap tight? You punching Melody. I don't think I'm a particularly violent man, but when you did that, all I could think was, Well, hell, Griff, you're in love with her. You'd be a fool not to be."

"You're making that up."

"I'm not." He stepped toward her, laid his hands on her shoulders. "I had to pull you off—sort of wished I didn't have to—but I realized, yeah, I want her. I want to help her. I can fix some things for

her. But *goddamn*, a woman who throws a punch like that? She can fix some things, too. She can do whatever she needs to do.”

She’d thought hearing that he was in love with her rattled her. But that last sentence, the tone of admiration, just stunned. “You thought that?”

“I know that. I’ve seen it. I admire the hell out of it. And I love you. So I don’t mind scaring you a little because you’ll handle it. But when you look at me, Shelby, you’d better see me. Just me. When you think of me, just me.”

“I don’t think of anyone but you when you kiss me, when you touch me.”

“Then I should do more of that.”

“Oh God, I wish you would.”

She wrapped herself around him, pressed her mouth to his.

And he did a lot more of it.

“Come inside.” He couldn’t get enough. “Come to bed.”

“Yes.” She ran her hands up his back, thrilled to feel hard muscle again. “Yes.” Drew in his scent—sweat and sawdust. “Yes.”

They circled toward the door, and she said, “Oh. Wait.”

“Please God, don’t turn that into a no.”

“No—I mean yes.” Still wrapped around him, she managed a breathless laugh. “I mean, I need to text Mama. I told her I wouldn’t be long, and I’m going to be longer.”

“Okay. Text and walk.”

“I can do that.” She took out her phone, worked to keep her hands steady enough to write the quick text. “She knew I was coming to see you, so I don’t think she’ll be surprised to— She’s sure quick to answer.”

They’d made it inside, to the stairs, had started up. Shelby stopped halfway.

“Problem?”

“No. No, not a problem. She says—” Shelby let out another quick laugh. “She says you’ll follow me home, so why don’t I save you the trouble of that, stay the night here. Then she says—I guess you could say she knows me—don’t worry about Callie wondering where I am in the morning. We should get up early enough for me to bring you home for breakfast. She’ll make pancakes.”

“I like pancakes.”

“Yes, but—”

“Text: Thank you, Mama. We’ll see you in the morning.”

He nudged her up another step so they were eye level, then laid his lips on hers. “Stay. Sleep with me tonight. Wake up with me in the morning.”

How could she resist? Why would she? She trailed her fingers over his cheeks. “I wasn’t expecting to. I don’t have a thing to sleep in.”

“If that’s an issue, I won’t sleep in anything, either. We’ll be even.”

“That’s fair.” She laughed again, a little giddy, when he swept her up, carried her the rest of the way with the puppy running to catch up.



Shelby wound her way into the fifties, mixed up the playlist with bluegrass.

She slipped in early to rehearse, thought it wonderful and amazing that she already had more than half a dozen Friday Nights in her pocket.

Tansy applauded when she finished “Rolling in My Sweet Baby’s Arms.”

“Love it!”

“I didn’t see you over there. I thought I’d punch in some bluegrass, mix in the folk and traditional with the standards. I thought I’d weave in a lot of Patsy Cline. Like a featured artist?”

“I love that, too. It’s going to be even better when we bring in some musicians, have a real stage. Which we will by September—October latest, according to Matt. The permits came in this morning!”

“Tansy, that’s such good news.”

“I can’t wait to get started. I’m scared, too, as we’re pouring a lot of money into this expansion. But . . . the last few weeks sure show people like coming in on the weekend, hearing live music.”

“You talked Derrick into trying every Saturday night for a band, didn’t you?”

Raising her joined hands over her head, Tansy turned a victory circle. “We’re going to try it for the rest of the summer, then see if the take justifies the outlay. You’re a big part of why we can do all this, Shelby. I don’t know how long it would’ve taken me to talk Derrick into the expansion if you hadn’t hit it with Friday Nights.”

“I love doing it, and you gave me a chance. I guess it’s worked out pretty damn perfect for both of us.” She stepped off the little stage. “How’re you feeling?”

“Just a little queasy first thing in the morning still, but Derrick brings me saltines and ginger ale, and that usually settles it down. And look!” She turned to the side, cupped her hands on her belly. “I’m showing!”

“My goodness.” Shelby widened her eyes at the tiny, tiny bulge. “You’re enormous.”

“Maybe not yet,” Tansy said with a laugh, “but”—she lifted her shirt—“I had to jury-rig my pants with a carabiner. Can’t button them anymore. I’m going to move into yoga pants, and buy myself some maternity clothes first chance I get.”

Shelby remembered well that feeling, that glow. “They make such cute ones, so you don’t feel like you’re wearing a tent or your granny’s tablecloth.”

“I’ve already got some in a shopping basket online. I just want to make one more pass before I order. Now I know you want to get back to rehearsing, but I want to know how you’re doing.”

It couldn’t be avoided, Shelby thought. The past dogged her like a shadow at high noon. “I’m so sorry you had to talk to those agents.”

“Derrick and I were fine with that, don’t you worry.”

“Forrest said they’ve gone back to Atlanta. There wasn’t much I could do to help them find all

Richard stole. I know it's silly, but I feel like if I could remember something, or tell them something that leads them to finding even one more thing, I'd be better about it all. When it comes down to it, they told me more than I could tell them."

"It's hard, what they told you."

"It taught me something. If I want Callie to grow up to be a smart, strong woman, someone who values family and friends, and respects herself, I have to show her. If I want her to know the satisfaction of making something of herself with effort and work, I have to show her. That's what I'm trying to do."

"It's what you are doing."

"I feel like I have to counterbalance—you know what I mean—all she's going to hear one day about her father."

"When she does, she'll have you, and your family. She'll have us, your friends."

"Seems like Richard never learned, never understood that's more than all the jewels he stole, all the money he swindled. If the years with him had any good to them, it was putting that bone deep in me. I took too much for granted before that."

. . .

SHE TOOK NOTHING for granted now, not the laughter inside the salon or the sighs of pleasure in the Relaxation Room.

She gave her grandmother a quick, impulsive hug after she set more towels at the shampoo stations.

"What's that one for?"

"Just for you. I'm happy being here with you. I'm just happy."

"I'd be happy, too, if I had a man like Griffin Lott looking at me like I was the Venus de Milo, Charlize Theron and Taylor Swift all at once." Crystal paused in her work, snapped her scissors. "I swear, I want a man for sex, but if Charlize Theron walked in and said, 'Hey there, Crystal, how about we go on over to your place and roll around in the sheets?' I believe I'd take her straight home and give that a go."

Amused, Viola rinsed off her customer's hair. "Charlize Theron. Is she the only one who'd tempt you to switch over from a man?"

"I believe she is. Now, that Jennifer Lawrence. She's as pretty as they come, and I do believe she'd be nothing but fun to sit around and have a drink with. But she's no Charlize Theron. Who'd you switch with, Shelby?"

"What?"

"Who's your fantasy lesbian lover?"

"I never thought about it."

Crystal just circled a finger in the air. "Give it a minute."

No, Shelby thought again, she'd never take these crazy fun conversations for granted.

"I'd try Mystique," she decided, and had Crystal frowning at her.

"Who?"

"She's a super villain—from the X-Men. Forrest and Clay were just crazy for the X-Men, remember, Granny? Jennifer Lawrence, the one you'd like to have a drink with, plays her in the movies now. Mystique can change into anybody, any shape, anything. So it seems to me a roll in the sheets with her would cover about anything you were after."

"I believe we have a winner," Viola decreed, and sat her client down in the chair.

A couple of hours later, she cuddled baby Beau and watched Callie and Jackson play on the swing set. She thought it would rain by nightfall, she could scent it, see it. But for this moment, it was about as perfect a late spring evening as she could ask for.

Her father was delayed at the clinic, so Clay saw to a few little gardening chores, and Gilly sat in the porch rocker, banished from the kitchen by her mother-in-law.

"It ought to be illegal to feel this happy," Gilly said.

"I'm awful glad it's not. Today, I'd be sharing a cell with you."

"I saw Griff today."

She'd have to get used to people equating her happiness with Griff. And they weren't altogether wrong. "You did?"

"I took the boys for a walk this morning, before the heat set in, and he was down the road a bit, fixing Miz Hardigan's gate—the sheriff's mama."

"She was in the salon today."

"I stopped for a while. It's nice of him to go by and see to little things like that for her. They don't charge her for those little things. I know, 'cause she told me herself. She gives them baked goods, and she knitted them both caps and gloves for Christmas."

"Look how big Jackson is! It wasn't so long ago he couldn't get up on that swing unless one of us lifted him onto it."

And Gilly's eyes filled.

She waved a hand in the air as Shelby patted her arm. "I've still got too many hormones, I guess. But . . . I don't think I'm going back to work, Shelby, when my maternity leave runs out."

"I didn't know you were thinking about that. I know you love your job at the hotel."

"I do, and I wasn't thinking about it, not really, until . . ." She reached over, stroked a finger over Beau's cheek. "I just don't think I can stand to leave them both. I just want to stay home with them for a while. A year maybe. Clay and I have talked about it. We know things'll be a little tight, but—"

"It's hard. It's hard to choose, it's hard to have to choose."

"I love my work, I really do. I'm good at it, too, but I want this year, that's all. I want this year for myself and my family. One year out of all the rest doesn't seem like too much, but it would be everything to me."

"Then you should take it. You've worked at the hotel since college. I bet they'd give you like a sabbatical. Maybe they can't hold your job, I don't know, but I bet you could go back when you're ready. And you won't have any regrets."

"It's putting a lot on Clay."

"He's got strong shoulders, Gilly."

"I never thought I'd want to stay home full-time, but I want this year. What about you? What do you want?"

"It feels like I've got it."

"For tomorrow."

Shelby glanced at the kitchen door. "I was thinking, just thinking. I haven't told anybody but Emma Kate as yet."

"I know how to keep quiet."

"You do. Once I get my head all the way above water, if I can find my own place, and I can find one I can work out of? I was thinking maybe I could start up some kind of decorating business. Designing and coordinating."

"You've always been good at it."

"I've been taking some classes online to get more experience and education. Just a couple to

start,” she added. “Ones I’ve been able to fit in.”

“You fit in more than anyone I know—except Granny.”

“Maybe I’m making up for not having enough to do for so long. I thought, well, if I could prove myself, Griff and Matt might use me some, or talk me up to their clients.”

“Sure they would. They have to redo rooms and areas up at the hotel regularly, Shelby. I’d put in a word for you.”

“Oh, I don’t know if—”

“Think big.”

“I guess I might as well. It’s just thinking right now anyway. I know I could run a business—still, I’d take more classes. But I sure know how to juggle money, keep accounts. It’s a ways off, but I’ve started tucking some money away for business classes.”

“Anytime I start toying around with the idea of starting up a cake and pastry business, that’s what stops me dead in my tracks, backs me up and turns me around the other way. The business,” Gilly said with an eye roll. “But you’ve got that MacNee in you. You know what else?”

“What else?”

“I’ve been wanting to give our bedroom a makeover. Between Jackson, then Beau, doing up the nursery fresh and getting Jackson in his big-boy room, our bedroom hasn’t been touched in five years. It shows.”

“Makeover can be a lot of fun, but . . .”

“Yes, there’s the MacNee,” Gilly said with a laugh. “Clay’s the same. Doing it over costs. If I’m going to stay home, I’ll have to be frugal about it, I know that, but God, Shelby, how I’d love to have a grown-up bedroom, a place for me and Clay to be me and Clay now and then. I can be frugal, especially if you’d help me out. You could practice on us.”

Gilly shifted, wrapped a hand around Shelby’s arm for emphasis. “Shelby, we’ve still got that mix of his old bedroom furniture and mine in there, and that awful, ugly lamp my aunt Lucy gave us as a wedding present.”

“That is an awful, ugly lamp.”

“If she didn’t claim it was an heirloom, I’d have accidentally knocked it over and made sure it broke in a dozen pieces. I don’t want fancy. I just want fresh and peaceful. Help me.”

“I’d love to help.”

The lamp had to go, but the furniture . . . refinish or paint, new hardware. It could work.

“And I’ve got plenty of being-frugal-about-it ideas. Sometimes it’s no more than switching things around and repurposing. Using what you’ve already got in a new way, adding some touches. And paint. Paint’ll change a lot for a little.”

“Now I’m getting fired up instead of teary. Do you have any time this week?”

“I could come by tomorrow morning, after I take Callie to Chelsea’s, before I head to the salon. About eight-thirty? Is that too early?”

“Nothing’s too early when you’ve got a toddler and a newborn. I was wondering if I could—Well, hey, Forrest.”

“Hey, Gilly.” He walked out from the kitchen, bent over the baby. “When’s he going to do something besides sleep?”

“Come on over and pay us a visit about two a.m.”

She caught the look in his eyes and, understanding, pushed up. “I’m going to take him in awhile—and pass him off to his grandmother. That’ll give me some time in the kitchen whether she wants me there or not.”

She took the baby from Shelby, slipped inside.

"I need a minute," Forrest told Shelby.

"Sure. Sit down."

"Kids all right out here for a minute? Clay's right over there in the vegetable patch playing farmer."

"He's got Daddy's knack for it, and the kids are fine."

"Then let's take a walk around front."

"What is it?"

"Around front," he repeated, took her arm.

"You're making me nervous, Forrest, and damn it, I was having a really good day."

"I'm sorry for that, and sorry to drop this on you on a really good day."

"Am I in trouble? Does the FBI think—"

"No, it's nothing like that." He guided her around the side of the house toward the front yard. Out of sight of the kids, out of earshot. "It's Privet, the Florida PI."

"I remember who Privet is," she said testily. "Did he tell you who his client is, finally?"

"No, and he won't. He was found dead early this morning, by his secretary."

"Oh my God. What happened?"

"It looks like he was killed between ten and midnight, and it looks like he was shot with the same gun that killed Warren."

It shouldn't come as a shock, she thought, and still it did. "He was murdered?"

"That's right. Looks like a break-in, or made to look like it. Like a sloppy one. But then you figure—from the report we got from the investigating officers—he was shot at his desk. He had a nine-millimeter in the drawer. There wasn't any sign he went for it, or put up a fight. Head shot, like Warren, too. Not a contact shot, but close range."

"Let me take a breath." She took it bending over, hands on her thighs. "I didn't like him. He scared me some coming into the house up North the way he did, and following me here. Just . . . lurking. But he left me alone when you told him to."

"They found pictures he'd taken of you and of Callie in his office, in his files."

"Callie."

"Some notes he'd made, an expense account. Not yet paid, and overdue, according to the file. They don't have the name of the person who hired him to shadow you. The locals are talking to the secretary, and to his associate, but so far nobody seems to know who hired him for this particular job. And there's no record."

"Maybe he didn't have a client. Maybe he lied."

"Maybe."

"But . . . you said it looked like a break-in, but wasn't."

"The door was forced from the outside, some electronic equipment was missing. His watch, his wallet, the petty cash. Things tossed around some. You might think it was a sloppy break-in. But his personal tablet and laptop, they were gone, too. And it seems the ones at his house aren't turning up."

"Someone was in his house, you think?"

"Slicker job there as there's no sign of forced entry at all. But anything to do with this case of his, except for those pictures, some notes and expenses, they're gone."

She straightened. Her face still felt too hot, her head too light, but she knew how to follow basic logic. "You think what happened to him goes back to that damn robbery in Florida."

"I do, as he brought it and the finder's fee up to me when I advised him to move on."

"So back to Richard—or to Harlow, now. Harlow escaped from prison, and he probably had a

new identity somewhere. He hired the detective to help him find Richard. But he found me and Callie. Only me and Callie because Richard was already gone. He came here, and he saw his other partner. She'd turned on him, so he killed her."

"We know he was here. You saw him yourself."

"The detective either thought Harlow was really a client, or was working with him. Doesn't matter much, I guess, which it was now. But he probably let Harlow into the office, sat there talking to him."

"And either Harlow didn't like what he heard, or he figured Privet as a loose end. He cut it off, staged a break-in, took what he needed—whatever he felt might link him—took a few valuables, some cash, and took off."

"He can't think I'm a loose end, Forrest. He stole all that information so he knows I'm not just broke but in debt. If he's still looking for those millions, he knows I can't tell him where they are."

"I don't know why he'd come back here, but I want you to keep being careful. He's killed two people now. Miami's going to keep us updated—professional courtesy. The feds will put an oar in, I expect. The damn thing is, Shelby, they can't find anybody who's seen hide nor hair of this guy except you."

