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WHEN WE
let go

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DELANCEY STEWART

Foreword

** A note to readers: This book was originally published as LOVE REBUILT. It has been edited and rewritten.*

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Maddie

CHAPTER 1

Coffee was critical. And I peered into the old tea tin someone had given me once (it had been filled with tea, but I'd fixed that right away), only to find I was out. Because of course I was.

And what the hell was that tapping noise outside? It was half-past barely the buttcrack of dawn. And I had no coffee, an increasingly bad attitude, and a growing irritation for woodpeckers. If that was actually a woodpecker.

Was he pecking on something metal? Stupid bird. I squinted out the cheap broken blinds over the dinette, but didn't see anything except trees. Because that was one thing I wasn't short on up here in the place to which I'd been relegated. There were plenty of trees.

Tap, tap, tap.

And persistent birds. I really hated birds.

But I didn't think that was a bird. The sound was annoying and abrasive, most likely human in origin, I thought. And only one person I knew was capable of inspiring the level of irritation I was feeling. I shuffled across the thin bubbled linoleum floor to the window that looked out the front. A glance out the window confirmed my worst fear. Jack.

An ungodly rage filled me at the sight of him, and perhaps I should have taken a breath and given more thought to the situation before acting. But that had never really been my style.

I pulled on the thin robe hanging on the back of the door and clattered my

way through the tinny space to the front, throwing the flimsy door open to crash loudly against the side of the trailer.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” My voice surprised me. It carried all the frustration and annoyance I’d kept bottled up and hidden under my assurances to everyone over the last year that I was fine.

“Well, hello, darlin’! You’re a sight, Maddie.”

Typical. Ambiguous. Everything Jack said could be interpreted nine different ways, and everything out of his mouth sounded charming, thanks to that lilting Scottish brogue of his. He knew it, too. It was his strategy for staying out of trouble.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, it’s not a compliment, love.” He gave me his half grin and cocked his head to the side, his waves perfectly styled above his perma-tanned face. God, he was sexy. And God, I hated the bastard.

“Don’t call me ‘love’. Or darlin’.” I sputtered. “My thanks was sarcastic.” I knew it wasn’t a compliment. I couldn’t recall the last compliment my bastard of an ex had paid me. But now if he believed I thought that he’d paid me a compliment, I was already losing this conversational battle. This was what happened when I had to talk to Jack before I’d had coffee.

“You’re a gorgeous woman, Maddie, but today you’re really working that mountain woman thing, ya know. The tatty robe, the smudgy black stuff around your eyes ...” He motioned to his eyes, as if I wouldn’t be sure where the smudgy black stuff was. And then he laughed. He was smiling, but the venom in his words worked as he’d intended. The smooth Scottish accent did nothing to me now except deepen my desire to kick him in the balls.

I tried not to care about his words, but I couldn’t help it. I swiped at my eyes. I didn’t exactly practice perfect makeup maintenance now that I was living on my own. In a trailer. On the side of a mountain. No one was usually around to care. “What are you doing here, Jack?” My plan was to get to the heart of the matter and then get him the hell away from me.

“Just doin’ you a wee favor, darlin’.”

I stared at the mallet in his hand, and realized that he’d been pounding a sign

into the ground in front of the half-framed house that stood next to my trailer. We were actually talking to one another through the non-existent walls of the front room. The front room of my dream house. My ex-dream house. The one I had been building with my ex-husband. Jack.

“What’s the deal with the sign?”

“What do think the deal with the sign is?” Jack grinned and my blood bubbled hot beneath my skin.

“It’s eight a.m. I don’t want to play guessing games.”

Jack turned away from me as a car motored slowly up the narrow road and came to a stop behind where he stood. “I think you’re about to find out.” As he said it, he turned back around and winked at me.

The wink threw me over the edge.

“Don’t you wink at me, you ass!” I practically screamed it, and as I did, the owner of the car emerged, his head turning my way as he ran a hand through shiny auburn locks.

Wow. I suppressed an involuntary shiver and pulled my robe a little closer around me.

The car was one of those practical luxury types. A Land Rover or a Land Cruiser or some kind of four-wheel-drive Land thing. I wasn’t an expert in slow, hulking cars. Actually, given that I now found myself living in a trailer next to a half-built reminder of my failed marriage and was working in a diner, it turned out that I was not an expert at anything. Not marriage. Not big cars. And certainly not men.

The man who approached the threshold of my trailer, taking in all my terrycloth-robed glory, had an air of practical luxury about him, too. He was tall and broad, his hair glinting with hints of copper in the morning sunlight. It was a little long, a little messy, but clearly some attention was paid to it. He wore aviator sunglasses that hid most of his face. But not his lips.

And his lips ... his lips were like a sculpture. The kind of lips that would make nuns blush and giggle. They were a little too perfect, maybe. But the guy wore flannel, like most people in this mountain town. And the short stubble covering his jaw gave him a rugged look that inspired in me a wild urge to rub

my hand over it. Or better yet, photograph it.

I longed to dart back inside for my camera, but I already looked like a loon. A robe-wearing loon with a camera would definitely not be better.

The man stepped around the car, gazing up at the half-built house, and I chastised myself for staring. My fascination, beyond his movie-hunk looks, was that this man was clearly different from the other people I'd seen up here, but he still managed to fit in. Something I hadn't mastered.

"How much?" the man asked, speaking to Jack.

"How much what?" I asked, my voice bordering on a high-pitched scream. What was going on here?

Jack ignored me. "I guess given the state, and the fact that winter's not far out, the better question is what's it worth to you?"

The man walked around the house, stepping into rooms, and testing structural beams with his hands and his body weight.

While he wandered around inside my house, I stepped down the front step of the trailer and stomped through the dust in my pink slippers to where Jack stood with his arms crossed.

"What is going on?" I hissed.

Jack raised an eyebrow as he looked me, his eyes sliding down to my chest. "Is that the teddy from our wedding night?"

I glanced down, horrified to see a flash of leopard-print silk exposed in the deep V-neck of the robe. "No." But of course it was. He was right. My humiliation was practically complete.

"You can take the girl out of the city ..." Jack grinned, shaking his head.

I pulled the robe tighter. So what if I still wore my expensive lingerie to bed? I deserved nice things. Even if Jack had taken most of them from me. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Selling the house for you."

"For me?"

"Thought you'd appreciate the help."

"I don't want your help, you cheating ass!"

The man had stopped examining the house and was looking toward me now,

a tilt to his head and a half-smile on those sculpted lips. I wished he'd take off those damned shades so I could see what he thought of this whole exchange, which he had surely overheard. I didn't know why I cared.

"This is my house, Jack. Maybe you forgot. Maybe you're so overwhelmed by the details of managing your own house—the one that has actual walls and a roof and working plumbing and sits on a nice street in a real city—Maybe that's all so overwhelming that you forgot this heap is mine."

Jack had the grace to drop my gaze for a split second. But then the smile appeared again. So freakin' confident. "I didn't think you really wanted it. Wouldn't you rather have the cash?"

I might, but definitely not with his help. "Isn't that for me to decide?"

"You've been sitting on it for four months, love. It's gonna rain and snow and blow up here before much longer. If someone's gonna build some walls, they need to do it now. Not good for the frame to sit out exposed like this for so long."

"That's not really your concern. And since when are you a construction expert?"

Jack took my elbow in a conciliatory gesture, and I wrenched out of his grasp. "Don't touch me!"

He offered me his most condescending smile, the one reserved for willful children and, of course, for me. "This gentleman is serious. He called as soon as the ad went live. He's got money. Wants to pay cash. I still care about you, Maddie, and I'm trying to help."

I sniffed. His platitudes would do very little to ease my burning desire to see him foundering in a pit of venomous pythons or drowning in a giant vat of scalding pea soup. "I'll tell you what would help me then. Talk to my lawyer next time she calls instead of dodging her! Give me what you owe me and then get out of my life, stay out of it, and get the hell off my property." I raised my chin and pointed it toward the strapping stranger who'd gone back to testing the foundation. "Both of you! Get off my property! It is not for sale!" I leveled my gaze at Jack again. "And take down whatever listing you put up!"

I marched over and grasped the sides of the For Sale sign that Jack had

planted and gave it a mighty tug. Naturally it wouldn't budge, and both men were staring at me as I pulled on the thing, squatting down low in my robe and slippers so I could put some back into it. I tugged again, like a Sumo wrestler lifting an opponent (did they even do that?) but the thing was stuck. I let out an unintentional grunt with my third failed attempt and then winced in shame. The entire world was conspiring to ensure that I looked like a complete idiot whenever possible. I bent my knees once more and really put my body into it, pulling as hard as I could, but the sign was planted like a Sugar Pine, roots deep and wrapped around granite.

"Let me give you a hand." The voice that rolled over my shoulder was low and smooth. Not Jack. The stranger.

Before I had time to respond, two strong hands reached around the sides of me, grasping the sign below my hands. He was standing directly behind me, practically hugging me. As if things weren't awkward enough. And he was close enough that I could smell him—some distracting combination of the woods and baked goods seemed to waft off of him.

"On three," he said. "One, two ..."

We pulled together and the sign popped out of the ground. The sudden release sent me backwards, of course, right into the solid chest of this complete stranger who had just been sizing up the irritating relic of my former life. I practically bounced off him in an effort to get some space between us, and then pulled my robe back together, glancing up at him.

"Thanks," I muttered.

He handed me the sign. I took it while looking up at his face, but I still couldn't read him. Damned sunglasses. All I could see was a reflection of myself. Brown curls flying in every direction, pink robe barely covering the ridiculous teddy I'd slept in.

"If you change your mind, why don't you give me a call?" he said. Then he handed me a card that he seemed to produce from thin air. This guy was either charming or eerie. I hadn't had time to decide which.

"I won't." I put the card in the pocket of my robe without looking at it. Unfortunately, that pocket had come unstitched a month ago when I'd caught it

on the handle of the bathroom door, so the card fell to the ground at my feet.

The man scooped it up and leaned forward, holding it out to me. “Maybe the other pocket?” I took it and tucked it into the pocket on the other side of my robe. As he walked away, a lingering scent of pine and cinnamon floated by. He smelled like the mountains. And like coffee cake.

I just stared. Because pretty much every last vestige of dignity I’d imagined myself to have that morning had dropped with the card to the dusty ground through the stupid hole in my pocket.

“Well then,” I said. “If we’re all done here.” I turned and marched back up the rickety stairs of my trailer and slammed the dinky door. It barely made a sound.

As I made coffee with the previous day’s grounds, I heard both cars drive away. When I was sure they were gone, I pulled open the shades and stared out into the wall of dark green trees across the road from my lot.

Alone again. Really, truly alone. Just me and my stupid unfinished house and my stupid trashy trailer. Living my stupid, stupid life.

Connor

CHAPTER 2

I probably should have just stayed away. After all, I had a house in Kings Grove already, and it wasn't exactly my policy to run around introducing myself to people. I liked my privacy. I worked hard to maintain it. It was part of why I lived in a remote village in the high Sequoias in the first place. That, and the fact that of all the places I'd been in the world, Kings Grove was the only place that had ever really meant anything to me.

And that particular property? I knew it was ridiculous, but owning that actual piece of land would be like coming full circle, closing a loop.

But when I'd spoken to the guy on the phone—what was his name? Jack something?—the Scottish brogue didn't charm me. I could feel when someone was disingenuous from miles away. And this guy was smarmy AF. That said, I'd been willing to meet with him to take a look at the property, see the state of the house.

I just hadn't expected *her*. I'd seen the trailer there the few times I'd driven by, but I'd never seen the woman with the wild curls and the fiery eyes. I would have remembered.

The woman next to the trailer should have been comical, maybe pitiable. But instead, as I watched her—Maddie, I think the Scotsman called her—march around in her terrycloth bathrobe, railing at her ex-husband, I didn't pity her. I couldn't help but admire her. In fact, if anything, I was drawn to her.

First of all, no one had yelled at me in years, and when she'd screamed at us

both to get off her property, a little thrill went through me at being treated like a regular person, like a nobody, even. When you're famous, people tend to be nice to you even if you're a complete fucktard. And I was pretty sick of that.

But besides her anger, Maddie was beautiful. Her flying curls and those light brown eyes pulled at something inside me. And couple her beauty with the fiery glint of her anger, her indomitable spirit . . . I didn't care about the house anymore, or the property. I just wanted to see Maddie again.

"Get off my property! It is not for sale!" She had said emphatically, her small pointed chin raised in defiance. I couldn't help but move closer to help her remove the For Sale sign. And when I leaned in over her shoulder and stood behind her, nearly embracing her and inhaling the floral scent of her shampoo, an electric charge filled the space between us, and I wondered if she felt it too.

Then again, I suppose it could have been considered pretty fucking creepy to get up right behind her like that and help tug the thing out of the ground. But I didn't always do the right thing around other people. I was bad at peopling. I was a writer. That's all I was good at. Imaginary peopling.

I didn't make a habit of giving out my card, but I hadn't been able to stop myself, practically shoving it into her hand before she managed to disappear from my life again.

As I'd climbed into my car to drive back down the rutted one-lane roads through the residential village of Kings Grove, I found I no longer really cared about buying the property. I didn't want it nearly as much as I wanted her. Of course, there were a few other things standing between us, not the least of which was that I was currently being investigated by the police.

But maybe once that blew over. Maybe.

Maddie

CHAPTER 3

When the morning's excitement was over, and I'd had three or four cups of almost-coffee, I felt prepared to move forward with the day. Which, for me, meant pulling a long shift at the diner in town.

Kings Grove was actually a wide spot in the road at just over six thousand feet up a California mountain. We had the necessities—a post office, a market, a library, a restaurant, and a hardware store. There was an old lodge, and the town saw its fair share of tourists, thanks to the towering trees that clustered in thousand-year-old groves to watch over us like sentinels. Grudgingly, I had to admit the place had a certain amount of charm. I'd liked it enough when I was a kid, when my family came to camp on the land where I now inhabited a tin can.

Forget that Jack had moved me here from San Diego, where we'd done wonderful things like go to the Old Globe Theater to watch Shakespeare in the summers, and eat the freshest seafood ever in La Jolla cove at a rooftop restaurant near the pink hotel where he had proposed. Forget that I'd been a girl who could find no occasion where heels were not appropriate, or that my previous wardrobe exploded from a walk-in closet roughly the size of my trailer. Where else would you store sixteen pairs of designer blue jeans? Before my divorce, an endless search for the perfect pair of jeans was exactly my kind of challenge.

But now? Now I was stranded. Literally.

My lawyer still could not explain to me how Jack had walked away with

almost everything even though he'd been the one who cheated. When I'd pressed her, she'd thrown up her hands in frustration. Typical. Jack was the kind of guy who got everything he wanted. He was the definition of winning. Charlie Sheen had absolutely nothing on him. He got the house. He got the Escalade and left me with the racy Jag coupe I'd gotten as an engagement present, which was hardly an appropriate vehicle given the terrain of my new home.

Though I had to admit, I did love that car.

Jack got to keep his cheap little girlfriend and his fancy life, and I got ... this. A half-built shell in a dusty mountain town where I didn't belong and hadn't belonged since I was a kid. Oh, and let's not forget, I also had a rickety fifth-wheel trailer on blocks that Jack had bought used and towed up here when he'd put together his master plan for getting me out of the way. A trailer that barely had plumbing and maintained only a fleeting acquaintance with electricity.

That said, I was Maddie Turner before I became Madeline Douglas. And being a Turner meant that I would stand up, dust myself off, and fight my way forward. That's what Turners did, as my dad would have reminded me if he were capable.

I tried to give myself a Dad-worthy pep talk as I pulled on the maroon polo shirt that was required for my fancy diner gig. *It's not forever. Just for now.* Dad would have said that if I called him. Maybe. Or maybe he would have told me again about the cruise he was on, about the food and the other passengers.

Dad wasn't really on a cruise. He was in a nursing facility for patients with dementia. But the cruise idea was one he held on to, and I thought it was better than his reality, so I didn't try to disabuse him of the notion.

I glared at myself in the small mirror in the bathroom. This shirt was hideous. It matched the way I felt about my life at the moment. It was fitting that I should have to endure it all while wearing a poly-cotton blend in a color that brought out the red in my skin tone.

My lawyer assured me we weren't done and that the money I needed to start over would come to me. There was a joint account she was convinced should be mine, one that would allow me to finish the house or move to a place I could live more comfortably. But Jack was fighting tooth and nail, and as of now, I was a

broke would-be photographer-turned-waitress working in a mountaintop diner. And I was late for work.

ADELE, the diner owner, frowned at me from the register as I arrived, her over-glossed lips sticky, pink, and disapproving as always. “Thanks for joining us, Princess.”

“Morning, Adele. Sorry I’m late.” I hated it when she called me ‘Princess.’

“Tables one through six will be happy to hear your sob story.” She tossed my pad to me and turned away to pluck at her cuticles in the light from the window.

“Morning, Mad.” Adele’s husband Frank was always reliable for a smile.

I didn’t think I was really a princess by any stretch, but compared to the locals up here in Kings Grove, I was fairly shiny. Visitors to the village tended to arrive in shorts and sandals with socks, or tank tops and acid-washed jeans. And the locals favored practicality over a flattering hemline or a leg-extending heel. Personally, I found it hard to shake the fashion ideals I’d cultivated over so many years, but tried to limit my mountain choices to denim and boots. Even if they had a three-inch heel, I figured boots were practical for a rugged environment.

Kings Grove was home to trees thousands of years old, and a place like that is bound to draw in all kinds. I’d grown up around these Giant Sequoias, but I was still floored by the sheer bulk of the things. It was humbling, standing next to something you knew had been in that same spot for over a millennium. My crumbly little life was a flash in the pan next to the lives of those trees.

“Sam. Chance.” I greeted the local contractors who had built the frame of our house before the divorce halted further progress.

“How are you, Maddie?” Chance Palmer gave me a smile. He was the most eligible man in town, a Stanford MBA who’d come to take over the family business when his dad had died suddenly of a heart attack. With his little brother Sam, he’d built almost every new structure in Kings Grove over the past four years, and plenty before that when they worked for their dad during high school and college. Chance was lean and muscular, his blue eyes sparkling above a

chiseled jaw and a chest that appeared to be cut from stone.

There was no doubt he was the star of the daydreams of most of the ladies living in Kings Grove, with his hometown-boy good looks, easy smile, and bulging biceps. I'd had many opportunities to witness the way his muscled torso glistened in the sunlight when I'd been left alone to "supervise" the construction of our dream home. His brother was pretty cute too, in a more understated way. But I was hardly in the market, and they were both too young for me.

"I'm doing fine, Chance." There were words unspoken there. Chance had seen a lot transpire between me and Jack. He and Sam had witnessed the complete disintegration of my marriage, and they treated me with a mix of pity and overprotectiveness.

"What's going on with the house, Maddie? The weatherman's saying this winter's going to be a real one." Sam watched me over the rim of his mug.

There'd been very little snow in California's Sierra Nevada for the past four years. The odds of a real winter seemed slim.

"For the sake of this drought, I sure hope so, Sam." I evaded his question and topped off their coffee. "Food up in a sec, guys."

I tended my other tables, getting omelets and stacks of half-dollar pancakes out as quickly as I could while Adele hissed and tsked from her spot at the register. I probably wasn't cut out for waitressing, but I did the best I could, and Frank helped me when I forgot to turn in an order or messed up someone's request. He was the best part of the diner's management team. The only good thing about Adele was that she disliked the other waitress, Miranda, almost as much as she hated me. Our shared despicability had forged an immediate bond between Miranda and me. Adele disliked us for different reasons: I was evidently just too fancy for her tastes, while Miranda had a nasty habit of spilling coffee, dropping plates, and finding things to trip over on completely smooth floors.

When the place was a steady hum of satisfied diners and empty tables, I poured a cup of coffee for Miranda and another for me. We stood behind the counter, savoring the calm, as we gazed past the yellow Formica tabletops to the quiet street.

“What’s going on?” Miranda could read me like a book. I hated it. But I also kind of liked it. It wasn’t like I had lots of girlfriends to talk to.

I sighed. “Jack stopped by this morning. He’s trying to sell the house. Some guy actually wandered around testing beams and tapping on things.”

“What guy? Someone from up here?”

“Like I would know.” I knew the nearest neighbors to my property, since my parents had been good friends of theirs when I was a kid. Otherwise, I kept a low profile and didn’t get too close to the folks who lingered around the village. I did make friends with some of the little kids who came running through my property now and then, fishing out snacks that I brought home whenever I went to the grocery store. Kids, I understood. Grown ups? Not as much. And the dust-smearing mountain kids who roamed in packs during the summer were my tribe. Or they had been once. My brother Cameron and I had roamed these hills with a band of grimy children of all ages, scrambling over rocks and laughing off scraped elbows. Now when the kids showed up with their jubilation and spared me a few minutes of laughter kicking dust around my lot, I relived the past for a little while. They let me snap photos of them and I let them climb on the unfinished structure of my stupid house.

I fished the card from that morning out of the pocket of my jeans. I’d pulled it out of my robe and stuck it there, planning to examine it later. I put it on the counter in front of Miranda.

“Holy cow,” she said, bending over to read the card as she pushed her blond hair from her face. “This is the guy who wants to buy your house?”

“Yeah, why? You know him?”

“Everyone knows who he is. No one really *knows* him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This is Connor Charles.”

“Yeah, I got that from the card. Where it says right there? See?” I pointed to the name. “Connor Charles.”

“Right. Well you know who that is.” She was nodding and giving me a look that said I should understand immediately whatever she was trying to convey.

“Miranda, seriously? No. I have no idea who that is. Some guy with dark red

hair and sunglasses.” The card didn’t offer any other information. Who had a card that only had a name and a phone number anyway, besides psychics and socialites? Weird. I shrugged and added, “Kinda hot, too.” I couldn’t help it. He totally was.

“He’s that super-creepy writer. The one who lives in the cabin around Deerwood Point off the meadow?” Her eyes were wide and the freckles across her nose seemed to stand out as if they were trying to help her make her point.

“Oh *him*.” I made my voice reverent, but I was just doing it for effect. “No idea. I haven’t really had a lot of time to get to know the locals, and I’m not exactly a bookworm. If he doesn’t eat here, I don’t know him.”

“He definitely doesn’t eat here. Not anymore, anyway.” Miranda glanced around and then leaned in, her glasses slipping down her nose. “He writes those twisted books. About serial killers and stuff? He’s super famous and super hot. And super scary.”

“Because he writes horror novels?”

She shook her head, a smile on her face that told me she was enjoying sharing the gossip. “No, because when he moved up here, he had a wife. Or a girlfriend. But no one has seen her for like a year. They used to go out together, eat here, go to the village potlucks. But then we didn’t see her again. Like literally, she disappeared. Rumor has it he’s keeping her prisoner up there in his fancy house.” She looked around, as if Connor Charles might appear at the counter. “Stay away from him, Maddie.”

“Well, I’m not planning to sell the house anyway. Not yet.”

“Right.” Miranda nodded as if that made perfect sense, and then spun around to answer a wave from one of her tables. Her coffee cup toppled off the saucer on the counter as she swung her arm, and I caught it and wiped up the mess as Adele watched from the podium.

I wondered how much of what Miranda thought she knew about Connor Charles was true. She had a vivid imagination and an appetite for gossip. Since I’d never seen Connor up here before, I wasn’t too worried about crossing his path again.

I spent the rest of an endless day at the diner, watching the sun weave among

soaring treetops from one side of the village to the other as some of the season's last tourists stopped through for burgers and sundaes before heading back to their tents and rented cabins. It was easy to lose track of the days up here. The mountains and the big trees measured time in centuries, not in months, days, and minutes. And most days looked about the same to me. But since Jack had stopped by, I knew it had to be a weekend, and a glance at the calendar on my phone confirmed it. It was Sunday. I had Mondays off. Normal people would be looking forward to some down time, or some project they'd been hoping to tackle on a day off. But Monday held little interest for me, and I'd spent many of the last few in bed, pretending things were not exactly as they were and hating myself for letting it all get so screwed up.

The cooktop in the trailer worked intermittently, and I got lucky that evening, managing to heat a can of soup to go with my toast and red wine. I carried dinner outside, managing the door with my foot and elbow, and wound my way through the skeleton house. In what would have become the eat-in kitchen, I set my bowl and bottle down on the concrete and lowered myself beside them. The kitchen was supposed to have soaring plate glass windows facing the slight decline behind the house that led to a ravine farther down the slope. In the early spring, you could hear rushing water down there, but by this point in late summer the entire state was parched and dry. Just a trickle of dusty water coursed through the rocky bed now.

I'd almost drown in that water as a tiny girl. I didn't really remember the incident. My brother Cam had told me that we were playing with some other kids from around the village, and I'd fallen in. There was a deep pond that had been formed over years and years of water rushing into it from the rocks above. It was a side branch of the bigger stream when it was flowing in full force, a quiet spot to the side of the rushing water. Quiet and deep. The water was freezing cold since it was snowpack runoff. I'd reached out too far that day and fallen in, and neither Cam nor I were good swimmers. We were too little. One of the bigger kids had jumped in to save me, pulling me out and carrying me back up to my dad. I hadn't been in long enough to swallow much water, and I was fine, but it had scared my brother. He'd made a big deal about learning to swim

after that, and stayed close to me any time he thought we might be in danger. He had been my protector from that day forward. All the way through high school to college and beyond. Until three years ago when he decided not to be anymore.

I stared at the darkening green around me. My home was perched atop a mini mountain, at the end of a dead-end road that climbed out of the small village of private homes. Many of them—most of them, really—qualified as true cabins. A few of our neighbors still had working outhouses, and most of the structures were rustic. One of the nearest neighbors had done his damndest to ensure that our huge modern house would never be built, petitioning congressmen and lobbying the Forest Service and anyone else who might help him preserve the *sanctity* of the place. But my family had owned this land for more than one hundred years, and there was little anyone could do to stop it from being developed. I had pushed Jack to build something a bit more spare, something that fit in with the rustic landscape instead of competing with it, but as with most of our arguments, I'd lost.

Jack had been everything I'd ever wanted when we'd met. It was like he'd read a book about how to sweep someone off her feet and had followed the instructions page by page as we got to know one another. He'd mastered the grand romantic gesture long before we met, and he had it down to an art form by the time I strolled into his office to ask about buying a condo I'd seen in my neighborhood. Jack was as slick and polished as any man I'd ever known, from his perfectly shined loafers to the salt and pepper waves that set off his blue eyes.

He told me he wanted to take care of me and didn't want me to work. I'd believed him, and too easily gave up the cluttered photography studio I'd been building into a real business. At the time it seemed like just another reasonable thing I did for love.

As the trees faded to blend into the background of inky blue sky overhead, I considered going in and picking up the camera. But it seemed like a lot of trouble, and every time I touched my camera I still heard Jack's voice telling me that photography was a ridiculous hobby for a woman like me. That I could easily pay someone to take the pictures I wanted. Jack's answer to everything.

But I had a fresh desire to take pictures after meeting Connor Charles. There was something about the mystery of those aviator shades, the intrigue Miranda had made me feel when she told me to stay away from him. She was probably right. But I just might pick up my camera again. Maybe.

The next day—my day off—I didn't give myself time to mope around. I put my jeans, boots, and ponytail in place, and then I climbed into my shiny Jaguar and drove down into town. The car didn't fit up here in the mountains any better than I did. And it was ridiculous that I lived in a tinny trailer and drove this particular specially ordered and ridiculously pricey car. I knew that. But I pretended I was a woman of mystery, full of amusing contradictions instead of terrifying swirling eddies of nothingness.

Connor

CHAPTER 4

Kings Grove was quiet. The summer was coming to an end, and weekend visitors tended to drive back down the hill on Sunday nights, taking their noise, dogs, and children with them. I liked the quiet. For one thing, it made it easier to write, when I actually managed to do it. I knew writers' block wasn't a real thing. When writing is your job, you just sit down and get it done, like any other job. But I'd gotten to a level of success where if I didn't quite feel like writing—and honestly, it had been months—I could tell my agent to hold off the publisher. The promise of my next blockbuster was enough to convince them to slide deadlines along a bit.

I didn't enjoy going into town lately—I hadn't for a long time, really—but I needed to restock groceries and pick up my mail. The grumpy post office administrator, Craig Pritchard, didn't appreciate it when I let my mailbox overflow and I didn't appreciate being lectured by an asshole. So I drove the short distance from the residential side of the village to town and eased into a parking spot in front of the post office next to a shiny convertible Jaguar. I spent a moment lingering next to the car, wondering who was crazy enough to drive such a thing in a place where tree sap and pollen did no favors to shiny paint jobs. I looked around as I always did in public, but this morning I didn't see any police cars, and no one I recognized was out on the sidewalk. Good.

It turned out there was someone I knew inside the post office, kind of. I busied myself opening my own box as the pretty woman from the half-built

house pulled a pile of fashion magazines from her own box on the opposite wall.

“You should really check more than once a week if you’re going to be ordering all these magazines,” Craig Pritchard’s flat voice informed her.

“Sorry, Craig.” Her tone said she was not sorry at all, and I couldn’t help the smile that crossed my face at the sarcastic sound of it.

Maddie looked beautiful today, her hair pulled back in a casual ponytail, and her face shining and fresh. She wore jeans, and I admired the way they molded to her long legs, hugged her curves. She glanced over at me and caught my eye for a quick second before jerking her gaze in the other direction, pretending she hadn’t just seen me. I couldn’t help but chuckle as she opened a magazine and leafed rapidly through the pages, obviously waiting for me to leave.

Before I could think better of it, I stepped near her, made it impossible for her to ignore me. “Hello again,” I said, feeling a goofy smile cross my lips as I got a whiff of the fruit-scented shampoo she must use.

“Hi.” She looked up at me, a slow blush creeping up her cheeks.

“Nice to see you again.” I said the words and forced myself to turn away, handing Craig the fat envelope I needed him to send my agent—the signed book his mother wanted. As he weighed my package, Craig decided to quiz Maddie about her choice in postal deliveries.

“What do you do with all these magazines, anyway? It’s not like anyone up here gives much weight to what kind of shoes you’re wearing.” He leaned out to glare at her high-heeled boots and then went back to ringing up my package.

“Just like to keep up with civilization.” There was a barely contained ire in her voice, and it made me like her even more.

“How’s the house?” He sneered when he asked this, his thin lips disappearing beneath the silver and blond mustache.

“The same.”

“We get enough snow and those walls might just topple over, you know,” he said with a smile. I didn’t like his tone, and wasn’t sure why Craig was inserting himself into Maddie’s business. Still, I knew there was no place for me in the conversation.

“So they say.” She closed her mailbox and stuffed her magazines into the big

bag hanging over her shoulder, taking her sunglasses in her hand.

“You gonna get back to work on it? People say you can’t afford to finish it.” Craig continued. I narrowed my eyes at him, but he wasn’t really paying attention to me.

“People should probably mind their own business,” she said lightly. I couldn’t stifle the laugh that burst out of me at that as I took my credit card back from Craig and accepted the receipt.

Craig was not deterred. “The things people build in the confines of a national park are pretty much everyone’s business, wouldn’t you say?”

“Not when we’re talking about private property, Craig. Thanks for your thoughtful interest in my home, though.” I’d moved to the door as they wrapped up their conversation, and held it open for her as she turned. I laughed again at the face she was making, her nose scrunched up and her tongue stuck out—an expression I knew was meant for the nosey mail clerk.

“Nice face,” I whispered, stepping out behind her as the door swung shut.

She stopped just outside the door, a blush turning her pretty skin pink. “I know. Mature, right? He just pushes my buttons.”

“I think that was his intent.”

“I’m sure it was.” She sighed.

We were standing on the sidewalk in front of the post office, Maddie looking up at me as the sun cast her curls aglow. She was gorgeous. I wished I could find some other reason to keep her talking, but nothing came to mind. “Well, it was nice to see you again, Mrs. Douglas.”

She visibly cringed. “It’s Turner. Maddie Turner. Douglas is Jack’s name. Jack’s my ex.”

“Right. Well, nice seeing you again.” I needed to walk away before I did something ridiculous, like ask her to stop by and visit me, like admit that all my solitude had grown old and that I was tired of being the mysterious subject of village rumors. I needed to go before I let myself become even more interested in the woman with the rampant curls and fiery attitude.

“Bye,” she said.

I spotted the young blonde from the diner approaching, and took that as extra

incentive to be on my way. I watched as they spoke together, turning to watch me get into my car and then getting together into the Jaguar parked at the curb.

Maddie

CHAPTER 5

Miranda's plan to drive down the hill to Fresno for some shopping and a movie was perfect. I was thankful for a friend, and as we slid into the low seats of my car, I grinned over at her. Miranda had a lovely innocence about her—part of it was her youth. At six years my junior, she still seemed fresh and young, and the long blond ponytail and complete lack of makeup added to that image. Her dark-edged glasses framed her pretty blue eyes and her open smile had made me like her immediately when we'd met.

I drove the car down the narrow winding road out of Kings Grove, enjoying the way it felt to harness some kind of power that I could hold onto.

"Slow down, Speed Racer," Miranda said, gripping the sides of her seat as we roared around a curve.

I tapped the brakes. "Sorry. I like the speed."

"I can see that," she grinned at me. "I've always been a little scared of this road."

"But you grew up on this road!"

"No. I grew up in Kings Grove. And I like staying up there. Or being down in the valley. I don't like the in-between parts."

I took the next few curves a little less aggressively and Miranda stopped clawing the leather.

"I didn't figure you for a crazy driver," she said, looking at me with wide blue eyes.

“I’m not. I’m a good driver. Just a little bit aggressive, I guess. I learned to drive on Southern California freeways and then out at the track at Buttonwillow.” I flashed her a grin.

“Buttonwillow?”

“The racetrack. Jack enrolled me in some driving courses when he bought me this car.”