"He let me see him."

"That's right."

She glanced toward the backyard, where the children played and her older brother tended the vegetable garden. "I can't run, Forrest. I've got nowhere to go, and it has to be safer for Callie here than anywhere else. I've got nothing for this man. I have to believe he was just—like you said—taking care of a loose end. It's horrible, but that's what he did."

"That's what it looks like. Don't go anywhere without your phone."

"I never do." She patted her pocket, and the phone in it, but Forrest shook his head.

"Anywhere. You take a shower, it goes in the bathroom with you. And." He pulled a small canister out of his pocket.

"What's this?"

"Pepper spray. You've got your Second Amendment rights, but you never could shoot worth shit."

Because he wasn't far off in that assessment, she bristled. "I wasn't that bad."

"Worth shit," he repeated. "And you don't want a gun around Callie. Neither do I. So you leave the gun to me, but you take this. You carry this with you. You have trouble, aim for the eyes. Put it in your pocket for now," he advised when she studied the canister.

"I'll take it, I'll be careful if doing that and saying that puts your mind at ease. He's no reason to come after me, especially now. I want to put this aside—that doesn't mean I'll be stupid—but I'm not going to keep it at the center of my life anymore. Now, Mama made her party potatoes and she's doing up some collard greens. I marinated the chicken myself, and Daddy's going to grill that up once he gets home. Why don't you come on in and eat?"

"I hate to say no. I love those damn potatoes. But I've got some things to do. Tell Mama I'll come by later if I can, scrounge up any leftovers."

"I will. I need to get back, check on the kids."

"You go on, then. I'll see you later."

He watched her walk back around the house. Things to do, he thought. The first was to go by Griff's. It wouldn't hurt to give his friend the information. He wanted as many eyes on his sister as he could get.

. . .

ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES, Griff set the next tile on the bathroom floor. The golden sand color made him think of the beach, so he thought the little en suite would be both pretty and cheerful.

While he listened to Forrest, he sat back on his heels.

"It can't be random. Breaking into a PI's office—*that* PI's office, killing him. You guys with the badges can't think that's random."

"It's being looked into. No," Forrest added, leaning on the doorjamb while Griff worked. "We don't think it's random. The trick is connecting Privet to Harlow, to Warren, to that fucker Foxworth, to the Miami case back five years ago. Odds are Harlow killed him, but you gotta ask why. What did the PI know, or who did he know, 'cause maybe those odds don't play. Maybe there's somebody else we don't know about."

"That's not a comfort."

"Nothing comfortable about any of this."

"What happened in Miami five years ago isn't over."

"Nope."

"If Harlow had the take from that job, he'd be gone. Maybe the PI was the last thing he had to cross off, and now he is. Gone."

Griff set the spacers, moved to the next tile. "Then again, if the PI knew where the take was, it seems like he'd have been gone."

"It's a puzzle."

"You're worried this Jimmy Harlow may be missing some pieces yet, and may still think Shelby's got them."

Forrest hunkered down. "There's not a lot we can do here but keep hunting for him locally, asking questions, showing his picture around. The federals, they're sniffing out leads, but what I get is there isn't a lot to sniff at this point. They've dug up some of Foxworth's past associates—same on Harlow and Warren. But nothing's shaken out of that. Not that they're telling us local badges, anyway."

"Do you think they're holding back?"

"Can't say for sure, and don't see why they would. But you never know. What I know is we've got an unsolved murder in the Ridge, and that doesn't sit well with any of us. My sister's in the middle of it, and that doesn't sit well with me, or with anybody in the department. We're keeping an eye out for her, extra patrols and the like. But she's not inclined to have dinner with the sheriff or spend the night with Nobby."

"If she was, I'd end up in jail for assaulting an officer. I'm looking out for her, Forrest. She doesn't much like that terminology, but she's going to have to live with it. It'll be easier when she moves in here."

Now Forrest sat back on his heels. "Is that so?"

"Sure it is. I've got that new security system in—pain in the ass, but it's done. I've got this fierce guard dog."

They both glanced over to where Snickers lay, snoring on his back, feet in the air.

"Vicious son of a bitch, that dog."

"He's just resting between patrols."

"Uh-huh. I think you know I meant 'Is that so?' about Shelby moving in here, not about the safety of it."

Griff continued to work. Laying a row of tile was methodical. So for him that made it soothing.

"I can't push that button yet. She'd balk. The fucker did a number on her, and she's working her way through it or out of it faster than most people would. But she's not there yet, so the word of the day is 'tenacity' with a side of patience. Because yeah, that's so. I want her here, with me. I want her and Callie here with me."

"If you go there and with your patient tenacity, son, talk her into moving in out here, my mama's going to start planning a wedding."

"That's fine, just the next step in the plan. But it's going to take Shelby longer to get there."

Forrest said nothing as Griff set the next spacers, carefully applied more adhesive to the subfloor.

"Is it my understanding you're planning to marry my sister?"

Griff sat back again, rolled his shoulders, circled his neck. "What do you think of this room?"

Obliging, Forrest straightened up, took a turn around the bedroom area. "Nice space, windows ought to give nice light, good views. Damn big closet for a secondary sort of bedroom. Window seat's a nice touch, like having its own bathroom. That tile you're laying ought to give it some glow."

"I'm thinking of a slipper tub for in here, and a vanity with an under-counter oval sink. I'm after plenty of storage with a small footprint. Recessed medicine cabinet over the vanity—more storage there, but frame it in to give it some style. And some bling with the lighting."

"Slipper tub and bling? Sounds female."

"Yeah. Pale, warm green for the bedroom walls, echo off the bathroom lighting for the ceiling fan with light kit."

"The bling."

"That's right. I'm going to do a small built-in for the closet, along with the rods and shelves."

Nodding, Forrest took another turn around, began to see it.

"You're putting this room together for Callie."

"Green's her favorite color, she tells me. That *Shrek* obsession of hers, that's bound to pass eventually. But it's a good color for her, and for a bedroom. A few years down the road, having her own bathroom's going to matter to her."

"And you're a man who looks down the road."

"I am. I'm in love with both of them, and being a trained observer, you know that already. Callie's there with me; Shelby's just gotta catch up. She'll catch up quicker, I think, if we can put this shitstorm the fucker left her in behind her."

"What if she doesn't catch up?"

"I wait. She's the one, so that's that. And Callie? The kid just lights me up. She deserves me. They both do. I'm a hell of a catch."

"Shit, Griff, if you had tits, I'd marry you myself."

"There you go." Seeing he'd reached the point where he'd have to measure and cut tile, Griff pushed to his feet. "I'm taking a break, tossing a sandwich together. You want one?"

"Thanks, but I've got a couple more things to do, and a hell of a lot better waiting in leftovers at my mama's once I do them."

"We'll walk down with you. Come on, Snick. Time for patrol."

The dog waved his feet in the air, did an ungainly rollover, then scrambled up.

"One of these days I'm going to get me a dog," Forrest said as they started down with Snickers racing down the steps, halfway up, down again.

"Snick's litter mates are gone, but I saw a sign for beagle pups on the turn at Black Bear and Dry Creek."

"It's not one of these days yet. I'm not home enough, and I don't think the sheriff would approve of me taking a dog for ride-alongs." Forrest glanced at the security panel as they passed it. "What

do you figure on doing if this fancy new security system goes off?”

Griff shrugged as he opened the front door. “Call you—and get my pipe wrench. It’s got weight.”

“A shotgun’s going to carry more weight than a pipe wrench, son.”

“Don’t have one, don’t want one.”

“City boy.”

Griff breathed in the night while the dog ran over the patch of grass to the verge of the woods where the stream bubbled.

“Not anymore, but I still don’t want a gun.”

He looked west to the faint blush of pink the setting sun painted on the clouds that smoked over the mountains. “I never had any trouble here. Worried about it some when I had all that copper for rewiring and plumbing. That stuff’s like gold and easy to transport. But nothing but that once, and that’s direct to the fucker and the shitstorm.”

Like his friend, Forrest looked west, toward color and cloud. “You’ve got a good spot here, Griff. It’s got a feel to it, appealing, settled. But it’s a fact it’d take a solid ten minutes for us to respond to that nine-one-one should you call for it. You can load a shotgun with rock salt if you’re feeling dainty about things.”

“I’ll leave the firearms to you, Deputy. I’m damn good with a pipe wrench.”

“Suit yourself.”

He would, Griff thought as he stood in the quiet, letting the dog run and sniff, watching the first star wink to life in a sky gone the color of pale purple velvet.

Suiting himself was just what he was doing. So he’d go fix that sandwich, then finish the tile in Callie’s bathroom.

“Front porch swing,” he said, and bent to rub the dog when Snickers raced back to him. “Maybe I’ll build one. Things mean more when you build them. Let’s eat and think about that.”

If he’d known while he sat in the kitchen eating a sandwich and doing some rough sketches of swings that someone was watching through field glasses, he might have changed his mind about the shotgun.



It took time to finish the room he wanted for Callie, to build a front porch swing. But he had plenty on his hands as Shelby was wrapped up in the plans for the engagement party.

Or more, from what she said, in keeping Bitsy under control.

He filled evenings and nights he couldn't be with her chipping away at projects on the house, and planning for down the road.

When they finally managed an evening together, she vetoed his suggestion of dinner out for a casual one at his place.

That was fine with him.

He was out in the yard when she arrived, just hanging the tire swing he'd made on a sturdy branch of an old hickory.

"Look at that!" she called out. "There's something Callie will make a beeline for."

"Pretty cool, huh? Got the tire from your grandfather."

He'd built it horizontally, choosing a mid-size tire that would suit a little girl's butt, and had fed the chain through a garden hose to protect the branch.

"It's so sweet."

"Wanna try it out?"

"Of course I do." She handed him a large insulated jug, leaned in when he slid an arm around her for a kiss.

"What's in here?"

"Hard lemonade. My granddaddy's recipe, and it's a winner." She scooted onto the tire, gave the chains a tug. "It's sturdy."

"Fun can be safe," he said, gave her a push.

She leaned back, hair flying, gave a laugh. "And it is fun. What made you think of such a thing?"

He didn't want to say—yet—that he'd been looking at plans for backyard swing sets, and had stumbled across the idea. "Just came to me. I had this friend—what was his name? Tim McNaulty—when I was about Callie's age. He had one of these in his yard—set vertical. This way makes more sense."

"I love it. So will she."

As if hypnotized, the dog sat on the ground, his head tilting this way, then that, following Shelby's rhythm. "I swear, that dog's bigger than he was when I saw him a few days ago."

"Next outdoor project's a doghouse. A big one."

"He'll need big."

She jumped off the swing. "I'm sorry I've been so tied up lately. I feel like I've had barely a minute without something that needed doing."

"I know the feeling. It's no problem, Red. Our best pals are getting married. It's a lot."

“It’d be a Macy’s Day Parade if I couldn’t keep Miz Bitsy down, and that’s taken every bit of creativity and energy I have. She’s jumping so fast from this party to the wedding and back again, my head’s on a constant revolution. She got it into her head Emma Kate should arrive at the ceremony—venue yet to be determined—in a princess carriage. White horses and a carriage, as Emma Kate had that on her wedding list when she was about twelve. It took some doing to nudge her off that one.”

“Emma Kate’s going to owe you for the rest of her life.”

“That’s a benefit. Why don’t we— Oh, Griff, you got a porch swing!”

Speaking of beelines, she made one herself, twirled a circle, the full skirt of her grass-green sundress billowing. “I just love it! How’d you find one this wonderful blue?”

“Like your eyes.” He followed her onto the porch. “I painted it. I made it.”

“You made it yourself? Of course you did.” She sat down, pushed off gently with her feet. “And it’s perfect, just perfect for sitting here on a lazy afternoon or a quiet evening. It’d be extra perfect if you got us a couple of tall glasses, and sat down here with me so we could sample that hard lemonade.”

“Be right back.”

When the dog tried to climb up with her, she hefted him up—no easy task now. “You’re almost too big.” But she hooked an arm around him, swinging and thinking she’d rarely seen a prettier spot.

All so green and private with the sky a blue dome dashed with white clouds. She could hear the stream, fast and lively from the last rains, and the insistent, echoing *rat-a-tat-tat* of a woodpecker busy somewhere beyond the green, setting up the percussion section for the chorus of birds.

“He’s got my spot,” Griff said when he brought out the drinks.

“He didn’t want to be left out.”

Resigned, Griff sat on the other side of the dog, who wiggled with absolute joy.

“There couldn’t be a better spot for a porch swing.” She sampled the drink. “I think I did Grandpa proud.”

“I’ll say.”

“It goes down easy, but it’s got a kick. It’s made for sipping. And sipping on a warm evening, on a porch swing, is even better. You’ve got your own little Eden here, Griffin.”

“Eden needs considerable work yet.”

“If Adam and Eve had put some time into working the garden instead of picking apples, they might still be there. Gardens, houses, lives, they’re a continual work in progress, aren’t they? I stopped progress on mine for a while, but I’m making up for it. It’s peaceful here. The light, the swing, this very fine lemonade. You, this sweet dog. I’m going to get what’s not peaceful out of the way, then we won’t have to think about it again.”

“Something happened.”

“I don’t know for certain, but I know now you didn’t talk to Forrest this afternoon.”

“No, not today.”

“I’m guessing he knew I was coming over, and I’d tell you. The police think they might have a kind of witness. On the detective. The FBI agents are going in to talk to him.”

“What did he see?”

“They’re not altogether convinced he saw much of anything, or anything useful. But the man—a boy, really—was in the building the night Privet was killed. He said how he heard this pop. Just one pop, like a muffled firecracker, he said. He didn’t think much of it. The timing’s right, and more, he saw who they think is the killer leave.”

“Harlow?”

“They can’t say for sure, but he’s claiming the person he saw wasn’t that big—tall or broad. No beard, either. He says blond hair—very blond—and glasses with thick, dark rims. Wearing a dark suit. He says how he can’t be sure of much, it was only a quick glimpse—saw him leaving the building when he was looking out the window. Saw him walk across the street and get into a big SUV.”

“Wig, glasses, shave.” Griff shrugged. “At a glance, in the dark, it’s hard to say if it was Harlow or not.”

“More, he was a little high at the time, and where he shouldn’t have been. That’s why he didn’t say anything until he was picked up for possession, and not the first time on that. He’d been working as a photographer’s assistant in that building, and he’d gone in late because he was setting up to shoot some porn on the side. He’s trying to make a deal so he doesn’t have to go to jail.”

“So he could be making it up trying to save his ass.”

“He could, but he has the time, and that single pop. Just one. The police didn’t say how many times Privet was shot, how many shots fired. So that’s something to consider.”

Griff considered it while they glided on the swing and sipped. “It’s a stretch to think somebody else shot the PI. Same gun, that’s what they said, as the one used to kill Warren. And we know Harlow was in the area. But let’s stretch it. Somebody else is involved, somebody else hired the detective. Maybe somebody connected to the Miami Montvilles, or the insurance company, or somebody Richard worked with at some point.”

“It makes me wonder if maybe that somebody killed Richard and staged the boating accident.”

“Bigger stretch.”

“I know it, but he was so determined to go, so I’m wondering now if it was to meet somebody, to finally deal with the jewelry he’d stolen. Another double cross, but on him this time.”

“What would you do if you’d just gotten your hands on millions in jewelry—not hot anymore—and had killed to get your hands on it?”

“I’d run fast and far, but . . .”

“There are still two people who want what you have,” Griff finished. “So you hire a detective, and you put him on it. And on you, Red, in case you knew something.”

“Griff, it’s made me think about how many people I let into that house up North in those weeks after Richard’s death. I might have let his killer—if there was one—inside to give me an appraisal, to take something away. Or all the times I was out of the house for hours at a go. Someone who knew how could’ve gotten in, looked around all they wanted. If Richard left something behind that mattered in all this.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m making it more complicated than it already is.”

“It’s pretty risky to try to stage a boating accident in the middle of a storm. Why not just dump the body—or leave it like the others?”

“I don’t know.” But she’d chewed it over endlessly. “I was thinking to buy time. Or maybe it was an accident—killing Richard, I mean. And the rest happened from there. And the simplest is usually right,” she finished. “Richard died in an accident. Harlow killed the woman and the detective. And this witness was coked up, got no more than a glimpse out a window. I’m going to stop worrying about it as of right this minute.

“We’ve got this beautiful evening, and a few hours to enjoy it.”

“Maybe you could stay, just stay again. I could get another invitation to breakfast.”

She smiled, sipped. “It happens I have an overnight bag in the car, in case I got an invitation.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Thank you. It’s on the floor of the passenger seat. Oh, and there’s a blanket on the seat. Would

you bring that, too?"

"Are you cold?" he asked as he headed for the car. "It must be eighty, at least."

"I do love a warm evening. Makes me feel like I'll never want to go inside, just stay out, watch the sky change, the light change, hear the first night birds when twilight comes."

"We can stay out as long as you want." He started back with bag and blanket. "I fell back on the old reliable of steaks on the grill."

"That sounds perfect. For later."

She took the blanket from him, gave it a quick whip in the air to open it.

"Where'd the dog go?"

"Oh, I put him inside, with the rawhide bone I had in my pocket. I think we'll all be happier this way." She laid the blanket on the porch, straightened, shook her hair back. Smiled. "Because I think it's time you got me naked on the porch."

She staggered him. Aroused him. Delighted him. "Is that what time it is?"

"I think it's past time, but I know you'll make up for it."

"I can do that." He set her bag aside, pulled her into his arms.

He took his time so the kiss alone left her limp—all watery knees and misty thoughts. He had a way of making that meeting of lips into a long, slow shimmer. A kindling rather than an explosion.

Wrapped in him, seduced when she had thought to seduce, she let herself be guided, let herself be glided along the river of sensation. Swaying to him, with him, on the old front porch with the sunlight like shattered gold and the world too still for a single leaf to stir.

He eased the zipper down at the back of her dress, enjoying, lingering over every inch of skin he exposed. Soft as silk, smooth as lake water.

His to touch.

He nudged the straps from her shoulders, gave himself the pleasure of laying his lips there. Stronger than she looked, he thought. Shoulders that didn't shirk from lifting a load.

He wanted—needed—to help her with the weight.

For now, he gave the dress a little brush so it flowed like air to her feet. The pretty bits of lace she wore echoed the tender green of the dress.

"I bought them special." She laid fingertips between her breasts when he looked down at her. "I shouldn't've spent the money, but—"

"Worth every penny. I'll pay you back."

"I'm counting on it," she said before his mouth took hers again.

A little stronger, a little deeper now so her head fell back to accept all he offered, to give all he asked.

He drew her down with him so they knelt on the blanket. Their lips broke apart long enough for her to tug the T-shirt he wore over his head; met again as she tossed it aside. Hot flesh under her hands, the water and soap of his shower teasing her senses as she played kisses over the curve of his shoulder.

And still that faint, lingering scent of sawdust, reminding her as the calloused palms reminded her, he worked with his hands.

A quick shiver ran over her skin, ran into her blood when he flicked the clasp of her bra open. Those working hands cupped her breasts, the rough pads of his thumbs stroked across her nipples, waking new needs, churning up a storm in her belly.

Everything in her so full now, so tender and already yearning. But his hands continued to play over her, finding more, stirring more.

He laid her back, ran his finger along the edge of the panties, along that vulnerable line between

thigh and center.

That sound in her throat, not quite moan, not quite sigh. It could undo him. His own needs gathered, but he held them, held them, floating his palm over the lace, building the heat under the thin barrier until her hands lost their grip on him.

Her breath quickened, deepened; the lids lowered over the magic blue of her eyes.

His to touch, he thought again. His to have.

He slipped that thin barrier away and took her up, took her over with his hands.

It burst through her, lightning through the storm, slashing pleasure, a new flash of deep, driving need. She dragged at his belt, impatient now for all, to take, be taken.

He drew her up again to help her, then took her hands in his to still them when she yanked at his jeans.

“No rush.”

Her breath in rags, desire a single mad ache, she looked at him—and saw that same need, that same aching.

“Maybe I’m in more of a hurry than you.”

“Let’s just take a minute.” He kept her hands trapped in his, took her mouth again. “I love you.”

“Oh, God, Griff.”

“I need to say it, need you to hear it. While I’ve got you naked on the porch. I love you. I don’t have to rush it.”

“I can’t get a handle on what I feel, on what you do inside me even when you’re not there. It’s so much.” She pressed her face into his shoulder. “It’s all so much.”

“That works for now.” He eased her back so he could bring up her hands, kiss them before he let them go. “It all works.”

He shifted, lowering to the blanket again so she lay over him. He threaded his fingers through her hair, loving the mass of it, the wild curls and color.

She didn’t have his patience, but she tried to find some, guiding him now through the kiss, letting her hands stroke and stir, feeling his heart kick under her lips.

When at last there was nothing between them, she rose over him, took him in.

Filled. Surrounded. Joined.

She pressed his hands to her heart so he could feel it drumming while she set the rhythm.

Slow, she fought to keep it all slow, and found the staggering pleasure of that easy pace. Rolls of it flowing in like a sea, building layer by layer like clouds.

With the air thick as honey, the sunlight streaming, she rode him over that sea, higher into those clouds. She clung, clung, clung to that breathless peak. Then let herself be swept away.

She could hear the birds again, little trills and whistles through the circling woods. She could even hear the faintest rustle of the faintest breeze through the trees, like quiet breath, now that her heart wasn’t hammering in her ears.

And she knew the pure, sated joy of lying limp on the porch, a thoroughly satisfied woman, beside the man she in turn had thoroughly satisfied.

“I wonder what the UPS guy would’ve thought if he’d come driving up to the house.”

Shelby managed a sigh. “Are you expecting a delivery?”

“You never know. I didn’t even think about it. Who could think?”

“It’s nice not to think. It seems I spend most every hour of my day having to do just that. I don’t think when I’m singing, and I don’t have to think when you start kissing me. I guess it’s like a song.”

“I was thinking.”

“Mmmm.”

"I was thinking you looked like some sort of mountain goddess."

She choked out a laugh. "Goddess. Do go on."

"All that crazy red hair, the moon-white skin. So slim and strong, and eyes like blue shadows."

"Well, that is like a song." Moved, and a little nervous with it, she rolled over again, propped on his chest. "You've got some poetry, Griffin."

"That's about it."

"It's more than enough." She traced a finger down his cheek. "You could be a god, all these hollows here." And down the other cheek. "The sun-streaked hair, all those fine, fine muscles."

"We're a set."

She laughed, lowered her forehead to his. "How deep is that stream of yours these days, Griff?"

"I guess about to mid-thigh—your thigh."

"That'll do it. Let's go splash in the stream."

He opened one eye, one cat-green eye. "You want to splash in the stream?"

"With you, I do. We can finish working up an appetite, and have another glass of that lemonade while we put dinner together."

Before he could think of a reason against, she got up, tugged on his hand.

"We're still naked," he pointed out.

"No point getting our clothes wet, is there? Let the dog out," she suggested, then dashed away.

A goddess, he thought. Or what was that thing . . . a sprite. But he didn't imagine sprites had such long legs. He let the dog out as Shelby ran over his lawn, then, thinking of the more practical, ducked into the house, grabbed a couple of towels.

He wasn't a prude—and would have been insulted to be termed one. But it felt pretty damn weird to rush over his own front yard wearing nothing but skin.

Before he got through the flanking trees, he heard the splash, the laugh, and the joyful yip of the dog.

She made rainbows, he thought, the way she tossed water up so the drops caught the dappled light and shone into quick color. The dog lapped, barked, swam some in the deeper water, then shook himself in the shallows.

Griff hung the towels over a branch.

"It's so wonderfully cool. You could drop a line in here, maybe catch something. You follow the stream down a ways where it widens, deepens, you could catch your supper most any evening."

"I've never fished."

She straightened, naked and obviously stunned. "In your life?"

"I grew up in the 'burbs, Red, spent a lot of time with urban activities."

"We have to fix that the very first chance we get. Fishing's good for you. It's relaxing, and you're a patient man so it should suit you. What kind of urban activities?"

"Me?" He stepped into the water, and she was right, it was cool. "Sports mostly. Basketball in the winter, baseball in the summer. I never went out for football. I had a pretty skinny build."

"I like baseball." She sat down in the water, let it bubble over her. "I believe my daddy might have traded me for another model otherwise. What position did you play?"

"Did some pitching, covered second. Liked playing second better, I guess."

"How come you're not playing on the Raiders softball team? The Ridge has a pretty good team."

"I might try it next year. This year, free time's for the house. Aren't you worried about rocks under your ass, or some fish swimming up . . . where I just was?"

She laughed, lay back enough to dip her hair in the water. "You really are citified yet. I know a couple of good swimming holes. We ought to try one some night."

"Maybe I'll put in a pond. I thought about a swimming pool, but that's a lot of maintenance, plus, it doesn't fit here. But a pond would."

"You could do that?"

"Maybe. Something to think about down the road."

"I love to swim." Relaxed, even a little dreamy, she trailed her fingers back and forth to ripple the water. "I started teaching Callie before she could walk. And we had a pool in the condo in Atlanta, so we could swim all year-round. When she's a little older, I'll take her rafting with one of Clay's groups. She's fearless, and she'd like that. But I want another year or so on her first."

She cocked her head. "Have you tried that?"

"The white water? Yeah. It's a rush. I figured on going again when my parents come down in August."

Her trailing fingers stilled. "Oh, they're coming for a visit?"

"Working vacation—they'll give me about a week on the place in early August. I've got some work I want to get done before they do. And I want them to meet you."

That had nerves dancing in her stomach.

"I want them to see for themselves I'm not exaggerating."

"You've told them about me?"

He gave her a long look. "What do you think?"

"Well." She sat up again. Those nerves were doing an enthusiastic clog dance now. "Um. Well, my family has a big backyard party early in August. If the timing's right, and you think your parents would like to come, they'd be welcome."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Are you cold?"

"No." More than nerves, she thought, and glanced—suddenly uneasy—over her shoulder. "A goose walked over my grave, I guess. But I'm glad you brought the towels." She rose, water sluicing off her skin, reached for one. "I didn't think about drying off."

He tipped her face up. "Do you have a problem meeting my parents?"

"No. It makes me a little nervous, but that's natural, isn't it? It's . . ." She hunched, shivered. "Something between my shoulder blades, and now I've got the willies for no reason I can name."

She wrapped the towel around herself, felt marginally better. So she leaned into him. "I'm nervous about meeting your parents, but I'm glad I will. I think it's nice they'd come down here to help you with the house, spend time with you. And I think they must be good people to have made someone like you."

"You'll like them."

"I bet I will. Let's go in, all right? I can't settle this itch between my shoulder blades."

He took the other towel, then her hand.

Field glasses followed them through the trees, across the lawn.



Shelby let her mother talk her into a facial. She should've known better as being next to naked on the reclining chair under a blanket was kin to being in a closed box when dealing with Ada Mae.

"It's nice Griffin's people are coming down this summer. I told you how we met them last fall." Having done the cleansing, the toning, the gentle exfoliation, Ada Mae used her truly skilled fingers to apply a thick layer of energizing mask.

"They couldn't have been nicer. I took over a basket of tomatoes from my garden, and we sat down and had some sweet tea on the front porch where his mama'd been working on some of the garden. Why, she'd hacked and cut and dug away at that scrub and tangle like a woman on a mission from God. Poison ivy in there, too. I showed her how you pull up some jewel weed, use the juice of it when you get poison ivy on you. Being from Baltimore, she didn't know about that.

"We had a good chat."

"You took tomatoes over so you'd get invited to sit on the porch."

"Neighborly is, neighborly does. I'm saying Natalie—that's his mama's name—is a good woman. And his daddy—that's Brennan—he's a fine man, fine-looking, too. Griff favors him to the life, I swear. You know what else?"

"What else, Mama?"

"They're just as fond of Matt, just like he was one of their own, and Emma Kate right along, too. That tells me something about a person, that they can embrace somebody into the family, blood or not. This mask's just going to set awhile. I'm going to do your hands and feet while it does."

Shelby might have said not to trouble, but no one in the world gave a foot rub like Ada Mae Pomeroy.

"You need a fresh pedicure, baby girl. And don't say you don't have time. Everybody who works here has to show off the products and services—you know how your granny feels about that. You need some pretty summer toes, that's what. We got that Wistful Wisteria. It's a good match for your eyes."

"All right, Mama." She'd see if Maybeline or Lorilee could squeeze her in for a quick one.

"Your skin's looking just beautiful, and so are you. It does my heart a world of good."

"Home cooking, steady work and seeing my own baby girl thrive."

"And regular sex."

Shelby had to laugh. "I guess I can't say that's not a factor."

"I know you still have worries, but they're going to pass. That Jimmy Harlow person, he's thousands of miles away doing God knows what to who. But I say if the FBI hasn't found him, he's taken himself off to somewhere foreign. Gone to France."

Eyes closed, her feet already in bliss, Shelby smiled. "France?"

“First place popped into my head. But he’s gone.”

She slipped booties onto Shelby’s rubbed, creamed and very happy feet. And started on her hands.

“Just like that no-good Arlo Kattery’s gone, maybe for five years in jail, I hear. And Melody Bunker, too. Word I get is when she gets out of that fancy rehab place, she might be moving up to Knoxville, where Miz Florence’s brother lives.”

“I don’t care where she goes or what she does. I swear, all that trouble from her seems years ago. It’s hard to believe it was only weeks. I wonder at someone like her, Mama, who thinks so much of herself she can’t see she doesn’t leave much of a mark on anyone’s life.”

“She tried leaving one on yours.”

“Well, she didn’t.”

“You’re doing something with your life, Shelby, and we’re proud of you.”

“I know you are. You show me every day.”

“Tell me what you want, baby. I know you’ve got something going on in your head. I can see it.”

Relaxed, drifting, Shelby sighed. “I’ve started taking some classes online.”

“I knew it was something! What classes?”

“On interior decorating. It’s just a couple little courses, but I’m doing pretty well, and I like it. I thought I’d take another when it’s done and I can afford it, and a business course, too. Get the experience and education.”

“You’ve got a talent for it. You sign up for those other courses, Shelby Anne. Your daddy and I will pay for them.”

“I’m paying, Mama.”

“You listen to me now. We worked hard, your daddy and I, to send your brothers to college. They had to work, too, but we bore the brunt because that’s what parents do. We do what we can. We’d have seen you through college just the same. You took another path for a while. But if you’re looking to get more education, we’re paying. You’d do it for Callie, and don’t tell me different.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you because I knew this is what you’d say.”

“You ask your daddy what he thinks, and you’ll get the same answer you’re getting from me. You’re not sitting around looking for us to pay your way through life. You’re working, you’re tending your own child, and striving to . . . to hone a God-given talent. If I can’t give my own daughter a hand up, well, what kind of mother would I be?”

Opening her eyes, Shelby saw what she’d imagined in her head. Her tall, occasionally fierce mother, standing over her, face set. “I love you so much, Mama.”

“You’d better. You can pay me back helping me freshen up the living room. Now that we’ve done so much new upstairs, it’s looking tired to me.”

“You’ll get around Daddy on that telling him I need the experience.”

“And you’ll get it, while I’ll get a fresh look in that room.”

She slipped mittens on Shelby’s hands, went around, began a slow, glorious neck rub. “Now that I’ve got you where I want you, I’m going to say when Griff’s people come visiting, you should go over there one night, cook them dinner. Show them what a good cook you are.”

“Mama—”

“I know most women don’t like another woman in their kitchen.” In her cheerful way, Ada Mae rolled right over objections. “But she’ll be visiting, and working while she is. I know I’d appreciate somebody setting a good meal in front of me after a long workday. Don’t I appreciate when you do it for me?”

“You do, but—”

“You ought to make that pasta salad like you made for your daddy and me the other night, with those fancy chicken breasts and good fresh peas.”

“Mama, that’s weeks away yet.”

“Time moves whether we’re watching the clock or not.”

“I know it, and that’s why I’ve got Emma Kate’s engagement party this week when it seems like two minutes ago Matt put the ring on her finger. I’ve got so much to do yet, to think about doing.”

“I wish you’d let me treat you to a new formal for it.”

They’d been this round, Shelby thought, and she was grateful, but she’d rather spend the money on design classes and continuing her education. “I love that you’d want to, but I just don’t have call for that kind of dress now, so it’d be wasted on just one wearing. And I’m going to be running around all night, making sure everything goes just as it’s supposed to—and keeping Miz Bitsy in line, more or less.”

“Bless her heart, she needs someone to.”

“And that’s me this Saturday night. It’ll be easier for me doing all that if I’m not wearing a long dress.” She’d had enough long, fancy dresses over the last few years, and selling them had put some black ink in her ledger. “You think I ought to wear my hair up or down?” she asked, knowing that would carve a new avenue for her mother to travel.