“Like defensive driving?”

“Not exactly. It was a ‘performance driving clinic.’ I learned how to control a skid, brake correctly, and how to ride a corner. Stuff like that.”

“You’re a race car driver?”

“No, I’m a woman who can handle a V8 with five hundred and fifty horses.” I downshifted around a curve, neatly making my point.

“Why’d Jack care if you could drive?” Miranda asked.

“It was part of Jack’s effort to mold me into the *perfect* woman.” I glanced at Miranda. Jack was generally an off-limits topic, even for Miranda.

“I see. What exactly did that involve?”

I sighed. “Lots of little things, but in the end, he must have missed some crucial element.” The valley rolled out before us, dusty brown hilltops with waves of dark green orchards curled between them.

“What do you mean?”

“If I’d been a success, he wouldn’t have had to bring in a newer model.”

“He cheated?”

“Spectacularly.”

Miranda didn’t press, but I could feel her buzzing with the effort of holding the question back.

“We moved up here to build our dream house. He parked me up here full time and went back and forth to San Diego to manage his business down there. He was supposedly moving his office to Fresno. He was going to specialize in vacation properties, cut down his hours. We were supposed to live up here and raise a family in the clean air.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Miranda said.

“I was to stay here and supervise the building. Because I’m such an expert at

that.”

“Right.”

“And I did. Despite how bored I was. No lunches with friends, no shopping on Coronado and no general San Diego wonderfulness. Instead I had an exciting daily routine of staring at trees and missing my old life. I got sick of Kings Grove.”

“How could you get sick of watching Chance Palmer build something?” Her voice took on a dreamy quality. Miranda had a not-so-secret crush on the overeducated contractor, though I’d never seen him look twice at her.

“Well, that was a good way to pass the days,” I agreed. “But you can only get so far staring at sweaty men out the window of a trailer. It’s not really a full life. And it’s not like there’s much else to do up here.”

“I think it’s nice,” Miranda sniffed. “There’s nothing phony in Kings Grove.”

“Look, it is nice. I know you grew up in Kings Grove.”

“I thought you kind of did too.” She tilted her head, confused.

“Not really. We spent some summers up here. My family owned the land we camped on. Where my house is.”

“Got it. Go on.”

“So when Jack stuck me up here, it was a big adjustment for me, that’s all. And I got the wise idea to fly back to San Diego to surprise him one weekend.”

“Uh oh.”

“Yeah. He’d moved his affair into our house.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. When I got there, he was out somewhere and she was lying out by my pool, wearing *my* bathing suit.” The words tasted bitter as I said them out loud.

“Holy.”

“My Manolo sandals were next to her chair, too. I thought there was some kind of weird misunderstanding on my part. But when I woke her up, the way she reacted made it pretty obvious that she was guilty of something. She was all self-righteous and defensive, talking about how I’d invaded her home. I nearly drowned her in my pool.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t.”

“We called Jack instead and waited for him to get back, but she confessed everything in the meantime. He’d told her we were divorced and that I’d left everything I owned behind. She thought it’d be fine to adopt all of my abandoned stuff.” I rolled my eyes. Like anyone would abandon that wardrobe.

I slowed the car as we merged onto the highway that connected the two-lane mountain road to civilization.

“So. What are we in the mood for?” I asked.

Miranda was still shaking her head at my confession. “Shopping. Food. Some civilization for the city girl and something for me to wear to work that might actually get Chance’s attention.”

My head swiveled. “Oh yeah?”

She smiled and nodded, blushing.

“I had a hunch about that.” I was quiet for a moment as I thought. “Miranda . . . he has no idea.”

“I’m super nice to him. I’m sure he knows.”

I thought back over all the times Chance and Sam had eaten in the diner. Miranda had never stopped by to chat, or even smiled in their direction that I could tell. “I think it might take more than a cute skirt. We might need to coach you on some flirting skills.”

She eyed me sideways, her chin slowly turning to face me. “Really?” The enthusiasm on her face said it all.

“We’ll see if I remember anything,” I said.

The sun beat down on the car as we headed through the busy streets; the temperature in the valley was at least twenty degrees hotter than it had been in the mountains. As we parked and walked toward the outdoor mall, I tilted my face toward the sun. Talking had been balm for my soul, and walking in the sun, in an actual city, was even better. Even if it was just for an afternoon.

We wandered into a patio restaurant for some Italian food, the scent of basil and garlic wafting around us, and enjoyed the movement of shoppers on the sidewalks as we talked about what to order. Once the menus were collected, Miranda gave me a questioning look. “Have you thought any more about the

offer on your house?”

I tilted my head at her. “I thought you were warning me off from that guy?”

“I don’t mean him. I mean in general. I really didn’t know you were looking to sell it.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t either. Jack told me he’d decided to sell it for me.”

“Is that his call to make?”

“Not at all. The house and the land is mine. For whatever that’s worth.”

Miranda sipped her iced tea, her eyes squinting behind the lenses of her glasses as she thought. “What are you going to do? You can’t live in that trailer forever. You’ll freeze up there this winter.”

“It has a heater.” I was being difficult. She had a good point. The trailer wasn’t awful, but it probably wouldn’t be ideal in the winter. “I don’t know. Maybe I should sell it, but it’s hard. That land has belonged to my family for a century. I camped up there as a kid, and so did my mom, and her dad before her.”

“You don’t have a long time to decide.”

“Thanks, Madam Obvious.”

She gently buttered a piece of crusty bread, lost in thought. After a moment she said, “You should totally call Connor Charles.”

“You told me he was creepy.”

“I don’t really know him. He’s just ... a stranger.”

“Everyone’s a stranger until you know them.”

“Some are stranger than others.”

I thought about the polite and handsome man I’d just spoken to at the post office. There was nothing about him that matched her description. Confident and successful? Sure, I could see that. Creepy and suspicious? I wasn’t getting that at all.

I leaned back and fixed her with a look. “Okay, you’re dancing around something. What do you know about this guy?” I tried not to let thoughts of his dark auburn hair or movie-star stubble enter my mind. Maybe I should sell the house to him. It wasn’t like anyone else was offering. Was I really going to finish building it anyway?

“You know how town is,” she said. “People talk.”

“And what do they say about Connor Charles?”

“Well, you’ve read the tabloid stuff about him, obviously.”

“Miranda, I’d never heard of the guy before this week.” I thought about what she’d said. “He’s famous enough to be covered in the tabloids?”

She nodded, her eyes widening. “Maybe he wasn’t *that* famous before, but then he beat his girlfriend up. They got pictures of her with a black eye, but she wouldn’t press charges and neither of them would talk about it.”

I took a bite of my pasta and let that roll around in my mind for a minute. “Sounds like he probably didn’t do it and didn’t feel like he needed to explain himself to a bunch of nosey reporters. What else?”

“I already told you about the woman he’s keeping captive up there.”

“You seriously believe that?”

She looked down at her plate and shrugged. “Probably not.” She raised her eyes to mine. “But then, where’d she go?”

“They broke up and she left at night when no one was around to see. Or she’s his cousin and was just in town for a visit. Or she’s just a friend and she drove out the back way. Why do you think she just disappeared?”

“She looked terrible, too. Like a starving animal, all shaggy and bruised.”

“She was bruised?”

Miranda nodded.

“Her face?”

“Her arms. Every time I saw her.”

It was my turn to shrug.

“That was in the tabloids, too. Some tourist or someone snapped some photos while they were walking in the parking lot. He hasn’t come into town to eat since.”

“I’m not surprised. So he’s a famous guy whose privacy has been compromised in really malicious ways. He’s been accused of terrible things . . .” I let my mind wander through the landscape Miranda had just painted. “I think I’d avoid people, too.”

“But there’s something else,” she said. She leaned so far over the table that her shirt nearly drooped into her pasta sauce. “He dated a girl I went to school

with. Someone younger than me. And I guess when they broke up, he didn't handle it well. Isn't handling it well, I mean."

"Is this girl a minor?"

"She was when they started dating, I guess. She's eighteen now. She got a *restraining order* against him."

I raised an eyebrow. Miranda was enjoying this guy's misfortune a little too much. "So what is she accusing him of, exactly?"

"Stalking."

"Huh." I'd have to think about that later. And I wanted to do a Google search and see what I could turn up. Miranda's intention might have been to warn me off of Connor Charles, but all she'd really done was make me curious about him.

I didn't know Connor. But I didn't like people jumping to conclusions about someone based on scant evidence and outward appearances. I'd gotten enough of that myself. I certainly wouldn't defend someone who was a legitimate stalker, but it didn't sound like there was much actual evidence. "Sounds like the police will figure it out. I think you might be leaping to conclusions though." I trailed off, realizing that I was defending a man who I didn't know at all. He could be the next Charles Manson for all I knew. "I don't know. I just don't like to judge people."

"Well, then maybe you should call him. See how much he'll give you."

Her unintended double-entendre was not lost on me, but she didn't seem to catch the way my smile widened as she said it. I shook my head. "See what he'll give me for the only family legacy I have . . ."

The thought of selling a place where my family had been happy together felt like selling part of me. And there were blessed few parts of me intact after my marriage to Jack. I didn't know if I could do it. The thought of my brother Cam's reaction made me doubt I'd ever be capable of selling, though it would be nice to be able to afford to leave the trailer behind.

Connor

CHAPTER 6

I drove home slowly from town, admiring the village I'd come to think of as my own, a growing sense of isolation building in my gut as the few people I passed narrowed their gazes at my car or pretended not to see me at all. I went the long way, purposely avoiding the Terry cabin.

These last few months I'd gotten it into my head that I should be more involved in my adopted community, try to make some gesture of good will. Life had been difficult since I'd moved to this place, and now that my own personal traumas seemed to be at an end—there was no one left in my life to lose, really—I wanted to connect.

That had been a mistake.

I pulled into my driveway, exiting beneath the sweeping second-story deck that hung prominently from the front of the house, and went inside, trying not to think about Amanda Terry.

It had started simply enough—I'd contacted the high school, letting them know I'd be open to conducting a writing seminar, visiting to talk about fiction, or tutoring students in writing, whatever made sense. And then Amanda had contacted me to discuss my field, to learn, she'd said. And that's how it had started out. But the way things had changed and escalated ... well, it wasn't something I'd anticipated at all. And now I felt nothing but regret and a faint disgust when I thought about how naive I'd been in reaching out at all.

My role as the reclusive writer should be enough. I didn't need people. I had

scores of people living in my head, after all. I just had to imagine them. Real people were overrated and unpredictable, and had proven time and again to be less true and genuine than I wanted them to be. Maybe I'd never learn.

Now, despite my resolve to be a recluse and never leave the house again, I couldn't help being pulled outside eventually by the steady stream of late-afternoon sunshine flooding the treetops and the call of distant birds. There was something so infinitely quiet here that even when it was interrupted by a distant motor or the laughter of the village kids, my soul still felt that steady calm. This was the only place I'd ever known that feeling, and now I was drawn out by it, coaxed to put on my hiking boots and climb the ridge behind my house and head into the wilderness surrounding Kings Grove.

I considered bringing the bag. It lay by the door where I'd left it and I knew eventually I'd have to finish that job. But I couldn't face it now. Another day I would, I promised myself. Another day, I'd finally finish the task that would close another chapter of my life. But for today, I just wanted to hike, to roam, to explore.

The sun slid down the western face of the mountains as I climbed the trails that wound through the national park, and by the time I was descending back toward the village, dusk had fallen in shades of gray. I came out of the woods a different way than I'd gone in, and maybe it had been instinct or something more intentional that had led me to exit the woods right on the edge of the property with the half-built house. Maddie's property.

I'd had no intention to bother her, but just as I stepped into the cleared area next to the house, she came out of the trailer, her hair down and wild around her shoulders, silhouetted by light from the trailer window. She held something in her hands, but in the half-darkness I couldn't see exactly what it was. I stood still as she moved to put something on the table outside, a wine bottle maybe? And then she lifted something else to her face. A camera. She swung her view around, her hands shifting on the camera as she turned, and then as she aimed the lens at where I stood, she froze.

She'd seen me, and I searched for something to say, something that would make it perfectly natural for me to be standing on her property in the darkness,

watching her. Something that wouldn't be creepy or add to whatever she'd probably already heard about me. Before I could find anything useful to say, she spoke, and her voice was loud and overconfident.

"I never leave the house without a gun." She took two steps backward toward her door as she said it.

Shit, I'd scared her.

I couldn't help being a tiny bit amused by her bravado. I stayed where I was, just in case she was serious. "Probably a good idea. But you can't shoot anything up here. National Park." I didn't move. "They'd throw you in jail for killing a bear."

"You're not a bear," she said, taking a few more slow steps toward safety.

I didn't want her to be scared, didn't want to be responsible for that. "That's a good point. I'm pretty sure it's also illegal to shoot people though."

"Not if they're trespassing." She sounded calmer—had she figured out who I was? Should I tell her?

I laughed. "Wouldn't count on that. This *is* California."

"You'd be wise to get off my property." She delivered this last bit as she reached her door, and I found myself willing to risk being shot if it would keep her talking to me.

I raised my hands and moved a bit nearer through the darkness. "Don't shoot me. I'll go."

Maddie went inside, closed her screen door and peered through it, then flicked on the trailer's outside light, illuminating me in its yellow circle.

"Sorry if I scared you." I shrugged. "It's just me." I hadn't handled that well, and didn't have much of an excuse.

She stood inside the screen, peering out through the flimsy material. "I'm still considering shooting you."

I smiled at that. Her fiery spirit pulled me nearer, even though I knew I should probably go. "I hoped you might reconsider selling the property instead."

"I don't think I'm interested." She stayed where she was, behind her screen.

"Well, maybe you will be interested," I said, smiling and stepping forward. I wanted to keep her talking to me, keep her attention on me. When she looked at

me, I felt seen in a way I hadn't in a long time, and I wanted to figure out what it was that made me feel that way. "Maybe I can convince you somehow."

"I doubt it," she said. "Anyway, I'd rather talk about it in the daylight."

I looked around then, realizing it was now full dark. I'd wandered onto Maddie's property in the dark and now was essentially refusing to leave. No wonder everyone thought I was some kind of psychopath. "Yeah, Of course," I said quickly. "I was hiking, and came back by this way. I kind of got stuck here, and I didn't realize how late it was. There's a perfect spot between the trees over there where the moon was rising tonight. This is one of my favorite spots in the park." I was rambling a bit, pointing to the break in the trees I'd always loved.

Maddie looked to where I was pointing, where the moon was hanging full between those dark tall trees. She nodded, lifting the camera slightly before seeming to rethink losing her focus to a photograph while I was still standing here.

"It's a compelling view," I went on. "This is part of why I asked about the house. It'd be so nice to have a house right here, to see that view in the evenings, to hear the water down there." I smiled at her, wishing it were lighter, wishing I could convince her to come outside, to talk. "I get distracted sometimes. I shouldn't have scared you, Ms. Turner. I'm really sorry."

"There's no real water down there," she said. "I'm surprised you even know the stream is there. It only really flows at certain times of year."

"In the springtime," I confirmed. "And there's one pool that gets deep." I remembered that pool well, it was part of what drew me to this property.

"I think you'd better go, Mr. Charles."

A warm heat crept up my neck, and I realized how completely wrong this entire interaction had gone. I'd had little practice with women in the past few years, and the draw I felt to Maddie Turner was throwing me off. I rubbed a hand across the back of my neck. "I'm really sorry," I said again. "I didn't mean to scare you, I really didn't think about the hour."

"Okay, well ..." She took a step back, holding the edge of the heavier door behind the screen, swinging it slightly closed.

"Right. Okay. Maybe we could talk about the house again at some point? If

you change your mind? You know, in daylight.” I was scrambling now. “Could I buy you coffee tomorrow?”

She shook her pretty head. “I have to work.” The door was a crack now.

“Okay then. Well, maybe another time. Good night.” I swallowed my embarrassment and turned to walk down the dark road toward the village.

What had that been about? What was I thinking? Appearing in people’s yards and holding incoherent conversations wouldn’t do anything to improve my reputation around the village. Not that I generally cared. But now that I’d met Maddie, maybe I was starting to.

Maddie

CHAPTER 7

I awoke groggy the next morning, and stepped outside with my coffee, pulling my robe tight around me against the vague chill in the air. Could this creeping hint of cold mean that winter was really on its way? My La Bruna teddy might have been the problem. The sheer lace wasn't really meant for outdoor wear. I think it was actually one of those things meant only for momentary wear, mostly intended to be tossed to the floor in the heat of passion. The most heat I could hope for lately was from the sun, and that was fading too quickly for my liking. It shouldn't be cold yet. It was only August.

I stood, gazing out at the sky as it brightened, and the scent of some kind of sugary baked bread hung in the air. I had to be imagining it—I hadn't even tried the oven in the trailer and couldn't remember the last time I'd baked anything. Ever. I'd never really been the domestic type. I breathed in the aroma of my coffee, and it smelled like it usually did: strong and nutty, decidedly not like pastries.

Squinting, I scanned the area around the trailer. The scent of fresh-baked muffins was hardly a typical harbinger of bad things to come, but my life was full of atypical warning signs. Behind my car, at the periphery of my lot, sat a familiar white Land Rover. The passenger window was down, and inside sat a certain auburn-haired man, who seemed unable to avoid my personal space. The heavenly scent was coming from over there. Crap.

I slipped back into the trailer, since Connor seemed to be distracted by

something inside the car and hadn't noticed me yet. The man didn't seem to have a very sensitive take-a-hint meter. And I was none too pleased with myself because there was a little spark of excitement jumping around in my stomach. Why was any part of me excited to see him? Shouldn't I be calling the cops about now? If stalking was his M.O., he did seem to have a knack for it. Maybe the post office hadn't been a coincidence. And the fact that he knew about the stream beyond my property unsettled me, since I'd been pretty sure that was knowledge limited to myself, my brother, and the band of ragged kids that traipsed through my lot most days. Maybe a few intrepid explorers.

I stared into the bathroom mirror trying to decide what to do. I could pretend not to be home, but my car was parked out front. And if Connor glanced in the windows, he'd certainly see me. Living in a trailer didn't afford a lot of good hiding places. I'd have to face him. But I was not going to give in to the little flame flickering inside my chest, the one that had ignited the first time I'd met Jack. That flicker of interest was a terrible guide, and I didn't trust it any more than I trusted the man in the car outside.

I'd face him, but I wasn't going to do it in lingerie and smeared mascara. Hating myself a tiny bit for doing it, I pulled on my jeans and a button down blouse, pinched my cheeks and swept my hair up into a loose knot at the back of my head. I glanced in the bathroom mirror and swished water around my mouth. On a whim, I grabbed my camera. Then I let the door slam behind me as I stepped back out with my coffee cup.

Connor's head snapped up as the trailer door slammed, and he immediately got out of his car.

I watched him approach, wishing I could consider him without the irritating awareness that he was handsome. Really handsome. There was something in the way he moved as he carried a paper bag and coffee tray toward me that was graceful, purposeful. And really, really hot.

But that didn't change the fact that he was here again. After I'd told him twice to get off my property.

"Do I need to get a restraining order?" I still wasn't sure whether I should be frightened or intrigued, but I could pretend.

He stopped walking, and looked like I'd slapped him, his shoulders springing up and his head lifting to look at me better. He shook his head and took a step back. "Look, no. I'm sorry. I've really screwed this up. I only came to apologize. I just can't seem to be around you without bungling things."

He looked sincere. And he was slowly turning around, taking whatever was in the bag with him. My mouth and stomach betrayed me. "Wait. What's in the bag?"

He stopped, but didn't come closer. "I brought you a muffin. And some coffee."

"I like coffee." I pointed at the picnic table outside my door, wondering if I was making a terrible mistake as the flame inside me glowed just a bit brighter.

In the sunlight, Connor's hair glinted and his skin shone. He was taller than Jack, his shoulders were wider and his waist was narrower. And he filled out his jeans much better than Jack ever had. And there was no reason in the world why I should be comparing this man to my ex-husband. I shoved down the irritating knowledge that Jack was still more a part of my life—and my thoughts—than I wanted him to be.

I sniffed at the heady scent lingering around us. "Blueberry muffins?"

He nodded.

"May I?"

He nodded again, a slow smile pulling the perfect lips up.

I reached for the bag and peeked inside. The scent hit me full force and I couldn't stop my hand from reaching in as my mouth watered. "These are Frank's muffins." I looked up at him for confirmation, but he looked confused. "From the diner." I smelled them each morning and it took all of my willpower not to eat them every day. If I did, I'd never fit into my jeans again. But one wouldn't hurt.

"Right." He nodded, a faint smile on the full lips. "My version of a peace offering. Blueberry muffins and coffee." He reached forward and took one coffee for himself. Miranda was sure to have something to say about his visit and the fact that he bought two coffees. I wondered if she'd been the one to wait on him.

"Coffee is a pretty good start. Muffins are good too," I conceded.

He looked at me for a long moment, his blue eyes thoughtful as they searched my face.

I felt uncomfortable under his gaze.

Finally, he shifted his weight, the scrape of his boots breaking the strange moment. “Have you thought any more about selling?”

“Since last night?” I shook my head. “You really are persistent, aren’t you?” I was lying. I had thought about it a lot. I’d thought about how selling would free me of this burden and allow me to leave Kings Grove behind and start a life somewhere else. Maybe get it right this time. And I’d thought about how that new life would have to be one without my brother, since I was certain he wouldn’t forgive me for selling this land. He might have given up his claim on it, but the memories that lay scattered in the soft dirt here were not mine alone.

Connor gestured toward the camera still dangling from my hand. “You’re a photographer.”

I nodded, and then snapped a candid of him. I hadn’t thought about it, had just brought the camera up and clicked.

He stepped back, his lips tightening into a hard line. His posture had gone rigid and he didn’t look happy, but he didn’t say anything. I sheepishly smiled an apology and set the camera down on the table. “Sorry. Instinct.”

He stared at the camera for a second, as if it might leap off the table and bite him, and I remembered what Miranda had told me about all the nasty press coverage he’d received.

“I’m sorry. I’ll ask next time. I’m totally out of practice.”

His face relaxed a little, but he still looked wary.

I sipped my coffee and looked back up at him. “Look, Mr. Charles. I don’t think I’m going to change my mind about selling the property.”

“Call me Connor, please.”

“Okay. Connor. I might not ever be able to build this stupid house.” I stared into the soaring frame, hating the ridiculous arrogance of the structure suddenly. “But I’m not selling the land. It’s part of my family. It’s been ours for a long time, and I don’t plan to change that.”

His head turned, his face changing as he processed my words. His expression

morphed, as if I'd just forced him into some kind of realization. "I didn't know that." His eyes skimmed me again, tracing from my eyes down the length of me and then quickly back up, lingering on my mouth before he spoke again. When he did, his blue eyes had shaded again, and his voice was quiet, strained. "So your family used to come here? When you were little?"

I nodded. His expression made it clear that this information was significant to him, though I had no idea why it would be. "We camped. My mom came here when she was little, too. With her dad."

He seemed to think about that, and then his face cleared. "Well that makes sense then. Of course you don't want to sell. I won't bother you about it again."

"Okay," I said, trying to figure out his sudden change of heart. He wasn't giving me a chance, though; his long strides were already taking him back to his car.

"Thanks," he called as he opened the door.

I watched him back up and drive away, something sinking inside me as his taillights disappeared down the hill. Why did I feel disappointed? I'd won, hadn't I? But if I was honest with myself, I was disappointed to know that whatever strange interlude I'd had with the mysterious Connor Charles had come to an end. Given everything that Miranda had told me about him, it was definitely for the best. And I had things I needed to focus on. Piercing blue eyes and auburn waves were not among them.

I opened the bag of muffins and ate the second one, sitting at the old table and staring into the woods, pausing to take shots of the sky as it went from an inky blue with streaks of pink and yellow to the light crystalline color that looked almost white.

If I never got out of this place, I'd have four million photographs of trees and sky, and a memory of ill-advised yearning for a man who was probably no better than Jack. And potentially much worse.

Connor

CHAPTER 8

Considering I was on deadline, I wasn't doing a lot of writing. I was doing a lot of sitting on the deck, staring at a blank computer screen and wishing for things that would never be.

That's what I was busy doing when two police cruisers pulled into the open space in front of the deck and two officers marched to the front door to knock. Though I would've liked to hide inside, I knew that wasn't a mature reaction, nor would it get me out of the situation I found myself in now.

I'd already been notified that Amanda Terry had filed a restraining order, and I'd gotten a few strange messages and letters to suggest there was something else going on, though I hadn't figured out exactly what it was quite yet. I'd turned that evidence over to the police, and they had looked at me as though I were a child, offering up a handful of rocks I'd collected, calling them diamonds. Evidently the local law enforcement already had an opinion about me, and in their minds, I was not the victim.

I hadn't been terribly worried about any of it. Until now.

"Hello officers," I said, greeting the two men who stood in the doorway.

"Hello sir, Detectives Rawley and Jensen." The taller man introduced them. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"What is this about?" I asked.

"Maybe we could come in?"

"Do you have a warrant?" I wasn't a cop or a lawyer, but I'd watched a lot of

television and done an awful lot of research for my books.

“No sir,” Rawley shifted his weight, looked uncomfortable. “Just some questions. About Amanda Terry?”

I sighed, turning and waving the detectives in. They climbed the stairs just inside the entrance, stepping into the open living area above. The whole house was built around a giant boulder overlooking a meadow in the back. The boulder had been carved out to make the fireplace. It was startling to those who hadn’t seen it before, and both detectives stopped for a moment and stared.

“Nice place,” Detective Jensen said, in the same tone of voice you might use to say, “I hate this place.”

“Thanks.” I gestured toward the couch, and the two men sat. I sighed and sat in the armchair next to the couch. “So.” I hoped we could do this quickly. I had a novel I was procrastinating.

“How do you know Ms. Terry?”

“She asked me to meet with her a few times to talk about writing. It was set up through the high school.” I’d already explained this to the first policemen who’d dropped by, but I doubted it would help me to point that out.

“And you are aware that Ms. Terry is a minor?” Jensen asked.

I nodded.

“So any sexual relationship would be inappropriate and a crime in the eyes of the law,” he pressed.

“There’s nothing going on here like that,” I assured them, leaning forward with my forearms on my knees. “Nothing.”

“Ms. Terry’s father has stated something different. He says there was a romantic element to the relationship, that she ended it and you have had a hard time accepting that.” Jensen spoke slowly, as if he was reminding me of something I’d simply forgotten.

“That’s not true,” I said. “Ms. Terry alluded once to her desire for the relationship to become romantic, but I told her exactly what you just told me. That it would be inappropriate, not to mention illegal.”

“Were that not the case, would you pursue Ms. Terry?” Rawlings asked, suddenly leaning forward and inserting himself into the conversation.

“No.”

The detectives exchanged a look.

“Mr. Charles, you already know that Ms. Terry has filed a restraining order. But her family has also asked us to look into criminal charges of stalking. They’ve asserted that you’ve made repeated attempts to reach Ms. Terry, have followed her and sent her handwritten notes, that you drive by the house regularly. She feels unsafe.” Jensen concluded his statement and watched me for a reaction.

It would be worthless to point out that half of Kings Grove drove by the Terry place regularly since it sat on the corner of the road into town. I’d been going out of my way not to drive by lately. “Am I under arrest?” I asked.

“Not at this time.”

“Do you have the evidence I submitted?” I asked. “The first officers who came by gave it to you?”

The officers exchanged a look and the taller one actually rolled his eyes. “We have it, but there’s not a lot we can do with it.”

“Do I need an attorney?”

“Probably.” Jensen and Rawlings stood then, and I saw them to the door. They departed after suggesting I shouldn’t be planning to leave the area.

I returned to the deck once they had gone, and called my agent to put me in touch with a lawyer.

“YOU KNOW, it wouldn’t hurt you to come back to Los Angeles, do some of the PR for the movie,” my agent said after he’d essentially brushed off the potential criminal charges being filed against me.

One of my books had been optioned a few years back and was actually being produced with recognizable stars and a decent amount of fanfare. It was a good thing for my career, but I’d had a hard time finding the appropriate level of excitement for any of that lately. I’d had trouble even finding the motivation to write. It was very possible I wasn’t going to have a career at all if I didn’t find

my way out of the darkness soon.

“I don’t think so,” I told him. “Plus, the cops just told me not to leave town.”

“Oh right. Well, forgive me saying so, but I wonder if those small-town cops actually have the jurisdiction they think they do.” Andrew’s voice was skeptical.

“I’m pretty sure they probably do.” My own voice was flat. I sat in a low lounge chair on my back deck now, staring out over the little meadow behind my property. A blue jay protested my presence loudly from a nearby treetop. “Anyway, LA is not really my scene right now.”

“Oh,” he said, and I heard the shift in tactics in the lowering of his voice. “You’re still thinking about everything that happened.”

“She was my sister, Andrew.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, and I could almost see him waving the thought away, waving away every horrible thing my life had been in the last couple years. He had no way of understanding any of it. And despite his inability to empathize on this particular topic, I still liked the guy. “You need more time,” he said, but I could hear that it was the last thing he wanted to give me.

“I do.”

“You’ll be here for the premiere though, right?”

I took a deep breath, let it back out. The tabloids had latched onto my sister’s illness, speculating wildly about her symptoms, making me into a monster. It was twisted and wrong, and I’d never addressed it directly, but putting myself in any kind of spotlight had become more unpalatable than ever before. “I can probably do that.”

“This is a big deal, Connor. Authors dream about having their books produced, about big stars playing their characters.” I knew Andrew had dreamed about it at least. And really, I had too, but that was all before.

“I’ll do my best.”

“How’s the sequel coming?” he asked.

The fact that it was a sequel was part of the issue. I hadn’t planned a sequel to *Twisted Knife*, but when it got picked up and produced, Andrew strongly suggested I write one in case the Hollywood folks wanted to pick it up too. Andrew was driven by dollars, and I couldn’t really fault him. His money-

focused motivation and strong network had made us both wealthy.

“It’s coming along,” I said, glancing at my abandoned laptop, sitting on the table at the edge of the deck.

“Great. Looking forward to some chapters this week.”

“Right. Chapters.” Chapters would require me having written more than one of them. Which I had not. I sighed. “Talk to you soon, Andrew.”

“Hang in there. This will blow over, man.”

I hung up, looking to where the bright blue sky met the rising trees. No wind up there. Odds of this blowing over? I shook my head. Hard to say. I was a novelist, not a weatherman. And now, if you asked the fine people of Kings Grove at least, I was a stalker.

My stomach lurched as I thought about Maddie Turner hearing about this, and my mind darkened as I considered what she must think of me now.

Maddie

CHAPTER 9

Adele almost smiled when I came into the diner fifteen minutes early for my shift. Of course, with the drop off in out-of-towners, there were only a few tables full. Miranda was already leaning over the bar working on a crossword puzzle.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

Miranda didn’t bother replying. ‘Everyone’ was back to their lives, done vacationing. “Synonym for ‘outcast,’ six letters.”

“Good morning to you, too.” I leaned in close and whispered. “Pariah.”

Her pencil scratched quickly across the page. Then her head whipped up and she fixed me with those bright eyes. “You’re a genius!”

I didn’t feel like a genius at all. I’d come in early because I was so angry after my latest phone conversation with Jack that I couldn’t sit inside my trailer for five more minutes.

“Annalise and I are getting married.” He’d delivered the news in a soft voice as if it might hurt my feelings.

“The ring she was wearing the day I met her was kind of a tip off. At our pool. In my bathing suit. Your grandmother’s ring, right? Didn’t exactly need a psychic to predict this one.” My voice sounded harsh and bitter but I didn’t care. I didn’t want Jack any more—she could have him. But it still hurt.

He cleared his throat, probably swallowing down the guilt. “Just wanted to let you know officially, is all. Anyway, my lawyer thinks that since you’re doing

well there, and since I'm furnishing you with such a nice plump alimony payment each month, you should be capable of reassuming the car payment."

Shock ran through me. I had few expenses up here, but keeping the trailer running and paying the property tax on the new house was plenty. I couldn't afford the payments on the Jag. "Jack, I ..."

"He also said that you should be able to take back your student loans. The interest rates are really low on those, and they don't cost much each month." I could hear him smiling and wanted to reach through the phone to strangle him.

I took a deep breath. "I chose to let you out of our marriage without a fight, Jack. I didn't ask for much, and I got even less. I ignored my lawyer when she told me how much I could take you for because I wanted to believe that there was something redeemable in our marriage that deserved to be honored."

"That's why she's still digging around that joint account, then?"

I was shaking. "That was the money we were supposed to use to finish the house. You left me in a stupid tin can without a penny!" This was bad. This meant I'd have to call my lawyer again. And that meant I'd owe her more money. If I didn't get that account, I'd never be able to pay her, let alone cover the Jag and the loans. "This is a new low, Jack. Even for you."

"Well, the paperwork is already drawn up. Any movement on selling our house?"

"My house. And I told you I'm not selling it." I was seething now.

"Don't know that you have a choice, love." That stupid voice. Sexy and soothing. This was how I became trapped in the first place. "Unless ..."

I sighed. "What, Jack? Unless what?"

"That was Connor Charles who came looking at it, wasn't it? I wrote his name down when he first called, but I didn't make the connection until I was driving back to San Diego."

"Yes, so?"

"He's in a spot of trouble, now, isn't he?" Jack asked, his voice turning evil.

Some strange protective instinct flared in me. "I don't know. Some stupid tabloid stuff maybe. Why do you care?"

"Well, I was just thinking. You still taking your pictures?"

The use of the word “your” indicated that Jack still had no respect for what had once felt like my calling. “I am,” I sighed.

“Why not take a couple of your beleaguered neighbor, then?”

“What for?”

Jack chuckled. “You’re a looker, Maddie, but you aren’t always that quick.”

I nearly hung up. “I’m not legally required to take crap from you anymore, Jack. See you later.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He apologized quickly. “Old habits. Look. You need money. And I’ve got a friend in Los Angeles—a guy I sold a vacation house to out on Coronado last year. He’d pay pretty well for a couple shots of your local stalker.”

“No. No way.” I cringed even thinking about it.

“There’s no easier money, Maddie. And I’m talking about significant money. Enough to set you free.”

“I am free.” Even as I said it, something was stirring in me, and I didn’t like it. Jack had thrown the tinder of an idea out and he knew I’d think about it, and that it just might catch fire. He probably knew how much I’d hate myself for even considering it, too. I couldn’t do that to Connor. I didn’t know him, but he seemed like a nice enough guy, and at this point I was willing to believe he’d just been cast in a negative light by the tabloids because he’d been an easy target. I wasn’t going to pile on, even if it would give me a clear path out of here. I wasn’t that kind of person, and I wasn’t that desperate. “Go back to your trashy little girlfriend, Jack.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“I don’t think you’d know ‘nice’ if it bit you in the ass. And you’ll be hearing from my lawyer.” It was an empty threat. I’d call her, but his lawyer was evidently far more savvy. If he said the car and loan payment were going to revert to me, it was probably already in the works.

“Maddie, please don’t be dramatic. I hoped this wouldn’t turn ugly.”

“It started out ugly, I just didn’t see it!” I hung up, swallowing my instinct to cry. Instead, I’d put on my hideous polo shirt and arrived to work early, and now everyone in the diner was pretending not to listen as two officers interviewed Miranda.

They were talking in low voices, but I could hear some of what they were saying as they quizzed her about Connor Charles and Amanda Terry. The two detectives peppered Miranda with questions about the times Connor and the girl had evidently come into the diner. From what she said, he did nothing wrong—they arrived separately, left separately, and never touched while they were together.

“If you think of anything else, let us know?” One of the detectives said to Miranda as they turned to go.

I turned to Miranda. “So I guess Amanda is pressing charges?”

“I guess so,” she said.

I thought about the way Connor kept appearing around me in the last few days. Could I buy the stalking accusation? Maybe it wasn’t that far fetched. I let the idea churn in my mind, but I was having a hard time making the man who smelled like Cinnabon into a bad guy.

Miranda lowered her voice and breathed into my ear. “Did you know Connor isn’t even his real name? That’s creepy enough right there.”

“Creepy enough for what, Miranda? He’s a writer. It’s probably a pen name.”

She shrugged and bounced over to make coffee.

I followed her.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice light. Her hands stopped moving and she turned quickly to face me. “Oh my gosh, I forgot to tell you! He came in here this morning and bought two coffees and two muffins. I swear he’s keeping that woman prisoner up at his house.”

“It’s kind of him to run out to get her breakfast then, I guess.”

“Who else would he be buying coffee for, though? I’ve never seen him with anyone.”

I wasn’t volunteering anything. “Maybe it’s not our business,” I pointed out.

“Maybe not,” she conceded. “But the fact that he doesn’t come around makes him creepy. Everyone else who lives here comes in and says hello.”

“Maybe he’s shy.” I tried to fit that idea to the broad-shouldered man who’d stood on my property this morning, the sun glinting coppery in his hair. I doubted he was shy. He was camera-shy, that much was certain. “Maybe he’s

just tired of the way everyone jumps to conclusions and spreads nasty rumors about him.”

“Well, he’s in trouble, that’s for sure.”

And so was I. The memory of my conversation with Jack was fresh, and I had no idea how I was going to handle payments on the Jag. If I lost the car, I’d be really and truly stranded. And I’d have to walk three miles to and from work each day. Fine in the summer, not as fine once it got cold. And the diner ran on reduced hours from November to March anyway, so my income was already going to take a hit. I had no idea what to do, but I’d have to figure it out fast.

I could do as Jack suggested. I could sell a photo of Connor. I actually already had one, the one I’d taken without his permission. Guilt flooded me as I considered it. I doubted that I’d be able to stomach saving myself by doing something that might further damage Connor’s reputation, even if it was an obscene amount of money. I wondered how much money it really would be. What would be a worthy price for the last vestige of self-respect I possessed? I wished Jack had never planted the idea in my head.

Connor

CHAPTER 10

I was surprised to see Maddie Turner standing in front of my house the next afternoon, staring up at it like she was studying the structure, admiring its lines. She looked beautiful, her little chin tipped up as her wide eyes took in the sweeping lines of my house. She wore jeans and a flowered blouse tied at her waist, and her shoes today were more mountain appropriate than any I'd seen her wear previously. For some crazy reason it made me want to go tell the guy in the post office that she did have sensible shoes. Maddie Turner brought some kind of protective instinct bubbling to the surface in me. I didn't understand exactly why, but I was doing my best to ignore it.

Stepping out onto the front deck, I called down to her. "I could ask you to get off my property. You're trespassing, you know. Maybe I should threaten to shoot you. Isn't that what folks do up here?"

She nodded and a nervous laugh escaped her. I couldn't help being charmed by it. "Sorry. Yeah." She looked around, seeming confused. "Um, I hoped maybe you might give me a second to talk?"

After the conversations I'd had recently with the cops and my agent, I wasn't sure I had any skill at talking at all. "We can try. I'm not very good at that. You've already figured that out, I guess. But there are plenty of folks tipsy around the meadow at this hour." The locals tended to walk the meadow loop at cocktail hour, meeting and greeting one another, often with tumblers in hand, as they meandered around enjoying the cooling evening air. I'd gone down once

with my sister, but I didn't feel welcome now.

Maddie looked down, and I knew I was making her uncomfortable, probably confirming whatever suspicions the recent police activity might have given her that I was unbalanced and dangerous. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not used to having visitors. Sometimes I'm really terrible with people." I turned and went inside, descending the front stairs and coming out to where Maddie stood.

"Ms. Turner."

She jumped and spun around, and then paused, looking over my khaki Henley shirt and dark brown cargo pants. I'd forgotten to put on shoes in my haste to come meet her, and she was staring at my bare feet now, a strange look on her face.

"Hi." She tucked her hair behind her ears and I had a sudden impulse to touch it, to feel its softness between my fingers. Her voice was quieter when she said, "Please call me Maddie."

"Maddie. Would you like to come in?" I tried to push down the strange hope I felt that she'd say yes, the almost giddy feeling inside me as I thought about her sitting next to me, talking to me.

She looked unsure, and I wondered if my invitation had sounded less than genuine. I'd clearly been around fictional people too much and had forgotten how to talk to real ones. Especially pretty ones. "I'm sorry, Maddie. Let's start again. Please come in."

"Okay," she laughed. "Yes, I'd like that."

I led the way through the front door and up the stairs into the living room. "Holy," Maddie said on a breath.

I couldn't help grinning at her. Where I'd felt the house was some confirmation of my evil nature when the cops had been here, now I felt a tinge of pride. I could see that Maddie understood the idea I'd had in building around the rock, pulling some of the magic of Kings Grove inside. "Yeah."

The bulk of the house was hidden from view when you first approached it. It engulfed the massive rock, climbing along its surface across the entire opposite side, and plate glass windows spanned several levels, overlooking a grassy meadow. The whole house looked out and over the wide green expanse, and as

we looked, several deer lingered at the far edge of the meadow, almost as if they were a fixed part of the scenery.

Maddie was silent as she looked around at the glass, metal, and warm solid wood that was everywhere. Much of the furniture appeared to be actually built into the house, low benches and tables seemed to grow from the walls and floor. On the side that hugged the rock, an immense stone fireplace glowed.

“Is that ...”

“It’s carved into the rock that the house sits on.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Don’t know really.” I shrugged, feeling pleased that she was impressed, and waved her toward a low couch near the fire. “Can I get you a drink? It is cocktail hour.”

“Uh, no, that’s okay,” she said. She looked around, and I became suddenly conscious of the other parts of my decor, the things she might not find as charming. Various skulls and gothic fixtures probably did little to put her at ease. There were framed posters from old horror films on one wall and a photograph of a dead tree filled with ravens on another. I cringed, but couldn’t do much about it now. These were the trappings of my career.

“Can I ask why you’re looking to buy another house up here when yours is clearly ... sufficient?” she asked.

I grinned at her. “You came here to ask me that?”

“No, sorry. Just curious. I mean ...” she trailed off and seemed to pull into herself, crossing her arms over her body and making herself a little bit smaller. She was nervous.

“So, what is the topic today?” I asked, as the memory of the last conversations I’d had over the past days swirled through my head—the police, my agent, the lawyer who’d called me back.

“Connor, if this is a bad time ...” she looked apologetic, and the way she met my eyes practically confirmed that she knew all about the investigation.

“No,” I said, wishing I were better at this. “Actually ...” How honest could I be? “It’s nice to talk to someone who isn’t accusing me of anything.” I motioned to the leather couch in front of the fireplace and we both sat.

She smiled and seemed to relax a little bit, her shoulders dropping slightly. “Where are you from? Originally, I mean.”

I laughed. “Not from here.”

“So where?” She seemed genuinely curious, and while I was used to being analyzed and picked apart and didn’t generally enjoy it, I wanted Maddie to know me. I wanted to know her.

“My family is from Chicago. But we spent our summers in California when I was a kid. And I liked it here.”

“Summers here? In Kings Grove?”

“All over. San Francisco, Los Angeles, Eureka, San Diego. And yeah, here too. I actually have a house in Trinidad, up the coast north of here. But I like it better up here. Or I did until recently.” I smiled, but had a feeling it was a grim look. “Kind of stuck here for now.” I sipped the drink I’d been nursing before Maddie arrived, but then felt rude. “Can I get you a glass of wine maybe?”

Maddie looked around, as if she’d just realized where she was, and my heart sank a little as I realized she was about to leave. She moved to stand again. “Listen, I’m totally intruding. I should have called ...”

“Please stay.” The words slipped out before I’d had time to think about saying them. Now it was too late to pull them back, and I found I couldn’t meet her eye. It’d been a long time since I’d had anything close to a friend, and despite my growing attraction to Maddie, she was the first person I’d had a real conversation with in a long time. I forced myself to look up, to meet her eyes. “Unless you’re going to ask me questions about my tendencies as a stalker or sexual predator, I could use the company.”

Maddie’s eyes found my face and stayed there for a beat, and then she seemed to decide something. She settled back into the couch. “Sure. Wine would be lovely.”

“I’ve got a Bordeaux I was saving ...”

“That’s not necessary,” she said. “I love a nice Bordeaux, but I’m just as happy with swill.”

“I’m sure you deserve better than swill,” I said. “I have an Oregon pinot noir, will that do?”

“That sounds great.”

I pulled the bottle from a rack below the bar table and opened it, pouring a glass and then setting it on the low table between us.

“Thank you,” Maddie said, and she took a sip of the wine and put the glass back on the table. I watched her, wishing this was easier, wishing we could zoom past the awkwardness between us and get to—what? What did I think was next? I didn’t know, but I wanted to find out. My eyes fell on the messenger bag next to her on the couch.

“What’s in the bag?”

She responded by pulling out her camera and handing it to me to inspect. “Aha, of course. What kind of pictures do you take? Is this how you make a living?”

“People mostly. I used to think it was my calling. Not exactly a living now. I’m a waitress.” She cradled the camera in her hands as I handed it back, and the way she held it charmed me, reminded me of how I felt with my fingers on a keyboard.

Maddie flicked a switch on the camera, removed the lens cap and fiddled with a few things, then she lifted it and raised her eyebrows in question. “May I?” She framed the shot before I could answer.

“I guess that would be okay,” I said, “though I’m sure you could find better subjects out there.” I tried to smile, tried not to think about how many times my picture had been taken like this, then paired with a headline that made me look like a monster. This was innocent though, this was Maddie. The firelight glowed behind me, and it was hard to feel anything but comfortable in my private refuge, with a beautiful woman here as my guest. I relaxed and smiled.

“So what do you think now?” I asked, picking up the thread of our conversation.

“About?” She put down the camera.

“You said you thought photography was your calling.”

“Right. I gave it all up to build a stupid house in a forest and live in a trailer with no modern conveniences of any kind.” Her eyes danced as she delivered this line, and I resisted the urge to reach out and take her hand, touch her in some

way.

I felt the irony of her words too, though, and it wasn't unfamiliar. "Sometimes life twists and we lose our path," I said. "Sometimes it gets hard to remember where you were heading. Sometimes other people steer for you and you get lost."

She nodded and reached for her glass. "So you're stuck here too?"

"What?" I shook my head, unsure what she meant.

"You said you're stuck here now. In Kings Grove."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I am. I've been advised not to leave the county."

"By the police?"

I nodded. This was one thing I did not want to discuss. With Maddie here, it was almost like I could play as if my life was normal, sane. But when she brought up the most recent horror, I didn't feel normal at all. "How did you end up living in a trailer next to a half-built house?" I asked her, switching our focus to her.

"What do you mean, 'end up'? My life was carefully constructed to allow me the privilege of living in a rickety trailer next to a half-finished dump. I planned it that way." She grinned and raised her glass in a toast.

I laughed. "Of course you did." I loved her smile. I wanted to see it again.

"I'm stuck, I guess. Just like you."

"Something to do with the Scotsman?" I ventured.

"Something," she agreed. "Divorce," she added. "Trailer life was never part of my plan. But neither was divorce. Or any of what's gone on in the last year or so."

"Feeling like you're not the one driving?" I asked.

"Right."

"So we're prisoners," I said. "At least we've got each other." I said it lightly, and we clinked our glasses together. But there was something in the words that felt like truth, which made me think maybe we really could be friends. I wondered if we could be more.

Suddenly she stood. "I'm sorry," she said, shoving the camera into her bag and moving toward the door. "I should go."

Disappointment flooded my chest. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I am, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have bothered you.” She seemed to be scrambling, as if something had frightened her suddenly.

“Maddie, did you come by to ask something specific?”

She turned, standing in the half-open door and pressed her lips together hard, as if she was thinking. Finally she said, “The property. Did you still want to buy it?”

Confusion flared in me. “I thought you weren’t going to sell?”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

I couldn’t do that, no matter how much the land meant to me or to my past, because I’d realized it meant more to hers. And I had a suspicion about who she was—if I was right, there was no way I could take it from her. “I can’t now. And for what it’s worth, I don’t think you should sell it at all.”

“It’s just that ...” She looked unaccountably upset. “I just think that maybe I do need to find a buyer. And you seemed so interested.” Her light brown eyes looked greenish in the low light of my entryway, like some complex stone with remnants of precious gems buried within.

“Not now. I can’t now.”

“Oh. Okay, then.” The words tumbled out of her, and she turned and disappeared down the stairs, headed out to the driveway.

“Bye, Maddie,” I called after her.

Had I done something wrong? Had I ruined things before they’d even begun? I didn’t know—living with shadows and ghosts, with the real and imagined characters in my head, had made me unsure how to operate in the real world. Maybe it was best if she stayed away. Since my sister had gone, taking what felt like my last shreds of humanity, I wasn’t worthy of her—of anyone.

Maddie

CHAPTER 11

“**M**orning Adele.” I knew I looked like a walking disaster. I’d gotten no sleep the night before, choosing to stay up and brood about whatever had gone on between Connor and me, and then about my own financial straits. Somewhere in the dark of the quiet night I had decided a few things, however. For one thing, it didn’t matter how attractive Connor Charles might be. He didn’t want to buy my house, and there was no reason for me to have any further interaction with him. It was clear that he was not going to be my salvation, and I needed to think of something else. And no matter how handsome he might be, the last thing I needed was a man in my life again. Especially a man with as many complications as he seemed to have.

And on that theme, I’d done a lot of thinking about Jack, too. Despite the fact we were divorced, that he was engaged, he still seemed to find lots of reasons to harass me. I wondered if it had just become some kind of habit for him. Maybe Annalise didn’t provide as easy a target I did. Regardless, his evil plans and ideas were not going to take up valuable space in my mind anymore.

I didn’t want to even admit that I’d considered the idea of cashing in on Connor’s misfortune with a photo as Jack suggested, but part of me had. But I wouldn’t anymore. Maybe the woman Jack created would have taken advantage of someone that way—easy money was something she’d grown used to, and small inconveniences, like other people, didn’t always matter to her. But I didn’t

like that woman very much, and I didn't want to be her anymore.

Somewhere during my rumination I remembered snapping the photo at Connor's house without thinking about it, and I pulled out the camera and played back the photos, determined to erase the few I'd shot of him. But when his face appeared on the tiny screen, shadows exaggerating the broody sadness of his features and his hair lit up from behind, I found myself startled. It was the best photo I'd taken in a long time. Maybe ever. There was so much emotion visible in that shot, and if I had the chance to get it into a proper editing program, there was no telling how incredible it could become. My finger hovered over the delete button, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was an amazing photograph. I had to keep it. I'd never do anything with it, but it was too good to delete.

At some point, huddled under the heavy blanket of the very late night, I came up with a vague plan, some parts of it genuinely horrid, though it did not involve me having to sell photos of someone with enough problems of his own, so that was a bonus. I would trade in the Jag. As much as I loved that ridiculous car, there was no reason I should be sitting on a car that cost more than the trailer I lived in. I could get something reliable, something that would handle snow well. Something that would probably be about half as much fun to drive, but would get me out from under the car payment with cash to spare.

The second part of the plan was much worse, but it was quickly becoming the only viable way to get out of most of the problems hanging over my head. And as I decided on how to enact it, I realized I might not have been excited to be stuck up here in a trailer, but I did love the mountains. And I would miss them. Almost as much as I would miss the idea that one day my brother might speak to me again. And if I went through with the second part of my plan, he definitely would not.

STAYING AWAKE LATE into the night didn't do me any favors the next morning.

"You look awful." Adele's sagging jowls waggled while she talked, and her beady eyes narrowed at me.

“I’m fine,” I responded automatically. “Though actually, I could use the afternoon off. I need to drive down to the valley.”

“You can have it, Princess. Work the morning, and then you can go. Gonna be dead in here today.”

I looked around. She was right. There were a few locals sipping coffee or poking at eggs, but most of the tables were empty, and not many people lingered out in the parking lot or on the street beyond. Kings Grove was getting ready to tuck in and sleep for the winter. And it was barely even fall.

The morning dragged on, as my mind turned over potential options for pulling together the money I’d need to get out of the mess I was in. Lower car payments would help. And I needed to call my lawyer.

“What’s with you?” Miranda asked, breaking me out of my thoughts. She had ketchup bottles lined up the counter, waiting to be refilled. I pulled another rag out in preparation for the inevitable mess.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Something.” Her eyes were intense, and I knew she could see more than I was willing to tell her.

“I’m a little sad today is all. I’m trading in the car.”

“For what?” She looked adorably confused, her blond ponytail swinging behind her as she cocked her head to one side.

“For a cheaper car with smaller payments.”

Her face fell a bit. “You? Without the fast sporty car? How will you maintain your fancy?”

“I think my fancy is out of place here anyway. And I’m more worried about maintaining my ability to afford food. And my heat.”

She nodded. Miranda still lived with her parents, so I was pretty sure she had no idea what I was talking about. “Did you hear the latest?” Her voice was a harsh whisper as she dropped her head toward my ear and leaned in, and though she seemed to think she was being discreet, her dramatic change of posture actually called Adele’s attention our way. Miranda stood up straighter and pretended to arrange the ketchup bottles on the countertop until Adele looked away.

“What are you talking about?” Something in my stomach clenched. I knew this would have something to do with Connor, just by the look on her face.

“Amanda Terry has gone missing.” Miranda’s eyes were wide.

I froze and my mind started spinning. “What?”

“Yeah. She disappeared two days ago. Her parents were in here, handing out flyers.” She pointed to the bulletin board behind Adele near the door. There was a picture of a young girl with big eyes in the center, with the word “Missing” centered above her.

“Oh no,” I breathed.

Miranda nodded out the window, where a police cruiser sat. Another dark car idled next to the cruiser. “I told you Connor Charles was creepy. He’s probably got her chained up next to the other woman in that big house up there.” Miranda was shaking her head. She’d already convicted him.

“He does not,” I snapped, not willing to tell her that I had pretty solid proof there was no one in that house except Connor. I felt sorry for him. Miranda was certainly not the only person willing to blame him so easily.

Miranda had the grace to look embarrassed as she muttered, “Yeah, you’re probably right. I’m sure it’s something else.”

I worked the morning, my eyes wandering repeatedly to the “missing” sign and my mind turning over every word Connor had said to me the evening before. It didn’t make sense—anyone who’d talked to him, who’d felt the almost tangible loneliness and sorrow that clung to him wouldn’t believe he was capable of anything like this. But it wasn’t my business, and aside from hoping for the girl’s safe return, I needed to put it out of my mind.

As the few lunchtime diners finished up, I told Miranda, “I have to go.”

“Hey,” she said as I grabbed my bag from beneath the counter.

I turned back around.

“I don’t know what’s going on with you, but it’ll get better, Mads.”

“Thanks.”

I DROVE to the valley and swapped my car for a reliable mini-SUV with four-wheel drive and minuscule monthly payments, and then headed to the RV shop when the weather forecast alerted me to the fact that a cold storm was coming to the Sierras. The man at the RV shop had smiled brightly when I told him I needed materials and advice on winterizing the trailer. I think he saw dollar signs when he figured out that I didn't have the first clue what I was doing.

I walked out with a huge winterization kit and a few suggestions on how to install it all. And as I drove up the hill again in the gathering darkness, watching the temperature drop on my dashboard thermometer as fat raindrops began pelting the windshield, I realized that it was probably too late. At least for this storm.

By the time I reached my lot, the rain was sheeting down and the temperature had dropped another fifteen degrees. I hauled the huge plastic-wrapped package out of the trunk, thinking I'd somehow get it started tonight, but as soon as I got near the door I realized that there was no way I was willing to figure it all out in the pouring rain. I dropped the kit next to the picnic table and dashed in, wringing water from my hair.

At some point, the constant pounding of rain must have lulled me to sleep, but it wasn't a restful sleep. It was more of a dark purgatory between day and night, sleep and waking. I was on edge, even in my slumber, thanks to the incredible noise of thunder crashing down around me and the wind wailing through the treetops and rocking my trailer. There were several tremendously loud crashes in the midst of it, the kind that shook the ground and made you wonder if God was cruel enough to send an earthquake as an ironic accompaniment to the storm. I was certain that something had fallen from the treetops. Something big.

The heating system had kicked on as well, and it was by no means quiet. The hum of the heat added to the sound of the storm and fueled the frightening dreams that plagued me—monsters chasing me through the forest, knocking me from cliff tops. In another dream, the trailer somehow plunged off its moorings and slid down the hillside into the pond I'd nearly drown in as a child, sinking to the bottom before the entire pool turned to ice.

I woke to a cold eerie silence, shivering beneath the blankets in my clothes. It felt as if the mattress I slept on had been turned to ice beneath me. I bundled myself within the quilt I'd thrown on top of the bed, and slipped my feet into the slippers that waited on the frozen floor. How had it turned so cold so quickly?

Teeth chattering, I shuffled out to make coffee and turn up the heater. The coffee maker responded to my repeated button pushing with a cold indifference that lit a tiny fire of panic within me. It was a bad day for the coffeemaker to die, I told myself, and turned to the heater, pretending I didn't already know that it would respond as the coffeemaker had. The thermostat had a battery in it, which was the only reason I could see that the temperature inside the trailer had dropped to just above forty degrees. As I went around flicking light switches, I finally accepted that the power was out.

Which left me stranded on a hilltop in the cold, surrounded by mud (confirmed by a glance out at the previously dusty ground around the trailer.)

I stared out the window at the debris that littered the ground—branches that had perched unwavering above me all spring and summer—and my eyes caught on the end of a branch that looked incredibly large, peeking out from behind where the new car sat near the road. Moving to the window next to the bed gave me a clear view of the other side of the car, and confirmed my fear. A tree was down across the road in front of the property, and from here, it appeared that it blocked my property completely from the village below. I stared at the downed pine, disbelieving. I picked up my cell phone, which had been charging next to the bed and jabbed the power button, but the phone was dead. I was basically trapped, without power. Or a phone.

I crawled back into bed and settled in to wait for one of three things: sunshine, help, or the motivation to get myself out of this mess. The rain continued to trickle down. Like my misfortune, the storm refused to call it quits completely.

Connor

CHAPTER 12

All I could think about the next evening as the rain pelted the mountains and the storm raged around me was that Maddie was up there on that hilltop in her rickety trailer. I didn't think it was safe—and I couldn't sleep at all, as worry for her crept around the corners of my consciousness, making me feel personally responsible for whatever might happen to her. When the power flickered and then switched off completely close to three in the morning, I couldn't take the worry any more.

Despite the pounding rain and almost constant flashes of lightning, I dashed to my car and guided it carefully down to the meadow loop that would take me up to Maddie's lot. The thunder boomed around me, and it felt like it was vibrating the entire Earth. Leaves and branches littered the road, and I avoided a few of the bigger things that had fallen, but as I approached the hill that led up to Maddie's lot, my heart jumped into my throat.

A tree was down across the road, and from where I sat facing the reddish trunk illuminated in my headlights, it looked like it could have fallen across the trailer as well. I said a silent prayer and slid out of the car, immediately soaked by the driving rain. The tree blocked the road entirely, and I couldn't see over it easily, so I launched myself over the trunk, scrambling over the rough bark and sliding down the other side.

Was she hurt? Was she even alive? I followed the trunk back toward the trailer, and relief began to seep around the edges of my worry as I saw that the

tree had fallen from behind where the trailer stood, missing it by a good margin. I was so relieved, I actually sank against the trunk for a long minute, letting the rain run down my face and neck in rivers, soaking me clean through.

If anyone from the village saw me out here in the middle of the night, leaning against this fallen tree in the pouring rain, they'd have some confirmation that I was indeed insane—I was pretty sure of that. But the relief I felt knowing that Maddie was safe, at least for now, was worth the risk.

I climbed back into my car eventually, considering what it meant that I felt so protective of this woman I barely knew—that I cared so much what happened to her.

THE NEXT DAY I was back at Maddie's lot in the morning, hoping to check in and verify for myself that she really was okay. I was sure she was freezing—the whole village had lost power. But when I got there, she wasn't there. A car was parked outside, but Maddie didn't seem to be within.

I walked a circle around the trailer, looking for damage and noticing a large plastic bag with a weatherization kit inside. She must have bought it intending to get it set up before the storm hit, but she'd been too late.

A lingering worry over where Maddie was lodged in the back of my mind, but in the meantime, I figured I could help her by setting up the trailer for winter. She'd bought the right things, or it seemed that way at least, and I was about a quarter of the way through getting the insulation placed when another man slid down the side of the fallen tree and approached.

"Hey there," he called, giving me a questioning look. He was older, had grey hair and a weathered face, but he looked friendly enough. I'd seen him, I thought, but couldn't place him.

"Hey," I answered. "Connor Charles. How are you doing?"

He nodded, reached out and shook my hand. "John Trench. I live just down the hill there on the meadow." He motioned past the tree. "Maddie's nearest neighbor, I reckon. Thought I'd give her a hand up here, get things cleaned up."

“That’s exactly what I was doing,” I said. “Looks like she was all set to winterize the trailer, just didn’t get to it in time.”

“That’s what she said.” He nodded again.

“So she’s okay then? Is she at your place?” Relief trickled through me.

“I came up early this morning when we realized the power was out. Invited her to stay for a few days. We’ve got a generator down at the cabin, and without a heater up here ...” he trailed off. “Well.”

“That was nice of you,” I said.

“Her parents were good friends of ours,” he said, and then he moved next to me and began pulling additional insulation from the winterization kit. “Let’s see if we can get this set up.”

We worked side by side for more than an hour then, getting panels dug in around the trailer to keep wind and cold from blowing beneath it. I wasn’t sure if it would help much, but figured every little bit would count. We didn’t talk after that first conversation, and now and then I could feel the man’s eyes on me, but for the most part the morning passed quickly, amiably.

John retrieved a chainsaw and some plywood from his house and we added the plywood panels to the base of the trailer, adding an additional wind and weather break. Then we took turns hacking at the fallen tree. It was hard sweaty work, but it felt good to do something to help Maddie. And even having John’s company was a nice change from the solitude and silence I usually endured.

We were finishing up somewhere after lunch time, and John shook my hand again. “Come down and have some soup, son. My wife makes a fantastic split pea.”

I couldn’t turn down the invitation, and the promise of seeing Maddie again lit a happy little fire inside me. “Thanks very much,” I said, and followed John Trench to his cabin, a small A-frame house tucked back off the road.

Maddie

CHAPTER 13

Louise Trench and I spent the day playing cards and eating soup next to the fire while John puttered around outside. I wasn't sure exactly what it was he was doing, but for a retired guy, he sure stayed busy out there. Maybe my lack of industriousness was part of the reason I was still living in a trailer. John probably would have built the house himself by now.

"What do your folks think about you living up here, honey?" Louise's dark eyes were sweet, searching my face.

"You haven't talked to my parents in a while, I guess?"

She looked stricken. "No, I'm afraid we've lost touch."

"Oh, that's not your fault," I said quickly. "Mom died a while ago, three years now, I guess. And Dad isn't quite himself these days."

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry about your mother." Louise looked sad, her hands clasping in front of her chest and her mouth dropping open. "And your dad, is he ...?"

"He's fine really. I mean, he's not really the same, but he's happy for the most part. He lives down in a care facility in the valley." I looked into the dancing flames, trying to figure out how to explain to Louise that everything was fine when the words I'd just said made it all sound so dire. "He kind of thinks he's on an extended vacation."

"That must be so hard for you and your brother. How is Cameron doing?"

I cringed. How could I tell this sweet woman that my brother wouldn't speak

to me; that we hadn't talked since Mom died? "He's good," I said, channeling my last conversation with Jess. "He got married about a year ago to a great girl named Jess. They got married in Hawaii."

"Oh, I bet that was beautiful."

I bet it was, too.

"Maddie," Louise's face was serious, and she fixed me with a no-nonsense stare. "If you ever need help, you can come to us. I know things have been hard."

Warmth pooled in my chest. How long had it been since I'd felt like someone really cared about me? I smiled at Louise's motherly tone. "I'm fine, Louise! You and John are so sweet to let me stay here while the power is out. I hope it won't be long. I hate to be a burden."

"I'd love for you to stay longer, if you want. John keeps busy up here, but it gets lonely. And you're up there alone on that hill ..."

John came through the door then, slapping his hands together, his cheeks ruddy from the cold. "It's definitely hinting of winter out there!" He smiled at me. "I'm glad you're not up there in that little motorhome, Maddie," he said. "Though it looks like you've been thinking about getting it ready for winter, huh?"

I thought about the giant winterization kit sitting next to the trailer in the mud. He must've noticed it when he'd been up this morning.

"Yeah, I need to get back up there and get some of that stuff installed, I guess."

"I went up to take a crack at it," he said, looking half guilty and half pleased with himself.

I stood. "Seriously? You did?" Though my pride wanted me to be hurt that he would assume I needed that kind of help, reality had set in.

I needed that kind of help.

"I did." John glanced at me and I gave what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "I hope you don't mind. Got all the skirting installed around the bottom and think it's shored up pretty good. I had some help, actually." He looked uncertain, and eyed me sideways as he stepped inside and Connor moved in behind him.

“Hi,” Connor said, almost sheepishly. His cheeks were ruddy too, and he wore a flannel plaid shirt over a T-shirt. Combined with the scruffy red of his beard and the wild mess of his hair, he looked like a true lumberjack.

“Well, hello,” Louise said, crossing the space to welcome Connor inside.

John introduced Connor and Louise.

“I’m sorry for barging in,” Connor started, but John interrupted him.

“Don’t listen to him. I invited him. He worked hard up there, figured the least I could do was share some of the best split pea soup in the mountains.” John beamed at his wife and a flickering beat of envy went through me as she smiled back, their love as evident as the smiles on their faces.

“Thanks for helping get my place set up,” I said. I felt a little sheepish, like a child that all these people had to take care of.

“Glad to,” Connor said, coming to sit next to me by the fire. “I was worried about you.” He said this in a lower voice, leaning in toward me slightly so John and Louise couldn’t hear as they moved around each other in the kitchen.

We were sitting close, something about the cozy atmosphere in the Trenches’ house pushing us to talk in low voices, to share space in a way we wouldn’t have otherwise.

“I went to your place last night,” Connor said, ducking his head as if he was embarrassed to tell me this. “In the middle of the night, actually.”

A tiny spike of shock ran through me—the rumors of stalking echoing in my mind. That wasn’t quite normal, but I was touched at the same time. “You did?”

“I know it sounds crazy. I mean,” his blue eyes found mine but then looked away. “I know I barely know you, Maddie. It’s just—”

“Come have some soup,” Louise called from the kitchen.

We stood and joined our hosts at their table, my mind turning over Connor’s words. What had he been about to say?

After lunch, John shooed Louise from the kitchen, and she took Connor out to show him photos of her children, long since grown and moved away. John and I did dishes together.

“So I gather you two are friends?” he asked me.

I remembered that Miranda had told me a story about Connor screaming at

John one time when he'd come across him up on the Ridge Line trail. I didn't imagine that John was much of a fan. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. I mean, I just met him."

"He was helpful enough this morning." He shot me a wary glance. "I've had a run in with him in the past though."

I nodded. "I heard something about you bumping into him hiking?"

John nodded. "I don't like to spread rumors. And I don't like to entertain malice if it isn't warranted." He put his sponge down in the sink. "But I will tell you what I know because we've known you all your life, Maddie. And I'd hate to see anything happen to you."

"Well that's a bit dark," I said.