“Oh! Mama could give you a wonderful updo, one that makes the most of your curls instead of hiding them.”

Since Ada Mae was off and running, Shelby just closed her eyes and enjoyed the rest of her facial.

She did have a lot to do, and a short time to get it done. Exchanging e-mails, calls, texts with the event manager at the hotel ate up considerable as the manager was grateful to deal with her rather than the bride-to-be’s “enthusiastic and creative mother.”

Shelby read that subtext clearly.

She had what she hoped would be the final conversation with the florist before the actual event setup, and yet another with Bitsy.

But she took a moment—with her new Winsome Wisteria toes—to sit on the little back patio with her grandmother at the end of the workday.

“You’re glowing, girl.”

Shelby took a sip of sweet tea. “Mama’s a genius.”

“She’s got a talent, but she had fine material to work with. You’re looking happy these days, and there’s no better beauty treatment. It’s hard to bring a glow out without the happy.”

“I am happy. Callie’s just thriving, we’ve got a new baby in the family to spoil and my best friend’s getting married. Working here’s brought back to me how much I love the Ridge. Then there’s the big bonus of my Friday Nights at the bar and grill.”

She took another sip. “And last but far from least, I’ve got myself a boyfriend who makes me glow even when he’s not around. I got awful lucky, Granny. Some second chances come too late.”

“You’re working for yours.”

“I won’t be stopping that anytime soon. Now that I’ve got my glow on, and my nails all pretty, I wanted to see if you’d have time Saturday to do up my hair before the party.”

Viola eyed Shelby over the rim of her glass. “And you’re going to let me have my way with it?”

“I’d never question the expert.”

“Good. I’ve got ideas there. Now tell me what’s really on your mind.”

Granny always had read her like a book. “The party’s the main focus right now. Do you know I just talked Miz Bitsy—and it took some doing—out of the last-minute hiring of a small string

orchestra to play in the ballroom? God knows what she's going to cook up that we have to toss out again for the wedding when it comes."

"She does love her girl, but bless her heart, she's always had fancy ideas that don't fit Emma Kate any more than Bitsy's size-five shoes would. There's another focus in there, Shelby. I can see it."

"I really do want your opinion and advice. I just . . . I'm so grateful to be able to work here, Granny, not just because I needed a job, but because it helped me come back. Helped me feel part of things here again. I want you to know how grateful I am."

"If you've got another job lined up, Shelby, I'm not going to be upset about it. I never figured this situation here was permanent for you. Running this place wouldn't fit you any more than Bitsy's shoes, either. What are you looking at?"

"It's not yet. Probably not for six months. Maybe longer—probably longer," she amended. "I'm taking a couples classes online, on decorating."

"You've got a knack for that like Ada Mae does for skin. I used to think you'd make your fame and fortune from your voice—then use your talent for decorating on the big houses you'd have."

"I'm not willing to do all the work a music career needs. The nights, the touring, the . . . well, the focus again. That's just not for me anymore, for who I am now. I don't get a second chance there—I threw that away, and I'm not looking to find it again."

"Life's just a continual stream of choices. You're making another choice now."

"I think I could build something for me and Callie, Granny."

Lips curved, eyes sharp, Viola nodded. "You're looking forward toward a career. Not a job, a vocation."

"I am. I'm doing really well with these classes, and I'm going to add in others—one on business management, too."

As she nodded again, Viola's smile spread. "You've got that in the blood, but education adds to it."

"I'm not going to rush it. I helped Gilly with her bedroom, and Emma Kate with some ideas for her apartment, just to see if I could work with somebody's space, and their needs. Now Mama wants me to help her freshen up her living room. I can't say how Daddy's going to feel about that."

Viola returned Shelby's grin. "Men don't like change as a rule, but they get used to it."

Revved up now—no one knew starting a business from the ground up like Viola MacNee Donahue—Shelby edged forward in her chair.

"I've got such ideas for over at Griff's. Sometimes I bite my tongue because it's his place, and he's so smart and clever about it already."

"Anyone smart and clever values another eye, another perspective on things."

"Well, sometimes I don't bite my tongue in time, and he hasn't gotten put out by it. Anyway, I'm going to take these classes, get the credentials, then I'm going to try to start up a small business. I'll need to keep working to support myself and Callie, and get this damn debt paid in full. Starting small's the idea, like you did—and Grandpa, too. Building steady. Do you think I've got the right direction?"

"Does it make you happy?" Viola held up a finger, then tapped it on the table. "Don't go discounting being happy in your work, Shelby. It's hard enough going to a job every day and dealing with a boss if you're not happy with your work. But when it's your own, everything's on you. If it doesn't make you happy, you're better off drawing that paycheck and leaving the worry to somebody else."

"This is just why I wanted to talk to you before I took too many more steps. It does make me

happy, Granny. It made me so happy just doing those little bits for Gilly and Emma Kate, seeing how pleased they were, knowing I could see what they'd like and how they'd like it. And I felt so silly happy when Griff used the paint color I picked for the front room, and how he bought this painted chest I saw over at The Artful Ridge—it's sure nice being able to go in there now—and just mentioned how it would look good at the foot of his bed. And it does."

"Then you do it. Do what makes you happy."

On a long breath, Shelby sat back. "I take a step forward, like with the classes, then I take two back. At least in my head. I thought Richard would make me happy."

"You made a mistake," Viola said flatly. "It won't be the last you'll make before you're done with the world. Not if you're lucky enough to live a long, full, interesting life."

"I can hope it's the biggest one I'll ever make." She reached for Viola's hand. "Will you help me? I don't mean with the money I'll need to get going. I mean, when I'm ready to start things up, can I ask you the half a million questions I'm bound to have?"

"I'd be insulted if you didn't. I've got a head for business, and your grandfather does, too. Who do you think helped your daddy get the business side of his practice going?"

"I should've figured. I'm counting on you."

"I'll count on you right back. Well, look here, we've got us a handsome man come to call."

"Miz Vi." Matt walked over to the table, bent down to kiss her cheek. "Excuse the grunge. We just finished up for the day over at Bootlegger's."

"And how's that coming?"

"We've got the footers in, ready for the inspector tomorrow. How are you, Shelby?"

"I'm good, thanks. Why don't I go get you a cold drink?"

He lifted the bottle he carried. "Have Gatorade, will travel."

"A glass with ice, then."

"Real men don't need glasses." With a wink, he chugged straight from the bottle. "Emma Kate mentioned you wanted to talk to me. Just me." Now he wiggled his eyebrows, made her laugh.

"I did, but I didn't expect you to make time so soon. You've got a lot going on."

"So do you. I heard you just headed off a string orchestra. Consider your feet kissed."

"You sit on down," Viola told him. "Take my chair," she added as she rose. "I'm shuffling my tired feet home, and having myself a drink with more kick than tea. You behave yourself with my girl, Matthew."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Granny. Love to Grandpa."

"You have his," Viola said as she went back inside.

"Is there anything else I should know about—now that we've avoided the cello?" Matt took a seat, stretched out his legs. Sighed. "God, that feels really good."

"A man who works as hard as you ought to have Vonnie for a massage every week. Keep yourself loose and healthy."

"Emma Kate's always saying the same thing about yoga. I'd rather the massage than trying to twist myself into a pretzel."

And he'd very likely rather be home now than sitting here waiting for her to get to the point.

"I didn't expect to talk to you about this until after the party or I'd've had my thoughts more together on it. I was just talking to Granny about it. She and my mama are the only ones I've said anything to."

"Not about the party, then."

"No, not about that. That's going to be just perfect, don't worry. It's . . ." She blew out a breath.

"It's that I've started to take some classes," she began, and took him through it.

"Griff said you had an eye. You can't always believe a man who's got stars in his own, but I got a sample myself with what you did at our place. And it cost under two hundred to do it."

"It was mostly just using what you already had in a different way."

"It looks better. Fresher. And the idea of matting and framing her great-grandmother's crocheted doilies? I wasn't big on that—seemed too girly, too fussy, when she told me. But they look great."

"Oh, they're done?"

"She picked them up last night, and we hung them where you said. Even if I didn't like it—and I do—the look on Emma Kate's face once they were up would've been more than enough."

"I'm so glad the idea worked, for both of you."

"She's itching to do something with the rest of the place now—I'd thank you for that, but it would be a lie. I'm trying to get her to hold off since we're going to look at a piece of land Sunday afternoon."

"You found something? Where?"

"Hardly more than a stone's throw from Griff's. Just under three acres, so not as much land as he's got, but the same stream runs through it."

"I bet it's pretty. I didn't think y'all wanted to move that far out of town."

"Emma Kate's a little nervous about it, but I think she'll come around when she sees it. Maybe you could save your ideas for her until I start building."

"Actually . . . I wanted to ask you—just you, Matt, not Griff, not Emma Kate—if you think, once I get my credentials, you could see your way clear to using me, if I seemed right and the job called for it. Or just mentioning my name to a client who maybe was thinking about using a decorator. I have two of my class projects right here on my phone."

She pulled it out of her pocket. "It's hard to see the details on the phone, but you'd see if you thought it worked overall."

"You haven't said anything to Griff?"

"No." Once she'd found the projects, she handed Matt the phone. "He'd say yes because he wouldn't want to tell me no, and so would Emma Kate. That's not what I'm looking for, that's not how I want to start out. I give you my word, if this doesn't seem like something that you'd feel comfortable doing, I won't say a thing to him or Emma Kate about it. I don't want you to feel like I'm putting you in the middle of something."

She took a breath while he studied her project, then flipped the screen to the second one.

"Your work, yours and Griff's, is so good. And your reputation, even though you haven't been around here all that long—not by Ridge standards—is already so solid. I think I could contribute to that. As an outside consultant."

He flicked a glance up at her, then looked at the phone again. "You did these?"

"I did. There are written projects, too, but—"

"They're good, Shelby. Really good."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly and seriously. Griff does most of our design work, and he'll step a toe into decorating if the client wants some guidance. You should show these to him."

"I will, but I don't want to show him with the idea he'd feel obliged to—"

"Show him," Matt interrupted. "We're a team, and when we make a decision, we both have to be in on it, have to agree. It's how we work. So I can't tell you yes until he's seen them. What I can tell you is when I talk to him about it, after he has, my weight's on yes."

"It is? You mean it? You— Wait." She leaned in. "Look right here," she said, and pointed to her

eyes. "Is this a favor to me?"

"Yeah. I think it's going to be a favor to all of us."

"All of us." She sat back again. "Thank you. I'll show him. It's going to take some time for me to get those credentials, work up a business plan, but knowing you'd recommend me takes a weight off."

"Is there any way you can do a little freelancing now?"

"I haven't finished the first class yet."

"Tansy's driving Derrick around the bend already. Paint samples, cut sheets of light fixtures, flooring samples, more cut sheets. And we just got the footers put in. If you'd work with her, it would give her some direction—she's got good ideas, but they're scattershot right now, and mixed in with her ideas for the nursery. And it would give him a breather. He'd owe you."

"I'd be glad to help her out if she wants."

"Done. You and Derrick can work out your fee."

"Oh, I'm not going to charge them for—"

With a shake of his head, he handed her back the phone. "That's not a good business plan."

She huffed out a breath. "It's not, is it?"

"Do you know how many friends, relatives, casual acquaintances and complete strangers wanted me and/or Griff to build their deck, paint their house, re-lay tile, gut their kitchen when we were starting out?"

"No."

"Me either because there were too many to count. Take the advice of someone who's been there, done that, and don't go down that road. If Tansy wants to get your opinion on cribs or paint for the nursery, pal-to-pal, that's one thing. This is expanding their business. You'll earn your fee."

"All right, if they want me."

"I'll give Derrick a call. If he's interested, he'll let you know. I've got to get going."

"Me, too." She rose with him. "Mama picked up Callie, but they're going to be wondering where I am by now. Thank you, Matt." She hugged him, gave him an extra squeeze. "You save a dance for me Saturday night."

"Absolutely. Show Griff those class projects," he repeated.

"I will, first chance."

She went back in. There were some customers still—a couple of women using the Relaxation Room after their treatment, a couple more who'd come in for hair after their own workday.

But Shelby's workday was done.

She got her purse, said her goodbyes, then stepped out the door.

And unexpectedly into Griff's arms.

The kiss caught her off guard, which may have accounted for her head going giddy.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"I saw your van, so I was coming in to hunt you up."

"I was just . . ." The giddiness cleared when she spotted Crystal, her customer and the shampoo girl who'd stayed late to sweep up, all with their faces pressed to the front window.

Crystal just flapped a hand at her heart when Shelby made shooing motions.

"We're this evening's first performance."

Griff only grinned, waved to the women as Shelby tugged him toward her van. "Working late?"

"Actually, I needed to talk to Granny, then I had a little rendezvous with Matt."

"A rendezvous in the Ridge. Do I have to go punch him?"

“Not this time. You know, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about, and some things I’d like to show you.”

“About the big party?”

“Not altogether. Why don’t you come home with me, come on to supper? Mama and Daddy would be pleased to see you. And Callie would be thrilled.”

“Three redheads, a doctor and a free meal. I’d be crazy to say no.” Still he looked down at his grubby T-shirt, dusty jeans. “But there was dirty work to be done today, and I haven’t gotten home to clean up.”

“You can wash up at the house, and we’ll eat outside. We tend to in this kind of weather.”

“Then I’m right behind you.”

“I’ll just let Mama know you’re coming, so she doesn’t get caught without her lipstick.” Even as she reached for her phone, it signaled a text.

“Your mama?” Griff asked as she read.

“No. From Derrick.”

It said only: *Yes, please yes. Save me from decorating hell.*

“Something we’ll talk about.” She walked to the driver’s door. “What’re you still doing in town?”

“It looks like I was waiting for you.”

It made her smile. The whole damn day made her smile.

. . .

THE BURLY SUV drove slowly by as she got into the van. She didn’t so much as glance over, but probably wouldn’t have recognized the driver.

He’d changed his look again.

As she drove toward home, he drove up into the hills.

He knew what he planned to do, and when, and it pleased him to know what had started in Miami was nearly over.



When Griff walked into Vi's place on Saturday, Snickers rocked the house. Women—stylists, customers, technicians—hunkered down to *oooh* over him, to rub his belly, stroke his ears, and generally to send the dog into an apoplexy of joy.

He thought back to his early twenties when he'd routinely looked for ways to meet women. He should've rented a puppy.

He'd come in—under protest, and under Emma Kate's orders—to get his hair trimmed up. He hated getting his hair trimmed up, but she'd been a little bit scary in the intensity of the order.

"You need yourself a trim," Viola stated, and made his shoulders hunch.

"Emma Kate said I had to, but you're busy, so—"

"Nobody's in my chair this minute. You come over here, Griffin, and sit."

The pup immediately plunked his butt down and looked pleased with himself. And the women chorused an *awwww*!

"A man should look well-groomed for his best friend's engagement party." Viola pointed a finger at her chair. "Be good like your dog."

"Just, you know, a little." Wishing himself pretty much anywhere else, Griff sat.

"Have I ever taken whacks at it?"

"No, ma'am."

She whipped a cape around him, picked up her spray bottle to dampen it down.

"You've got a fine head of hair, Griffin. I'll see you keep it. I suspect you were traumatized at the barbershop as a young boy."

"They brought in a clown—one of those crazy-wigged clowns. It was bad. Really bad. Did you ever read *It*? Stephen King's book? That kind of clown."

"No clowns around here of any kind." Enjoying herself, she gave his cheek a rub. "Boy, you need a shave."

"Yeah, I'll take care of it later."

"I'll give you a shave." When his eyes went a little wild, she just smiled. "Have you ever had a woman give you a good, close shave with a straight razor?"

"No."

"You're in for a treat." She adjusted the chair, picked up her scissors. "You haven't asked where Shelby is."

"I was counting on you to tell me."

"She's in the back. We got a group of six women, friends since college. They're taking a long weekend together, staying up at the big hotel. It's nice having forever friends. You've got that with Matt."

"Yeah, I do."

She kept up an easy conversation while she drew small sections of his hair up between her fingers, snipped. To relax him, he knew. Every couple of months, when he talked himself into going in for a trim—or got pushed there—she did the same.

He liked to watch her work—the quick, competent, precise moves, the way her eyes measured the cut even as she talked to him or tossed out orders, answered questions.

She could keep up with half a dozen conversations at once. He considered it a rare skill.