"Connor is mostly a stranger up here. He built that fancy house over there, moved in, and then disappeared for a while. When he came back up, he had a woman with him. For a while, it seemed like he was gonna stay, put some roots down here, and get to be a part of things. He even talked about having spent some time up here as a kid, but no one around here remembers him. Not that it matters, really. But then, he ..." John paused, swallowed hard. "Well, the woman who lived with him disappeared. No one saw her for a while, and he'd come down to town alone, looking pretty bad."

"Bad how?" How Connor could ever look bad, I had no idea.

"Like maybe he'd gone off the edge. He's a writer, you know. Writes some pretty dark stuff, I guess, though I've never read it."

I shrugged. I'd never heard of Connor Charles before a few weeks ago, but I hadn't run in what I would call 'literary' circles.

"Anyway, folks figured he might have been struggling with something. A couple people took him some food, tried to visit. He mostly didn't answer the door, and when he did, he told them to leave him alone. Someone asked about the woman, and he didn't give many answers there either, just said she was gone and slammed the door."

John was silent for a minute, staring out the window over the sink.

I waited for him to continue, trying to imagine what could have driven Connor through such a dramatic change. Who had the woman been?

“I don’t like to make things up, but I’ll tell you what I think, Maddie. I think he killed that woman.”

Shock roared through me. Miranda had said it, but John Trench was a different story. “What? Why would you say that?”

“When I hiked up to the top of the tree line along Ridge Line Trail, I heard something way off the trail. I like to go up there and explore sometimes, shore up the trails and help the rangers.” He smiled, a modest blush crossing his cheeks. “Anyway, I heard something up there, something that got me curious. Sounded like a bear scratching the bark off a tree trunk. I followed the sound.”

I tried to imagine myself purposely following a bear and determined that I was either a complete wimp or that John was potentially suicidal. “It wasn’t a bear, I guess?”

“No. It was Connor. He was digging. He was digging pretty deep, because he was standing in the hole and I could only see the top half of him.”

“Why would he be up there digging?”

“Well, that’s what I don’t know. But like I said, he was way off the trail. I doubt he thought anyone would stumble over him there. So I surprised him, I guess, when I said hello. And he didn’t look happy for the company. Yelled at me to get away, to leave him alone. And he looked mad enough that I wasn’t going to stay around to argue or ask questions.” He shook his head. “I think he was burying something.”

“I just ... Connor doesn’t seem like he’d be capable ...” the words were out before I considered that he was presently accused of a crime. And that his supposed victim had just gone missing. Maybe he *was* capable. A chill ran through my blood. I had nothing else to say, but questions swarmed my mind and conflicting emotions filled my gut.

“Anyway,” John brushed his hands together as if brushing away the dark atmosphere that his story had brought about. “He was friendly enough this morning. Seemed worried about you, Mads.”

“Thank you,” I said again. I peered into the other room where Connor and Louise sat with a photo album spread across their laps, laughing.

I RETURNED to my trailer and my half-built house two days later, and was amazed at the changes that had been made in my absence. For one thing, the fallen tree had been chopped into thin disks and hauled off the road. John had told me this, but seeing it was something else. He planned to collect the wood to stack for his fireplace, and I vowed to help him haul it down and stack it for him. I couldn't pay him back, but I could try.

The trailer looked completely different. Not only had John and Connor installed the thick plastic skirting around the bottom, but they'd shored it up with panels of plywood, digging it in a foot or so around the perimeter to block the snow. I would never have thought to do that, and even the first step inside told me that made a difference. The floor wasn't as icy as it had been, and the whole place sounded a bit less flimsy as I walked through it. I felt better, like I'd been pulled back a few feet from the edge of whatever precipice my life perched above.

The power had been restored the day before, and the trailer was a toasty sixty-seven. I celebrated by making some coffee and checking my phone, now that I could charge it again. There was one message besides the one from Adele telling me that the diner was closed until the power was back. And it was a doozy.

"Maddie. It's your brother. I need to talk to you. I'm coming up to see you on Friday. Just wanted to let you know. Hope I can remember how to get up there."

Cam. Was coming here.

After judging and ignoring me for three years, he couldn't just send me an email. He was coming. In less than a week. I let that idea roll back and forth in my head as I paced around a few times.

I owed him an apology probably, but I felt like he owed me one, too. Somehow I didn't believe that was why he was going to come all this way, though. There was something else, and I doubted it was good. I wondered if Jess would be with him.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of tires on the road outside. I

pushed the curtain aside to see Connor getting out of his car, walking toward the trailer. The sun poured over his shoulders, lighting his hair and giving him that ethereal glow.

The sight of him sent my heart racing and my palms sweating. What I couldn't figure out was whether my reaction to Connor was attraction or fear.

Connor

CHAPTER 14

After I'd shared lunch with the Trenches, and with Maddie, I went almost reluctantly home. The big house suddenly felt less like a refuge and more like a prison. Where the dark wood and smooth rock had once felt masculine and refined, now they seemed oppressive and confining. Where the lack of traffic up my little private road had once seemed a necessary luxury, now it felt isolating.

My laptop sat on the end of the long wooden dining table, and I slid into the seat in front of it and stared at the last chapter I'd written in my current book. There had been times in the past when I'd returned to my own words and read them with a sense of surprise, not quite remembering when I'd actually written them. Writing had been as natural as breathing, as walking. But now it was torturous, and I couldn't find the connections I once had to my work.

Not since my sister had been here, actually. Though her presence had been distracting in some ways, there was something comforting in knowing someone else was nearby. It seems fundamental and silly, but I guess I liked knowing I wasn't alone. And in the year since she'd been gone, I'd been more alone than ever.

I sighed and leaned back in the chair, closing my eyes and remembering the way it had felt to sit next to Maddie at the fire in the Trenches' little house. I recalled the sound of her soft laughter, the feel of the fire dancing warm on our backs and her hair glowing in the light. Her image reassembled itself in my

mind, and I imagined her sitting at my own fireplace, mentally placed her there behind me.

And then, with the strength of my own imagination sitting at my back, keeping me company, I wrote.

For the next two days, fueled by the imagined presence of the one person I most wanted to actually be near, I wrote more than I had in the last two months. And when the deluge of words began to taper, when the creative impulse I'd felt so strongly withered to a gentle pulse, I closed the laptop and slept. And when I woke up, I showered and got into my car without thinking. I needed to see her again.

MADDIE'S TRAILER looked significantly more sturdy now than it had before the big storm had come through, and I was selfishly pleased—both that I'd helped make it so and that maybe she would think of me a bit next time the rain and wind came in and she stayed warm.

Though how warm and safe could she really be in this thing?

As I approached the front door, it opened, and Maddie stepped out, appearing on the top step with her hair arranged on top of her head and her cheeks pink. She glowed and I resisted the urge to pull her into my arms. We weren't there. I didn't even know if we were going there exactly—there was certainly enough in my life to keep her from wanting me the same way.

"Hi," I said, my voice sounding loud in my own ears. I hadn't planned out what I wanted to say to her, hadn't really thought of much beyond seeing her again, and now I wished I had something to give her, some reason to be here.

"Hey," she said, and a hand lifted to push a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She didn't meet my eyes and the way she crossed her arms over herself gave me a sense that she was wary of me, worried maybe. "Thanks for all the work you did up here," she said, her head turning to indicate the fallen log we'd cut up. "You and John. You saved me."

"I was worried about you," I said simply. "But I'd do all that work again if it

meant another afternoon at the Trenches' place."

She looked at me quizzically and then laughed. "Oh! For the soup! It was amazing, wasn't it?"

I hadn't meant the soup. I'd meant her, but I just smiled. The soup had been good too. I stepped back, moved toward the picnic table, hoping she might sit with me for a few minutes. The temperature had come back up and the sun had dried the forest, but there was a definite feeling of fall in the air. "I was a little worried before that," I said, and I slid onto the bench. Maddie stepped down from the trailer, walking nearer. "The way you left the other evening ... I thought maybe I'd scared you, or ..."

She shook her head and I watched the loose tendrils dance around her face. "No, it wasn't you. It was just ..."

"The things people say." I wanted her to confirm it. I wanted to get the rumors and the lies out in the open. Maddie had never asked me about the charges, hadn't addressed the thing that lay between me and pretty much everyone else up here.

She didn't answer, didn't meet my eye. She shifted her weight and crossed her arms again.

"About me," I tried.

She glanced at me, her eyes grazing mine and then dropping again, and then she sighed and sat next to me at the table. "Maybe that was part of it." She paused, maybe searching for words. "And part of it is just that it felt awkward suddenly. To be sitting in a man's house, drinking wine. I've been through a lot, and ... it felt really different, that's all."

"Different bad?"

"Just different, I guess."

We were both silent a minute, looking out at the dense forest edging the property.

"Maddie, would you be interested in having dinner with me?" My mouth had a mind of its own when she was near, and I wished I could suck these words back in, but they'd already spilled out. I waited, hoping maybe it wasn't too much to ask.

She watched me closely for a minute, stared at my fingers tracing grooves in the worn tabletop, let her eyes scan my face. “Are you asking me for a date?”

I couldn’t help the vague hint of a smile that I felt dance over my face. She was adorable. “Something like that, I guess.”

“Um ...” She was stalling. “I guess that would be okay.”

Ouch. Still, it wasn’t a solid no. “You sound so enthusiastic.”

“I’m sorry. I’m torn. I’m confused.”

Of course she was. Who wanted to have dinner with a stalker? No one wanted to be alone with the guy who’d killed his wife, who kept women chained in his basement. I knew about all the rumors ... I just didn’t want to validate them by addressing them. But maybe that needed to change. “I don’t want to push you. I just think ... well, I think maybe you see past all the ridiculous things people say about me. Maybe you actually see me.”

I paused. Maybe that was too much to say. I was terrible with people—this was why I dealt with fictional people instead. I had a lot more time to decide what they should say to one another and could practice lots of scenarios on paper before I found the perfect one. This particular interaction would have already been deleted. I ran a hand through the hair I knew was wild on my head, feeling defeated. “Well, maybe I can call you instead? Give you a little time?”

She looked at me hard then, tilting her head and meeting my eyes. “Okay. Call me.”

Something danced inside me, a little victory jig. I handed her my phone. Just as she was handing it back, a tall lithe girl dashed toward us from the edge of the woods. “Maddie!” Terror was written in her expression.

“Ella, what’s wrong?” Maddie jumped up from the table and rushed to the girl, taking her hands.

Ella’s face was red and she was out of breath from running. Her lip trembled as she spoke, and I could tell she was struggling not to cry. “We need help. My brother, Austin,” she gasped. “He ... I think his leg is broken, or his ankle ... I don’t know. He twisted it!” A teardrop streaked down her dusty cheek.

“Okay,” Maddie said, keeping her voice impressively calm. Maddie clearly knew this kid. I stood, moved to Maddie’s side. “Where is Austin now?”

“In the woods, just past the trail up the hill,” Ella said, the tears running down both cheeks now.

“We’ll come with you,” I said. “Is he alone?” There weren’t many, but there were a few predators in these woods and I didn’t like the idea of a hurt child by himself up there.

“No,” she said. “My cousin Adam is with him.”

“Let’s go, okay?” Maddie said, taking the girl’s hand.

Ella nodded and we all turned back to the woods. We dashed together through the scattered debris that littered the forest floor. West coast forests were dry and sparse compared to the dense undergrowth that made Eastern woods almost impassible, and our only impedance was the dense clutter on the ground—these woods hadn’t seen a fire in more than four decades and were filled with tinder. We skirted around Manzanita bushes and climbed over fallen logs, our feet sliding on a carpet of dry pine needles as we climbed up the hill toward the trail.

I followed just behind Maddie and the little girl, noticing how the girl grasped Maddie’s hand tightly as we moved, and I was happy she was able to comfort her. I just hoped Austin wasn’t hurt too badly, and that we’d be able to get him home before dark. The sun was already dipping low to the tree line, sending long shadows shooting over the amber ground.

The heart-wrenching cry of a small child bounced toward us, and I heard a second little voice saying, “It’s okay, Austin. They’ll be here soon. I hear them.”

We topped the rise, huffing and gasping for breath after the steep climb at high altitude. Austin and his cousin sat on the ground, Austin’s back against a boulder and his face streaked with tears and grime. He stared at his right foot as if it was no longer his, or he expected it to do something mutinous at any moment.

“Hey buddy,” I dropped to the ground beside him. “You hurt your leg, huh?”

The question brought a fresh round of tears, and the little boy sobbed uncontrollably for a minute while I rubbed his small back.

Maddie knelt on his other side. “It’s okay, Austin. We’re gonna get you home and make it feel better, okay? Can you point to the spot that hurts?”

Austin pointed to his right ankle, his face crumpling as he looked toward a tall rock up the hillside. "I jumped and my foot didn't go right."

The rock he was pointing to was a good fifteen feet up in the air. I raised my eyebrows, thinking he was lucky he hadn't hurt himself much worse. Then I remembered that my sister and I had done similar things in our unattended moments up here.

"Well let's get you down the hill and see about some ice and maybe some cookies or something, huh?" I said. Then I leaned over and scooped the little boy into my arms. "Wanna ride on my shoulders? Get a good view and tell me which way to go to get home fastest?"

"Okay," he sniffled.

I positioned him up high on my shoulders, holding the little boy's legs near my neck and being careful not to touch his injured ankle. "Which way, captain?" I asked.

Ella and Adam looked relieved, and both followed as Austin directed Maddie and I down the hill and back toward the village. I made a few adjustments to the course the boy set to get us back in the most expeditious fashion, explaining my changes in direction to Austin and trying to keep his mind off his leg.

"Captain, I think I saw some bandits off that way, let's dodge around this tree here." I tried to make our quick trip home into a game, and by the time we arrived at the Peters' little green cabin, Austin was laughing and smiling as I brought him gently back down to the ground.

A man I'd never met stood in the street in front of the cabin Austin indicated, with a whistle in his hand. "I was just about to call you kids home," he said, slipping the whistle into his pocket. His eyes narrowed as he took in Austin at my side. "What's going on?"

"Ella came to get me, Mr. Peters," Maddie explained, stepping forward. "Austin twisted his ankle up on the hill near the trail. It was lucky Connor was right there, I wouldn't have been able to carry Austin all this way."

"Austin navigated all the way back here," I said, ignoring the suspicious look that Mr. Peters had trained on me. "And Adam did a great job looking out for Austin while Ella came for help. You've got some smart kids here, sir."

The suspicion shifted slightly with the compliment, and Mr. Peters took Austin's hand. "Thanks," he said. "We do. We know it."

Ella smiled up at us and then threw her arms around my waist. "Thanks, Mr. Connor," she said. Maddie's eyes glowed as she watched this, and a shy smile crept across her soft lips.

"Thank you both," Mr. Peters said. "We appreciate you looking out for the kids."

"Any time," I said. "If I can ever help with anything else, let me know."

"I hope you feel better, Austin," Maddie said. She grinned at the little guy, who seemed comfortable enough now. I doubted it was anything too serious.

"Thanks again, to both of you," Mr. Peters said. He shook my hand, and we turned away, heading back around the corner toward the trailer.

For a few minutes, we strolled in silence, the low light of early evening glowing around us. After a moment, Maddie turned to me. "You're pretty good with kids."

"That surprises you?" I'd always been better with kids than adults. I felt they were kind of like animals—they could sense intention.

"No," She said. "I don't know. I'm still trying to figure you out."

"Well, when you do, let me know," I said. "I've been working on it for years. And I think the cops might be interested in whatever you come up with, too." I couldn't help that last part.

"They've been around again?"

"I think we're developing a pretty serious relationship. They come over almost every day now." They'd interrupted my writing frenzy the day before, something I was still unhappy about. I'm sure my surly attitude hadn't helped their suspicions of me.

"What are they looking for?" Maddie asked, her question tentative, like she wasn't sure how far she could push.

"Amanda Terry, I suppose." I was glad we were going to actually talk about it.

"Did they search your house? Bring a warrant and everything?"

"Even dug through my underwear drawer," I said, remembering how violated

I'd felt as I'd watched them. "She's not in there, if you were wondering." They had almost taken my laptop, but a call to my lawyer had actually been effective at stopping that. This time at least.

Maddie laughed lightly, the sound easing some of the tension accumulating between us.

"I guess they got some tip off that I've got a dungeon in the cabin. Where I keep my victims and whatnot." Maddie stifled another laugh, as if she wasn't sure exactly what to make of that statement. I went on. "They've been reading too many of my books, I think."

"So what do you think happened to her?"

"Amanda?"

"Yes."

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck and squinted down at her, to see her better in the quickly fading light. I sighed. "I haven't the first idea. She's a nice girl. I hope she's all right. I don't trust her folks."

I really hadn't talked to anyone about the strange relationship I'd sensed between Amanda and her parents, about the tension I felt there, the pressure. The cops hadn't asked—they were too busy trying to blame me—but I needed to say something, I knew. Especially with her missing. The thing was, I didn't think she was in danger.

Maddie's voice sounded surprised. "Her parents? Really?"

I quickly tried to backtrack. "Never mind." I hated rumors. I hated the power we had to malign one another with words and I didn't want to do it. It had certainly been done enough to me. I knew better. "I shouldn't have said anything about it."

"I won't say anything to anyone," she said. "I shouldn't have asked you about it at all. I'm sorry."

We arrived at the top of the hill, where my car was parked. "It's fine, Maddie. You're curious. You have every right to be. And I don't want you to be worried about ... well, about the obvious issues that you might be worrying about."

"I'm not *that* worried," she said, but I could hear the truth in her voice. She

didn't know what to make of me, and I couldn't blame her.

I felt resignation and sadness as I said, "Of course you are."

We stood still for a moment, facing each other. I wanted to step closer to her, maybe dare myself to lean in and put my arms around her. But as compelled as I was to move closer, I took a step back instead. I needed to give her space, let her decide what to think about me. The last thing I wanted was to give her any reason to believe the things she heard about me.

"I'll call you soon," I said.

"Okay," she said, her voice a breathy whisper that sent a little tingle up my spine. "That'd be good."

"Talk to you later." I climbed into my car, and Maddie lifted a hand as she walked up to her trailer.

I hoped she didn't really believe I was a stalker or a murderer, and every cell in my body was praying that she'd have dinner with me if I called.

Maddie

CHAPTER 15

Work was becoming slower by the day, with fewer tourists dropping through the diner as the summer waned and evenings turned brisk. The bulk of our clientele now were police investigators, who were asking more and more questions in their search for the still-missing teenager. I understood, from local gossip and from the fact that Connor was not in custody, that they had very little to go on in terms of linking him to her disappearance. But since the cops weren't sharing and Connor hadn't made any kind of public statement, the only information we had were the increasingly incredible stories put out through the town gossip mill and through the tabloids.

Miranda and I practically fought over every new customer, both of us suffering from a significant reduction in tips compared to what we'd enjoyed when the season was in full swing. I didn't want to wait on the detectives, though. I didn't want an order of pancakes to evolve into a discussion of Connor Charles. It wasn't that I felt guilty, exactly. But I did feel something. And until I could define it for myself, I hoped they wouldn't decide to ask me any questions about Connor.

"You look worried," Miranda breathed as she paused next to me behind the counter. I'd been staring absently at the detectives.

"No." I shook my head and tried to smile, banishing dueling concerns over Cam and Connor. What in the world could my brother be coming all the way up here to say? And was going on any kind of date with Connor really a good idea?

I'd spent five years believing myself to be someone who turned out to be only a figment of Jack's imagination. How could a person date if she didn't know who she was supposed to be or who she was? "I'm a little distracted."

She raised an eyebrow, but I wasn't about to share. "Divorce stuff," I told her, and she sighed, her eyes closing in a knowing way. I wasn't lying, that really did sum it all up, didn't it?

I took my break at the library next to the post office. There was a public terminal there with Photoshop installed, and I'd been dying to get a look at the shots I'd taken over the past few weeks since I'd picked the camera up again.

I didn't have high hopes. I hadn't taken photos in at least a full year, and my innate sense of framing and light was probably rusty. Like anything else, mastering a camera took dedicated practice. Getting back into it was hard. Not to mention every time I picked up the camera I heard Jack's stupid accented voice challenging my belief that I had any talent. But I'd had enough of listening to Jack.

I slipped into the cool quiet of the library, waving to Christine the librarian and then sliding into the seat at a station. I plugged the card reader into the USB port and started scanning through the photos I'd captured since I'd been brave enough to shoot again.

The mountain scenery made a glorious subject, and I had plenty of inspiring sunsets showing the retiring sun draping its final rays over treetops and stretching out beneath shimmering clouds. But the best photos I had captured were of Connor in his living room in front of the fire. I'd seen them on the tiny camera screen, but as they appeared on the screen in front of me, I couldn't help staring in awe. The fire lit his hair in so many shades of red and gold I wondered why everyone didn't wish for red hair. His skin shone in the cast of the flames, and the light created shadows that emphasized the jawline I remembered wishing to run my fingers over during our brief time together. He looked pensive, dark, and as sexy as any man I'd ever seen.

Scanning through the photos made my stomach tighten, and desire lit inside me—foreign and unfamiliar, like a friend I'd had years ago suddenly popping around to see me. The rush of sensations made it hard to remember that of all the

eligible men in the world, Connor was probably not among the top choices when ranked by reliability, trustworthiness, or transparency. I knew very little about him, and the police were every bit as interested in him as I was. Still, the very sight of him on the monitor did something to me, and the freedom to stare at him unabashed as he looked back at me from the screen was a pleasure I reveled in for far too long.

“He’s not a bad looking chap,” drawled a familiar Scottish brogue that turned my stomach.

I shut down the photo-editing program and snatched my card file from the USB port, spinning around to face Jack. “What the hell are you doing here now?”

“Good to see you too, love.”

“Stop calling me that!” I stood, ushering Jack from the library as Christine watched with open interest.

“Seriously, what are you doing up here?” I stood facing him on the sidewalk outside the library.

“Cops called about your boyfriend. Told them I’d come up and see what all the fuss was about.”

“What? Why would they call you?” Jack’s only link to Kings Grove was me. And we were definitely not linked now.

“My name’s still on the deed for the house,” he said. “I guess they’re looking to talk to anyone with any connection to pretty much anything.”

My mind was spinning. “Your name is still on the deed?” I repeated. “Why would that be true?”

“Just a minor oversight, love. I’ll have it handled.”

I shook my head. I’d let Jack handle things for way too long. “I’ll add it to the long list of things to speak to my lawyer about. How did you know where to find me?”

“Cute blond in the diner. What’s her name?”

“None of your business,” I hissed.

“An unfortunate moniker,” he said, his smile revealing the perfect teeth that I was considering punching my fist into.

“Mads,” A gruff familiar voice came from behind me and I turned. Frank had wandered across the street while I’d been talking to Jack. “Everything okay here?” I felt a rush of affection to the older man. It was nice to know he was looking out for me.

I nodded. “It’s fine, Frank. Thanks. Jack was just leaving.”

Frank looked intimidating, even with his apron still tied around his waist. He was pulling a cigarette from a pack as he leaned somewhat menacingly toward Jack and then turned to me. “Better head back in before my better half blows a gasket. Your break ended fifteen minutes ago.”

“Oh crap,” I turned on my heel and took a step away. “Thanks, Frank.”

“Good photo, love,” Jack called. “Remember what we talked about.”

Jack had spent more time in Kings Grove since we’d been divorced than he ever had when we’d been married. I wondered if I could be reimbursed somehow for all the irritation he’d caused me since I’d been legally unleashed from his side.

MY CELL PHONE rang as I pulled up to the trailer that evening after work. It was a Chicago area code and a number I didn’t recognize. My mind immediately jumped to my brother Cameron, but I knew he had a Los Angeles phone number. I hadn’t exactly kept up with him over the last three years, but I knew from Jess—who did call and email now and then, even though we’d never met in person—that he had not made a cross-country move to Chicago.

My brain shifted as the phone rang again and I stared at it. Hadn’t Connor said he was from Chicago?

I couldn’t help the quick scrabble I made to answer, excitement giving me sudden chills. “Hello?”

“Hi Maddie.” Connor’s rich deep voice solidified the goose bumps that had crept over my skin.

A strange mixture of excitement and muted fear rushed through me as I sat in the car pressing the phone to my ear. I realized I was smiling. “Hi.”

“Is this a good time?”

“Right now?” *He wanted to go on our date right now?*

“Right. Yes. Is now a good time to talk?”

“Oh. Talk.” *I am an idiot.* “Yes, it’s fine.”

“I think that’s what these phone contraptions are designed for.” I could hear him smiling.

“That’s my understanding, too.” I was definitely an idiot.

“Excellent. Glad that’s settled.”

I might have actually giggled. My nerves were jangling and my brain felt like butterscotch pudding.

“So,” he said slowly. “Would you like to come over for dinner? Maybe the day after tomorrow?”

“Dinner at your house?”

“I’m not very comfortable in town at this point.” His voice had shifted from playful to frank and low. “Plus, I thought you might want a break from the diner. And maybe from your trailer.”

“I do. Good point.” I wondered what in the world we would eat. It wasn’t like we could order in. Not that it really mattered. I wouldn’t even notice the food if I sat across a table from Connor, I’d be too distracted by his jaw, his hair, those searching eyes. Was he planning to cook, though? I had heard of men who could cook, but I’d never known one besides Frank at the diner. “Sure, uh, should I bring something?”

“Wine?” he sounded uncertain. “I mean, I have some here. And you don’t really have to bring anything. But if you wanted to bring something.”

“I can do that. Um ...” My mind was still churning. Was I saying yes to this date? My body suggested that yes would be a good answer, and since my mind was stuck, my tongue forged ahead. “What time?”

“Six?”

“Okay.” I was still smiling. I couldn’t help it.

“See you then.” He sounded relieved, and I was pretty sure I could still hear a smile in his voice.

“Good night.” I ended the call and got out of the car.

I decided to admit to myself that I was more intrigued by Connor than I was afraid of him. And I wanted to get to know him better.

ADELE CALLED the next morning as I was getting ready for work to tell me that she didn't need me to come in. I peered out the window. Blue sky, light breeze. Winter was not here yet. But there weren't many visitors in the park and Adele and Frank were spending the day cooking for the search parties who'd been out combing the woods for Amanda Terry. Though the locals had organized and been searching the village and residential areas, we'd been advised to leave the more rugged areas of the park and backcountry to the officials, who were running search operations with helicopters, drones, and vehicles where the terrain allowed.

I had breakfast outside, feeling the warmth of the sun on my back and looking up toward the towering trees. I hoped Amanda was safe somewhere out there. Though the woods were a comfort to me, I wouldn't survive long alone and lost within them. I didn't know where Amanda was, but the scuttlebutt at the diner indicated that the police weren't certain about anything. Though they couldn't locate her, there were no signs of a break in or a struggle, and nothing in recent weeks beyond the contested relationship with Connor that might suggest she'd run away. Her parents continued to point the finger directly at Connor, but the more I got to know him, the harder it was to imagine he would ever hurt anyone, let alone a teenaged girl.

I was going to see Connor tomorrow. At his house. My body tensed at the memory of the last time I'd been at his house. When I closed my eyes, I could see the way his body moved as he'd walked across the room, and how easily he'd hopped over logs and navigated the woods with Austin on his shoulders. I could even imagine how it might feel to press myself into his arms, run a finger across those glorious lips.

But I shouldn't let my mind go there. That was definitely not the point of tomorrow night, I told myself. The point was to have a nice dinner with an

attractive man, to get a momentary respite from the overwhelming crapstorm that my life had become. The point was to pretend, for a little while, that I was not a woman on the verge of becoming destitute and living in a trailer for the rest of my life, and to try not to envision Connor as a potential stalker or kidnapper.

I had decided that Connor was just an unfortunate tabloid target, that the thing with Amanda was some kind of strange misunderstanding, and that he was just a normal guy. A normal guy who wrote really creepy books. And who'd had a few run-ins with people around town.

I'd seen nothing to suggest that I should actually be worried, but I texted Miranda about my plans just in case, asking her to text me a couple times and send the police if I didn't answer. Just in case. After a few minutes, her shocked replies became less shocked, and she agreed.

Until tomorrow evening, distraction would be the goal. Since I didn't have to go to work, I decided to go for a hike instead. I'd just committed to this plan and gone inside when I heard the crunch of wheels on the dusty road outside. An unfamiliar car rested behind mine, but the men who climbed out of it and stood squinting at my half-built house and trailer were familiar enough.

I pulled my hair back and struggled into some jeans before the knock came at the door.

"Hi." I stood looking at two police detectives on the other side of the screen.

"Mrs. Douglas? Do you have a few moments to speak with us?" The detective held a badge up against the screen for me to see.

"It's Turner now," I said, the correction coming as a reflex. I wanted nothing to do with Jack—not his person, not his name. I had no doubt that everything legal that pertained to the land I was standing on still said "Douglas," and I needed to deal with that right away.

"Sorry, uh, Ms. Turner." The emphasis on the 'Ms' was almost a question.

"Divorced," I said, stepping out the door. "We can talk out here." I pointed to the table.

"Thanks." Both men sat stiffly at the picnic table. "I'm Detective Rawley. This is Jensen. We wanted to ask you a few questions about Connor Charles."

I tried to keep my face passive. I had wondered if I'd have to talk to the

detectives eventually. “All right,” I said.

“Do you know him?” Rawley asked, a pencil poised over a black moleskin notebook.

“I’ve met him a couple times,” I told them. “I don’t know him well.” I was almost shaking with nerves, and couldn’t figure out why. Anytime an authority figure questioned me about something, I felt immediately guilty. It had made grade school particularly tough.

They both nodded. “Can you describe your first meeting with him?”

“Sure. He came up here. He was interested in buying the house.” I pointed at the skeleton framed next to us. Jensen’s attention seemed to stay focused on the monstrous ridiculousness of it while Rawley nodded again and turned back to me.

“Is he going to buy it?”

“No.”

“Is it still for sale?”

“Are you in the market?” I smiled.

“No. Just curious.”

“I’d consider selling,” I told him.

“You’re not going to finish building it?”

“I thought you were going to ask about Connor Charles.”

He nodded again. Rawley’s thing seemed to be the knowing nod. It was already getting old. “So you didn’t sell him the house. But you met him again at some point?”

“I, uh ... I went to his house. To talk about potentially selling.”

“When was this?”

“Last week,” I said.

“And again he did not want to buy?”

“Right.”

“Were you inside the house?” Jensen was watching me again. He had a hooked nose and wire glasses. He appeared to be the insightful observer of the pair.

“For a little while.”

“And what was Mr. Charles like during this time?”

“He was polite.”

“Was he receptive to your request for him to pose for photos?”

My eyes snapped to his. “What?”

“When he posed for you. Did he know you were taking his picture?”

I nodded. “I always carry my camera. I’m a photographer.”

“Anything published anywhere we would have seen?” Jensen was squinting at me now.

“Doubtful,” I said, my mind still stuck on the fact that they knew about the photo. “Weddings and portraits mostly. And not for a while.”

“So Mr. Charles was calm and polite, and he posed willingly for photos.”

“Right. Um, can I ask how you knew I took a photo?”

Jensen smiled and spoke for the first time since sitting down. “You can ask.”

“But you won’t tell me.”

He smiled again. I decided I liked it better when Jensen didn’t smile.

“Did Mr. Charles do anything to frighten you? Did he threaten you? Touch you?”

I shook my head.

“You work at the diner, correct?”

I nodded, stealing a move from Jensen’s book.

“Do you know Amanda Terry?”

“No, I don’t know her. I’ve seen her in the diner. But I’ve never talked to her.”

“Ever see the two of them together?”

“Never.”

The officers looked at each other, passing some kind of knowledge. “Very good. Just a couple more questions, then.” Jensen stared at his notebook for a minute and then fixed me with a critical gaze. “What is the nature of your relationship with Mr. Charles?”

That was the million-dollar question right there. “I guess we’re acquaintances.”

“A few folks around the village have mentioned seeing you together.”

“Mr. Peters. The Trenches.” I was doing a mental inventory of people who might know I’d been seeing a bit of Connor, and the names popped out of my mouth.

“Right. And your ex-husband, too.”

My head snapped up. “What? Sorry?”

“Mr. Douglas noted that you’d moved on from your marriage, that you’re dating Mr. Charles.”

“Not that it’s any of his business at all, but that is false,” I told them. “We have never had anything that could be construed as a date.” Would Jack’s evil influence never end?

“Okay, that’s fine.” Jensen wrote something down while Rawley nodded some more. “Well, I hope we’ll be welcome to return should we have further questions for you, Mrs. Douglas.”

“Turner.”

“Right. And here’s my number if you think of anything else we might need to know.” He handed me a small white card.

I raised an eyebrow as I took it. I doubted I’d be thinking of anything else.

They both nodded this time, and rose to leave.

As I watched the dark car pull back down the hill I felt strangely violated. Their questions had been benign enough, but I sensed some deeper agenda. Did they know I was going to have dinner with Connor? Would it matter in any way? How would that affect his case, I wondered.

More concerning, how did they know that I’d taken photos of him? Unless ... my mind went back to Jack, seeing the picture over my shoulder. No doubt he was salivating, hoping I’d change my mind and decide to hang Connor out to dry by selling that photo to whatever dirt-digging friend he had in LA. I shook my head, annoyed that Jack had never known me well enough to understand that I couldn’t do that. Consciously deciding to hurt someone in order to further my own interests wasn’t in my nature. Or if it was, I’d have to be really damned desperate to do it. And I might have been desperate, but I wasn’t that desperate.

I returned to the trailer, laced up my boots and grabbed my camera bag to

head out for a hike.

Connor

CHAPTER 16

Maddie was going to have dinner with me. I had to repeat it to myself a few times until I actually believed it.

Just the knowledge of her acceptance had broken something loose inside me, and some of the darkness that had hung over everything in my life for so long seemed to dissipate. I felt myself changing, too. The solitude I'd craved and preserved at the expense of everything else wasn't attractive to me now. I wanted something else—some kind of connection I'd never sought before. I wanted to be known, and to know someone else. It was an uncomfortable realization, but it was welcome, in a way. For years I'd wondered if there was something broken in me, something that made me different in some fundamental way from everyone else. Why didn't I want the same things they did? Why did I find happiness in silence and solitude? Why did I prefer fictional company to that of actual people?

Maybe I just hadn't met the right people.

But if Maddie was coming for dinner, I needed to take care of a couple things. For one thing, I'd need to actually be prepared to make a meal, which meant venturing to the grocery store in town. I was not the town's most celebrated citizen at this point, and I wasn't eager for the exposure, so I set out as soon as the store had opened for the day. The place was quiet, if not empty, and I didn't run into anyone I knew.

I checked out, feeling happier than I had in a long time, and loaded the

groceries into my car, pleased to have been left alone. There were a few police cruisers in the parking lot, and the distant drone of a helicopter told me they were still searching the back hills for Amanda. I shook my head as I got into the car, wondering if my plan to be as cooperative as possible and otherwise stay uninvolved was the right one. My agent had suggested I needed to be seen visibly helping with the search, but the police had asked me to stay away from the girl's family. I'd given the detectives every bit of information I had, had gotten in touch immediately when anything new popped up that they might have interest in, and I had decided to put my faith in the law.

But that did little to lessen the belief of everyone in Kings Grove that I was a dangerous man. And I knew that what they'd seen of my sister only added fuel to the fire, but that was no one's business but my own. And it was business I planned to finish today.

With the assurance that Maddie was coming to dinner, and the belief that maybe life was finally turning a corner for me, I finally felt capable of doing what I needed to do for Cathy.

I put the groceries away and packed up my hiking supplies, taking the black bag that held her urn and tucking it into my pack. It was big and awkward, but I didn't mind. This was the last time I'd have a chance to carry my little sister, morbid as that thought was, and the hard firm pressure of her urn against my back reminded me we were together this last time.

The Ridge Line trail was one of her favorite spots in the park, so I hiked it as the sun burned toward midday. I did my best to take in the sweeping views of the Great Western Divide and the endless march of pine and granite down into Kings Canyon with the appreciation I knew my sister had always felt for these things, and by the time I'd reached the stacked rocks at the side of the trail, the place she'd told me to go, I felt ready.

I'd been here once before and nearly completed the job, but John Trench had wandered by, and I'd ended up screaming at him in my grief. After that I hadn't been able to leave her there, having destroyed any chance at a peaceful atmosphere with my outburst and certainly degrading John's opinion of me. But today, with the sun shining over the peaceful Sierra, with a strength in my heart I

hadn't felt in a long time, I knew I could do what my sister needed. What she deserved.

I dug a wide deep hole, laughing to myself wryly as I remembered the conversation we'd had just before the end. I'd told her that the whole point of becoming ash was that you could be scattered in your favorite place, but she'd shaken her head vehemently.

"I want to be in one piece," she'd said. "In the beautiful vessel I chose, in the beautiful spot I chose."

I'd looked at the urn, which had sat on the mantel in the house for weeks before it was finally applied to its morbid purpose. "I'll do whatever you want, Cath."

And this was what she'd wanted. As I covered over the urn with the dark rich mountain dirt, I felt tears slip down my cheeks at the finality of the act. And though leaving my sister here atop this ridge meant she was really truly gone, I was able to do it because it was the first time since she'd died that I actually didn't feel alone.

I covered the hole, whispered a solemn goodbye to my little sister and walked quietly home, my heart and mind thankfully silent.

Maddie

CHAPTER 17

Thanks to the police interruption, I got a later start on my hike than I'd intended, and decided to take the Ridge Line trail to the top of the ridge instead of heading out in the car to some more distant trailhead.

The sun shone brightly above, but beneath the canopy of tree branches, it was shadowed and relatively cool. I picked my way up to where the trail lay on the hillside and then enjoyed following the dusty groove at a brisk pace up the side of the mountain. Living at six thousand feet might not have ever been my ideal, but it had definitely improved my cardiovascular fitness. I was only a tiny bit out of breath after hiking at a steady pace for the better part of an hour.

I paused at different points to capture things along the way with my camera. There wasn't much wildlife out, which surprised me. Usually, on a weekday when there were fewer people up and down the trails, one could find deer, martens, or even the occasional bear crossing the trail. I wasn't eager to bump into a bear, but it might be worth it for the photos.

Just as I had that thought near the top of the tree line, I heard a scraping noise off the side of the trail. I wondered if it was a bear, and briefly considered following John Trench's example and seeking it out. I stood still and listened, and the scratching noise continued, then stopped. It began again, and then stopped again. I stood long enough to realize that there was a rhythm to it. This was not a bear. And there was a slightly metallic sound to the noise, a grating of metal and stone. If it wasn't a bear, what in the world was it?

My feet decided to find out before my mind had consciously joined in the plan. I walked softly through the matted pine needles and sticks littering the ground, stopping each time I broke a twig, sending a crackling noise ricocheting through the trees.

I crept through the shadows, approaching the noise, and almost gave myself away when I spotted a familiar blazing auburn head in front of me. Connor stood next to a shallow hole, shirtless, his muscled torso glistening with sweat in the sunlight. His back was to me, and I'd been quiet enough that he hadn't turned to see what or who might be approaching.

John Trench's story came back to me, and I wondered if Connor would shout at me if he saw me. I knelt down low, hoping if he turned this way, he'd be looking at eye level and not at the base of the big tree only ten feet or so behind him.

There was a bulky bag next to the hole he was digging, black and awkwardly shaped. Fear spiked through me. Was this where he buried the women? Was Amanda Terry in that bag?

Connor put the shovel down briefly and picked up a bottle of water. He stood tall and leaned his head back, drinking, and I couldn't help but marvel at the strength evident in the body that stood before me. Hard planes of muscle stretched down the length of his back, making a hard ridge on either side of his spine. My eyes were drawn to the waistband of his pants, where they sat low against that solid back. There wasn't a part of him that didn't look strong. And though I found him incredibly sexy, as I crouched in the cover of the forest watching him dig a secret hole, I realized that all that power was also frightening.

He picked the shovel up again and resumed digging. The hole didn't look like I imagined a grave would. It wasn't long and narrow. It was more of a circle. But then again, if he was burying Amanda, she might be in pieces. She definitely wasn't in a coffin. My stomach turned as I had that thought. He probably didn't need a traditional grave-shaped hole. I shook my head slowly, amazed by the direction my thinking had suddenly taken. Fear began to bubble inside me. What if he caught me here?

I cowered in the shadow and instinct kicked in. I quietly raised my camera to my eye, snapping a couple quick shots before backing very slowly away. The farther I got from Connor, the more terrified I became at the implications of what I'd just seen. He was at least a quarter-mile off the trail, and he'd certainly believed, as I had, that he'd be one of the only people up here today.

I skittered back onto the trail and hustled back down the mountain, not wanting him to catch up with me on the way back down. I practically sprinted to my trailer from the bottom of the trail, in a near panic. Could it really be true, then? He was killing those women and then burying them right up here off the trail? Who did that? Psychopathic murdering horror novelists, I guessed.

If I'd had trouble finding any fear of Connor before, I didn't have trouble now. I sat on the edge of the bed in my trailer and let my mind run over all the clues I'd had about what this man really was. The warnings in town could have been enough. Why hadn't I listened to people? I liked to think I was open-minded, but perhaps I was actually just dense. The Trenches warned me off and I didn't listen. I plodded forward, in oblivious pursuit of what? Some kind of fanciful relationship with a man whom I'd perceived as vulnerable and kind?

I dropped the camera to my side and curled up on the bed, letting my mind run through the many horrible things that could have happened as a result of my own stupidity. If I thought I had problems now, they paled in comparison to the kind of problems I might have had if Connor had kidnapped me ... or so much worse.

I squeezed my eyes shut as my mind turned to the girl from town, Amanda. Had I just witnessed her burial in an unmarked grave? What had he done to her first? I felt sick thinking about it. Sick and unsafe and horrible.

There was no question I needed to call the police and tell them what I'd seen. And I would. I just needed a few more minutes to process everything. I needed to give my mind time to shift from the view of Connor I'd had previously to the one that was unquestionably the correct view. He was a dangerous sociopath. A murderer.

I really knew how to pick men.

I picked up my phone after I found the card Officer Jensen had handed me.

“Hello?”

“Officer Jensen? It’s Maddie Turner.”

“Ms. Turner. How can I help you?”

“I saw something today. I saw Connor. I took some photos. I need to see you.” My voice was racing to match my whirling mind.

“We can come up to your, er, house if you like.”

“Okay. Yes. Please.”

“We’ll be there as soon as we can. Half hour?”

“Okay.”

“You sound upset. Do you believe yourself to be in danger, Ms. Turner?”

Did I? No. Connor hadn’t seen me. For all he knew, I was eagerly anticipating our dinner tomorrow night. “No, I’m fine.”

“Okay. See you in a bit.”

I scanned the woods outside my trailer, pacing near the windows until the police arrived. When their car pulled up to park next to my own, I felt a sense of terrible finality sinking in. This was it. I had the evidence that would seal Connor’s fate.

This time, the officers came inside, squeezing themselves around the small table next to my kitchen. I explained what I’d been doing this afternoon, what I’d seen.

“You did the right thing calling us.” Jensen was trying to be reassuring. Rawley nodded. “These pictures are useful, too,” he said, scanning them on the small screen on the back of my camera. “I hope you didn’t put yourself at risk.”

“He didn’t see me.”

Jensen was quiet, and I felt a need to know what the plan was. What would happen now?

“What will you do?” I asked.

Jensen cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes, as if trying to decide whether he should tell me anything. “We’ll go see what’s buried up there.” Simple. Of course. “First thing. And if it’s what we think it might be, we’ll make the arrest and get this thing put to bed.”

I nodded. Right. Make the arrest. It was ludicrous, but I was relieved to know

that they'd probably arrest him by tomorrow, and that I wouldn't need to call to cancel our date. It'd be cancelled by default when they took him to prison. *For murder.*

I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

"Will you let me know?" I tried to think of a reason why they would. "Just so I can, you know, get closure?"

The officers looked at each other and seemed to pass some kind of information. I wondered momentarily if Rawley ever spoke.

"That's pretty non-standard," Jensen said. "But if we make an arrest I'll call you. And I'll call you if we don't."

"Thank you," I said.

"We need the memory card from the camera," he said, holding it out to me to remove.

I ejected it. I'd put in a new one before my hike, so there wasn't much on it besides trees and animals. And the evidence that would put Connor Charles in prison. "You won't have to tell him about the photographs, will you? That I took them?"

"No," Jensen said. "But you don't need to worry, either. We'll make sure you're safe."

"Okay." My voice was small and I suddenly felt exhausted.

The officers left, and sadness sank down over me, turning my feet to lead and my heart to stone. I hoped I'd done the right thing.

Connor

CHAPTER 18

When I returned home after burying my sister, I was in a quiet mood. I poured a glass of scotch and took it out onto the back deck to think. I wanted to drink to her memory, to her energy.

“Not everything needs a drink to commemorate it.” I could practically hear her voice, and I let myself pretend she was sitting there next to me, at my side, as she had been for so many years.

“Every event in our lives should be marked and appreciated in some way,” I said aloud. “And saying goodbye to you—really saying goodbye ... That is something I want to make sure to respect.”

The ghost at my side remained silent after that, and I let my mind roam the vast store of memories I had of us. She’d been only eighteen months younger than I was, and because of the way our lives had turned out, we’d been inseparable. The only real time we’d been apart had been during the first year I went to college, but she’d joined me there just a year later, and our constancy had gone on. We were siblings, but we were like two sides of a coin, best friends. While other siblings fought, we were always of one mind. We didn’t always get along, but maybe we realized that with so many things set against us in the world, we needed each other.

Cathy’s death had been awful, and I’d felt like my soul was literally ripped in half. Maybe it was only beginning to mend.

“I miss you, little sister,” I told her, swallowing down the rest of my scotch.

I didn't write that night. My sister's spirit seemed to linger around the house, and I found myself content just to sit with her, to drink a little more than I probably should.

When the police came to the door, I was tipsy, which certainly didn't help matters. But I was also truthful, and as much as I hated the thought of them disturbing Cathy just when I'd finally put her to rest, I knew it would be done, and what I wanted played very little part in anything.

"There was an eyewitness, Mr. Charles," one of the detectives said. "Who took photographs of you burying something."

My mind flew to Maddie, but then ratcheted back. Every tourist who hiked up there had a camera. It could have been anyone. And what had they taken photos of exactly? A grown man crying over a pile of dirt?

"You'll do what you need to do. You'll find I'm telling the truth. If you want me to, I'll take you up there myself."

"No need," they'd said.

And I'd watched the police car leave my property and sent a silent apology to Cathy. "It'll all be over soon," I promised her. "And then we can both rest."

Maddie

CHAPTER 19

The next morning I stayed in my bed long after the sun had pushed its exploring fingers through the louvered blinds in the front room of the trailer, covering the kitchen and couch in lines of yellow light. I stayed there until the phone rang next to me, displaying Connor's name. I stayed in bed until the phone rang a second time, a half hour later. Officer Jensen. This time I sat up and answered it.

"Ms. Turner?"

"Yes, hello."

"Just wanted to thank you for your information, and let you know that it turned out to be a false lead. I'll leave your photo card for you at the post office."

I sat up straighter. "What?"

"He was burying something, but not what we thought. There's not enough here to make an arrest."

I shook my head slowly, this information settling around me like dust. "What was he burying?"

Jensen paused, obviously considering how much to tell me. "An urn."

"An urn? Like with ashes?" That was still creepy.

"Not a match for the missing girl, if you're wondering." He paused. "We were."

I wondered how they'd figured that out so quickly, but realized they might have gone up and dug soon after we spoke. I imagined a team of police

investigators with yellow tape, dark coats and flashlights, swarming up the side of my mountain. I guessed they could have had some kind of mobile forensics lab.

“Oh. Yes, okay. Thank you.” I hung up. What kind of urn was Connor burying, then? Whose ashes were in it? And what was I supposed to do now, go on a date with him as if nothing had happened?

I puttered around the trailer, trying to let my mind settle naturally on some new image of Connor. He’d moved from sexy and intriguing to terrifying and sociopathic over the course of just a few minutes yesterday when I’d discovered him digging off the trail. Now I wasn’t sure what to think. When I analyzed the facts as I understood them, I realized that not much had changed since he’d asked me out. There was no proof of him having done anything wrong, and no real reason why he would be any more dangerous to me now than he was the day before.

As the hours edged away, I decided that though I was confused, I was also relieved. I hadn’t wanted him to be a bad guy—part of what had been so hard yesterday had been the difficulty I’d had getting myself to fully accept that he was capable of murder. I wasn’t sure I’d gotten there at all. And so when it came time to either call him to cancel or take a shower and get ready for dinner, I still hadn’t decided what to do.

I picked up the phone, dialing Connor’s number.

“Maddie.” He sounded happy when he picked up the phone.

“Hey,” I said slowly. My voice was thin and hesitant.

“Uh-oh. What’s wrong?”

“I’m not feeling great. I don’t know if I can do dinner.” Why hadn’t I just said I couldn’t? Why did I leave the door open? “I mean, I can’t.”

“Oh.” Disappointment made his voice lower and my heart sunk a bit. “I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do? Chicken soup or something?”

Guilt bubbled up in me over the sincerity in his voice. “No, I ...” I dropped my head into my hand. What the hell was I doing? “I’m just ...”

“You’re not sick, are you?” His voice was flat, emotionless.

I cringed. “No. Not really.”

“What happened?”

Could I tell him? I shook my head. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I can trust my instincts anymore. I’ve been so confused about everything.”

“About me, you mean.”

“About a lot of things. I’m so sorry. I’m kind of a mess.”

“No,” he said softly. “You’re not a mess. You’re smart. You’re doing exactly what I’d advise my sister to do. You don’t really know me and you have no reason to trust me.”

“Would your sister listen to you?”

“Probably not,” he chuckled. “But you have to do what makes sense to you. Maddie, I don’t want you to be scared. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. Maybe we should wait until everything blows over.”

“Maybe,” I said, feeling my mind rotating again. “I’m sorry. I’m a hot mess. I’m waffling and confused ...”

“Well how about this,” he said. “I’m cooking either way. I’ll make enough for two people and you are welcome to come at any time if you change your mind. And if it doesn’t work out tonight, then I would love to have you over another time. No pressure at all.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling awkward and socially incompetent.

“If I don’t see you, have a good night, Maddie.”

“You too.” I hung up and lay back on my bed. What the hell was wrong with me?

After replaying the phone call in my mind several times, I found myself standing under a spray of hot water, contemplating what I would wear.

Connor wasn’t a killer, and I had no real reason to believe he was a stalker or a sociopath, or anything other than what he had told me he was. That said, there was no way I was going to go up there without getting some actual answers from him. I was exhausted by the circles my mind had been forced to execute in the past few days.

I put on a bit more makeup than I usually wore and chose a bottle of wine that Jack had sent up before I’d made that fateful trip back to San Diego to “meet” Annalise. It was some Napa cult wine that Jack had gushed about. It

seemed like maybe Connor would appreciate it, and I had said I'd bring the wine. I texted Miranda to remind her to check in, and then tucked my phone into my jeans and left.

Despite my lingering doubts, I was looking forward to spending time with Connor. I hadn't really seen him since we'd carried Austin down the hill. It was hard to believe I'd turned that caring and gentle guy, who'd taken the fear from a little boy, into a monster in my mind so easily.

The bottom line was that while I really didn't know much about Connor Charles, he was as intriguing as any man I'd ever met.

I knocked on the door and waited. It was silent inside, and for a moment I wondered if maybe Connor had gone off somewhere. But his Land Rover sat outside, and lights glowed against the meadow beyond the rock that cradled the house. After a bit of scrabbling noise from inside, the door pulled inward, and Connor stood grinning at me.

"You're here." There was surprise in his voice, and the polished and glimmering fire god had been replaced by a scruffier version. Connor wore flannel pajama bottoms, a fraying grey T-shirt, and a backwards cap covering his fiery locks. His face was unshaven, and the stubble was far less groomed than I was used to.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, realizing he'd definitely not planned on me coming. "I changed my mind. Again."

He grinned. "That's great! Come in." He waved me in. "I'm so sorry I'm not really dressed. I didn't think you'd actually show, but I'm really glad to see you."

I followed him into the open space of his living room, the fire perpetually glowing in the huge fireplace. "Maybe this isn't a good time?"

"It is, it's a great time. I just got to writing again. I've been totally incapable for so long, and finally lately something got kicked loose. I haven't felt it in so long I didn't want to stop."

I held forth the wine bottle and he took it, his eyes never leaving my face.

"You look great. Can I get you a drink and I'll go clean up real quick?" He put the bottle on the counter and walked around to find a corkscrew in a drawer.

As he prepared to open the bottle his eyes scanned the label and widened. “You really want to open this?”

I shrugged. “It’s so much easier to drink that way.”

His eyes crinkled as he looked at me, amusement and surprise making his dimples appear beneath the scruff. “You have a point. I just ...” He put the bottle down. “Maddie, you know this is like a five hundred dollar bottle of wine, right? I mean ... at least that.”

I wasn’t impressed. Fancy wine was Jack’s thing. “Do you think it’s drinkable?”

“I think it should be way better than drinkable. But now I’m going to make you wait to taste it. We’ll have it with dinner if that’s okay with you.”

I nodded.

“I’ll just get it open so it can breathe a bit.” He opened it and then put it aside. “I can’t believe you brought that. I’m going to have to up my dinner game—I’m not sure my cooking can stand up to such a fancy wine.”

“If your dinner didn’t come out of a can, you’re already winning.” I smiled at him. He really did look excited. I guessed that now wouldn’t be the best time to ask the questions that were swirling around in my head, or mention any of the visits I’d had with the police. There’d be time for that, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell him I’d basically turned him in the day before.

“Here you go.” He handed me a glass of wine poured from another bottle, which he’d pulled from a cabinet on the far side of the kitchen. “It’s no Harlan Estate.” He nodded toward the bottle I’d brought. “But it should hold you over while I go shower.”

“Thanks.”

“Make yourself at home,” he called as he jogged up the stairs that climbed along one wall of the living room. He disappeared through what I assumed was the bedroom door, and I was alone.

I turned to take in the view over the meadow, appreciating the way the light filtered around the tall grass and flowers as evening moved in. And then I looked around the room. One wall held old movie posters framed over a desk with a still-glowing laptop and some post-it notes stuck on the tabletop.

It made me weirdly happy to know that Connor was working again. There was a part of me that felt a little bit protective of the huge fiery man—even as little as I knew of him. It might have been guilt—at least part of it. My phone call to the police was weighing heavily on my mind.

I wandered around the room, picking up objects on shelves and replacing them, looking for something I couldn't identify. Would something in this room reveal Connor's secrets? Would a trinket on a shelf tell me if he was dangerous, if I should be worried? Probably not. But it didn't stop me from snooping as I waited for him to reappear.

Besides the gothic-inspired doo-dads, there was nothing here screaming to me that this guy was a murderer, a sexual predator, or anything besides someone who collected unusual decorations. There were some glassed ships and a lot of books. The glass skulls and ornate knives on display weren't threatening, just exotic. And as far as I could tell, there was no one being held captive here. If there was, she was sure quiet. Besides, the police had searched the house.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out to see that Miranda was being diligent in her check-in promise.

- *You okay? Text back or I send in the cavalry.*
- *Don't send them yet. All is fine. Give me an hour or so, okay?*
- *Will do. PS. Have fun. I'll text in a bit.*

I settled into the couch and waited for him to return.

Connor

CHAPTER 20

I took the world's fastest shower, trying to push down the excitement bubbling in my stomach. She'd actually come. I had been sure she wouldn't, and had forced myself to forget it, to focus on work. And then she'd appeared, looking skittish and uncertain, but she'd come.

She was curled on the couch when I came back down the stairs.

"I'm sorry about that, Maddie. I don't want you to think I wasn't excited to see you. It's been in the back of my mind all day. I kind of think it's what got me writing again." I poured myself a glass of wine.

"It's fine," she said. "I'm sorry about waffling earlier."

"I don't blame you." I sat on the couch next to her, careful not to get too close. I didn't want to scare her, and now that she was here, I wanted her to stay. More than anything I'd wanted in a long time. "You seem like the kind of woman who considers every decision pretty carefully."

She laughed and gave me a wry smile. "Seriously? I live in a trailer, can't finish building a house, work in a diner ... What exactly is it about this image that leads you to believe I have myself together?"

I didn't know if I could explain it to her, and what came out didn't make as much sense as I'd hoped. "You seem like you live life the way you want to, the kind of person who drives the train."

"I've never driven a train. Plus, I think trains pretty much go where the tracks lead."

“So maybe that’s not a good metaphor.”

“Says the writer.”

“I told you, I’m rusty.” I dropped her gaze, turning over the question I’d been wanting to ask her. “I want to ask you about something, but if I don’t get dinner started, we’ll never eat.” It could wait, I decided. “Will you keep me company while I cook?”

She followed me toward the kitchen and settled on a stool across the counter from where I stood. “You’ve got me curious,” she said. “What do you want to ask?”

“It’s about the house,” I said. “The property.” I’d been thinking about it, about how the property had been in her family for so long. About what I knew of it from when we were both children—about the memory I had of her from that long-ago summer. I was fairly certain she didn’t remember me, but I knew now that Maddie, or a tiny wild-haired version of her, had been part of a pivotal moment in my life.

“You back in the market?” she asked. “I’m definitely still willing to sell. Maybe it’d be easier if it was you who bought it.”

I looked at her hard. “That property is part of your family, Maddie. Don’t sell it.”

She scoffed and looked sad. “I don’t think I have a choice.”

“I’d like to offer you one.”

“How?”

“Let me make an investment in the house.” It was a little out of left field, I knew, but I hoped she’d consider the idea I’d had earlier today.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’d like to help you develop the house. Get someone in to design something that works on the property and help you get it built before the snow comes.”

Surprise was clear on her face, and she put her glass down abruptly, spilling a bit. “Why would you do that?”

“There are some tax benefits to investing in real estate,” I told her, handing her a paper towel. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to tell her exactly why the property meant so much to me too.

“But wouldn’t you have to buy the property and lease me the house?”

“No. I’d only own the house. You own the land. So you grant me the right to develop it, and I grant you the right to live there rent-free.”

“I don’t see how that helps you much.”

“It’d be a small deduction,” I said. “But every bit helps.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I ... we don’t know each other very well, Connor. That seems like a lot to undertake.”

She wasn’t wrong. But I didn’t want to back down. “Maybe,” I said. “I want to help you, Maddie. And I know you’re proud and capable and don’t need it ...”

“I probably do need it,” she said. “But that doesn’t make it easy to agree. I just ...”

“You don’t trust me.”

Her face changed then, a wary look flashing across it before she swallowed hard. “Should I?”

“Do you have any real reason not to?” I picked up the kitchen knife and began chopping the celery and carrots on the board in front of me. I felt like we were finally going to venture into the territory we’d need to cross if anything real might develop between us.

“I don’t know.” She picked her wine up again, took a sip. “Let’s not talk about the house, though. That’s my problem. I’ll figure it out.”

“I just wanted to throw it out there. Offer stands.” I tried not to let the disappointment I felt show on my face.

I covered by moving efficiently around the kitchen, both of us silent as the awkwardness of the conversation hung in the air between us. As I moved, following the practiced motions I’d learned when I used to cook for my sister and myself, I began to relax a bit. Dave Matthews played in the background, and I found that I liked having Maddie sitting there, watching me with those big amber eyes.

After a few quiet moments she said, “Connor, the police have been around, asking me some questions.”

I wasn’t surprised. “I figured they would come see you soon.”

“They asked about Amanda. And about us.”

“Right.” I couldn’t help stirring a little more furiously at the sauce.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to think,” she said.

I put down the spoon and looked at her. This would be it then. We’d finally get this all out. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Ask me the questions, Maddie. Ask me the things you need to ask. Let’s get this done.” I wanted to answer. I wanted to tell her everything.

“Okay. What happened with Amanda?”

“She asked me for help. She said she wanted to be a writer, wanted to interview me. We met a couple times, in public places. Literally, three times. Twice at the diner.”

“And?”

“And that was it. The next thing I knew—according to people in town and the always-reliable tabloid news, we’d had a full-blown relationship and she had dumped me.” I shook my head and opened my arms wide as I explained, still shocked at how crazy this was. “According to those sources, I became upset about the breakup and took to stalking her. Now it seems I’ve kidnapped and killed her, and buried the body up on the ridge.”

“Did the police come talk to you about that part? The ridge?”

“Yes.”

“Did they tell you there was an eyewitness?”

“They did. They told me there were photographs, too.” Maddie’s eyebrows shot up at this, and a blush crawled across her face. It had been her. A sinking feeling filled me, but I did my best to ignore it as I watched her, silent.

“I was hiking,” she said. “I had my camera, and I heard you digging. I followed the sound, and ...”

“And you saw me digging a hole off the trail, and figured I was disposing of some evidence.”

She nodded, and I saw the flicker of guilt cross her face. “I’m sorry, Connor.”

I put down my glass and leaned forward, catching her gaze and doing my best to hold it. “It’s fine. I don’t blame you. I would have called the police too,

Maddie. My timing wasn't good."

"What were you doing up there?" She whispered.

I turned down the heat on the pot on the stove and then took the stool next to Maddie. "I was actually burying someone, just not the way you thought. My sister." I stared into the fire and decided to tell her everything. If I wanted her to trust me, to believe in me, I needed to share things I didn't share with other people, and I could start here. "This was supposed to be her house. I had it built for her. This was her favorite place in the world—the happiest place we spent time as kids. And I wanted to give that back to her. She ... We ... didn't have a very joyful childhood."

I stopped talking to take a deep breath, preparing myself to say the next words.

"I brought her up here to show her the house for the first time, to tell her it was hers. That's when she told me she was dying. Stage four ovarian cancer. She'd been diagnosed just before I started the house, and had kept it from me."

"Connor ..." Maddie's voice was a whisper.

"She told me she wanted to die up here. No doctors, no tubes or machines. So that's what happened."

"Oh." She reached tentatively across the space between us and put her hand on mine, wrapping her slim cool fingers around my hand and squeezing gently. "I'm so sorry."

I couldn't help staring at her hand on mine for a long second, pulling comfort and warmth from it. How long had it been since anyone had touched me? I couldn't honestly remember. "I had her cremated. That was what she wanted. And she told me to dig a hole and bury her up there on the ridge. We stacked rocks so I'd know exactly where she wanted it. That was the last time she'd been able to hike, before things got really bad."

"I've seen that stack," Maddie said. "I wondered who put it there."

"I did," I told her. "But I had a very demanding director."

We were both silent for a minute, she took her hand back, a chill creeping into my palm where it had been.

"But I couldn't do it then," I said, looking up at her. "I wasn't ready."

“So you did it today.”

“I did. I went up there a year ago to do it, and I couldn’t. She was the only person I had in the world, and even having ashes here felt better than taking her out there and leaving her. For a year I let her sit here with me, keeping me company.” I shrugged, feeling a little silly. “I talked to her. And I didn’t want to give that up. I kept her here even though it wasn’t what she would have wanted. I kept her. Out of pure selfishness. Or weakness.”

Maddie shook her head. “No, I understand. I’m not sure I could have done it if it were my brother.”

“But now, the time felt right,” I said. “And it’s been a year. Too long to ignore her wishes.”

“I’m sorry, Connor. For your loss, and for sending the police.” Maddie’s eyes shone in the fire’s glow.

“I would have done the same,” I said, sliding off the stool and returning to the stove. If I sat there any longer, I’d burst into tears, and that wasn’t really the image I wanted her to have of me.

“So a year ago, when you tried ... that must have been when John Trench saw you?”

“Turns out that spot isn’t as secluded as I thought,” I said. “But when he found me, I was falling apart. I ... Catherine was my whole family. My whole world.” I stared at her a second, wondering if she could understand. “I know it’s stupid, but I feel like I should have known that she was sick. Like maybe I could have done something if I’d known early enough.”

“Why don’t people around here know about this?” She asked. “Wasn’t there an obituary? Or a notice or something? Didn’t her friends come up?”

“She and I ... we weren’t good at connecting with people, I guess. She had a few friends. I called them, but there wasn’t a lot to do once she was gone. I was about all she had, too.”

“Wasn’t there anything in the papers about you, though? You’re kind of a celebrity.”

“Connor Charles is,” I conceded.

Maddie raised an eyebrow and one side of her mouth tipped up. “What do

you mean?”

“I wasn’t born Connor Charles. It’s a pen name. My real name is Christopher Connors. And he’s not famous at all. So no one cared. No one ever did care much about either of us.” I couldn’t help tossing that in, though I knew it sounded pathetic.

“So the thing with Amanda ...” she said. “Was there anything more to it? More than just ... tutoring, or whatever?”

“There wasn’t much ‘whatever’ at all. She asked a lot of questions. She was a bright girl.” I cleared my throat. I didn’t like thinking of her in the past tense. “She IS a bright girl.”

“So the stuff about the relationship?”

“Out of the blue.” I sighed, leaning onto my elbows on the counter. “I’m sorry ... this is a hard topic. I’m just ... I’m worried about her. And I’m not allowed to be.”

“You’re not allowed?”

“Because I’m a suspect.” I hadn’t talked to anyone about this who wasn’t interrogating me, hadn’t confided my side of it all in anyone. It was an immense relief. “Because I’m not supposed to care. Because I’m supposed to be a sociopathic maniac who’s holding her in some secret underground cell here at my house of horrors.”

Maddie watched me for a long second, then shook her head lightly and motioned toward the stove. “I think the deal on offer here tonight was supposed to be dinner.”

“You’re right.” I said, the mood shifting instantly and the dark aura that had settled dissipating as I returned to the stove.

“Can I help?”

Maddie did not strike me as a woman who cooked, but I also liked her sitting there, watching me with that alert perceptive gaze. “There’s not much to do, really.”

“Or you think I can’t cook.”

“Make no mistake. I’m doing the cooking here tonight.”

“And I’m just here to watch?” she asked.

“And to eat,” I said. “And for decoration.” I couldn’t help the words—they were true, and I shot her a direct look to ensure she knew I meant them.

“Decoration, huh?”

I winked at her and grinned, and appreciated the way the mood had shifted since I’d told her about my sister and about Amanda. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was that she now understood something more about me, something that explained her fears away.

“I didn’t mean to make it a joke,” I said, picking up the conversation as my compliment still floated between us. “You’re beautiful, Maddie. I’m sure you know that.”

She smiled as a warm embarrassed blush scaled her cheeks, making her even more beautiful than before and setting my own pulse pounding.

Maddie

CHAPTER 21

The atmosphere had changed since his revelations. The mood had deepened somehow, but it was more comfortable. I watched him cook, turning the wine glass between my palms. Connor was gorgeous, and every word out of his mouth tonight, every emotion passing through his eyes, told me he wasn't capable of the things people suspected him of. And if he wasn't capable of any of that? How painful must it be for him to bear these accusations? The looks and the talk in town ... My heart sank with the realization of what he'd borne through these last few weeks, and how he'd had to bear it totally alone.

And the ways in which I'd contributed to it.

Connor turned back to me, not quite meeting my eyes.

There was no proper way to answer his compliment, so I just smiled as a warm embarrassed blush scaled my cheeks.

He leaned in toward me, resting one elbow on the counter as if about to share a secret. "I hope you won't mind me saying ... that Scottish guy? He must be a complete idiot."

"Oh, I don't mind. It's nice to hear it from someone else, actually. He is," I confirmed.

"How could he ever let you go?"