“She’s going to be beautiful all her life.”

“Shelby?”

Viola met his eyes in the mirror, smiled. “Wait till you see her tonight. She’s got to get out of here soon, get Callie settled, then come back here so I can do her hair up. I see it in my head already.”

“You’re not going to straighten it, are you?”

“Not a bit. She says she’s got to get up to the hotel early, so you won’t be able to take her, and that’s a shame because I believe the pair of you would make quite the entrance.

“Lorilee, I’m about done here. Would you go heat me up a towel for Griff’s shave?”

“Sure thing, Miz Vi.”

“You really don’t have to—”

“Griffin Lott, how are you going to talk me into leaving my husband of near to fifty years and running off with you if you don’t trust me not to cut your throat?”

So he ended up cocked back in the chair, a moist hot towel covering his face—but for the nose. He had to admit, it felt great—until he heard the sounds of her stropping the razor.

“I still use my great-granddaddy’s razor,” she said conversationally. “That’s for sentiment mostly. He passed it to my granddaddy, and he’s the one taught me how to shave a man.”

He actually felt his Adam’s apple try to shrink.

“When’s the last time you did?”

“I shave Jackson most every week.” She leaned down close. “We think of it as foreplay.”

As he choked, she removed the towel. “We won’t think of that as you’re thinking of that with my grandbaby. Added to it, I used to shave Mayor Haggerty every Saturday morning—before he retired and moved to Tampa, Florida. We’ve got a woman mayor now.”

She poured oil into her hands, rubbed them together, then smoothed it over his face.

“This is going to soften your beard up, and give you a nice cushion between your face, the cream and the blade. Smells nice, too.”

“That doesn’t sound like your grandfather’s shave.”

“You’ve got to move with the times.” Busily she laid a thick layer of shaving cream over his face, his throat, using a wide, stubby brush to whirl it. “So to go back, I don’t shave the mayor these days. But there are one or two around who like a good barbershop shave regular who come in. Others go to Lester’s Barbershop. He’s always talking about retiring, and if he ever does, I’ll be expanding my services for gentlemen.”

“Always thinking.”

“Oh, I am, Griffin.”

His gaze slid toward the straight razor with its pearl handle, then away.

“What you do,” she continued, “is work in short strokes, with the grain of the hair. Then, if you want a good, close shave like I’m giving you today, you go back again, against the grain.” Gently, with her thumb, she pulled the skin under his sideburn tight. “Don’t feel much pressure, right? Gotta let the blade do the work. If you need pressure, you need a sharper blade.”

She worked methodically, keeping up a flow of words. He relaxed, mostly, even when he felt the blade against his throat.

“Are you aiming to marry my girl, Griffin?”

He opened his eyes, looked up into hers. He saw amusement in hers. “As soon as she’s ready.”

“That’s a fine answer. I taught her to shave a man.”

“Really?”

“She might be out of practice, but she had a good hand with it. And speaking of that, here she comes.”

He was afraid to move, could only shift his eyes. He heard the dog scramble up, heard her voice. Heard her laugh.

“Fathoms deep,” Viola murmured. “That’s what the poets say. You’re fathoms deep, Griffin.”

“And still sinking.”

“Well, look at this! I didn’t know you went for the barbershop shave, Griff.”

“It’s my first.”

Shelby stroked two fingers over his left cheek. “Mmmm. Smooth as it gets.”

“Foreplay,” Viola said again, and had Shelby snickering.

“It does make you think, doesn’t it? Granny, I’m sorry, but I have to go. I got an SOS from the hotel as it seems Miz Bitsy took herself up there even after she promised she wouldn’t. Now I have to put out a couple little fires before she gets them blazing.”

“You go right on. I told you to take the day off.”

“I thought she’d be busy right in here. She’s got appointments, for hair and nails. I’ve got to get her out of the way, smooth things down and be back here in less than a half hour to get the girls. I promised I’d take them to Story Time, and Tracey’s got plans. Miz Suzannah’s got a dentist appointment. I can’t let Miz Bitsy have her head up there right now, and I don’t want to disappoint Callie and Chelsea.”

“I’ll do it.”

Shelby gave Griff’s shoulder a pat before she hurried to the front counter for her purse. “I don’t doubt you’re good at putting out fires, but—”

“No, not Miz Bitsy. I’ll pick up the kids, take them to Story Time.”

As with the puppy, this generated a chorus of *awws* from bystanders.

“Griff, I’m talking about two four-year-olds.”

“I got that.”

“And don’t you have work?”

“Matt took off—he and Emma Kate were able to grab an appointment to look at this place for the wedding.”

“What place?”

“I don’t know. Some wedding place. I’ve done about all I can do on my own till about three, when we’ve got some more material coming in.”

“I’m supposed to have the girls over at Miz Suzannah’s at around three. They’re having a sleepover.”

“There you go. I’ll pick them up, take them to Story Time. We can kick around in the park or something for an hour, whatever, if you’re not back. I’ll drop them off, and be back when the material gets here.

“You can take my truck. I’ll take your van.”

“I’m not sure if Tracey would feel right about you taking the girls.”

“Oh, she’ll be fine, Shelby.” Viola flicked that idea away. “She’s a sensible girl, she knows Griff, and she knows you’ve got your plate full today.”

“You’re right. My head’s already spinning.” She dug her keys out of her purse pocket. “Thank

you, Griff. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Take your time. If you're not back by three, I'll just give Callie a nail gun, give Chelsea a skill saw. It'll keep them busy."

"You're a comfort to me."

"Keys are in my right front pocket."

She arched her eyebrows. "You just want my hand in your pocket."

"Didn't know it was an option when I put the keys there, but it's a nice one."

She slid her hand in, hooked the keys. "Thank you," she said again, kissed him, said *mmmm* again. "Y'all pray for me," she called out as she hurried for the door.

. . .

GRIFF SETTLED DOWN at Rendezvous Books, where apparently Story Time for the preschool set happened once a month. And who didn't like Story Time? he asked himself, leaning against one of the stacks with a glass of iced coffee while about a dozen pint-sizers sat in a circle, listening to a story about a young boy and a young dragon with an injured wing.

He knew Miz Darlene—a retired schoolteacher who worked part-time at the bookstore. He and Matt had put a small addition on her house the previous fall, giving her a cozy reading room.

She deserved one, he thought. She read really, really well, doing voices, adding just the right elements of sorrow, joy, surprise and wonder.

She had the kids in the palm of her hand. And he was pretty interested in what was happening with Thaddeus and his dragon Grommel himself.

From somewhere deeper in the store, a baby began to cry. He could hear a woman's voice softly soothing, then the sound of her steps as she walked, back and forth, back and forth, and the crying stopped.

Sunlight streamed in the front window, through the glass panes of the front door, falling in square patterns of light on the old wood floor.

The pattern changed when the door opened; the bell jingled, then the pattern fell back into place. Changed again when a shadow crossed over it. He barely noted the man as more than that—a shadow that changed the pattern briefly.

Then the story ended, and Callie ran straight to him.

"Did you hear? Did you? Grommel's wing got better, and Thaddeus got to keep him! I wish I had a dragon."

"Me, too." He reached down for Chelsea's hand.

"Can we get a book?" Callie wanted to know. "About Thaddeus and Grommel?"

"Sure. Then I say we get ice cream cones and head to the park."

They got the book, and since it turned out there was already a second adventure written, he bought each girl the new one, then ice cream that dripped in strawberry streams faster than the kids could eat them.

He used the water fountain in the park to deal with sticky hands before he worked off the ice cream high by chasing the girls around, up and down the big play station.

When he dropped down, feigning defeat, the girls ran circles around him.

Callie tugged Chelsea's hand so they moved a few steps away, and began to whisper.

"What's the secret?"

"Chelsea says boys are supposed to ask."

He sat up cross-legged. "Ask what?"

More whispering, then Callie gave an innately female head toss and marched to him. “I can ask if I want.”

“Okay.”

“Can we get married? We can live in your house, and Mama can come, too. ’Cause I love you.”

“Wow. I love you, too.”

“So we can get married like Emma Kate and Matt, and we can all live in your house with Snickers. For happy ever after.”

Undone, he drew her in. “Let me work on that.”

“No tickles,” she said, rubbing his cheek.

“Not today.”

“I like tickles.”

He drew her in again. Fathoms deep, he thought. “They’ll be back.”

He took out his phone at the signal.

Sorry it took so long—fires all out. On my way back.

He kept an arm around Callie as he answered.

In the park, smoking cigarettes and having a couple beers. We can switch off from here.

Her answer came moments later. *Don’t litter. I’ll be there in ten minutes.*

He slipped the phone back in his pocket. “Your mom’s on the way, Callie.”

“But we want to play with you!”

“I have to go to work. But before I do . . .” He shoved up, grabbed up both girls like footballs and had them squealing as he raced around the play set with Snickers running after them.

He caught sight of the man who’d come into the bookstore—or he thought it was him—at the far end of the park. Found himself holding the girls just a little closer.

Then the man glanced to the left, grinned, waved and strolled off toward someone Griff couldn’t see.

Kids, he thought, setting the girls down so they could chase him. They made you suspicious of everything and everyone.

. . .

SHELBY ZIPPED THROUGH the rest of the day, doing the switch—kids and cars—with Griff, dropping the girls off at Miz Suzannah’s. She gave Callie an extra hug, thinking it was her first genuine sleepover—one outside family.

Back to the salon for hair, and at Crystal’s insistence, makeup. While she’d have preferred seeing to her own face, she couldn’t find a way to say no without insulting Crystal. But her nerves showed enough for Crystal to vow not to “tart her up.”

It certainly saved time, having herself fussed over like a celebrity, while she sent and answered texts from hotel catering, from the florist, from Emma Kate.

And too many to count from Miz Bitsy.

They kept her faced away from the mirror while they worked in tandem, then swung the chair around with a flourish for the big reveal.

All doubts vanished.

“Why, I look *amazing*!”

“Played up your eyes more than you usually do,” Crystal began, “but kept it subtle. So it’s elegant, like your hair.”

“I’ll say I’m elegant. And I look like me with a boost—not like the two of you fussed over me for

near to an hour. I love it, Crystal, and I'll never doubt you again. And Granny, my hair is just wonderful. That thin band for just a little sparkle sets off the curls you've got tumbling out the bun in the back."

"A few loose tendrils around your face," Viola added, fussing with them a little more, "so it doesn't look like you spent five minutes on it—just spent the right five."

"I don't know if the rest of me can live up to what y'all have done, but I'll try my best. Thank you, thank you so much!" She hugged them both. "I've got to go. I'm determined to be at the hotel before Miz Bitsy. I'll see you both there."

She calculated she'd have the house to herself for an hour before her mother got home—two if Ada Mae opted to get her hair and face done up at the salon first.

She wouldn't need two.

She grabbed a Coke out of the kitchen, took a breath. She'd planned on wearing her simple black dress, but with the Grecian style Granny had come up with, she reassessed as she went upstairs.

The black dress would work for anything, no question—and had already done service at three Friday Nights. She'd yet to wear the silver gray one she'd brought with her from her closet up North. It just didn't suit Friday Nights. But for this . . .

Taking it out, she held it up in front of her, turned to the mirror. The lines were a little more fluid, more flowy, and would play up the hair. Not the black shoes now, she decided. They'd be too stark. But she had those blue sandals with the low heels—low heels would be more practical anyway when she'd likely be running around half the night.

And the dress had slit pockets, so she could slip her phone right in, have it handy.

Decision made, she dressed, added long dangling earrings and a trio of thin, sparkly bracelets from Callie's dress-up box.

She packed toiletries, a change of clothes since she was having her own overnight at Griff's after the party.

In an hour flat, and feeling pretty damn good about herself, she got back in her car and drove to the hotel.

Shelby figured she'd spent more time there in the past three weeks than she had in the whole of her life, but it still made her smile to make that turn up the rising road and see the spread of the big stone building through the trees.

She parked, took the slate path toward the wide front veranda, where two big white pots held red and white begonias with some trailing blue lobelia.

If Emma Kate and Matt decided to have their wedding here, she imagined those pots spilling with yellow and lavender flowers.

Some of the staff greeted her as she crossed over the wide-planked floor of the lobby, headed straight for the ballroom.

Decorating was well under way, and she saw, happily, that she'd been right. The deep purple cloths over the white added casual elegance, the perfect canvas for the bowls of white hydrangeas and clear, square holders holding white tea lights.

A mix of high- and low-tops, of chairs and stools.

She planned to echo that on the terrace, add some freestanding urns with white calla lilies and roses, some peonies and airy, trailing greenery.

It was all so Emma Kate.

Spotting the florist, Shelby moved to her. "Point me where you want me."

By the time the future bride and groom arrived, everything was in place—and she saw from the

look on her friend's face, every hour of work, every drive up and back, every banging Bitsy headache had been worth it.

"Oh, Shelby."

"Don't start watering up! You'll have me doing it, and we'll ruin our makeup. We both look amazing."

"It's so beautiful. Everything I wanted, and more I didn't know I wanted. It's like a dream."

"It was our dream." She took Emma Kate's hand, and Matt's, joined them. "Now it's your dream. I now pronounce you engaged."

"We have one more favor."

Shelby reached in her pocket, pulled out her fist. "I happen to have one favor left over, right here. What can I do?"

"Matt and I decided on our song—at least for now. 'Stand by Me.' You know it, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"We want you to sing it tonight."

"But you've got a band."

"We really want you to sing it." Emma Kate took Shelby's hand between both of hers. "Would you please, Shelby? Just that one song. For us."

"I'd be happy to. I'll speak to the band about it. Right now we're going to get you a drink, and I'm going to show you around before people start getting here and you don't have a minute."

"Griff's right behind us," Matt said. "In fact, here he is now."

"Oh, well, my! Look at you." She brushed a hand down the lapel of his dark gray suit, and thought how lucky it was she'd worn the pale gray dress. "You're so dashing."

"Goddess of the mountain," he murmured. "You take my breath."

He lifted her hand, kissed it. She flushed—something she'd taught herself not to do—as a redhead—while still in her teens. "Thank you, sir. The four of us do look nearly as wonderful as the room. I think we should have the first glasses of champagne. And Emma Kate, I want to show you the terrace. We've strung little white lights in the potted trees. It's a fairyland."

"Flowers and candles and fairy lights," Griff commented as they toured the space. "All the sparkle, none of the fuss."

"I cut miles of frills out of Miz Bitsy's vision, but I really do think she's going to be pleased with how it all turned out. We might have a storm coming in, but not until after midnight."

She tapped her pocket and her phone. "I keep checking my weather app, and so far, so good. There's Miz Bitsy now. And doesn't she look pretty in her long red dress? I'd better go talk to her."

"Want backup?"

She grabbed his hand. "Do I ever."

. . .

SHE DANCED WITH HIM. It didn't occur to her until later that not once did a memory of other formal parties and elegant dress intrude. She never thought of Richard, who'd worn a tux as if he were born in one.

Everything centered on the moment.

Dancing with her father, who pulled out some of the ballroom moves he'd retained from when Ada Mae had nagged him into lessons. And her grandfather, who swung her into some clogging—and there her muscle memory wasn't as keen as his—when the band kicked it up a few licks. With Clay, who hadn't inherited any rhythm at all, and with Forrest, who'd taken Clay's share of it.

“How’d you get in here?” she asked Forrest. “You’re not wearing a tux or even a suit and tie.”

“It’s the badge.” He circled her in a smooth two-step. “I told Miz Bitsy I was on duty.”

“Are you?”

He only grinned. “I consider myself always on duty, and I haven’t worn a monkey suit since senior prom. I hope to continue that winning streak.”

“Nobby’s wearing one.”

“He is, but he swore to back me up on the on-duty excuse.”

“What’d you bribe him with?”

“A fancy coffee and a couple bear claws fresh from the bakery.”

She laughed, circled with him.

“You look as good as it gets tonight, little sister.”

“I feel as good as it gets tonight, big brother. Look how happy everybody is. Emma Kate could light the place up all on her own.”

“Stealing her back,” Griff said as he cut in.

“I could arrest you for that, but I’ll let it go. There’s a blonde over there who looks like she could use some company.”

Shelby glanced over. “Her name’s Heather. She worked with Emma Kate at the hospital in Baltimore. She’s single.”

“That works.”

Griff drew Shelby in as Forrest wandered toward the blonde. “You’ve got a hit on your hands, Red.”