"I don't think it was hard, actually ..." I didn't really want to discuss Jack. Things had finally veered out of uncomfortable territory, and I didn't want them

heading back in that direction. I finished the wine in my glass.

“Are you ready for this incredible wine you brought?” Connor had the bottle I’d brought in his hands, and was pulling clean glasses from the cabinet.

The irony of discussing Jack while poised to drink his expensive wine was not lost on me. “I’m ready.”

Connor poured and we toasted one another. And when my phone buzzed with Miranda’s check-in text, I quickly replied, telling her that everything was fine and no more checks would be needed.

DINNER WAS PHENOMENAL. Connor was an amazing cook, and once the questions that had lingered between us were answered, it felt like we were starting on a clean page.

“Are you sorry you didn’t save that wine for some important occasion?” Connor was finishing the last sips of his second glass.

I shook my head. “Not even a little bit. I’m glad I got to share it with someone who could appreciate it.” I smiled at him. “I’m glad I didn’t open it by myself and drink it with ramen, having no idea what a crime I was committing.” I mentally slapped myself for bringing up the word ‘crime,’ but Connor seemed to take it in stride.

We sat together on the couch before the fire, closer than we’d ever been. Our legs pressed together on the couch, and his hand rested lightly on my knee, his fingers moving slowly back and forth. It was comfortable, but a thread of tension wove between us and I realized I wanted him to lean in, maybe kiss me. An anticipation I hadn’t felt in years circled through me and as much as it made me slightly giddy, I was enjoying the sensation.

“Do you ever feel like we’ve known each other a long time?” Connor asked, squinting an eye as he turned to look at me.

I thought about that. There was something very familiar about him, but I couldn’t necessarily say it was because I felt I knew him. I hadn’t really begun to feel like I knew Connor until tonight. “I’m not sure.” I smiled, not sure if I

should admit what was on my mind. “There’s something about you that is really familiar. But I wonder if it’s because I’ve always had kind of a thing for men with red hair,” I said quietly.

His eyebrows went up and then a sexy smile spread across his face, making a dimple appear on his cheek. “Is that right?” His hand on my knee became more assertive, the pressure firmer, the thumb moving in a circle along my thigh.

Connor leaned nearer, and I wasn’t sure if he was going to kiss me, but I knew I wanted him to. He paused there and then pressed his forehead to mine, neither of us speaking. The fire crackled behind us as we sat, breathing the other in. Neither of us moved, electricity flinging between us, our lips so close to touching that I could almost feel it—a phantom kiss.

Being this close to Connor was overwhelming. There was that scent—cinnamon and pine, and something else, something masculine and strong. But there was another feeling that came from having him so close, and it was confusing. It reminded me of being a child in some way, not in that I felt like a little girl, not at all. But the happiness I’d felt running these mountains wild as a girl, the freedom and lightness that came with youth, with being oblivious to the weight the world would one day put upon me, it was all tangled up in the way I felt being near Connor.

After what felt like years in suspended animation, our foreheads touching and my hand resting along the side of his jaw, Connor inhaled a sharp breath and then softly touched his lips to mine. And something unlocked, released like a gate being opened, a harness removed, and I was lighter in that moment than I could remember being. Connor’s lips were soft at first, then more insistent, and finally the kiss deepened and our bodies found each other as we melded into one another on the couch.

It could have been minutes, it might have been hours, and in that time we became more than two lonely people who’d been struggling on separate paths to make sense of the worlds we’d unexpectedly found ourselves inhabiting. Instead, for a little while, we shared each other’s burdens, told each other secrets in the form of kisses and caresses, whispers and quiet laughter in front of a glowing fire.

“It’s not the right thing to say,” Connor said after a while, sitting back and running a finger across the lips he’d been kissing. “But I want you to stay tonight.”

Surprise made me widen my eyes and sit up straighter. “We don’t know each other well, Connor.” I found that I wanted to say yes, if only to spend a night surrounded by that warmth and strange familiarity that came in being by his side, but I knew it might only serve to confuse me in the end.

“I know,” he said, and there was a hint of pain in his voice. “So why do I feel like I’ve known you forever?”

I wasn’t a big believer in karma or destiny or anything like fate. But if we both felt like there was some link between us, some kind of bond that transcended our current time, our current situations, then was it wrong to just embrace it?

“I’ll stay,” I said, surprising us both. “Between the wine and food ... and, this,” I said, failing in my effort to include everything happening between us, “it would be hard to leave.”

“Good,” he said, and a smile spread across his face that made my heart swell. It was nice to see Connor happy—I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen him smile like that before.

We stayed before the fire for a long time, and eventually, Connor took my hand and led me upstairs.

He looked back at me as he led me into a room at the top of the stairs, and then stepped inside, flicking on a dim light. I moved with him, our hands still connected, and when he tugged slightly, I moved into his arms, finding myself encircled. The sudden warmth and closeness was overwhelming, and the scent of him had me reeling. It was the scent of something familiar but unidentifiable, something that smelled like childhood, like home. I squeezed my eyes shut against his hard chest, my hands finding their way around his body, skating over planes of hard muscle and pulling myself into him.

My breasts were pressed up against him, and my nipples hardened until the contact with his body sent little spikes of arousal straight through me. The nearness, the smell, my attraction to him, it all combined to make my knees

wobble and my arms grasp more tightly to a man who I was fiercely attracted to.

And then something changed. The smell of Connor, the hard solidity of him, and the way he whispered my name as he held me, all sent me deeper into the moment, into my own desire. I clung to him, feeling suddenly unsure as a mild fear passed through me, and a vague thought about Amanda Terry and the accusations against this man swirled in my mind. The thoughts and feelings in me combined, making me feel almost drunk, like I was spinning out of control. My breath beginning to come faster as his hand slipped lower down my back and cupped my ass.

Even when Jack and I had been together that last year, when I was living up here and he was living two lives between here and San Diego, there had been only a few moments of closeness between us. And those intimacies we shared felt rote and rehearsed. We followed a very bland and unimaginative script for sex.

There was something wild and unbound in the room with Connor and me now, something threatening to erupt and ravage me. And I was equal parts terrified and tempted. The hard nearness of Connor, and the firm pressure I felt against my stomach as he pulled me closer drove the rational voice warning me away into silence.

Connor's fingers traced the line of my jaw and then circled it, his thumb near my ear as his fingers tilted my head up. His mouth met mine as I felt his other hand twine through the curls at the back of my head. His lips were tentative at first, but as my mouth opened to him, they became hard and insistent. There was no more asking permission, no more quiet carefulness between us. I'd come here willingly, pressed myself against this man, and opened myself to him. And this thing happening between us now was the result of all of those decisions.

I tilted my head back and Connor found my throat, his mouth hot on my skin as his tongue flicked and tasted me. His hand supported my head as he explored me, and my breath was coming in gasps. I pressed myself against him, one leg wrapping his thigh to increase the contact where I needed to feel it. Connor's hands found the bottom of my blouse and pulled it free of my jeans, sweeping it off over my head. He paused, pulling back to look at me, his eyes burning. The

lamp in the corner illuminated him from behind, and caught the burnished gold in his hair, bringing the image of a fire god back, making me unable to stop myself from grinding against his thigh.

“You’re so beautiful, Maddie.” His voice was low and rough. He picked me up and sat me on the edge of a firm solid desk next to the sweeping window near the bed, his mouth exploring my shoulders as his hands cupped and squeezed at my ass, pushing us together.

I found the waistband of his jeans, my hands fumbling with the button there, and Connor stopped. He stepped back from me, his eyes never leaving mine. He pulled off his shirt, grabbing it with one hand behind his neck and pulling it over his head in one fluid motion. And then he unfastened his pants and pushed them down, stepping free.

He stood before me, not moving for a moment. I didn’t know if he was giving me one last chance to change my mind or if he was considering changing his. But as the light danced across the ridges of muscle in his chest and highlighted the bulge of his erection, I found myself teetering on the edge of self-control. I could walk away now. But a minute longer and the choice would be gone.

I opened my mouth to stop things, to let my common sense back into this overheated room, to interrupt this strange sensual moment with a near stranger. And I whispered his name instead.

From that moment forward, there was no going back.

Connor fell on me like a man who hadn’t eaten in months, his mouth and hands everywhere at once. I wasn’t conscious of him pulling my jeans off, but when he looped his arms around my thighs and lifted my hips off the table so he could taste me, he had my complete attention. He teased and sucked until my legs were shaking and all I could feel was the aching emptiness that I knew he could fill. I twisted myself from his grasp and reached for him, grasping his hard length through the boxer briefs before pushing them off of him.

His erection stood up, the vein along the top pulsing in the shadow of the dim room, and I traced the line with my finger before stepping down off the edge of the desk and bending over to trace it with my tongue. Connor’s groan

emboldened me, and I put my hands on either side of his taut ass and turned us both around, pushing him back so that his butt was against the edge of the desk. His hands immediately found the edges of the surface and he braced himself as I took him into my mouth.

I hadn't done this for Jack in years. He'd complained about something I did once, and my confidence was shot. But Connor seemed to be enjoying it enough, and I experimented as he moaned above me, saying my name in a gravelly voice that spoke of approval and desire.

Soon, Connor was grasping my shoulders, pulling me up from the floor, and I complied. The ache between my legs responded immediately to his hands, which had fallen to my breasts as his mouth retook mine. I was wet and aching with need, and I nearly crumpled to the floor when Connor stopped, biting out, "Be right back."

I watched as his round, perfect ass moved away from me, the strong muscled legs carrying him through a doorway on the far side of the room. I stood still in front of the window, feeling cold and desperate. He said he'd be right back.

He returned, holding a foil packet in his long fingers. "Sorry," he said, pulling me against his body again. "I knew I had one somewhere."

I took the packet from him and opened it, rolling the condom down the length of him as he watched.

"God," he whispered, picking me up when I was finished and pulling me against him, my clit pressed against his stomach and his erection pressing up the line of my ass. He walked me back to the edge of the table and set me down, his mouth devouring my neck as his fingers played at my entrance. "You're dripping," he breathed.

I grasped the firm length of him, guiding his tip to my center, and pressed myself forward. I moaned, and he pressed inside slowly. His delicious size filled me, stretching me and meeting the need that had been burning in me since he'd first touched me. I exhaled, wanting to keep him there, right there, forever. But then he began to move in and out, slowly. And I wanted nothing except for him to keep doing that. Exactly like that.

His hands were pulling me toward him, the desktop was firm against my

butt, and there was nowhere for me to go. I was pressed against him, impaled by him, with an impossibly immobile surface behind me, and all I wanted was for him to go deeper still.

“More,” I heard myself breathe, and Connor responded with a strained grunt, increasing the rhythm, the pressure.

Finally I felt the tension inside me mount to the point where I felt I might shatter. I was laying back against the desk now, Connor’s hands pulling me to him on either side of my hips. I reached down to where our bodies met and pressed my finger against my clit. It was as if I had pressed the release button. My own shuddering orgasm took over, and I pulled Connor with me. I could feel him pulsing within me, matching the uncontrollable pull of my muscles inside. He let loose a loud cry, but the words were lost to me as I said his name, never wanting the feeling to end.

We didn’t move for a few long delicious moments, the aftershocks rocking through us as our bodies remembered themselves, became two again instead of one.

“I might just clean up,” I said, seeing a moment to pull myself together.

Connor’s eyes found mine and there was something wounded and deep burning in the depths. “Bathroom’s over there,” he said. “But you’ll stay?”

I tried to imagine dressing and going home now, and found the emptiness waiting for me far less appealing than the burnished beautiful man in front of me. “I’ll stay.”

After I cleaned up, I moved toward the big bed, climbing beneath the ample covers to nestle against Connor. As his arm circled my waist, I sighed, and I found myself feeling more relaxed than I had in years.

WHEN I WOKE, it was to a steady tapping sound. Light, rhythmic, like soft rain hitting the windows. But it wasn’t raining. I opened my eyes to bright sunlight streaming in through arched windows revealing the tops of trees stretching for the limitless blue sky. And when I rolled over, there was Connor. Typing

furiously. He was absorbed completely, focused on his work.

I watched him with sleepy eyes, resisting the urge to smooth the furrow between his brows, to run my fingers over the curls on his bare chest. I contemplated interrupting him completely in another way, but he stopped typing as the thought formed in my mind. His lips curled slightly and he turned to look at me.

“You’re awake.”

“You’re busy.”

“I know, I hope I didn’t wake you. I didn’t want to leave you, so I brought it up here.”

I smiled. He didn’t want to leave me. I loved the sound of that. “You didn’t wake me. I’m glad you’re writing again.”

He sighed. “I am too. It’s coming fast. Like these are words I’m supposed to write. That’s how it’s been before, when things are good.”

“So things are good?”

He slid the laptop onto the nightstand and pulled me into his arms. “In so many ways.”

His phone rang downstairs, breaking the moment. He planted a sweet kiss on my forehead and then slid from the bed. “I should get that, though I don’t want to. It’s only ever bad news.”

My heart sank a little as he walked out the door. He wore the flannel pajama bottoms he’d been wearing when I arrived the night before and I wondered if those were his working pants as I stretched in his bed for a few minutes more. Finally, when I heard his voice on the phone downstairs, I rolled out of bed and got dressed. I was thankful I hadn’t worn the sundress, since I’d be taking a walk of shame around the meadow now. I wished I had brought my car.

When I got downstairs, Connor was making breakfast, the phone beside him.

“Stay for pancakes?” he asked.

“Is there anything you don’t do?” I laughed.

“Nope. Learned to fend for myself at an early age.”

He smiled as he said it, but I wondered about his childhood. It sounded like maybe it was true, that he and his sister had been on their own. I wondered about

the circumstances that would have left them alone, but it was not the time for heavy questions.

“Anything important on the phone?” It felt intrusive, but I found myself dangerously close to caring about him, wanting to help shoulder his burdens in some small way, as if I didn’t have enough of my own.

“No, not really. My lawyer. He doesn’t think there’s a solid case against me. The detectives are trying, but it seems like it’s turning into a smear campaign. He said there’s some tabloid talk at this point, but nothing substantial.”

“I hope it’s not bad,” I said. I had no idea how a person handled having their name splashed across magazines in supermarkets. I doubted I’d ever be high profile enough for anyone to care.

“Nothing I’m not used to. Just another version of the ‘guy who writes sick and twisted must be sick and twisted’ story. I just hope Amanda turns up soon. Just because they can’t pin it on me doesn’t mean she doesn’t need help.”

I shuddered, thinking about what kinds of things might have befallen the pretty teenager. Whatever they were, I was confident that Connor was not involved, but it didn’t lessen the potential for tragedy. “Right. Okay, well, if you’re sure I can’t help, then I should get home, actually. My brother is coming today,” I told him.

“You must be excited.”

“Wary, definitely. Worried, yes. A little bit terrified. Not super excited.” He’d told me about his sister, I guessed I should tell him about my brother.

“Oh.” He looked surprised, sitting up straighter and squinting at me. “Can I ask why?”

“I think he hates me,” I said. It was true. “It’s my own fault. I don’t blame him.”

“What happened?” Connor reached across the table, taking my hand.

I let out a long breath. The story didn’t make me especially attractive, and I was hesitant to confide it, but Connor had told me about his sister, so I went ahead. “I was married, as you know.”

“The Scotsman.”

“Jack. Right. Well, he wasn’t fond of my family. Or I guess maybe it was

that family—any family—got in the way of things he wanted to do.”

“Kind gent,” Connor commented.

“So when we got married, I stopped getting home as often. Jack made other plans for us at holidays and wanted to travel, so for a couple years I missed events that were normally important to my family. I didn’t want to fight with Jack, and part of me was thrilled to travel, to experience new things. I thought I was building a marriage—a life.”

Connor nodded his understanding.

“So when my mother got sick, I went home. My brother suggested we each spend some time at home, helping my dad, but Jack wasn’t keen on the idea at all. He liked having me at home, he said, and I was dumb enough to think it was more about me and less about having someone to do his laundry and shop for groceries.

“Time just kind of passed, and though I called and talked to my dad and my brother at first, eventually Cam stopped answering. I knew he was home a lot as my mom got worse, and I was there once or twice, but at the very end...” I trailed off, shutting my eyes as I remembered how it had felt to hear from my father that day as Jack and I lounged on a beach along the Mediterranean. “We were on a trip when my mom died, and Cam will never forgive me. Both for my absence at the end and for all the time I wasn’t there as things got worse. Dad declined too, and Cam had his hands full.”

“I’m sorry, Maddie.” Connor squeezed my hand, but I couldn’t take any solace. My brother was right to hate me, and now I was terrified to see him.

“He got married last year. He didn’t even tell me. I only found out because his new wife refuses to let there be this distance between us, and she calls me sometimes. I’ve never even met her.”

“Wow,” Connor said. “But you will today, I guess.”

I shrugged, pulling my hand free to wipe at my eyes. “Maybe. I guess.” I stood. “But I’d better go get ready either way. Thank you for this.”

Connor stood and met me as I moved toward the door, pulling me against him and peering down into my face. “Thank you for coming,” he said, his voice warm and strong. And then he kissed me gently, sending the jitters in my

stomach about seeing Cam flittering up in chaos. “And let me know about the house,” he added.

I nodded, my knees a little weak from his kiss. I gathered my things and walked to the door, feeling all wrong. I didn’t want to leave, I realized. I could stay here forever, live in the warm familiar comfort of Connor’s house.

But I needed to go deal with reality. My life. My brother. My house. I needed to clean up my mess.

Connor

CHAPTER 22

I'd watched Maddie leave after breakfast, believing with every fiber of my being that my life was shifting course and that finally things were about to start making sense again. The loneliness I'd felt my whole life was receding like the freeze of a too-long winter, and it seemed like the first rays of something new and promising were breaking through the gloom.

As soon as she'd left, I'd picked up where I'd left off in the manuscript I was working on, amazed as the words flew from my fingertips. The sun tracked across the sky as I worked and before I realized it, evening had fallen again. I closed the laptop, feeling the strange shift I always went through as I moved from the world I imagined and wrote to the one I actually inhabited.

Maddie's brother was arriving today, I remembered. I wondered if he was here, how their reunion had gone. Maddie hadn't invited me to meet him—it was obviously something of a tense reunion, so I wasn't surprised—but I still wished I could see her, could offer some support if she needed it.

I had silenced the phone before I'd begun working, and I picked it up from the kitchen counter now, popping a few salted almonds from the bowl into my mouth as I checked messages.

My agent. I swallowed hard and tried to steel myself. Where calls and messages from my agent had once been the harbingers of good things to come, these past few months had gotten increasingly worse in terms of publicity, and his calls tended to be warnings about new rumors and speculation. As the subject

of a stalking and kidnapping investigation, I didn't imagine the tabloid page he'd attached as an image would be anything I'd like.

I tapped on the photo to enlarge it and was confronted with my own face and a headline reading "Horror Writer Suspected of Murder." The headline was inflammatory and I'd need to talk to Andrew about that—there were no official charges, and if there were, murder was certainly not going to be among them. I'd given the police enough counter-evidence of my own to be fairly sure I wasn't a real suspect, just the only one they had at the moment.

But it wasn't the headline or the story full of half-truths and speculation that made my stomach turn sour and my heart solidify inside my chest. It was the photo. I recognized it. It was recent. It'd been taken right here, inside my house—my sanctuary—by someone I'd begun to trust implicitly.

Maddie.

I thought back through our interactions, during which she'd seemed honest, forthright, and trustworthy. There'd been nothing to indicate duplicity or even a capacity for this kind of betrayal. But there was the photo—and she'd told me herself that her financial situation wasn't good. Of course she needed money. And selling photos of beleaguered celebrities was a sure way to cash in.

I just hadn't thought it was possible. Not for her.

But as I swiped the photo off the screen and then threw my phone violently at the far wall, I found a familiar certainty I'd been trying to push away. I was supposed to be alone. I was different from everyone else, and they sensed it. I didn't work the same way, didn't think the same. The universe had set me up time and again to tell me I was meant to be alone, and I kept falling into the same old trap of believing it wasn't true, believing there might actually be someone for me.

But there wasn't, and I was done hoping for any truth other than this one.

I pulled the shades over the windows and stoked the fire. I was done letting people in.

Maddie

CHAPTER 23

I had an afternoon shift at the diner, and I'd told Cameron to meet me there. I was glad he was coming up, though I was nervous about seeing him. He was angry with me, for some good reasons. But if there was a place that might bring us close again, it was here, under these trees that had known us as kids, near the rocks that had been our castles, and the logs and streams that had been our playground.

I knew Cam would be disappointed to see the half-formed monstrosity standing in the place we used to camp. He'd given me permission to build, and even signed over his legal claim on the property. But he'd done it to be rid of Jack, who had pestered him with lawyers and complications until he did. I wondered how much Jack had paid him to walk away from our childhood. And I wondered if Cam regretted it at all.

When I arrived, the diner held the usual few regulars. Chance and Sam were there, sitting in a booth by the window, and Miranda was shifting her weight nervously behind the counter, stealing glances at Chance.

I wandered over to their table after sticking my bag under the counter and giving Miranda a wave. I felt like I owed them some kind of update. It'd been months since there'd been any progress on the house.

"Hey guys," I said, bringing the coffee pot over with me. "Staying busy?"

"Hey, Maddie," Chance said, his blue eyes smiling along to match the sexy mouth. "We're busy enough. We've got a job putting in some double panes up

around the bend past the Ridgewood trailhead, and then we're finishing the Taylor's shed. They want to turn it into a guesthouse."

I smiled at that. A guesthouse? It'd be nice to have a house at all. "I'm glad there's work to do. I don't have much to report on my own place."

"You might want us to come wrap it in plastic for the winter, though." Chance did the talking, but Sam was nodding. "We already put down a waterproof subfloor, so you shouldn't have water damage there."

I nodded. I think they'd explained that to me while they'd worked on it. But I hadn't been listening back then.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll let you know about the plastic. Any idea what that might cost?"

Sam shook his head and Chance fastened his eyes on his coffee cup for a second. "No charge, Maddie." He looked back up at me.

His words hit me like a fist to the gut, and my chin went up. "Don't do that. Don't do that pity thing."

Chance looked guilty and I saw him catch Sam's eye. "Nope, it's not about that. It's part of the deal we already made. It's our job to protect the foundation if we don't finish building before winter."

"But it's not your fault you didn't finish building." I wasn't sure if he was telling me the truth or if this was a pity offer.

"No, but the contract is the same."

Whether it was generosity or pity, I kept finding myself in the position of having to accept help. I couldn't solve this problem myself, regardless of what my pride said. "Okay. Thanks, guys. Coffee's on me this afternoon. Pie, too."

They both smiled, and Sam raised his cup to me in a silent toast.

I delivered them each a big piece of Frank's famous apple pie and thanked them again.

That was when the bell over the door jangled, signaling the entrance of the brother I hadn't seen in more than three years. He looked much the same as I remembered. He was lean and tall, with a goatee and short clipped dark hair. His eyes were small, perceptive, and he typically dressed in black. A tattoo snaked up one arm, which had always seemed to work with the ladies. A petite woman

stood at his side, looking around with interest. She was frail, thin, and small. And her eyes were slightly sunken under a bob of wispy blond hair. She was pretty in a fragile way. It had to be Jess, the sister-in-law I'd never met.

Cameron caught sight of me, and our eyes met. No expression crossed his face. Instead, he broke the gaze and helped the small woman into a booth near the door, whispering into her ear as he made sure she was comfortable. Then he straightened up and walked toward me with long purposeful strides as she smiled at me across the space and waved a hand.

The first thing I'd felt on seeing my big brother was love. The pure joyful admiration that I'd always felt as a child washed through me. Here was my protector, my guardian, my defender. And the next thing I felt, as he moved toward me, was fear. Fear that maybe nothing would ever go back to the way it was supposed to be.

"Maddie," he said, coming to a stop before me. No hug. No nothing.

I stood still, wringing my apron between my hands. "Cameron." I tried a smile. "I'm so happy to see you."

He made a noise. A cross between a sigh and a "humph." There was no way I could twist it in my mind to sound like, "I'm happy to see you, too."

I realized, as he stared at me with cold eyes, that I might possibly have sacrificed the one relationship that mattered in my life in service to the cold broken shell of my marriage to Jack.

"Do you have time to talk?" he asked.

"I will in about fifteen minutes when my shift ends. Do you want something to eat or drink? Can you wait?" I was talking fast, nervous.

"Yeah." He turned around and walked away, taking the seat across from the woman at the table. I followed him, picking up menus from the counter as I passed.

I put the menus down in front of Cam and the woman, and smiled at her.

"You must be Jess."

Her smile widened and she stood up, offering her hand for me to shake.

"Maddie, it's so nice to meet you finally."

I took her hand smiled at her. "You too."

A strange look crossed her face and she pulled me into a hug. I stood awkwardly in her embrace for a second, before I managed to hug her back. I released her, and I wanted to thank her for keeping a tiny strand of connection between Cam and me, for making sure this relationship didn't die completely. But Cam was sitting at the table seething over his menu, so I just nodded.

"It's wonderful to meet you," I said as she slid back into the booth. Cam looked upset, definitely. Not mad, exactly. His expression was unreadable and it was making me wildly nervous. I had no idea what to do, so I ended up standing, holding my order pad before me.

"It's so great to finally meet you, too. I think we'll need a minute," Jess said. I nodded and went back behind the counter.

Miranda was staring at me, her eyes full of questions. I bowed my head as I walked toward her. The full extent of the damage I'd caused to the relationship I'd once had with my brother began to weigh on me like an iron veil placed atop my head. I could hardly stand beneath it.

"Who is that?" Miranda asked quietly.

I was trying to stop tears from gathering in my eyes as I squatted down beneath the counter and pretended to organize empty salt shakers on a shelf. "My brother. And his wife."

Miranda nodded. I could see the questions in her eyes, but I knew that even she wouldn't ask them when I was about to burst into tears. "Let me know if you need any help," she said, putting a hand on my back.

I smiled at her and took a few deep breaths before standing up. "I think Chance and Sam could use some more coffee," I said, hoping to distract her. It worked. She immediately flushed and dropped the pen she'd been holding. As she bent down to retrieve it, her head made fierce contact with the edge of the counter, making a resounding thump.

"Oh!" she cried. She stood back up, a hand on her forehead and a distressed look on her face. "Thanks for trying," she said. "It's hopeless. I can't even form a sentence around him."

I glanced at Chance. He was deep in conversation with his brother. "Just go ask if they need coffee. Then ask what they're working on," I suggested. "It's

dead in here. You have time to chat.”

“I’ll probably pour coffee on him.” Miranda stared at the countertop, looking doubtful beneath her dark-framed glasses.

“Hey,” I said, drawing her eyes up again. “You’re a gorgeous funny woman. He should be so lucky.”

She half-smiled.

“Just go chat.”

“Easier said than done.” She picked up the coffee pot and walked slowly around the counter. I could tell she was working hard not to trip.

My brother’s eyes were on me the second I glanced back over. He raised a hand to signal me and I headed back to his table.

If Cam was going to treat me like any other waitress, I’d treat him like any other customer. “Have we decided?” I asked brightly. “The tuna melt is great, by the way.”

Cam’s eyes narrowed. “You hate tuna,” he said.

For some reason, that small admission that he did know me, that I was not just a waitress, nearly crippled me. But I wouldn’t let him see it. I smiled even wider. “True,” I quipped. “But not everyone shares my awesome taste.”

Jess smiled, but Cam simply ordered a cheeseburger and soda.

“For you?” I said, addressing Jess.

“Just an iced tea, please,” she said.

“Eat something.” Cam’s voice had changed and I took a second to try to figure out what was going on. His voice was almost a plea, and he’d reached a hand across the table to his wife. “Please.”

She shrugged. “I guess I’ll try the tuna melt, then.”

Cam looked relieved and I went to put their order in. Cam didn’t look at me or speak to me as I brought their drinks, and a bit later, their food. But Jess was always ready with a welcoming smile. My shift ended while they ate, and I took some time to clean myself up in the bathroom, to reapply a bit of lip-gloss. It felt like a thin defense against whatever might be coming.

Miranda had been standing at Chance and Sam’s table for at least five full minutes, and I watched as Chance said something that made her laugh. She was

adorable, and I hoped Chance could see it. He was engaged in the conversation, his light eyes on her face, and his posture opened toward her. Sam wasn't ignoring her either, and I wondered for a moment if she might just have her choice of the village's two most eligible brothers. Miranda deserved it. As I watched, though, she seemed to stumble over her own foot, taking a huge step back as she braced herself on the edge of their table. The coffee pot skittered across the tabletop spewing its contents and knocking Sam's plate into his lap as the silverware hit the floor with a clatter.

I rushed over with a towel to help as Sam was getting up. He was using his napkin to stop the tide of coffee spreading toward him across the table from the spinning pot. Chance got up too, but he was at Miranda's side, holding her arm. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Miranda was blushing furiously, "Fine, fine," she managed, leaning forward to retrieve the pot.

I sopped up the spill with a towel, and Miranda gathered the plates and turned on her heel, disappearing into the kitchen. A quick glance at Chance found him watching her go. "She's pretty adorable," I suggested.

Chance's smile widened, but Sam added, "She's kind of a disaster." He did not look amused at the pie and coffee staining his khaki pants.

"That'll wash right out," I told him.

"Thanks Maddie," Chance said, leaving a twenty on the table anyway. "Will you make sure Miranda gets her tip?"

"Sure thing," I told him. They left and I knew Miranda would be beating herself up in the back, but I needed to get back to my brother.

Cam and Jess had finished, their dishes pushed to the end of the table. Jess hadn't touched her food. I removed the plates and dodged quickly into the kitchen. Miranda was peering into the small round mirror on the wall, smoothing her hair.

"It's safe, they're gone," I told her.

She turned wide blue eyes on me. "I'm mortified," she said. "I told you I was a mess around him."

I shook my head. "I don't think he cares," I told her. "He didn't look upset in

the least. He watched every step you took away from him. There might be something there.” I hugged Miranda as her face cleared and her smile grew.

“Hopefully Sam hasn’t already told him any horrible stories from school.” Her lips pulled into a comical frown.

“I didn’t know you went to school with Sam.”

“He graduated the year ahead of me. He was always popular, and I was always tripping on things and embarrassing myself.” She looked at her feet. “So nothing’s changed, really.”

“I’m sure a lot has changed,” I told her. “And besides, Chance can draw his own conclusions. I have to go find out why my brother drove all the way up here,” I told her. “Can’t be good.”

Her expression changed as she peered through the kitchen window to glance at my brother and Jess standing by the door. “Good luck,” she said, looking as uncertain as I felt.

We went outside and I turned to Cam. “Do you want to follow me up to the trailer?”

“Trailer?”

“Oh. Yeah, the house isn’t finished. I’m staying in a trailer for a bit.”

“It won’t sleep all three of us.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I tried to imagine Cam and his tiny wife being happy on the bunks in the back. “Um, it does have bunk beds.”

Cam ran a hand over his short hair and looked around. “I don’t care at all ... I mean, I hadn’t planned for us to stay anyway.” He was looking at Jess, who was sagging slightly at his side. “But Jess is tired.”

She smiled, but there was something else in her face, something that made me worry about her. Something was wrong here.

“There’s the lodge,” I said, pointing to the end of the parking lot. “It’s the slow season, I’m sure they have room.”

Cam nodded and Jess looked relieved. “I’ll get Jess settled and then I’ll follow you. Can you wait?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Maddie, it was so nice to meet you officially,” Jess said. Her voice was

sincere as she hugged me again. She felt so thin and insubstantial. I reminded myself to bring them some of Frank's cookies. Here was a girl who could stand to gain a few pounds.

"You too, Jess. Thanks for keeping in touch." I whispered it into her ear and she smiled back at me as she walked away at my brother's side.

I settled on a bench outside the diner to enjoy the afternoon sun and contemplate the reason why my brother had come all this way to talk to me when clearly I was the last person he wanted to speak to on Earth.

AFTER TWENTY MINUTES, Cameron returned. "Let's go."

He climbed into a massive forest green truck and started it as he watched me climb into my little SUV. Somehow I couldn't imagine him driving that huge thing in Los Angeles, but I guessed that on LA freeways, you have to stake your claim. And no one would tangle with a truck that size.

I led Cam back to the trailer, trying hard to stay calm while simultaneously preparing myself for whatever he might be here to say. It couldn't be good.

Cam got out of his truck at the top of the hill and looked around with wide eyes. He glanced over the trailer and the half-erected building and focused on the trees and the land. I could see him watching himself play as a child, his eyes following shadows of us running and whooping and leaping, through the ferns and over logs. We were wild up here, and we were partners. Always together. Always a team.

Until now.

His gaze fell on me, and for a split second he smiled, and I knew he saw me as I was. As we were together. But then the curtain fell over his eyes again. And I was shut out.

"It's the same," Cam said. "It all looks the same. Except this monstrosity." He pointed at the foundation and frame of Jack's house. My house. He sat at the table and I sat across from him.

I bowed my head. "I know." I had to try. Maybe if he knew that I could

acknowledge my mistakes, maybe that would be a start. “Cam, I know I messed up. I know you needed me, and ...”

“That doesn’t matter.” He interrupted me. “Yeah, you screwed up. And I’m still angry about it. But I didn’t come up here to talk about any of that. I need you now.”

I stared at him. His face was still an impenetrable mask. “What do you mean?”

“Jess is sick. And I can’t afford to get her what she needs while I’m paying for Dad’s care.” Our father lived in an assisted care facility that looked after dementia patients. Insurance covered part of it, but the rest wasn’t cheap. “I need you to step up. Do what you haven’t done in three years. Be a daughter. Be my sister.”

Warring emotions boiled inside me, but I was afraid to tell Cam how unfair his words were because he might walk out of my life again. “I wanted to be both,” I said. My voice sounded weak and I hated myself for it.

“Where is Jack?” Cam asked after a long silence.

“We’re divorced.”

He nodded. “I assume you’re doing fine, though. He had a pretty solid cash flow, I’m guessing.”

“He did. He does.”

“And you?”

I shook my head. “Cam, I live in a trailer.”

He dropped his head into his hands, his elbows on the tabletop. “Please, Maddie. Tell me you can afford to take care of Dad.”

The pain in his voice shredded me. If I thought I’d felt desperation before, it was nothing compared to what I felt ripping me into tiny pieces now. “I don’t know.”

“When you could, you wouldn’t be bothered. And now? Now that I really need it?”

I searched myself, as if I might find some reserve of resources that I’d just forgotten about. But no reserve existed. If it did, everything would be different. “Things have changed a lot for me, Cam. I want to help, though. Maybe if Dad

moved to ...”

“Forget it.” Cam said, standing. “Just forget I ever came. Go back to whatever frivolous thing you’re doing with your life now. Go back to pretending you don’t have a family.”

“Hey,” I said, standing and blocking his path to his truck. “You’re the one who quit calling, quit telling me what was going on.”

“You didn’t care.”

“I did care.”

“Your husband didn’t.”

“No. And I was weak. And stupid. And maybe I needed some help to see it.” I paused, feeling myself building some momentum. It felt good to blame him, to finally get out some of the anger I felt at his disappearance from my life. After what he’d just told me, I knew it was unfair, but I couldn’t stop myself. “Maybe I was the one who needed some help. But you never thought of that. You decided to abandon me, Cam! Where were *you*?”

Cam stared at me, shock on his face as he considered my words. Then he shook his head, a sad smile crossing his face. “Don’t turn this around.”

He climbed into the truck and slammed the door. The window slid down and he glared at me. “We’ll be here tonight because Jess can’t handle another long car ride right now. But we’re leaving tomorrow. Just forget you saw me.”

The truck roared off down the road, leaving me in its dusty wake. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I watched my big brother leave me, turning his back on me in person this time as I stood alone on top of my wretched hill.

THERE WAS little consolation for the mood that Cam left me in that night. I moped around the lot a bit, standing in my unbuilt house and staring out the nonexistent windows, looking for glimpses of my childhood self, hiding behind tree trunks. But I wasn’t out there anymore, and neither was my big brother. I was truly alone up here.

Images of Connor’s smile drifted through my mind. I couldn’t help but let

myself linger mentally in front of his warm fire, in the glow of his attention. I didn't want to need a man to make me feel good, to make me feel like my life wasn't swirling down the bowl. After what Jack had done, I didn't want to need anyone.

I shook my head fiercely, forcing myself to focus on the present—I needed to speak to my lawyer.

I made the call, dialing my lawyer's number from memory. Her receptionist picked up and connected me, and I took a deep breath as she said hello.

"Maddie, I'm making good headway," she assured me. "I've gotten Jack's lawyer to push forward the paperwork for the deed."

"That's good," I said. I was glad to have everything in my name, as it was supposed to be in the first place, but it didn't help me much in the short term. "The account? Any progress there?"

"No," she said. "I wish I had a different answer for you on that."

My hopes fell. "Right. Well."

"Hang in there, Maddie. This isn't over. I still have some avenues to pursue there, and it's always possible that Jack will have a change of heart."

"That would require a heart."

I hung up and forced myself to put emotion aside and think. There were ways for people to make money—for most people, that meant work. And the diner was not going to help in this situation, especially as hours got cut in preparation for winter. But once I'd had a lucrative freelance business as a photographer. Maybe I could do it again.

I sketched some ideas on paper for the idea. I was a photographer. With no clients. But I could change that. I had a portfolio, a collection of decent shots that were lingering in a cloud account that I hadn't accessed in at least two years. I could see if my old site was still useable. I could reach out to previous clients, ask for recommendations. And I could start the new venture I'd been too afraid to begin since Jack had made me question my talent and myself. It might not result in the immediate money that I needed. But it was better than doing nothing.

If I'd been a different person, I might have used this desperation as an excuse

to sell the photo of Connor I knew would undoubtedly bring a good price. Jack had left a message goading me about it, telling me his friend would pay thousands of dollars for a good up-close photo. While that was a good amount of money and it would certainly help, I couldn't imagine doing it. I was going to save myself somehow, and help my brother. It was better to find a path toward that end on my own, using my own skills and talent, if I had any. And it was better than hurting someone who'd been hurt enough recently—someone who needed a friend, not a betrayal. Someone who also happened to be sinfully hot...

I couldn't fix what had happened between Cam and me, but I could try. And even if I couldn't mend what was broken between us, I had no choice but to repair the cracks in my own life. I couldn't sit here on the side of a mountain forever. I went to bed early, the plan solidifying in my mind as I forced my thoughts away from the edges of the desolate pool of abandonment that beckoned as a result of Cam's hasty departure.

Maddie

CHAPTER 24

I went to the library first thing in the morning, paid the subscription fee to resurrect my old website and watched it go live again. There. That was a start.

Next, I drove to the lodge and parked out front, relieved to see Cam's big truck still there. I was heading for the doorway when I saw Jess sitting on a bench down the walk. She was looking out at the wide clearing around which the parking lot flowed. It wasn't a meadow exactly, but it was full of grass and wildflowers, and in the mornings it sometimes held a low mist that floated above the greenery.

Jess sat with her eyes closed, breathing deeply. Her skin was almost translucent and something about her struck me as angelic, ethereal. Otherworldly.

"Hey," I ventured, walking close to her. "I don't want to interrupt."

Her eyes opened slowly and a friendly smile spread across her face. "I'm happy to see you, Maddie. Will you join me?"

I barely knew this woman. And she'd known my brother only since the time he'd decided to keep me from his life because of my choices. I had no doubt that she'd heard all about the worst aspects of me, and she knew the good parts of me only through what she might have gotten directly from me over the phone. I wasn't expecting an easy friendship between us. I sat down softly, keeping several feet between us.

“I don’t bite,” she said, scooting closer to me.

I had no idea what to say. The idea of my brother having a wife had been strange enough, and she’d emailed photos so I knew what to expect in some ways. But finding that Cam had married this fragile soft creature was like a revelation to me, and a new view of my brother’s personality was revealed in her.

“I’m so sorry we haven’t met in person before,” she said. She seemed undaunted by my inability to speak, leaning toward me and smiling warmly. “I tried to get Cam to close this gap years ago.”

“You’ve been amazing. If it weren’t for you, I would know even less about my brother’s life. At least, thanks to you, I have a vague idea what’s going on with him.” We sat silently for a moment, Jess wearing an easy smile. “How did you guys meet?” We’d never discussed her first days with Cam.

“We met after your mother died. It was a really hard time for him. For you both, I’m sure.”

I nodded. Cam had never acknowledged that it might have been hard for me to lose Mom.

“He was angry. About a lot of things.”

“How did you meet?”

“In a grief group, actually.” She said it matter-of-factly, and I tried to imagine Cam going voluntarily to any kind of therapy.

“I didn’t know.” My heart was threatening to pull apart, the seams starting to stretch and fray. I cleared my throat to make sure no tears would find their way out.

“He’d lost your mom and dad at the same time, in a way.” She smiled sadly. “But all he talked about was you. That was how I knew I needed to help him hang on to you.”

I couldn’t help but stare at her. I’m sure my mouth fell open, and everything I felt must’ve been clear on my face. It had been hard for him. He had cared. He’d walked away from me, and then he’d grieved my loss as if I’d died. In one way I was touched, but a much more tangible and virulent emotion rushed through me—rage. “I didn’t die,” I bit out. “He left me. He abandoned me.”

Her smile didn't waver. "Every situation is colored by your experience of it, right?"

I wanted to tell her to be quiet, being all sage and wise in the face of my anger. But she was calm, and her smile was a small comfort. And she was far too nice to be angry at. She was also right.

"He has missed you so much, Maddie. He has photos of you from childhood. He looks at them when he thinks I'm not paying attention." The smile finally faded. "I need you to make up." She said this with a plea in her voice and a finality that got my attention.

It must be true then. She must be really sick. But my future with Cam was not in my control alone. "He pretty much told me how it would be last night. He left me again." I looked down at my hands, momentarily embarrassed by my ability to regress so completely, to blame everything on my big brother as if we'd just been scolded for making a mess.

But I did blame him. He could stay and try to make this work, but he was going to turn his back and leave, knowing that I had failed, that I was suffering, too. Maybe he couldn't help me at all, but he could at least be my brother. It didn't matter though, because I didn't have what he needed. I couldn't help him. Now I felt like I wasn't just failing my family and myself. I was also failing this ethereal stranger, this frail angelic girl before me. "I don't have any money. I can't help."

"Cam doesn't need your money, Maddie."

"That's what he asked for."

"Because he's too proud to ask for what he really needs."

"Which is?"

"Forgiveness." She sat back then, and I got the feeling that she was letting that sink in. After a moment she spoke again. "I'm not going to be here for long, I know Cam told you I'm sick. And I love your brother with everything I am, with all the strength I have. And he needs you. He's going to need you more soon." Her eyes filled with tears, and I felt like I'd do almost anything to comfort her, this near-perfect stranger who loved my brother as much as I did. "Please fix this, Maddie. Please."

I shook my head slowly. "I have no idea how."

Heavy footsteps approached and Jess's face told me that Cam was walking towards us. "What's this?" he said, his voice strained. He was trying to sound jovial. "A meeting of the minds? Am I in trouble?"

"Probably," Jess said.

He took her hand and lifted her to her feet. "Ready to go, darlin'?"

She looked pointedly at me and then up at him. "No, actually. I'd like to stay another night. I felt so tired last night, I really didn't get to look around at all. I'd like to see these big trees I've heard so much about."

"They're just trees, Jess," Cam said, putting his arms around her. He cast a sideways glance at me. "They're nothing special."

I couldn't help myself. I coughed out the word "bullshit" as if we were drinking beers in a bar. For one second Cameron's face lightened, and he almost laughed. But then he remembered that he was angry with me, I guess, because he shook his head.

"We should get you home, honey."

"I'm tired of home. I'm tired of rest." Jess pulled out of his embrace. "I've asked to meet your sister for years, and I am not leaving now." She stood before us, her hands in fists at her side. I had the impression that she was gathering all her strength for this show of defiance.

And Cam's face revealed everything. He couldn't deny her. He loved her completely, and I could see that he would do anything for her. He looked at me, and I could see the struggle on his face. A half-smile appeared, as if coaxed there. "Tour of the big trees, sis?"

I could play along. With Jess's plea ringing in my head, there was certainly no way I could say no.

THE GROVE of trees for which the village had been named was a short drive from the lodge. Healthy tourists walked there every day, but Jess was clearly spent after her show of defiance, and I wondered if she'd even be able to navigate the

paved pathways and gentle grades around the fenced grove. We all rode in Cam's truck, and her face was pale and her breathing noticeably labored as we drove down the hill.

Cam needed no directions. He'd been here thousands of times. So had I. When we needed adventure away from our parents, we'd wandered into the town or down here. It was a couple left turns from the village and the way was clearly marked. This was tourist central, unlike the residential part of the village where you needed a compass and a great deal of luck to get around if you were from somewhere else.

I'd always laughed at how tourists got completely distracted in the tiny parking lot at the base of the grove. There were two Giant Sequoias at its edge, grown together over centuries or millennia. The trees shared one hulking trunk and then separated to reach side by side towards eternity above. It was breathtaking. But there was so much more to see if you ventured up the trails beyond.

Jess stood beside the twin trees, leaning up with her camera in hand. She squatted, she stepped back, she turned the camera and fiddled with the adjustments on top. While she tried to capture the giant trees in one frame, I quickly snapped a few pictures of her. Finally, Cam stepped up and pulled the camera from her hand. "If you spend the whole time trying to capture them on film, you'll never see them at all. They're too big for pictures." He took her hand and guided her toward the path, leaning over to plant a kiss on the top of her blond head.

Something in my heart squeezed. It felt a tiny bit like jealousy, but I knew that wasn't really it. It was true, my brother had cared for me gently at one time—for most of my life, actually. And he'd always been quick with a hug or a sweet kiss on the cheek. He'd never been embarrassed to hold my hand, even when we'd changed elementary schools and he was in fifth grade and I was a terrified second grader. He led me down the hall to my classroom by my hand and hugged me goodbye at my classroom door, ignoring the looks that other kids gave us. He would handle them later, I knew. Cam had always been good at taking care of himself. And everyone else. I was glad that he had someone to

care for in Jess, but the thought of her dying nearly sent me to the ground in a puddle. What would Cam do then?

I shook my head and vowed to be cheerful, to win Cam back so that I could be there to help when he really did need me. Jack may have taken him from me, but he wasn't going to stop me from getting him back, and I didn't need his friend's dirty money to do it. My heart lifted as I realized this—maybe I was finally free of Jack's influence on me after all.

We strolled along the path, which climbed at a steady rate as we approached the back of the small grove. Enormous trees with red flesh and soft bark stood majestically beyond the fenced walkway, making the ground we walked feel almost sacred. These trees made you appreciate how short human life is, how little time we really have. They were here when I was born, and they would stand when I died. Lives like mine, like Jess's, were just a blip on their radar.

"It's humbling," Jess breathed as we sat inside the hollowed-out log of a fallen giant. The trunk we rested in had been used over the centuries as a stable, a shelter, even a barracks for soldiers.

"I love showing this to people," Cam said. "I've forgotten how amazing it is up here."

"It makes you realize how fast the rest of the world is moving, how busy we all are spinning our wheels," I said.

They both looked at me, and for a second I thought Cam would say something awful. But he just nodded.

Jess looked pale, and a thin sheen of sweat coated her forehead. "It's beautiful," she said. "I think I'm ready for a little snack, though." She forced a smile, and I could tell she was struggling.

Something passed through Cam's eyes for a split second as he looked at me, and then it was gone. Fear. It had been a wild fear that I'd seen before he recovered himself. "Sure, babe." He rose and helped Jess to her feet. "Let's go back."

They walked along slowly in front of me, his arm around her shoulders as she gazed upward. I took shots of them walking and smiling at each other, their heads close. At times they stopped as we headed back to the car, and one of them

would point upward, showing the other something high up in the treetops. Their love for each other was so clear in those instances and I envied them. But almost more than I wanted that kind of companionship for myself, I was happy to see that my brother had found it. I was glad he hadn't been alone these last few years.

We got back to the car and Cam took us to the diner. "Is this still the only game in town for food?"

"Pretty much," I said.

"Then I think we'll need some more of that pie."

We went inside and Miranda brought us each a slice of Frank's pie, and for a little while, Cam talked to me like an old friend.

Maybe the pie turned the tide for a short time, or maybe it was Cam's distraction. While he and I talked, Jess smiled and nodded, but she was clearly exhausted. I wondered what she was suffering from, but if they weren't bringing it up, I was certainly not going to ask.

"So, sis. The idiot is gone, you live in a trailer and work in a diner. What's the plan?"

Straight to the point. "By idiot, I guess you mean Jack."

"Who else?"

"Right." Jess looked embarrassed for me, so I explained. "It's fine. He was an idiot. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Me either," Cam breathed.

"I'm sorry," Jess said.

"It's for the best," I told them. "And for now, there isn't a huge plan. I've been kind of feeling my way along. It's been less than a year."

"Right, but. I mean ..." his eyes softened and for a minute, my big brother was back, sitting across from me. "You can't stay up here. This isn't the right life for you."

I cocked my head to the side. "I like it up here, actually. It's not about location," I said. "But you're right that I can't live in a trailer, work in a diner and live on the bloody edge of poverty much longer."

Cam's face darkened at the mention of money, and I knew he was thinking

about whatever care Jess required and my Dad's bills, too. I wished I could help.

"The lawyer is still working on a few things," I said quickly. "That part of things might get better. But until that happens, I've got some ideas."

"Any hot mountain men up here?" Jess asked, smiling brightly.

"That's all she needs," Cam spat.

"Actually ..." should I really tell them? Jess's eyes lit up when I started talking, so I plowed ahead. "There is a guy up here. He's a writer."

"Who?" Jess's voice was excited and she sat up straighter.

"Connor Charles. Do you know of him?"

She clapped her hands. "Oh my gosh, yes! I read all his books. I even have one with me! They're pretty crazy. Very dark, and ..." She stared at me hard for a second, a strange look on her face. "Oh my God, I bet you're exactly his type."

"Why do you say that? Did you read an interview or something?"

She shook her head, still watching me like she was trying to figure something out. "No, but ... any time there's a victim in one of his books who gets saved, who escapes whatever horrible psychopath is on the loose ..." she paused and glanced at Cam. "She looks just like you."

"What?" I dropped my fork. What did that mean?

"It's uncanny, now that I'm thinking about it ... but yeah, all the victims that get rescued or escape or whatever, they all have brown curly hair and light brown eyes."

That was strange. But not really earth shattering. "Seems like he could think of something else once or twice ..."

She shook her head. "I think it's kind of his thing."

"Or a lack of originality," Cam said.

"Huh, well, maybe I'm his type, like you said." Connor could save me all he liked with that incredible hair, and the strong arms that I could still feel around me if I closed my eyes.

"Earth to Maddie." Cam sounded irritated.

"Sorry." I blushed. Clearly they knew I'd been thinking of Connor.

"Look, Maddie. I'm happy for you, I guess." Cam didn't look happy.

"You sound it."

“Well, maybe it isn’t the best time for you to be running around with some guy. I mean, you have a lot of things to straighten out up here. Maybe you don’t need a distraction like that. And your track record with men ...”

“Point taken.” I wanted him to stop. I felt happier than I had in years, just thinking about Connor and the sweet honesty that seemed to live between us. Now that I had definitely dismissed the idea of selling a photo of him, I was eager to see his face again. Cam wasn’t going to ruin it for me. “Maybe you should meet him while you’re here.”

“No, I ...” Cam started to disagree, but didn’t get a chance to finish.

“I’d love to meet Connor Charles! Do you think he’d sign a book for me?” Jess was practically bouncing.

Cam turned to watch her and his expression crumbled from protective and wary to completely adoring. He smiled and put an arm around her. “Will you ask him, Maddie?”

I nodded and went outside to call.

Connor

CHAPTER 25

After twenty-four hours of darkness and self loathing I was reaching the end of some rope, unsure what I was going to do next. I couldn't leave Kings Grove, though I'd put in a call to the detectives to make sure that was the case. If I could have driven away from here, gone almost anywhere else, I would have.

"You're still a suspect," Detective Jensen had confirmed. "You need to stay put until we give you the all clear."

"I'm a prisoner up here," I'd growled, angry and frustrated.

"We'll be in touch, Mr. Charles."

It was a wonder my phone was still working, actually, after I'd hurled it against the wall. The screen was cracked, but nothing else seemed to be wrong, which was good considering I couldn't drive down to the valley to replace it if I needed to. I couldn't actually do anything—it was like my hands were tied. They might as well go ahead and put me in jail for all the freedom I had.

Maddie's face haunted me, every word she'd spoken cycled in my head as if I could find some clue that she would betray me. I searched my memory of our one sexual encounter, looking for signs that she'd been faking it, faking everything. There'd been nothing, nothing I could find that made me think she had any plans to take advantage of my situation, of her proximity. I'd believed her, I'd trusted her.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized my trust was a symptom of

my loneliness. The only way to avoid being taken in and used was to avoid people completely. I swallowed down the anger and self-pity that came with that realization.

I had just taken a seat on the back deck when the shattered phone rang and Maddie's name appeared on the broken screen.

I took a deep breath and picked it up, some ridiculous shard of hope inside me that somehow she could say something that would make me believe in her again, that maybe it was a misunderstanding.

"Maddie." My voice was sandpaper and acid.

"Hi!" She sounded happy—giddy, almost. She cleared her throat and said again, "Hi. Are you okay?"

"Well, there's a lot going on." My words were terse and I held in my anger, knowing if I let it go, I'd let out a string of obscenities and fury I would regret.

"Oh, right. Well, for one thing I just wanted to say hello. I know I saw you yesterday, but it feels like it's been forever."

She was right about that. Everything had changed in that short time. "Okay."

My tone was coming through clearly and I could hear hesitation in the next words. "Maybe this isn't a good time to ask this—you sound really busy—but my brother is in town for only another day. And his wife is here, and it turns out she is a huge fan of yours. When I mentioned you, she got really excited." She paused, and then went on. "I wondered if you might have time to meet them."

"She wants a picture?" I could hardly believe she'd have the nerve to ask me. Was she going to sell this one too?

"Or an autograph maybe?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, holding in the rage and confusion I felt. My voice wavered slightly. "That's flattering. Will you give her my apologies?"

"I ..." I heard the understanding finally click into place. "Connor, what's wrong?"

"I'm busy, Maddie. I'm supposed to be working up here, not entertaining the locals. I need to get back to it."

"Oh, sure ..." The hurt in her voice gutted me and I was even more angry at myself for being unable to stop caring. "I guess I'll leave you alone, then."

Alone. Exactly. As I was meant to be. “I wish you would.”

“I ... okay, then. Bye.”

“Goodbye, Maddie.”

I put the phone down on the arm of the chair and ignored the swirl of wrongness in my gut, the feeling that maybe there was still a reasonable explanation.

That worked for about an hour, and then I couldn't help the shard of optimism that refused to die, and I couldn't seem to stomp it out. I'd had twenty-four hours to think about it, to worry, and it still didn't make sense.

Maddie wouldn't do that, I was certain of it. And if she had, would she have had the nerve to call and ask for an autograph?

I stared out at the green meadow, watching a doe pick her way through the tall grass, innocent and naive. The world was not an inherently evil place, I reminded myself. People were not naturally out to get each other. I knew I had a choice to make. If I decided to believe the worst, I'd spend the rest of my life as a bitter man, alone.

“I don't want this,” I said angrily, startling the doe and sending her leaping into the trees.

I went inside and pulled one of my hardback author copies off the shelf behind my desk. I signed it, and grabbed my car keys, driving to the diner before I could think too much more about it.

As I pulled into the lot, I looked around, wanting to make sure I didn't bump into Amanda Terry's parents, or anyone else involved in the investigation. Though I was not guilty, I didn't enjoy the looks or the interrogations that followed those run-ins.

On the sidewalk in front of the post office, I saw a familiar glow of wild brown curls and my heart skipped a beat against my will. Maddie was the most beautiful woman I'd ever known, and her very presence had a power over me. But in the next instant, I saw who she was with, and my eager heart stilled.

Jack. Her ex.

They were engrossed in what looked like a heated conversation, and neither noticed as I stepped nearer, standing between two parked cars just a few feet

away.

Maddie's posture was tense, and for a second I nearly went to her side, ready to protect her. But I made myself wait, listening.

"Get to the point, Jack."

"I just wanted to compliment your photography skills again. I'd forgotten how talented you were, when you used to do weddings and such." My stomach twisted at the mention of photos.

She sighed. "Jack ..."

"I guess it makes sense that your photographs would be your salvation." He grinned and then pulled a thick envelope from inside his navy blue sport coat, holding it out to her. "Here you go, love. I told you that photo was worth a fortune. Just like I promised."

I couldn't see Maddie's face, but she shook her head quickly. "You promised a lot of things. I don't remember money being one of them. Not recently, anyway."

He chuckled, reaching his manicured fingers into the envelope to reveal neat stacks of cash lined up inside. "For the photograph. I sold it, just as we agreed."

Darkness swept through me then as anger finally won out over the other warring emotions. "That's perfect," I said, stepping up to the curb. "The one person I thought I could actually trust."

"Connor, I ..." Maddie's face changed as I watched—from a surprised smile to a horrified expression as the realization of what I'd just seen dawned on her. "No, Connor, it's not—"

"Mr. Charles," Jack said, and it took everything I had not to punch him in his smug face.

"Jack." I spit his name out, and it left a bitter taste in my mouth. "This is all so clear now." I looked between them. "I don't understand why things didn't work out between you. You're perfect for each other, you know that?"

"No," Maddie said, her voice shaking. She took a step away from Jack, as if she wanted to distance herself from him, or from the situation.

"I used to think I was a good judge of people," I told her, my voice no longer angry but sad instead. "I came down here to apologize to you. To give you this."

I handed her the autographed book. “To meet your sister in law ...” I couldn’t continue, couldn’t look any longer into Maddie’s eyes and try to understand how she could have done what she’d done. I shook my head and walked away, and I was in my car and heading back to my beautiful prison before she could say another word.

Maddie

“Well he seems put out,” Jack said, turning everything into a joke as he always had.

I spun back around to face him. “Listen to me, Jack.” I pulled myself up straight even though all I wanted was to crumple into a ball and cry. “I don’t want this money. I didn’t sell that picture. You did, without my permission. I could sue you for copyright infringement, or libel, or ...” my brain spun as I tried to figure out how Jack stealing my picture might be a prosecution-worthy offense.

Jack was laughing at me, chuckling silently beneath his smarmy smile.

“Just go away,” I said, my voice becoming thick as tears threatened. “Please. Just go away forever. Go marry Annalise and leave me alone. Don’t come up here again. Don’t call me. Just go away. Please.” My voice broke on the last word and I wiped at the tears rolling down my cheeks. I was too exhausted to try to hide them.

“If that’s what you want, Maddie,” Jack said, pretending to be hurt. “I was just trying to help...”

If he said anything else, I didn’t stay to hear it. I turned and headed into the library. I needed to see how my picture had been used, what damage Jack had done. Jess and Cam had gone back to the lodge to rest, and I had some time to myself. At least I had the signed book, maybe that would win me some points with Cam.

I nodded to Christine as I sat down at the one terminal in the small library. I wondered if I was the only one who ever used it.

Glancing over my shoulder to make sure she wasn't watching, I typed Connor's name into Google. Several pages of results came up. All the retail listings for his books, conferences he'd spoken at, and interviews in magazines and papers. And images. Lots of images.

I scanned the headlines of some of the articles. They weren't all from the most reputable of sources, but they were definitely intriguing in a stomach-turning kind of way.

Connor Charles – Woman Beater?

“He’s a Tortured Artist” – Ex-Girlfriend of Author Connor Charles Speaks Up

Dark and Twisted: An Inside Look at the Mind of Connor Charles, Horror Writer

Writer Charles Accused of Kidnapping, Potential Murder

I felt sick. But not all the headlines were as awful as these. Some mentioned Connor's foundation for foster kids, others talked about his donation of money to school libraries. Another mentioned his investment in a charter school in Chicago. There were not as many articles about Connor's good deeds as there were those that speculated about his evil nature, but I was happy to see some weight on the other side of the scales.

I read. For at least an hour, I read all about the accusations that had followed Connor from relationship to relationship. There were photos of him with a tall thin blond woman, a bruise on her face as his arm circled her waist in a possessive way. There were pictures of him with his arm over the shoulder of another woman, a fierce look on his face as he glared at the photographer.

There was good, and bad, and lots of in between. Connor had been to many events, had lots of pictures taken of him. The photos were the most intriguing thing to me, of course. Seeing him in a life completely outside my own, outside my knowledge and understanding of him, was fascinating. He often looked unhappy, troubled. But always painfully handsome.

I went back to my name search and clicked the image link. A full page of

Connor's face came up. But there was one photo that caught my attention completely. Connor, in front of a fire, his face in shadow. My photo.

I followed the photo to its source, and read a horrible tabloid article full of half-truths about the investigation going on up here. It had quotes attributed to "concerned neighbors" saying things about how suspicious they were, how Connor behaved in a manner that made him untrustworthy. My blood chilled and I sat back, staring at the screen. A dark shadow filtered into my gut and settled there. Had Connor already seen this? Was this why he was so angry?

I ran my hands through my hair, a new feeling of desperation washing through me. How had this happened? I'd refused to sell this picture. I was at the bottom of a pit of financial desperation, this picture had been a lifeline, and I'd chosen not to take it because I cared about Connor. I'd sworn to find some other way. And here it was anyway.

How had Jack gotten it? I had to think back to when I'd first looked at the picture. I'd pulled up the photos on this terminal during my break and I'd been working on it when Jack had come in. I wondered if he would have any idea how to log on and retrieve it from the terminal—Jack was the type to pay other people so he didn't have to learn how to do things himself. And I always cleared the memory when I used a public machine.

My blood chilled. I always cleared the cache...except that day. Jack had surprised me, and I'd yanked the memory card out of the machine and left. I tried to remember if I'd gone through my usual effort of clearing the photo cache in the editing program, but I knew with a certainty that I hadn't. I opened the program and clicked to list recent files. Several images were listed by the auto-assigned filename the camera gives them. My camera. I clicked one, and the image of Connor came up.

Jack had stolen my picture from this machine, and it was my fault. I wondered how much he had gotten for the picture. I wondered how I'd ever married someone who was capable of this. I moaned out loud, deleting the photo cache and shutting down the terminal. This was bad. And I needed to go to Connor and try to fix it. I couldn't let him believe that I would do this to him, that I would knowingly betray him.

I left the library and drove straight to Connor's house.

"MADDIE, I don't have time for this right now...." Connor appeared above me on the overhanging deck, no doubt beckoned out by the noise of my SUV spewing gravel as I raced up the driveway. "I was pretty clear on the phone and you already have the book."

"No!" I was practically falling out of the car in my haste to get to him, to explain myself and make this right. "I just...Connor, you have to let me explain."

"There's really nothing to say." His voice was low and disappointed. He turned and the fiery head disappeared out of view.

"There is!" There was. There was plenty to say. Like how I didn't believe any of what they were saying about him. That I wanted to stand by him through this, through all of it. That I didn't betray him—that I wouldn't do that. He could choose not to be with me, but he wasn't going to make that choice based on the belief that I sold him out when I'd done no such thing.

I scrambled to his door, knocking ferociously. "Connor! I have to talk to you!"

He let me knock for a full five minutes. My arm was tired and my knuckles were banged raw. I cursed the fact that no one had doorbells up here. An actual cabin would be too small to need one, but this behemoth of a house could use something more effective than my bony fist. Just as my knock was losing intensity, Connor pulled the door open, his face angry and exasperated in the shadow beyond the door.

"Maddie, please just go away."

"I can't. Not until you let me talk to you."

He kept me standing at the door, an eyebrow arched in a face that looked exhausted, etched by tiny lines. "What do you want to talk about?" His voice was soft, tired. "You want to tell me about how you worked to get close enough to get a good shot? About how you used me to further your career, your own

financial interests? You want to talk to me about why I can't trust a damned person in this world? Or about how your little picture just added fuel to the fire in this police investigation? Is that what you want to talk about, Maddie? Because I don't want to talk about any of it."

He might as well have slapped me. He'd already made up his mind about all of it—told himself the story of how that picture got online, and left it at that. "That's not what happened." My voice was stronger than I felt. I wanted to melt, to disappear in the face of his disappointment in me, his belief that I could betray him so completely.

"You have two minutes." He made no move to invite me in.

"I took the picture without thinking about it. I had no plans at all," I began. "But Jack..."

"Somehow I knew he'd be involved. You two seem to spend a good deal of time together for people who are supposedly trying to lead separate lives."

My head snapped up. "That's not true."

"Either way. Go on."

"Jack walked into the library when I was reviewing my shots, and he saw that picture. He said he had a friend in Los Angeles who would pay a lot of money for it." I watched Connor's face as I spoke. It was like a mask of stone. No expression flitted through the icy blue eyes. His lack of response made me nervous, and my words were flying out in a jumble. "He wanted me to sell it. And when the stuff with my brother and Jess happened—that's my brother's wife, she's really sick, and so there are going to be bills, and I can't help them—well...there's my dad's care to worry about too, and the house..."

"You were desperate. You saw an opportunity and you took it. I don't blame you." He seemed to think about that last part for a minute. "No, I take it back. I do. You had other options, Maddie. I gave you other options." Connor took a step back and began to shut the door. He looked as if the sadness of a thousand lives weighed heavy in his heart.

"No!" I wedged my foot forward, blocking the door.

Connor looked surprised for a brief second, almost amused. And then he tilted his head to the side and sighed. "We're done here Maddie. We're just...this

is done.”

“No, we’re not. That’s just it. I had every reason to sell that picture. But I didn’t. I didn’t do it, because I didn’t want to be that person. I didn’t want to be under Jack’s thumb, and I didn’t want to be the girl who would throw someone I care about under the bus to save myself.”

Another raised eyebrow, but the door remained open.

“I didn’t do it, Connor.” My voice was almost a whisper now. “But I didn’t remove the photo from the cache, either. I was using the public terminal at the library. Someone else found the photo. Someone else sold it.”

He said nothing for a long moment, the blue eyes searching my face, reading my soul. Finally he said, “Jack.”

I nodded. “Probably.”

Connor was silent for a moment. He didn’t get enraged, he didn’t slam the door. But he didn’t reach out to hug and forgive me either. “Okay. Well, thanks for letting me know.” He took another step back and then said firmly, “Bye.”

I moved my foot out of the way, watching in shock as the door swung shut. I found myself staring at the heavy redwood plank in disbelief. That was it? Did he believe me or not? What was I supposed to do now? I couldn’t just go back to the trailer and go on with my life. My heart pounded in my chest, and every beat was a painful ache. Knowing that Connor had just pushed me out of his life made me realize how completely invested in him I’d become in a very short time.

Still standing there, I imagined him on the other side of the door, in that big house all alone. I pictured him believing that I’d betrayed him, that he really was on his own against the world. His sister was gone, and now he’d lost me too. He had no one, and the knowledge made my chest heavy and brought tears to my eyes. He had me. He just didn’t want me now.

I shuffled back to my car, my body numb and my mind a spinning wheel, casting in all directions for an answer to an unsolvable problem. When Cam called a little later, I told him I’d see him after my early shift the next day. He said he and Jess were going to take a quiet evening anyway.