“I know it.” She slid her hands up his back, pressed her cheek to his. “It feels so good—just like you. I was just saying how happy everybody is. It’s so nice knowing people are happy for Emma Kate and Matt. And Miz Bitsy— Oh, there she goes, tearing up again, and bolting toward the ladies’. I’ll just go take care of that.”

Shelby turned her head, brushed a kiss over his cheek. “It shouldn’t take long—or it could take twenty minutes if it’s a genuine crying jag. I’ll probably appreciate another glass of champagne once I handle this.”

“I’ll make sure it’s waiting.”

She started for the doors, and the restrooms beyond them. And pulled out her phone when it rang.

“Miz Suzannah? Is everything all right?”

“It’s nothing much, honey. It’s just Callie forgot Fifi, and she’s heartbroken. We didn’t realize it until we were getting them into bed. I’ve tried substitutes, but she’s just set on her Fifi.”

“I don’t know how I could’ve sent her off to you without Fifi. We don’t want her first overnight spoiled. I’ll just run to the house and get Fifi, drop her off. It won’t take fifteen minutes for me to get there.”

“I’m so sorry to interrupt and cause you that trouble. My Bill would go get the dog, but I know your mama’s been locking up.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m on my way now. Tell Callie I’m bringing Fifi.”

She spotted Crystal on her way to the ladies’. “I’ve got a favor to ask. Miz Bitsy’s in there, crying a little, just happy, you know how it is, and emotional. I’ve got to run get Fifi for Callie. Could you just soothe Miz Bitsy—or ask Granny to—and let Griff know, if you see him, I’ll be back in under a half hour.”

“Sure, I will. You want me to go get Fifi?”

“Thank you, but I’ll be quick.”

“Oh, here! I meant to give you this at the salon. The lipstick I used on you.”

“Thank you, Crystal. Keep this party going!”

“You can count on me.”

Hurrying off, Shelby shoved the lipstick in her right pocket, the phone in her left. She cast her mind back to packing for Callie. She *knew* she’d had Fifi right there, but . . .

She saw it now, Callie picking up the stuffed dog to talk to it about their sleepover.

And carting the dog with her when she’d followed her mama into the other bedroom.

“On the windowsill,” she remembered. How she’d overlooked that, she’d never know.

That was all right—she’d be back again before anyone missed her. And Callie and Fifi would be reunited.

She cut around town as a Saturday night in the summer could be busy, and made it to the house in under ten minutes. Grateful for the low heels, she ran for the door. They’d scheduled her song for midway through the evening, so she had thirty minutes to spare. But no more.

She dashed straight upstairs, into her bedroom.

“There you are, Fifi. I’m so sorry you got left behind.” She plucked the much-loved dog off the windowsill, turned to rush right back out again.

And he stepped into the doorway. The dog slipped out of her numb fingers as he moved toward her.

“Hello, Shelby. Long time, no see.”

“Richard.”

His hair was dark, a deep, unfamiliar brown, and fell in careless waves well over his collar. Thick scruff covered the lower half of his face. He wore a camo T-shirt and rough khaki pants with scarred army boots. A combination he wouldn’t have been caught dead in.

Oh God.

“They—they said you were dead.”

“They said what I wanted them to say. It didn’t take you long to go running back home, and spreading your legs for some carpenter. Did you cry for me, Shelby?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You never did understand much of anything. I guess we’ve got to have a long talk, you and I. Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He reached casually behind his back, drew out a gun. “Yes, you are.”

The gun in his hand struck her just as unbelievable as all the rest. “Are you going to shoot me? For what? I don’t have anything you could want.”

“Did have.” He nodded toward the photo on her dresser. She saw now he’d taken it apart.

“I know you, Shelby. You’re so damn simple. One thing you’d never get rid of—that picture you gave me of you and the kid. If they picked me up, they’d still have nothing. I kept what I needed with my lovely wife and daughter.”

“Behind our picture,” she murmured. “What did you hide there?”

“Key to the kingdom. We’ll talk. Let’s go.”

“I’m not—”

“I know where she is,” he said quietly. “Spending the night with her little friend Chelsea. At the grandmother’s. Maybe I’ll just go over there, pay Callie a visit.”

Fear sliced through her, a knife to the bone. “No. No, you stay away from her. You leave her be.”

“I’ll kill you right here where your family will find you. If I have to handle it that way, the kid’s my

next stop. Your choice, Shelby.”

“I’ll go. Just leave Callie alone, and I’ll go with you.”

“Damn right you will.” He gestured her out of the room with the gun. “So predictable—always were, always will be. I knew you were a born mark the first time I saw you.”

“Why don’t you just take what you came for and go? We don’t mean anything to you.”

“And how far would I get before you called your cop brother?” As they stepped out of the house, he put an arm tight around her waist, pressed the gun into her side. “We’re going to walk down a little bit, take my car. A minivan, Shelby? You’re an embarrassment to me.”

That tone, that pitying tone. How often had she heard it? “I’m nothing to you, never was.”

“Oh, you were so useful.” He pressed a kiss to her temple, made her shudder. “And at first, hell, you were even fun. God knows you were eager in the sack. This one. Get in, climb over. You’re going to drive.”

“Where are we going?”

“A little place I know. Quiet. Private. It’s just what we need for a heart-to-heart.”

“Why aren’t you dead?”

“You’d like that.”

“I swear on all that’s in me, I would.”

He shoved her into the car, forcing her to crawl over to the driver’s seat.

“I never did anything to you. I did what you wanted, went where you wanted. I gave you a child.”

“And bored the crap out of me. Drive, and keep it to the speed limit. You go over, you go under, I’ll shoot you in the gut. It’s a painful way to die.”

“I can’t drive if I don’t know where I’m going.”

“Take the back roads around that hole-in-the-wall you call a town. Try anything, Shelby, I’ll take you out, then I go after the kid. I’ve got too much at stake, and I’ve worked and waited for it too long to let you fuck it up.”

“You think I care about the jewelry, the money? Take it and go.”

“Oh, I will. First thing Monday morning. If you hadn’t come into the bedroom, you’d never have known I was there. As it is, we’ll have a reunion weekend, then I’m gone. Just do what you’re told, like always, and you’ll be fine.”

“They’ll look for me.”

“And they won’t find you.” Sneering, he pressed the barrel of the gun into her side. “Jesus, you stupid bitch, do you think I’ve outwitted the cops all this time and can’t keep ahead of a bunch of Barney Fifes for a day? Take this turn coming up, to the right. Nice and easy.”

“Your partner’s been around. Jimmy Harlow. Maybe he’ll have better luck finding you.”

“I don’t think so.”

His tone froze her blood.

“What did you do?”

“Found him first. Steady on these switchbacks. I wouldn’t want this gun to go off.”

Her insides quaked, but she kept her hands steady as she negotiated the tight wind of the climb.

“Why did you marry me?”

“It served my purpose at the time. I never could smooth you out, though, never could make anything out of you. Listen to you, look at you, I gave you plenty of money, taught you how to buy the right clothes, how to give a decent dinner party, and you’re still the ignorant hick from the Tennessee hills. It’s amazing I haven’t bashed what brains you have out before now.”

“You’re a thief and a swindler.”

“That’s right, honey.” His sneer shifted to a cheerful grin. “And I’m damn good at it. You? You’ve never been good at anything. Take this excuse for a road on the left. Nice and slow now.”

He might’ve thought her ignorant, useless, malleable, but she knew the hills. And had a reasonable idea where they were going.

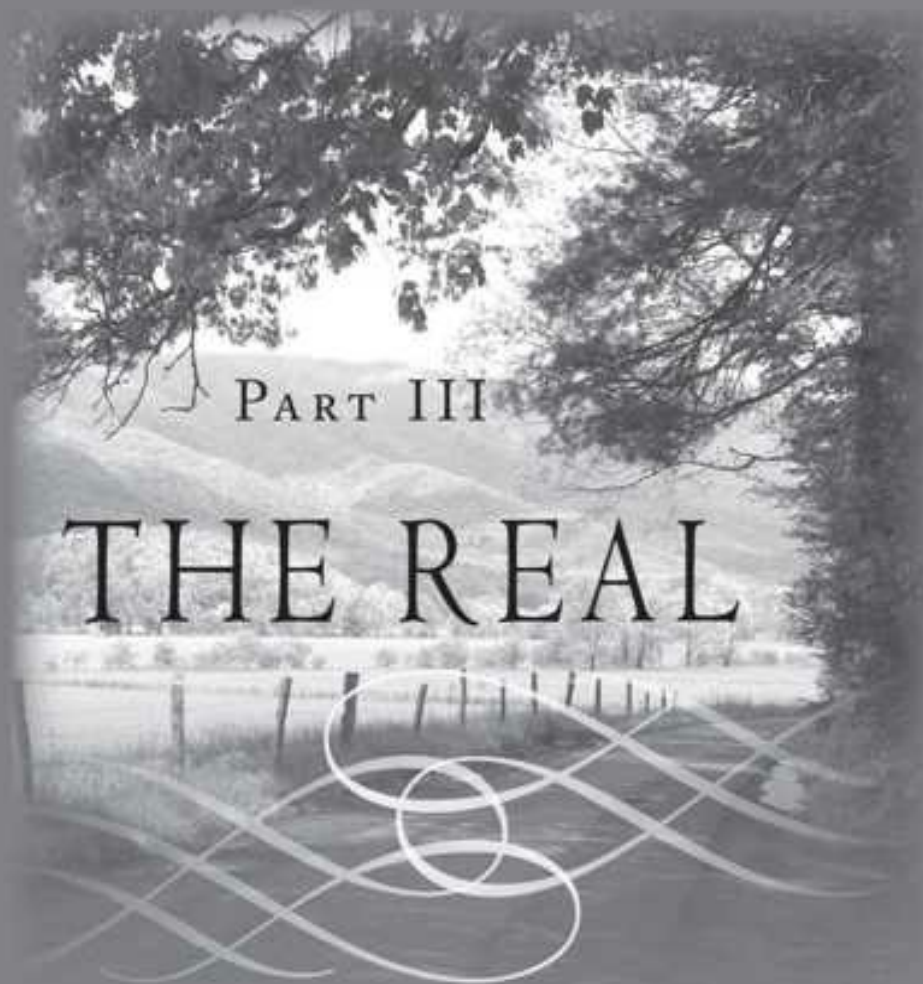
“What happened in Miami? All those years ago,” she asked, wanting to keep him talking, distract him as she slid her left hand into her pocket.

“Oh, we’ll talk about that. We’ve got a lot of things to talk about.”

Texting while driving, she thought, struggling not to give way to hysteria, was dangerous.

She hoped to God she managed to do it right.

Because while she knew the hills, she thought she knew the man beside her now. And she believed he meant to kill her before he was done.



PART III

THE REAL

They do not love that do not
show their love.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



The country-dark road twisted like a snake as it climbed, and gave her an excuse to ease off the gas. She let the fear show—no point in pride—and the show of fear could be another weapon. Or at least a shield, she thought, as she slipped her hand into her pocket, and prayed she could manage a coherent message.

“Why didn’t you just run?”

“I don’t run,” he said with that same self-satisfied smile on his face. “I navigate. You were just what I needed to make my new ID solid after the Miami job. It didn’t take me long to realize you’d be useless on the grift, but you made for a good temporary cover.”

“Nearly five years, Richard?”

“I never figured to keep you around that long, then you got knocked up. I think on my feet,” he reminded her. “Who’s going to look for a family man, a man with a hick wife and a baby? And I had to wait for the take to cool down. And for Melinda to get out. She made a hell of a deal—you have to give her credit. I’d thought she’d get double what they gave her, and that would’ve been plenty of time for cooling off and covering my tracks. But she always could surprise me.”

“You killed her.”

“How could I? I’m dead, remember? Make this right. Nearly there.”

Nothing back here, she thought, but a couple of cabins—at least that’s all there’d been when she’d left the Ridge.

She hit Send—she hoped—because she had to put her left hand back on the wheel.

“But you’re not dead, and you killed her.”

“And who are the assholes looking for over it? Jimmy. I’m in the clear. I’m going to stay in the clear. And when I pick up what’s mine Monday morning, I’ll be in the clear with millions. Long-range plans, Shelby, take a lot of patience. This one cost me a little more than a year for each five million. That’s a damn good deal in the world of big pictures. Pull up right beside that truck.”

“Who else is here?”

“Nobody now.”

“My God, Richard, whose place is this? Who did you kill?”

“An old friend. Turn off the car, hand me the keys.” Once again, he jabbed with the barrel of the gun. “You’re going to sit where you are until I come around for you. Try anything—anything—I’ll put a bullet in you. Then I’ll go get Callie. I know people who’d pay a premium for a pretty girl her age.”

She hadn’t known he could sicken her even more. “She’s your child. She’s your blood.”

“Do you actually think I care?”

“No.” Her hand was back in her pocket, frantically tapping. “I don’t think you care about anything or anyone. And there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to keep Callie safe.”

“Then what’s left of the weekend should be easy on both of us.”

She considered locking the doors when he got out, just to give herself more time to send the next message. But it would only spike his temper. It had to be better to make him believe she was utterly helpless.

It wasn’t too far from the truth.

When he came around, opened her door, she got out compliantly.

“Here’s our little home away from home.” He used a penlight to shine a thin beam, showing the way to a small cabin, roughly built.

Her shoes crunched on the short gravel walk leading to a sagging front porch. A couple of old chairs, a rickety table. Nothing she could see that could be used as a weapon.

He dropped the penlight back in his pocket, handed her a key.

“Unlock the door.”

She did what she was told, and at the prod of the gun, stepped off the dark porch into the dark cabin. She jolted when he turned on the light—couldn’t help herself. It came yellow and dull from the globes on a wagon wheel dropped from the pitched ceiling.

“I call it the Hickville Dump. It’s not much, but it’s ours. Sit down.”

When she didn’t move fast enough he shoved her toward a chair of red-and-green plaid. She caught herself, turned to sit, and saw the blood on the floor, smears of it leading to a closed door.

“Yeah, you’re going to clean that up, then I’ve got a shovel with your name on it. You’re going to bury Jimmy, save me the sweat.”

“All of this for money?”

“It’s always the money.” The excitement, the light that had first drawn her to him, beamed out. But she saw it now for what it was. Hard and false.

“It’s always the money,” he repeated, “but it’s the ride, too. It’s knowing you’re the smartest one in the room, no matter what fucking room. It’s knowing if you want it, you can take it.”

“Even if it belongs to someone else.”

“Especially, you moron, if it belongs to someone else. That’s the ride. I’m going to grab a beer.” He sent her a wide smile “Get you something, honey?”

He backed into the tiny open kitchen when she said nothing.

So sure she was paralyzed, she thought, he didn’t even bother to restrain her. She kept her hands clenched together in her lap, the knuckles white. But it was as much a rising fury as fear now.

The lamp, she thought, the one on the table with the black bear hunched by the trunk of a tree. It might be heavy enough if she could get her hands on it.

There’d be knives in the kitchen.

She imagined the Winchester rifle over the fireplace was unloaded. But maybe not.

And there was an engraved plate on the stock that read “William C. Bounty.”

She relaxed her fingers, started to slide her hand toward her pocket, let it lie still again when Richard walked back, sat across from her.

“Isn’t this cozy?”

“How did you do it? How did you survive the boating accident?”

“Surviving’s what I do. Melinda was getting out. I didn’t count on Jimmy busting out, complicated things a bit. I didn’t think he had that in him. But Melinda, I knew she’d be a problem. She always was a dog with a bone, just never let go, so she’d need to be dealt with before I cashed in.”

He settled back, obviously relaxed. “I always figured on the five years—and it was close enough. So . . . a little vacation with the fam, tragedy strikes, and I’d be off the grid again.”

"We'd have been with you if Callie hadn't gotten sick." When his eyes gleamed, understanding struck her with true horror. "You were going to kill us. You were going to kill your own baby."

"Young family's holiday vacation ends in tragedy. It happens."

"You couldn't have gotten away with it. If the authorities hadn't hunted you down, my family would have."

"Not if I died trying to save you. It should've played out that way. I'd have spent a couple days painting us as a happy little family—people tend to believe what they see. Good-looking couple, pretty little girl. Then we'd make a day of it on the boat. Go out far enough, get some wine in you, wait until dusk."

He took a slow sip of beer, smiled at her. "I toss the kid over, and it's easy money you'd go right over after her. I wouldn't have to put a mark on either one of you."

"You're a monster."

"I'm a winner. I'd scuttle the boat, get my scuba gear. With my new ID and a change of clothes in a waterproof pouch, I'd have made it to Hilton Head in a few hours. Which is what I did—without you along."

"The squall."

"Unexpected bonus."

"You could've died out there. Why risk dying?"

"You don't get it, never will." He leaned toward her, that light glowing again. "That's the *point*, that's the rush. All I had to do was dump the tanks, catch a cab and pick up the car I had waiting in long-term parking at the airport. Drive to Savannah and my drop box there. Wouldn't have needed that if I damn could have found the key for my box in Philly."

He watched her while he took another sip of beer. "You got into that. Where was the key?"

"In the pocket of your leather jacket, the bronze one I gave you for your birthday two years back. It had gone through a little hole and into the lining of the jacket."

"Well, son of a bitch." He gave a half-laugh, shook his head as he might over a missed putt on the green. "That key would have saved me some time and trouble. Either way, I'm dead. The way it turned out, you got to play the grieving widow for a while. How did that suit you?"

"I wish it had been true."

He laughed, toasted her with his beer. "Coming back to the boonies brought some of that sass back. Let's see if a little housework knocks it back out of you." He rose, went back in the kitchen.

When he picked up a bottle of bleach and a scrub brush, she got to her feet.

"You want me to clean up the blood?"

"You're going to clean up the blood, unless you want to clean up your own along with it."

"I can't—"

He swung out with the back of his left hand, quick as a snake, striking her across the cheekbone hard enough to send her stumbling back and into the chair again.

She didn't know why the blow shocked her, now that she knew him. Really knew him. But he'd never hit her before.

"God! I've wanted to do that for *years*!" The furious pleasure on his face iced her blood. He could, and would, do more than knock her down if she bucked him. Even as he stepped toward her, she held up a trembling hand.

And again it was more rage than fear.

But she let only the fear show. "I just meant I need a bucket. I need a bucket of water and—and a mop. I can't get it cleaned up with just the bleach and a brush. That's all I meant. Please, don't hurt me."

“Why the fuck didn’t you say so?”

She let her head hang, and thinking of never seeing Callie again, her family, never seeing Griff, let tears come.

Let him see the tears, she thought, let him think that’s all that’s in me.

“You start sniveling, I’ll give you worse than a love tap. Go find a damn bucket. Make a move I don’t like, you *will* be mopping up your own blood.”

She went into the kitchen, scanning, scanning. No knife block, but surely there was a knife in a drawer. And there was a good cast iron skillet still on the stove, and a coffeepot. Filled with hot coffee that would make a weapon.

She looked under the sink, considered her options there, then in a skinny closet. There she found a broom, mop, bucket. Some old cord, some rusty chain, butane lighter fluid, bug spray.

She considered grabbing the bug spray, aiming for his eyes with that as the pepper spray was in the purse she’d left in her car. But he was nearly on top of her.

She took out the mop, the bucket, filled the bucket with hot soapy water.

She carted it over to the largest smear of blood.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“Hold it,” he advised.

“I’ll do what you tell me to do. I just want to get through this, Richard, but I need to use the bathroom.”

He narrowed his eyes. She kept her gaze downcast, her shoulders slumped.

“Right there. Door stays open.”

“If you won’t give me privacy, at least don’t look at me.”

She walked to the tiny bathroom—razors maybe in the old medicine cabinet? A window too small for her to wiggle through if she had the chance.

She put the seat down on the toilet while he hovered in the doorway.

“Just don’t look at me!” She let out a choked sob. “The door’s open, you’re standing right there. I’m just asking you not to watch me. For God’s sake.”

He leaned against the jamb, cast his eyes up to the ceiling. “Awful dainty for someone one step up from an outhouse.”

She smothered her sensibilities, lifted her skirt, pulled down her panties. And shot her hand in her pocket.

Please God, if you’re listening, let this make sense. Let this go through.

When she was done, heat flushed her face.

“Jesus, look at you, sweaty, splotchy, your hair like something a rat wouldn’t nest in. I don’t know how I ever got it up with you.”

She dipped the mop in the bucket, wrung it out, began to wash up the blood.

“And what’s your pithy comeback? Hurt feelings.” He made crying noises. “God, you’re weak. You think that asshole you’re fucking now’s going to stick?”

“He loves me.” Saying it, knowing it, steadied her.

“Love? You’re a handy piece of ass. It’s all you ever were, all you’d ever be. A handy piece of ass who’ll splash around in some backwoods creek.”

She froze, and slowly lifted her gaze. “You spied on us, on me?”

“I could’ve taken you both out.” He lifted the gun, pointed it at her head. Said, “Pow, pow. But I wanted to lay it on Jimmy’s plate. A nice, tidy circle.”

“But you killed Jimmy.”

“Unavoidable alteration in plans. Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered. I always do. Put your back

into it, Shelby.”

She went back to mopping, and began to make plans of her own.

. . .

GRIFF GOT HUNG UP talking construction with Derrick, lost track of some time. He had Shelby’s champagne, but he didn’t have Shelby. A glance around showed him Bitsy was back—a little damp-eyed as she danced with her future son-in-law.

Shelby was probably dealing with some other small crisis, he thought, but set out to look for her.

“Hey, Griff, hey!” Crystal came over, pointed at the glass of champagne. “Is that up for grabs?” She took it, drank deep. “I need it after drying Miz Bitsy up. She was watering like a leaky pipe.”

“Looks like you and Shelby got it done.”

“Oh, it was just me—that’s why I was looking for you, but I got waylaid a couple times. It’s a hell of a party! Shelby had to run home for a minute. Get Fifi for Callie. She should be back by now, I guess.”

“When did she go?”

“Oh, I don’t know exactly since I was dealing with the leaky pipe, then Miz Bitsy’s sister—they call her Sugar?—she came in so the two of them were leaking together. I guess it’s been about twenty minutes or so. She should be back or on her way.”

Maybe it was the dregs of all that had happened, but the dread just dropped over him like a shroud. He yanked out his phone, intended to call her, and it signaled an incoming text in his hand.

“It’s Shelby.”

“There you go.” Crystal patted his arm. “She’s just letting you know she’s on her way back, I expect. No call to look so worried, honey.”

But when he brought up the text the bottom dropped out of his world.

“Where’s Forrest?”

“Forrest? I just saw him over that-a-way flirting with a pretty blonde. I—”

But Griff was already moving, and fast. He cut across the dance floor, ignoring those who called out a greeting. He spotted Forrest, and what he felt must have showed on his face. After a casual glance in his direction, Forrest’s eyes went cold.

He turned away from the blonde without a word.

“What happened?”

“She’s in trouble.” Griff held out the phone.

richard live hs gun mking me drive black drango wst on bb rd ky license 529kpe

“Christ.”

“What’s BB Road?”

“Black Bear Road. Wait.” Forrest clamped a hand on Griff’s arm before his friend could take off. “You’re not going to find her driving hell-bent all over the hills.”

“I’m not going to find her standing here.”

“We’re not going to be. Nobby’s over by the bar there. Get him. I’m calling it in.”

“I’m going after her, Forrest.”

“Not saying different, but we’re going to go with the best chance of finding her. Get Nobby.”

They pulled Nobby outside, and Clay and Matt with them.

“We’re going to do this smart,” Forrest began. “Two men to a team. The sheriff’s putting more together right now. We’re going to blanket the area west of town. Odds are he’ll keep to the back roads. Clay, you look here.”

Clay clamped a hand on Forrest's shoulder, leaned in to look at the map on his phone. "You and Nobby are going to cover this section here. You keep your eyes peeled for that vehicle, that license plate. Matt, you sure about this?"

"Hell yes."

"I'm going to have you go into town, hook up with the sheriff, he'll—"

"What's going on here?" Viola stepped outside. "What's happened? Where's Shelby?"

Griff only waited a beat. "You're wasting time figuring out what you should say or not, Pomeroy. Richard's alive—I don't know how—and he has her. We're going after her."

The color drained out of her face, made her eyes blaze like blue fire. "Boy, if you're putting a posse together, your granddaddy and I are going to be part of it."

"Granny—"

"Don't Granny me," she snapped at Forrest. "Who taught you to shoot?"

"I'm going now," Griff said.

"Nobby, set it up from here, will you? Griff and I are going."

"Callie," Viola called out.

"She's fine, Griff checked, and we've got a man there sitting on the house right now." Forrest kept going, opened the lockbox on the side of his truck, took out a Remington rimfire rifle, a box of ammo.

"I've seen you shoot so I know you can handle it."

Target shooting was as far as Griff had gone, ever, but he didn't argue.

Forrest got in the truck, took his favored Colt out of the glove box. "We're going to get her back, Griff."

"Not sitting here, we won't."

"I'm counting on you to keep a cool head." Even as he spoke, Forrest punched the gas and they were flying. "We're going to keep your phone open, in case she's able to send you another message. Use mine to coordinate with the other teams as they come along. The sheriff's already pulled in the federales. They got equipment we don't run to in the Ridge, and better techs. Shelby keeps her head, keeps her phone on, they're going to track it."

"He had to be watching her, or be in the house when she went back."

"We'll find out when we get her back."

"He's going to be the one who killed the woman."

Forrest's face was stone as the speedometer inched higher. "I wouldn't bet against it."

"I saw him, I think. I got a bad feeling about the guy I saw—when I took Callie to the bookstore, then to the park. He played me."

"Let's worry about now."

The now had fear tearing through his heart, his head, his belly. "He has to have somewhere to go. Shelby said he never did anything without a reason."

"We'll find him, and we'll get her back. Safe."

Before Griff could respond, his phone signaled. "It's Shelby. Jesus, she's got nerves of steel." He struggled to read the jumbled text as they flew around switchbacks. "Old Hester Road, I think she means Hester."

"I know where she means. It's Odd Hester. Scatter of cabins and old campsites, deer stands up that way. Remote. You relay that, Griff, to Nobby, and he'll take it from there."

"What the hell does he want with her?"

"Whatever he wants, he's not going to get it."

Ice, sharp and jagged, poured in through the tearing fear. "How far away are we?"

“A ways, but we’re traveling a hell of a lot faster than they are. Bring the others along now, Griff.”

He made the relay, yanked off his formal tie.

He wouldn’t lose her. He would not lose her. Callie would not lose her mother. Whatever had to be done, he’d do it. He looked at the rifle across his lap.

Whatever had to be done.

“She’s sending another. *Right hardpack track past mulberry stand. Single cabin. Truck.*

There’s a truck already at the cabin.”

“Might have more hostages. Or it might be his old partner. Let the others know.”

Griff couldn’t say how Forrest kept the truck on the road, not at this speed, not around turns so sharp they could cut bone. More than once they fishtailed or the tires kissed the narrow shoulder.

And still it wasn’t fast enough.

“She’s sending . . . it says . . . William, she means William. William Bounty.”

“Bounty,” Forrest corrected. “I know where it is. She’s guiding us in faster than the fucking feds ever could.”

“How far?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Make it less.” With hands cold as steel, Griff began to load the rifle.

. . .

SHELBY EMPTIED the bucket twice, refilled it.

Stalling, as nothing was going to remove the stains from the old wood floor.

But she poured a puddle of bleach from the bucket on the stain, got down on her hands and knees to scrub at it.

“Now that’s the kind of job you’re suited for.”

“Scrubbing floors is honest work.”

“Loser work. You lived the high life for a while. I gave you that.” He gave her a nudge in the ass with his foot. “I gave you a good taste of the high life. You should be grateful.”

“You gave me Callie, so I’m grateful. You always meant to kill them, didn’t you, the people you ran with, the woman who you lived with—she said you married her. Did you?”

“Not any more than I married you. Thinking I did was about the only really stupid moment she had when we were together. Women, what can you do? They’re wired to be suckers. But she wouldn’t have given up, even thinking I was dead. She’d want the score. She was getting too close. I walked right out behind her, out of that dive where you were singing to a bunch of rubes.”

He shook his head, circled her while she worked. “I saved you from a life of embarrassment thinking you could ever make anything with that mediocre voice. And Mel’s face when she saw me? Priceless. I take back what I said—that was her second really stupid moment. She rolled the window down, said, ‘Jake. I should’ve known.’

“Those were the last words she said, and yeah, she should’ve.”

“She loved you.”

“See what love gets you?” He gave her another little kick. “It’s just another con.”

She sat back on her heels, then rose slowly, bucket in hand. “I’m going to need more than this to bleach out that stain. Is there more?”

“You’ve got plenty, right there.”

“Yes, but I need it to—”

She heaved it up, straight bleach with a faint tinge of blood, into his face.

When he screamed, she had a choice. Go for the gun or run for the door. And she was too fired up to run.

She kicked, aiming for his groin. The floor was just wet enough that she slipped a little, and it took the leading edge off the kick. But she made contact. Even as she tried to grab for the gun, he fired it—wild and blind.

Her ears rang. She ducked, snatching at the mop, hoping to make better contact with his balls with the handle. But his flailing hand got a fistful of her hair, firing stupefying pain into her skull.

She jabbed her elbow into the same tender area, and knew she hurt him, knew she gave him pain. But he was as wild as she was now, and flung her across the room like a rag.

“Bitch, you bitch.”

She rolled. She wasn’t sure how well he could see, hoped he was blind. Desperate, she wrenched off a shoe, flung it across the room, praying he’d follow the sound.

But he walked slowly toward her, the whites of his eyes shattered and red.

“I’m not just going to kill you now. I’m going to hurt you first.” He rubbed his left eye with his free hand.

Making it worse, she knew. Please, please make it worse.

“Let’s start with a kneecap.”

She braced for the pain, then scrambled back in shock as the door where the bloodstains ended burst open.

Richard whirled, blinking his burning, blurry eyes as the bloody mountain of a man rammed him.

Horrible sounds, the grunts, snarls, the crack of fist against bone. But the only sound that mattered was the clatter of the gun as it leaped out of Richard’s hand on impact and hit the floor.

She bolted after it, nearly dropped it again out of hands soap slick with her own sweat.

She swayed up to her knees, bit down, gripped the gun in both hands.

The big man was bleeding, and whatever force had driven him into the room and at the man who’d shot him was eaten away now. Richard had his hands around the man’s throat. Squeezing, squeezing.

“Dead. Thought you were dead, Jimmy.”

I thought the same about you, she thought, and said calmly, coldly, “Richard.”

His head whipped around. She wondered what she looked like through those burning eyes. She hoped she looked like Vengeance.

He bared his teeth, let out a short laugh. “You haven’t got the spine.”

He lunged at her.

. . .

THEY HEARD the first shots as Forrest spun the truck onto the dirt track. All plans to go in quiet, one in front, one in back, while backup poured in behind them, dissolved.

He floored it, fishtailed over the gravel walk as the next shots rang out.

“Go in fast,” Forrest shouted as they leaped out of either side of the truck. “If he’s standing, drop him.”

They hit the door together. Griff swung the rifle up.

But Richard was already down.

She knelt on the floor, holding the gun out, gripped in both hands. There was blood and bruising on her face. Her dress was torn at the shoulder where more bruises bloomed.

Her eyes were cold and fierce, her hair a wild, tumbling tangle of flame.

She never had and never would look more beautiful to Griff's eyes.

She swung the gun toward them, and he saw her arms tremble. Then she dropped those trembling arms.

"I think he's dead this time. I think I killed him. I think he's dead now."

Griff shoved the rifle at Forrest. His heart started beating again when he had his arms around her.

"I've got you. You're all right. I've got you."

"Don't let go."

"I won't." He eased back only to pry the gun out of her stiff fingers. "He hurt you."

"Not as bad as he wanted. Callie."

"She's fine. She's safe. She's asleep."

"He said he'd kill her if I didn't go with him. He said he'd go after her." She looked over at her brother, who pressed fingers against Richard's throat. "I had to protect her."

"You did what you had to do," Forrest told her.

"Is he dead now?"

"He's breathing. They both are, but they sure are a mess. It'll be up to the doctors and God whether they make it."

"He shot him, shot the big one—Jimmy—and thought he was dead, but he wasn't. I threw bleach in his eyes, but it wasn't enough. I slipped on it, I think, when I went to kick him in the balls, and he got me by the hair. He was going to shoot me, but the other one came out like a demon from hell. I got the gun. I got the gun, and the big one, he couldn't fight anymore he was bleeding so bad. Richard was choking him. I said his name. I said, 'Richard,' so he looked at me. I don't know why I thought that would make him stop. He thought less than nothing of me. He thought I was weak and stupid and spineless. He said that. He said I didn't have the spine, and he came at me. I had the spine to shoot him three times. I think it was three times. He didn't go down until the third time."

Forrest shifted, crouched eye-to-eye with her. "You did what you had to do."

Her eyes lost the fierceness, went glassy with tears. "You have to take it back."

"Take what back, baby?"

"That I can't shoot worth shit."

Weak-kneed, Forrest rested his brow to hers a moment. "I take it back. Get her out of here, Griff. I got this."

"I'm all right."

Rather than argue, Griff just picked her up.

"You came." She touched his cheek. "I knew you would, somehow. I didn't know if the texts were going through, or who I was texting for sure. I've got them alphabetical, so it was going to be you or Forrest or Granny, maybe Grandpa. I knew if they got through, you'd come. You'd fix it."

"You fixed it yourself before I got the chance."

"I had to— Someone's coming." Her fingers dug into his shoulder. "The lights. Someone—"

"Backup. You're safe now." He turned his face into her hair. "You've got the whole damn Rendezvous Ridge Sheriff's Department and God knows who else coming."

"Oh, that's all right, then. Will you take me to see Callie? I don't want to wake her up. I don't want her to see me until I've cleaned up, but I need to see her. Well, my God, that's Grandpa's date-night car. Set me down. Set me down so they're not scared."

He put her on her feet, but kept an arm around her. When he felt her shivering, he stripped off his jacket, draped it over her shoulders as her grandparents got out of the car.

"I'm all right. I'm not hurt. I'm—" The rest was muffled against her grandfather's shoulder. She felt him shaking, knew he wept. Wept with him a little as others drove up.

“Where is the bastard?” Jack demanded.

“Inside. I shot him, Grandpa. He’s not dead—again—but I shot him.”

Jack took her face in his hands, kissed her wet cheeks.

“Let me see the girl.” Viola pulled her away, studied her face. “You were born to take care of yourself and yours. You did what you were born to do. Now we’re going to take you home and . . .”

She paused, steadied herself. “Griff’s going to take you home,” Viola corrected. “Your mama and daddy are at Suzannah’s with Callie. Just staying there while she sleeps. They need to hear your voice.”

“I’ll call right away. I had my phone in my pocket. He never knew I had it. He never knew much about me, I guess. Sheriff.”

Her head felt too light, and the dark circled for a few seconds as Hardigan strode up to her.

“I shot him. He was going to kill me so I shot him.”

“I want you to tell me everything that happened.”

“She gave Forrest the outline,” Griff interrupted. “She needs to get away from here. She needs to see her daughter.”

Sheriff Hardigan tapped his cheek where Shelby’s was bruised. “He do that?”

“Yes, sir. It was the first time he ever hit me. I guess it’s going to be the last time.”

“You go on home now, darling. I’ll be around to talk to you tomorrow.”

It took some time. Clay rushed up, picked her up off her feet, held her suspended as if he’d never let her go. There was Matt, who thrust his phone out to her after he’d hugged her so she could speak to Emma Kate.

“Tell Forrest I’m taking his truck.”

Griff drove away from the cabin, from the blood, from the lights, then just stopped at the turn onto the road.

He drew her over against him, held on.

“I need a minute.”

“You can take all the minutes you want.” She started to relax against him. “Oh hell, Griffin, I forgot to tell them. Richard has a key in his pocket—or I guess that’s where it is. It was in that picture frame, the one holding the picture of me and Callie I gave him. He said he was going Monday morning to the bank, and I think he means one of the banks right in the Ridge. It’s where he put the jewelry, the stamps, too, I guess. He put it right in the bank in Rendezvous Ridge.”

Keeping his eyes closed, Griff just breathed in the scent of her hair. “Who’d have figured to look for it there?”

“I guess he was canny in that way. I have to tell them.”

“You will. Tomorrow’s soon enough. They’ve waited five years. They can wait one more night.”

“One more night. I want a hot shower and a gallon of water, and I want to burn this dress. But I want to see Callie more than anything.”

“That’s first on the list.”

“Do you know the way to get back to the Ridge from here?”

“I haven’t got a clue.”

“That’s all right.” She took his hand in hers. “I do. I know how to get us home again.”

Epilogue

Shelby slept long and deep, comforted by the sight of her sleeping child, and her own mother's fussing, her father's gentle, if insistent, exam.

The sun beamed high and bright when she woke, turned the hills she loved into a glimmering green, bathed to shining by the storm that blew through while she slept.

She might have winced when she looked at her face in the mirror, at the purpling bruise on her cheekbone. And winced again, with an added hiss, when she pressed testing fingers against it.

But she reminded herself it would heal and fade.

She wouldn't allow Richard to leave a mark on her. Or on hers.

She heard voices as she went downstairs, followed them into the kitchen.

She saw Griff leaning on the counter smiling at her grandmother, and her grandfather giving Matt some instructions over a hitch in his truck. Her mother put a pretty tray together; her father drank coffee in a splash of sunlight. Emma Kate and Forrest with their heads together, and Clay, Gilly and the baby huddled together.

"This looks like a party."

All conversation stopped; all eyes turned to her.

"Oh, baby girl, I was just fixing you breakfast in bed. You need rest."

"I slept just fine, Mama, and I feel just fine now." She went to kiss her mother's cheek, snatched a piece of bacon off the plate she didn't really want to make her mother smile. "Party. Oh, Emma Kate, your party."

"Don't even start to go there." Jumping up, Emma Kate hugged her hard. "You scared me, Shelby. Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I'm happy to promise that."

"Come over here and sit," her father ordered. "I want a look at you."

"Yes, sir, Daddy. But where's Callie?"

"We took Jack over to Miz Suzannah's so she'd have more company." Gilly smiled but gripped Shelby's hand tight. "We all thought you'd sleep longer."

"I'm so glad you're all here. I'm so glad I woke up to all of you." She looked at Griff. "All of you."

She sat so her father could turn her face this way and that, shine his little light in her eyes. "Headache?"

"No. Not a bit, I promise."

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

"No—well, my cheek's a little sore. Tender."

"That's what this is for." Viola gave her an ice pack, and a kiss on the top of her head.

"Feels good." Like bliss, Shelby thought. "He backhanded me because he could, and he pulled my hair like a girl in a catfight. Mostly he just tried to hurt me with words, like always. But he couldn't. Nothing he could say could— Oh, good Lord, I forgot again. Forrest, I have to tell you

why he was here, in the house when I came to get Fifi. He was after—”

“A key? Safe-deposit box he’s been paying for under the name of Charles Jakes for about five years now?”

Deflated, she shifted the angle of the ice bag. “Yes, that’s what I forgot to tell you.”

“Griff filled me in last night when I came by. You slept late, Shelby. We found what the feds have been after right in the First Bank of Tennessee on High Street.”

“All of it? Here?”

“Most of it. The owners and their insurance company’ll be notified. That’s for the federals.”

“Tell her the rest, Forrest.” His mother poked him. “I still can’t believe it.”

“What rest?” Her stomach pitched so she reached for the Coke her mother had put in front of her. “Is he dead? Did I kill him?”

“Not that part of the rest. He made it through the night, and they give him a decent shot of making it altogether.”

Closing her eyes, she let out a breath. She’d done what she’d had to do, just as Forrest had said, but dear God, she didn’t want a killing on her hands. Even Richard’s.

“He’s going to live?”

“They say he is. Then he can spend the rest of his life behind bars. The other one, he’s one tough son of a bitch. They’re giving him a better than decent shot.”

“I didn’t kill him. I don’t have to live with having killed him.” She closed her eyes again. “But he’ll go to prison. He won’t get out again.”

“He’s going to spend what’s left of his life in a cell. He’s never going to touch you or Callie.”

“Tell her the good part,” Ada Mae insisted. “We’ve had enough talk of that man in this house.”

“Spending his life in prison’s a pretty good part,” Forrest said, but shrugged. Then grinned.

“There’s a finder’s fee for the property stolen in Miami. Standard ten percent. There’s going to be some paperwork and some hoops to jump through, but Special Agent Landry figures you’ll get about two million out of it.”

“Two million what?”

“Dollars, Shelby. Pay attention.”

“But . . . he stole it.”

“And the information you gave us found it.”

“We need to have mimosas.” When Ada Mae wept into her hands, Jack put his arms around her. “Oh, Daddy, why don’t we have any champagne?”

“They’re going to give me all that money.” Shelby held up her hands, struggled to take it in. “Enough I can pay off the rest of the debt?”

“Don’t see how it’s your debt to begin with,” Viola said, “but you’ll be free and clear. The man’s not dead, Shelby Ann, and you were never his wife. Unless you’ve got fools for lawyers, some of that debt’s already going to be gone. You’ll have enough left, if I have any say about it, to give you a good start.”

“I can’t imagine it. I have to let it settle in. I just can’t believe I’d be free of that weight. Free of him, altogether.”

“I want you to eat now, and rest some more.”

“I need to see Callie, Mama.”

“What are you going to tell her?”

“I’m going to tell her as much of the truth as I can.”

“She’s got MacNee, Donahue and Pomeroy in her,” Viola said. “She’ll stand up to it.”

. . .

LATER SHE TOOK Callie to Griff's. She thought both of them could use some time around a man who'd never hurt them. And she wanted some quiet time of her own with him.

She sat on the porch with him while Callie raced around with the dog in a shower of bubbles.

"I can't believe you bought her another bubble machine."

"It's not another. It's one for here."

"I'm so glad you said it was all right to bring her here for a while."

"It's always all right, Red."

"I guess I know that, too. So much went through my mind last night, on that awful drive, in that cabin. I'm only going to bring him up to say Daddy's checked in with the hospital. They both came out of it. Richard, he's trying to work a deal, but they're not giving him room for one. And the other one, he's giving them chapter and verse. I think Forrest had the right of it. He's never going to get out of prison. I don't have to worry for Callie on that score."

"I'd never let him near her."

She heard it in his voice—the fierceness and the love.

"I believe that, too. Everything from last night's a little jumbled today. I don't know if I told you everything straight."

"It doesn't matter. You're here."

"I'd like to fix us a nice supper later, the three of us."

"I'll fix it."

Smiling, she tipped her head to his shoulder. "You're not a bad cook as cooks go, but I'm better. And I'd like to do something normal. That's how I feel when I'm here. I feel normal."

"Then stay. Stay for supper, stay the night, stay for breakfast. Stay."

"I have Callie."

He said nothing for a moment, then rose. "Would you come in for a minute? I want to show you something." When she looked out in the yard, he turned.

"Hey, Little Red, will you watch Snickers for me, make sure he stays right in the yard? We need to go in for a minute."

"I will. I will. He likes the bubbles! See, Mama, they make rainbows."

"I see them. You stay right in the yard with Snickers. I'm just inside."

"Where's she going to go?" Griff asked as he drew Shelby in. "And you'll be able to see her out the window anyway."

"Did you start on another room?"

"Mostly finished one." He led her upstairs. She could hear Callie laughing through the open windows, hear the dog's joyful barks.

Normal, she thought again. Safe and real.

On the second floor he opened a door.

The light spilled in through the windows, splashed on the pretty green of the walls. He'd hung a crystal light catcher in one of those windows, and more rainbows shimmered.

"Oh, it's a wonderful space. The color's like bringing the hills right inside. You did a window seat!"

"Thinking about doing some shelves over there, but haven't decided. Plenty of closet space."

He opened double doors and made her eyes go wide. "This is amazing. It's all set up, all painted and pretty. Even the light in here. Is that . . ." She opened another door. "A bathroom, so pretty and fresh. And . . ."

She spotted it then, the little soap dish. A grinning Shrek.

It felt like arms hugged her heart.

"You did this for Callie."

"Well, I thought she needed her own space, one she could grow into. You know Callie and I are getting married. Can't have your bride bunking in an unfinished room."

Her eyes stung. "She mentioned that. How you're getting married."

"Want in on that?"

She turned to him. "What?"

"Bad timing." Flustered, frustrated, he scrubbed a hand over his hair. "I usually ace the timing angle. Might still be a little off balance. I want her to have her own space, that makes her happy. I want her to be comfortable here. Sometimes you might want to stay, and she'd have this for herself. Like the office you'd have on the third floor."

"Office?"

"I haven't started on it yet because you might want it somewhere else, but I think it's a good space. It'd be across from where I'm going to put mine. First-floor-office idea was good," he added, "but the third floor takes work away from the living space."

She hadn't quite caught up. "You're going to build me an office?"

"How are you going to run a business if you don't have an office?"

She walked to the window, watched Callie and the dog. "I never talked to you about any of that."

"Miz Vi did."

"Of course she did. You believe I can do that? Start up and run my own business?"

"I think you can do anything. You have already. What's going to stop you? Anyway, you'd both have space, and you could spend more time here. See how it works for you."

"How about you, Griffin? How's it work for you?"

"I love you. I can wait awhile. You've had a hell of a time, Shelby. I can wait awhile, but I want the two of you here as much as I can get. I want you to be mine. I want—"

When he cut himself off, she shook her head. "Say it. You've earned it."

"I want Callie to be mine. Damn it, she deserves me. I'm good for her, and I'm going to keep being good for her. I love her, and she should be mine. That's the second part of this, I guess, but it's just as important as the first part, just as important as you and me."

She sat on the window seat, took a breath.

"I'm going to be there for the two of you. That's where I draw the line. You know what fear is—you do, because you went through it. The kind of fear where you don't think you've got any blood left in your body. Where everything's drained out of you, but fear. That's what it was when he had you. I can be patient, Shelby, but you're going to know what you are to me. What you and Callie are."

"I know fear. I know fear like what you spoke of. I felt it, too, and with it a terrible, blinding rage. Both so tangled they were one thing in me. That fear and rage that if he did what he planned to do, I'd never see my baby again, or tuck her in at night, or watch her play and learn. Never dry her tears. And a fear and rage I'd never see you again, or have you hold onto me or take my hand the way you do. So many things, I can't say all of them. It would take a lifetime."

"But I knew you'd come. And you did."

She drew another breath. "I've never said I love you."

"You'll get around to it."

"How about now?"

She watched the change, so subtle in his face, in his eyes. And her heart just smiled inside her.

"Now works for me."

"I've never said I love you because I didn't trust. Not you, Griffin, I came to trust you so easily, and that scared me a little so I didn't trust me."

Crossing her hands over her heart, she swore she could feel it swell. "It's all been so fast, so I'd think, I can't get carried away with all this. I can't let myself go, just ride this wave. But I did. I am. I love you, I love who you are with me, with Callie. I love who you are. It might've been fear and rage that made it come so clear. But it is clear. You made Callie this room—for her. She's already yours. So am I."

He stepped to her, took her hands. "Was there a yes in there?"

"There was a whole bunch of them. Weren't you paying attention?"

"I got a little lost after 'I love you.'" He drew her in, took her under, took them both under with the light splashing and rainbows circling.

"I do love you," she murmured. "It fills me up, lights me up. Like Callie does. I didn't know anyone else could make me feel that way. But you do."

Overcome, he rocked her, rocked them both. "I'm never going to stop."

"I believe you. I believe you and I . . . we're going to build wonderful things together. With you, I can look past today and tomorrow into weeks and months and years."

"I've got to get you a ring. I should get Callie a ring."

Her heart just melted. "You're right. She does deserve you. I'm going to keep you filled up and lit up, too." She eased back, framed his face. "I want more children."

"Right now?"

"Pretty much right now. I don't want to wait. We're good with children, you and me, and Callie should have a big, noisy, messy family."

He was grinning, and those clever eyes shining with it. "How big?"

"Three more, that'll make four."

"Four's doable. It's a big house."

"I have such ideas about this house—I've held back."

"Really?"

"Really. And I'm going to be ferocious on some of them." She threw her arms around him. "I'm going to work with you on this house, on this family, on this life. And we *are* going to build something strong and real and beautiful together."

"I think we've already started. If you're going to have all these ideas and give me all this help when it comes to the house, you should move in pretty soon."

"How's tomorrow?"

She loved seeing the surprise, then the joy.

"Tomorrow's also doable. Word of the day. 'Doable.' It's all doable."

"Why don't we go talk to Callie about it?"

"Let's do that. Stay for supper," he said again as they started downstairs. "Stay the night, stay for breakfast. I know I don't have a bed set up for her yet, but I'll fix something up."

"I know you will."

They walked outside the old house they'd make theirs. Walked to where a little girl and an ungainly puppy raced around in a whirl of glistening bubbles, where the hills rose green and the clouds smoked over them in a bold blue sky. And the water bubbled musically over rocks in dappled light and shadow.

She'd found her way home, Shelby thought.

All the way home.

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