Connor

CHAPTER 27

It would have been nice to be able to forgive Maddie when she'd come to my door. I could almost picture myself reaching out, pulling her into my arms and burying my face in her strawberry-scented curls, just letting it all go.

But I couldn't let it go. Maybe Maddie was telling the truth—I suspected she was. But none of that mattered. Letting Maddie close had reminded me of something I'd already known, and it wouldn't do me any good to close my eyes to that lesson again.

So as hard as it was to let her go, that was what I did. It would be better for us both in the end. Maddie couldn't save me, and I couldn't save her. It was time for both of us to save ourselves.

I sat on the leather couch next to the cold fireplace and leaned my head back onto the leather. I'd wait for this horrible investigation to come to its inevitable end, and then I'd leave. I'd find some new place to be anonymous and alone. A small town was clearly not the right place—too many helpful neighbors and caring citizens. No, next time I'd go to New York or Montreal. Someplace new, someplace big and thrumming with so much chaos, no one would notice the solitary life of one lonely writer.

The whirling descent of my self pity had nearly swallowed me when I heard the distant whine of sirens drawing closer. I moved to the front deck and listened as their whining screams filled the peaceful mountainside, sending birds

scattering into the sky. As the sounds grew louder, the flashing lights came into view down around the meadow loop, and after another moment, a police car pulled up my driveway.

I sighed and went to answer the door just as the knock came.

Maddie

CHAPTER 28

I'd gone back to work, but I was worthless there. Eventually Miranda cornered me, her blue eyes wide behind her glasses.

"This stuff really has you turned upside down, doesn't it?"

"Sorry?"

"You gave table six table four's food. And that guy wanted tea, but you gave him coffee. You're a mess! Maybe you've been around me too long."

I looked around. I wasn't sure if I'd made those mistakes, but it didn't surprise me. "Crap. Sorry."

As things fell back into a lull and I was able to catch my breath, Miranda and I both leaned over the counter, resting on our elbows and watching the street beyond.

"I kind of want to go kick Connor's ass for upsetting you like this."

"It's not his fault."

"What do you mean?"

"It's for the best, right? I thought the guy freaked you out."

"I don't know him, Maddie." She stared out the window for a minute, and I wondered if she was picturing him in her mind. "He's pretty hot, though." A huge grin spread across her face.

I couldn't help but smile. "He is. It doesn't matter now though." I hadn't told her the part about Jack, about the photo.

"Why not?"

“He’s not speaking to me. He thinks I betrayed him.”

“Betrayed him? Why does he think that?”

I opened my mouth to explain but Miranda was no longer listening to me. She was staring out the window, open-mouthed, as a long procession of police cars flew through the parking lot outside, coming out of the village.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I’m generally the last to know.” I watched the cars pull out onto the main highway. In the back of one car, the shadow of a figure could be seen. It was impossible to tell who it might have been, but the sinking feeling in my stomach told me I already knew. And that I’d been wrong again—about everything. The car followed the others out to the main highway and disappeared, and my heart squeezed painfully.

“Holy cow,” Miranda said under her breath. “That was some kind of serious show of force right there.”

I turned to look at her. “I don’t think that means what you think it means.”

“Whatever.” She was still staring out at where the procession of black and whites had been. “Do you think that was...?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I hope not.”

The rest of my shift was painful. Everything I thought I’d decided, everything I thought I knew about Connor—could I really have been that wrong? I wasn’t surprised. I’d been wildly off base before, after all. But if that really had been Connor in that car, that meant the police had found enough evidence to arrest him. And if that was the case, then I hadn’t only been wrong, I’d been stupid. I’d been alone with Connor several times. I’d sought him out at his house. I’d ignored every warning anyone had given me.

That night I fell into an exhausted sleep, unsure about everything from what my life was going to become to whether my brother would be a part of it. And I was most unsure about Connor. Could I have really been so wrong about him? My heart said no, but I couldn’t stop seeing that form in the back of the police car. Had it been him? My head told me I was a horrible judge of people.

THE NEXT MORNING I awoke no clearer, and a gnawing worry had begun to eat at me about Connor. We hadn't been together, not really. But the sudden absence of the possibility of him in my life stung much more than I would have expected. There was a gaping hole within me suddenly, and I wasn't sure how to make the ache subside.

Cam's truck was still parked outside the lodge when I arrived, and without a real plan, I wandered toward it. When I rounded the back edge of the truck, I was surprised to find Cam leaning against the front bumper, staring ahead of himself with unseeing eyes.

"Hey you," I said, surprised that my voice sounded normal and revealed none of the pain that was eating at my insides.

"Hey."

"What's going on?"

"I think we'll be here another night or so. You wouldn't think it, but long car rides can be really draining."

I knew Cam wasn't talking about himself. I wondered how much of Jess's reluctance to leave was about being tired from the ride, and how much was about her insisting on staying until things were definitely resolved between Cam and me.

"I'm glad you're staying," I said. "It's nice to see you. And to meet Jess."

He cocked his head to the side, giving me a piercing look. For a minute I thought he was about to let loose, give me a dressing down for all the infractions over the years. I felt like I might just collapse under the weight of my regret if he did. After the words Connor had thrown at me, I didn't know how much more I could take. But Cam didn't say anything awful. Instead, he smiled. "It's nice to see you again, too. I'm sorry it's been so long."

I wouldn't have thought I was capable of smiling, but I managed it nonetheless. "What are you doing now?"

"Just giving Jess some quiet. She needs rest."

I nodded. "You could come back to my place, if Jess didn't mind."

He shrugged and then smiled. "I'll just let her know. Be right back."

"Hey, give her this," I said, handing him Connor's signed book.

He looked at it in his hand for a moment, turning it over to stare at Connor's serious portrait on the back, but said nothing. He jogged into the lodge and reappeared a few minutes later, climbing back into his truck. "Let's go. I got to see the outside of it, but why don't you show me around this trailer you're so proud of?"

"Ha!"

"I want to get another look at the house, too." Cam had worked with Chance and Sam many summers before, helping build some of the cabins around the meadow. I knew he was thinking about the house with his contractor mind now, when before he'd seen it only as my angry brother.

I got back into my car and Cam followed me through the village we had played in as children, up to the lot that once held only our beat-up station wagon and a couple tents, some folding chairs and the same old picnic table that I used now. A strange slow shame crept through me as he took time to look at the half-erected mansion that Jack had planned, wandering through the rooms. I walked at his side, silent.

"This is pretty ambitious," he said, his voice low. He kept his tone neutral, and it occurred to me that he was trying to keep the newfound peace between us, just as I was.

"It's too much," I said, agreeing with the words he hadn't spoken. "I haven't had the funds to re-plan it and finish it."

He gave me a direct look then, and I knew he understood being short of funds and was thinking of Dad. And of Jess.

I gave him the two-minute tour of the trailer and the house. He spent some time wandering the perimeter of the property, and I knew he was remembering the time we'd spent here as a family. I often did the same thing, but when Cam wandered through his memories he looked down, running the toe of his shoe through the soft mountain dirt. When I remembered, I always looked up. It was the trees that had always drawn me to this place.

After a bit, I joined him behind the frame of the house where he stood looking down the hill toward the trickle that was a river in springtime.

"What do you remember about that day you fell in?" he asked.

“Not much. How old was I? Four?”

“Maybe five.”

“I remember climbing the rocks along the edge of the river. I remember that the water looked deeper than normal.”

“And faster.” Cam’s voice was grim. “We shouldn’t have been down there. There’d been so much snow that year.” He looked up at me, his eyes narrow. “It had never been a real river before. It was usually more like a trickle. But that year it was big.” He shook his head slightly. “I should never have taken you down there.”

My heart swelled with hope. This. This was my big brother. He was back, at least in the memory of that day. “It wasn’t your fault, Cam.”

“What else do you remember? Do you remember the kid that pulled you out?”

“I don’t think so. Only in flashes, but I can’t see him, just a shadow above me. Do you remember who he was?”

Cam squinted, looking down the hill again, as if he was watching the older kid pulling me back up the hill to my dad. “He had this crazy dark red hair, and a little sister.”

My mouth might have fallen open just a bit as I turned to look at Cam. Something had just clicked in my mind, and my memory snapped into place. The shadow above me in my memory had red hair that caught the sun and blazed in shades of red and orange, I just hadn’t remembered that part until now. Connor. I swallowed hard, wondering if it could be true that Connor had saved my life as a child. If it was him, did he remember it?

We turned back and walked to the picnic table, both of us sliding into the same spots we’d always taken as children, leaving room for our parents at the other end without even thinking about it. But as soon as I was settled, I stood again. My mind was turning furious circles. “Beer?”

Cam nodded.

I returned and he started talking, holding the long bottle between his palms and rolling it back and forth. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you meet Jess earlier.”

I sat still, listening.

“We met in a grief group I attended when I was traveling for a film, out in Arizona. Everything was hot and dry there—it was a desert set—and there she was, bright and cool and bubbly.”

“She’s wonderful,” I agreed.

“Things happened really fast. She moved in with me, we got married. She doesn’t have family, so we went to the justice of the peace on a trip to Hawaii.” He tilted his head and stared at me for a second, but I knew he wasn’t seeing me. I waited for him to continue.

“She got sick last year. They gave her six months and she’s already lived twice that.”

“Cancer?” I asked. He nodded. He didn’t offer more, and I didn’t press. “I wish I could help.”

“I don’t know how long we have,” Cam said. “How about if I call Jack and see if I can persuade him to let go of that account?”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Maybe I can help you.” He stared at the tabletop. “You were right. What you said. About how you needed me, and how I just left you with him. I should never have let you marry him. I should never have walked away.”

“It wasn’t your call.” My voice was weak.

“You needed me. And I left you.” Cam’s voice broke and he looked away, taking a long pull from his beer.

“Well, if you can persuade him, you might have a future in law or sales. Maybe you can manage something my lawyer hasn’t been able to in a year.”

He nodded, a half smile turning up his lips. “Maybe. Jack’s such a pussy. What’d you ever see in that skirt-wearing douchebag?”

I shrugged.

“You know how to pick ‘em, sis. This guy, Connor...he’s been in the newspaper back home. Did you know that?” The words hurt, but Cam’s voice was soft and his eyes shone as he watched me.

I nodded, cringing as I thought about the picture Jack had stolen. My picture, and it was being used to help smear Connor’s name.

“Think it’s all true?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I don’t think so, though.” I didn’t know how to explain that despite everything I’d seen, I believed Connor. I believed his story about his sister, and I believed him about Amanda, too. “He wanted to buy this land, Cam. That was how I met him. But he changed his mind suddenly a while ago, and now I might understand part of the reason why.”

“I didn’t know you were trying to sell it.” Cam’s voice was steady, but he was looking at me with hard eyes.

“I wouldn’t have been able to—it means too much to me, to us. But he changed his mind before it came to that.”

“Why?” Cam asked.

“This is going to sound nuts. But I think it was him that pulled me from the creek.”

Cam’s eyes widened.

“I never put it together until now. But he has red hair, and he’s always looked so familiar to me, kind of...comforting, in a weird way I couldn’t put my finger on.” I stared into the distance for a minute, thinking about the way Connor had changed his mind about buying the land.

“I think he wanted to buy it until he figured out who I was. I told him it had been in our family for years, that I played up here as a kid, and then he changed his mind suddenly. I think he remembered me, but he didn’t say it.” I searched my brother’s face, as if the answer might be there somewhere, hidden in the rough-looking goatee, or in the lines of worry around his eyes.

“I don’t know what to make of that.”

“What else do you remember about him?” I asked.

“Not much,” he said. “I remember a red-haired kid with a sister. But his name wasn’t Connor.”

“It was Christopher.”

“Yeah!” Cam smiled. “Chris. And his sister was Cathy, I think. They played with us a few times one summer. Now I remember. You seriously don’t remember him?”

“I was four.”

“Well, I do remember him pulling you out of that river. He must be what,

seven or eight years older than you? I remember that he was the oldest kid when we were roaming around in our little pack. I thought he was pretty cool, actually. He'd invent games for us, spy games and stuff." Cam must have read the questions on my face. "He was a nice kid, Maddie."

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"Maybe he didn't want to freak you out."

"It freaks me out more that he's been spending time with me, that he knew and I didn't. And now the thing Jess said, about everyone he saves in his books looking like me. That's just weird."

"I don't read the books," Cam said. "Too dark."

"You make seriously weird movies. His books are too dark for you?"

He smiled and shrugged, and I glimpsed the brother I'd known for years, the little kid I'd gotten into trouble with. "What are you going to do?"

I shook my head. "That's a good question. I was going to take Jack for everything he was worth and build the cabin that should be here. But I couldn't do it. And I was going to sell Connor out by peddling a photo of him to the press. But I couldn't do that either."

Cam didn't comment.

I stared at the open walls of my former dream home. "Now I want to help you and Dad, and survive the winter, I guess." A cool breeze kicked up, as if summoned by my words. It smelled of green things and old, fertile earth.

Cam stared at me. "Well you've got me," he said. "Anytime you need me."

I couldn't help it. The tears squeezed their way from the corners of my eyes as I smiled, and a sob climbed my throat and flew out. I let him take my hand and I dropped my head to the table onto my other arm. The vacuum in my life where my brother used to be had grown so big that I thought I'd never be able to fill it. I'd gone on, trying to ignore it, but knowing that he was back was the best answer I could have hoped for. Things almost felt right, but now there was a new hole where Connor had been, and that void was full of confusion over a past I didn't remember, but one that I was certain Connor did.

When I could stop crying, I stood and wiped at my face.

"I should get back to Jess, Mads." Cam's voice was soft.

“I know.”

“She has appointments this week, but I think we’ll be here at least another night.”

“Okay.” I turned and stepped in front of him. “For what it’s worth, I really, really like her, Cam. And I’m so sorry she’s sick.”

He nodded and pulled me into his arms, holding me there long enough to almost make up for the three years he’d left me alone.

Connor

CHAPTER 29

I spent a full day taking stock. For some that might mean meditating, or rereading journal entries, or visiting with friends or family. For me it meant hiking through the September chill, staring out at the immovable features of the Sierra Nevada, and trying to understand how I fit into it all.

The vast constant landscape that surrounded Kings Grove changed, but it did so slowly, by centimeters. There was no expectation that the mountains would sprint forward, that the rivers at the base of those mountains would suddenly reverse direction or jump their banks and carve a new path. They did move—both the mountains and the rivers moved and changed daily—but they did so slowly, purposefully, and of their own accord.

I was, I decided, like the Sierra Nevada itself, slow and purposeful. A big part of me had wanted to forgive Maddie immediately, if only to alleviate the pain inside me that had grown constant and aching since I'd closed my door in her pretty face. But it wasn't in my nature to trust easily, and it was even harder to forgive, and harder still to admit I was wrong.

When the detectives had come to my door to tell me my name had been cleared, that they'd finally gathered enough evidence to corroborate the story I'd been telling them all along, I felt vindicated. I wanted to rush back inside and laugh at the insanity of it all, celebrate the fact that it was finally over. But I had no one to laugh or celebrate with, and now that the pressure of the investigation was off, it was time to figure out how much of that was nature's intent and how

much of it was a choice I'd made.

The majestic rugged landscape before me gave me the space I needed to think, and the metaphor I needed to understand my own mind. I wasn't impulsive, and it wasn't easy for me to shift direction.

But I was tired of being alone.

And more than that, I suspected my life had been steering me toward Maddie Turner all along.

Maddie

CHAPTER 30

I arrived for my shift at the diner the next day on time, and the sun sprinkled gold through the treetops, making me feel like the universe and I had come to some kind of agreement.

Miranda practically bounced off the counter toward me when I arrived. “Did you hear?”

I shook my head, putting my bag beneath the counter and tying on an apron after giving the diner a quick sweep with my eyes. Only a few patrons, all contentedly eating. “Hear what?”

“The police cars. It wasn’t Connor.”

My mind spun, but then quickly settled. I’d known it wasn’t him. On some fundamental level, I’d known it. Relief swept through me, loosening muscles I didn’t realize I’d been holding tense. “Who was it?”

Miranda’s face contorted a bit. “Amanda’s father.”

“What?” I’d met Mr. Terry a couple times. I couldn’t imagine the man doing anything terrible to his daughter. “You mean he...did he hurt his daughter?”

She shook her head. “Amanda was never even missing.”

It was my turn to shake my head. “I don’t get it.”

“Well, this is just the gossip around the village, so I’m sure there are pieces missing. But Carol Hammond was in early, and she told us some of the details.”

“How did Carol Hammond know?”

“She lives next door to the Terrys, and I guess she was the one who called

the police.”

My eyebrows went up. It was hard to say if living in a village full of busybodies was a good thing or a bad thing. “Why?”

“I guess Carol was at the Terry’s house when Amanda called from wherever she’d been hiding, and they have one of those old fashioned answering machines that talks out loud. Amanda left a message and Carol heard it. You know Carol and Mrs. Terry are old friends.” Miranda was waving her hands as she talked. She loved telling a good story. “Mrs. Terry wouldn’t tell her anything, but Carol figured a few things out from what she heard—mostly that Amanda wasn’t missing, that she wasn’t in any danger. She was calling home for a chat.”

“Her parents pretended she was missing?” An idea of what the Terrys might have been doing formed in my mind. “They were trying to make it look like Connor had done something to her?”

“He is kind of an easy target, I guess. One with a lot of money.”

That made some sense. They must’ve had some plans to blackmail him. “But if they were trying to blackmail Connor, wouldn’t he have known? Why didn’t he just go to the police?”

Miranda shrugged. “Police work is not my specialty.”

Just then Chance and Sam Palmer swaggered through the doors and Miranda’s jaw dropped open.

“Go seat them,” I hissed at her, pushing her from behind the counter.

Adele was making a beeline to help the brothers, but Miranda stepped up, regaining herself. “I’ll help these guys, Adele.”

I watched as Miranda showed them to a booth and managed to hand them menus and get their coffee without spilling a drop. She didn’t manage many words, but at least she hadn’t broken any plates yet.

“Nicely done,” I commended her when we were back out of earshot.

“Thanks,” she said. “Now what about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You. And the hot writer. He’s off the hook. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. He hates me. More than ever.” I recalled his angry face from the day before. I had my brother back, maybe that would be enough.

“You’re just trying to talk yourself out of doing anything because you’re scared after Jack was such an ass.”

I gaped at her. “I don’t think the two things are related.”

“Yes they are.” Miranda was twenty-four. And she still lived at home. But maybe she’d hit the nail on the head. I cringed as she continued. “And you’re afraid every man is a jerk at heart, that they’re all going to hurt you like Jack did.”

“That’s not true!” *That probably was true...*

“You’re scared, Maddie. And when we’re afraid of something, that’s when life is showing us an opportunity.”

“I’m afraid of heights but I don’t plan to jump off the Golden Gate next time I’m in San Fran. I’m not sure your logic holds.” I lifted an eyebrow. It was hard taking sage advice from her, but I knew she was probably right.

“Okay,” she said, spreading her hands in front of her and taking a step back. “Just trying to help. And really, I’m just telling you all the stuff you told me about going after Chance.” She walked away, her ponytail swinging, and circled the restaurant, checking on tables and lingering to take Chance and Sam’s order.

I held my spot at the counter for a few more minutes. I knew I should try to mend things with Connor. If nothing else, I needed him to know that I would never betray him, that I hadn’t sold that photo. Even if he didn’t believe me, I had to try. And I couldn’t imagine never seeing him again.

WHEN I GOT HOME that evening, I didn’t give myself time to back out. I pulled off the ugly maroon polo shirt I wore for work and put on a simple white button-down blouse with jeans. I splashed some water on my face and tried to tame my curls, finally giving up. Connor hated me. It wouldn’t matter what I looked like when I went to apologize and try to explain, only that I did it.

I drove to his house on the other side of the meadow with butterflies dive-bombing around in my stomach, my emotions careening wildly. I was nervous and scared, but the fear I felt now was of a purely emotional variety. Connor had

nothing to do with Amanda Terry, her father's arrest made that clear enough. It felt like a redemption to know that at least I hadn't been completely wrong about that. Connor was a good person. And that was why he deserved my explanation. I just wasn't sure he'd be willing to hear it.

The pointed deck loomed above my head as I walked to the recessed front door, the stars just beginning to prick points of light in the dark canvas of sky over the house. I took a deep breath and then knocked hard on the door, the sound reverberating in the cave of rock around me.

I stood for a few minutes, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, my nerves threatening to overwhelm me as the moments grew longer. I'd seen Connor's car. But he could have gone for a hike. Wherever he was, it didn't seem that he was here. Or maybe he was just ignoring me. I didn't really blame him.

Without thinking too much about it, I circled around to the other side of the house, following the small dirt path that ran along the meadow. Another tiny porch jutted out from that side of the house, overlooking the grass and greenery below. And sprawled in a chair on the porch, his feet propped up on the railing and glass of something raised in his hand, was Connor. He was staring out at the murky sky and hadn't seen me yet. The door behind him was closed, so I was certain he hadn't heard me knocking.

I turned, changing my mind about disturbing him and giving myself an out. He looked so peaceful, I told myself. I'd come back tomorrow. But just as I ducked back into the shadowed overhang, he called out.

"Maddie."

I stiffened and turned back, walking back out into the open.

He'd stood and was gazing down at me. His face was impossible to make out in the dim light. I had no way of reading his expression, and his voice held little to guide me as to his feelings.

"Hi. I'm sorry to bother you."

His head tilted to one side and then he took a sip of his drink, but he remained silent. I sensed that he was deciding what to do. "You want to come up?" He sounded tired, but not angry.

I shrugged, surprised at the invitation. “Okay, sure. Yes.” I walked around to the front of the house again, my heart in my throat.

Connor

CHAPTER 31

I'd been planning to go see Maddie this evening, and felt a little wash of shame that she'd beaten me to it. Still, seeing her standing there beneath my deck looking uncertain and lovely made my breath come faster and my heart stutter. I waved her up the stairs into the living room, relief washing through me that maybe we could figure things out between us.

"Drink?" I asked.

She stuffed her hands into her pockets. "No, I don't want to keep you long."

I waved toward the stools that faced the breakfast bar and she sat, her fingers finding their way to one another and fidgeting nervously. I sat next to her, our knees nearly touching, and waited. Maddie wouldn't meet my eye.

"I wasn't sure you'd even speak to me," she ventured, still watching her fingers dance. "I hoped you might give me a few minutes to explain what you saw...what you thought...with Jack." Her voice wavered and I realized how nervous she was.

I wanted to touch her, to comfort her, but I needed to hear her words, so I waited. "Okay," I said.

"Jack sold the photo I took of you." She looked up at me and I nodded, urging her to go on. "I told you the truth before. I told him I didn't want to sell it, and I didn't give it to him. I honestly had nothing to do with selling it. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I'd considered it. Things have been..."

"I know they've been hard."

“Right. Well, yes, but I knew I couldn’t do that to you. I didn’t consider it for long. And Jack and I were not working together. When he showed up at the diner with that money...it was nothing I was expecting, Connor. And I didn’t take it.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t need any more convincing. It was obvious she was telling the truth, and the emotion with which she stared at me now, her eyes liquid and pleading, nearly broke my heart.

“I’m so sorry.”

“If you didn’t sell it, why are you sorry?” I asked.

She dropped my gaze again, leaned forward onto her arms. “I’m sorry for all the trouble it’s caused you—for the contribution to the mess that was already going on. I wish I had been here for you, helping to defend you.”

“That’s not your responsibility,” I said. “I believe you about the photo. I’ve had time to think about what I saw and heard between you. I know you well enough to know you weren’t lying. I was just angry and needed somewhere to aim that. I’m sorry.”

“I understand.”

We sat in silence for a moment, but I knew I needed to add something more, and Maddie seemed to sense that I wasn’t finished. I straightened my shoulders, turned to face her. “I think I owe you another apology, actually.”

“You do?”

“For being hot and cold about the property. And for not telling you who I was.” Her wide-eyed expression and slight nod made me think she knew what I meant. “I should have told you everything as soon as I realized who you were. I wanted to buy that place because...it’s always meant something to me. That spot...” I looked into the fire, wondering if I could possibly explain to Maddie what that day by the river had meant to me, how it had shaped me. “That day when we were kids, when I pulled you out of the river...it was important to me.”

“It was a million years ago,” she whispered.

“But I see it every time I close my eyes. I think it’s the only thing in my life I’ve ever done right. I see you in the water, your eyes huge. You were so little, and you had this enormous wild mop of curly hair. When we played, before we went down to the river, there was something about the wild child with the big

crazy hair that drew me in. You were loud, and fierce, and so fearless. And I saw my sister and me when I watched the way your brother was with you.” I remembered her dark haired brother, his quick defense of his little sister, his constant watching presence at her side.

“But then you fell into the river and he couldn’t help you. We were all perched on the rocks over you while you tried to get out, and you kept sinking under. And Cam was yelling like a crazy person, and trying to fish you out with a stick, but he didn’t go in.” He’d been frantic, but he must not have been able to swim.

“And your eyes were everywhere, and then they landed on me, and I jumped. I didn’t even think about it. I remember knowing I had to save you. And I did.” My eyes found hers. “I saved you. You’re the only person I’ve ever been able to save.”

“What do you mean? Your sister?” She asked.

I leaned back and laughed, but there was nothing funny about the stories I had to tell about those I’d failed. “Yeah, for one. But way before that. I’ve lost a lot of people, I guess. My grandpa used to live with us when we lived in Chicago. But he died when I was pretty little. I used to crawl in his bed every morning and he’d tell me stories. One day I went into his room to wake him up, and he was dead.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.” Maddie gasped and brought a hand to her mouth.

“And then the summer we came up here for the first time, my parents had been in a car accident, so my sister and I went to live with my aunt in northern California. She and her husband were the ones who brought us up here during the summer. But they had never wanted kids. And they didn’t want us. And so when I was eighteen, it was just me and my sister.” I remembered the way they’d let us go, as if we’d just been visiting and had somewhere to return to.

Maddie reached out tentatively and laid her hand on mine. The warmth seeped through me and I felt my shoulders drop. I turned my hand over and grasped her smooth fingers in my own.

“I think at first, I didn’t even realize I was doing it.”

“Doing what?” she asked.

“Trying to save you over and over again so I could feel that sensation. Of doing something right. Of succeeding.” My voice had become a whisper. I’d never admitted this out loud, never really realized it until yesterday.

“You’re a huge success,” she argued. “Surely that means something?”

“With words, I do okay. With people? Not as much. I’ve never been good at getting close to anyone. I’ve had relationships...” I paused, but knew I needed to tell her everything. I went on. “But I’ve never done it right. They get tired of trying to understand. And they leave.” I took a sip from the glass on the counter. “My agent finally asked me why all the ones who survive in my books have the same curly hair, the same brown eyes.”

“Like me,” she breathed. “You keep saving me.”

“My sister actually figured it out first. She said you were the only person I’d ever kept from leaving me. And somehow it stuck with me, even when I didn’t think it was that important to me.” I smiled, hoping she wouldn’t think I was completely crazy after this. “Once I realized it, after we’d come up here to my house, I came back to the spot and saw this house you were building. And I wanted some part of that memory to be mine. So I offered to buy it. But then I realized who you were. And I couldn’t take it from you.”

“And when you figured out who I was, why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

I didn’t have a good answer. “I don’t know. I just wanted to be near you, and didn’t know if it would freak you out to hear it. And then the deeper we got and the longer I waited, the less it seemed like I could tell you.”

She nodded and looked up at me then, and I saw that she understood. Her eyes held mine and her fingers rose to trace the side of my face, drawing lines of heat down my jaw, through the stubble at my cheek. Finally, her index finger traced my bottom lip and I couldn’t help the ragged breath that escaped me.

I reached for her, pulling her into my arms. “It almost broke me when I thought you’d sold me out,” I whispered. “I didn’t even realize how much I trusted you, how much I’ve come to depend on you in so short a time.”

“I would never do that,” she said, looking up into my face.

I lifted her hand, bringing her palm up to kiss and she shivered in my arms.

I pulled her closer, and felt the heat of her body pressed against mine, the

solidity of something I thought I might never feel again warming my body and my heart. For a long moment we stood like that, looking into one another's eyes and breathing together, two parts of one unified being. And then she tilted her head up slightly and I leaned down, capturing her mouth with my own.

Maddie melted into me, her arms sliding around my neck, pulling me closer. And I held her possessively, conscious of how tenuous the connection between two hearts and two people could be, carefully focusing on protecting the delicate trust we were building together.

Our lips slid together, seeking and solidifying the bond between us, cementing the trust we shared with each breath we took.

"I never expected to see you again," I whispered eventually, when Maddie moved her head back for a breath. "It makes me almost believe in fate."

She watched me, her eyes glazed and her lips swollen from the kiss, and a flicker of a smile crossed her mouth. I turned and led her upstairs.

Maddie

It wasn't warm upstairs, but when Connor pulled his shirt off, I didn't feel the cold. I stood before him, watching him undress before me. The moonlight coming in the window shimmered on his bare skin, deepening the lines around his muscles. His hair was wild and caught flecks of light from the moon, and I had a flickering image of a wolf, or a lion ... something wild and carnal. He stared at me for a second, stripped to only his boxers as we stood at the foot of his bed, and then he stepped near and pulled me into his arms, kissing me gently but with a fierceness that spoke of years of loneliness, of secrets finally shared, of an end to so many painful chapters.

We fell together onto the bed, and the intensity of all that had passed wound itself into what transpired between us. I flew and dove, guided by Connor's strong hands and the tumult of emotion I felt for him. I'd never been multi-orgasmic. Until tonight.

Connor found ways to tease and push me, eliciting sounds and reactions from me I didn't know I was capable of. His hands, his tongue, his commanding voice, were everywhere.

"On your stomach," he said, and I thought it might be just a suggestion, but I complied, the harsh tone of Connor's voice suggesting we were walking the line between play and command. Once I was there, my head nestled into the soft down pillow, Connor's knee nudged my thighs apart. His breath was hot on my throat as he leaned over me from behind, one hand tracing up my my ass, my

back, wrapping around my waist and pulling me back slightly.

He notched himself at my entrance, his mouth taking mine over my shoulder. It was awkward, close to discomfort, but also so ridiculously hot. I pressed up into him, and centimeter by centimeter, he pushed inside me. The angle, and the way he had me trapped beneath him kept it tight, and as he wedged inside me, it felt like a slow invasion—not just of my channel, my most sensitive anatomy, but of my mind, my very existence.

Connor held me tightly, and once he was fully seated, began thrusting into me. It was shocking and so hot I was on the brink as he began, my clit rubbing against the fabric of the sheets beneath me as I writhed in his arms.

I came once just like that, the friction and suggestion of something illicit spiking me over the edge. Connor held me and gasped into my ear as I climaxed, the noises I couldn't repress clearly ratcheting up his desire.

“Fuck,” he breathed as his thrusts became more aggressive. “Fuck that was hot,” he said. Moments later, I felt him tightening against me, and I would never have thought it was possible, but as he came, my body responded in kind, shattering into a thousand shards as we reached the edge together.

Jack would happily tell people that I wasn't orgasmic at all. He actually believed that some women couldn't achieve it. But I had always known that I was not one of those women. Though Jack and I had many things together in the early days...great sex was never one of them. For some reason, I thought it was great for him, and that maybe that was enough. But as Connor ground out my name as he released into me, and as my body responded in kind, I knew that really satisfying sex was only so if both parties were equally involved. And I'd never been that involved with Jack.

Connor relaxed, letting himself rest to one side of me, half of him still laying across my bare body. His breathing gradually slowed, and I listened to it as I stared out at the sky cluttered with stars, the moon shining off to one side and creating dark looming shadows out of the ancient trees that watched over us.

“I never expected to see you again,” Connor said, his voice a whisper. “It makes me almost believe in fate.”

I didn't answer him, but thought about that. Was Connor supposed to save

me? In ways beyond the literal act of pulling me from the river? I certainly felt saved in that moment as he lay next to me out in the deepening chill of night. But being sexually sated and being saved were really two different things, and I did understand that now, though I might have felt differently, were I ten years younger.

He kissed me gently and we lay there until I was sure he had fallen asleep. But then his voice sifted to me through the darkness. “Maddie, let me save you one more time. Let me help you with the house.”

I knew that saving me financially had much more insidious ramifications than pulling me out of a river. “I’m not sure I need saving in that way, Connor,” I said, nestling back into his arms.

MY PHONE RANG EARLY the next morning, pulling me from Connor’s embrace to find my jeans, where I’d left the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Is this Maddie Turner?”

“It is.” I’d learned to be suspicious after Jack and I had separated and his lawyer had called asking me all kinds of questions.

“Do you do weddings?”

“What do you...” I was waking up slowly, and suddenly realized that this was a call about a potential photography gig. “Yes, absolutely!”

“My fiancé and I are getting married up in Kings Grove in September. The 14th. I know it’s really short notice. Are you booked?”

This woman clearly had no idea I was just getting my business off the ground. That said, I did have a pretty good wedding portfolio from my time in San Diego. “I’m not, actually.”

“Oh thank goodness! And what’s your rate for eight hours?”

At one time, it was quite high. I wondered what I could get away with. The student loans I was going to have to start paying would be about five hundred a month. “One thousand?”

The woman on the other end squeaked and I wasn't sure if I'd talked myself out of a job. "That's so reasonable!" she squealed.

I suddenly wished I'd been more unreasonable. "Oh, good."

"When can we meet to sign contracts?" She wasn't messing around.

"Any time, really. Will you come up here?"

"I'll be up next week to talk to the caterer anyway. Can we get together then?"

I gave her directions to the diner and hoped Adele would be okay with me meeting a client during my shift. I'd tell her she didn't have to pay me for the time we talked.

I hung up feeling more optimistic than I had in months.

"What was that?" Connor's sleepy voice came from the pillows as strong hands pulled my shoulders backwards into bed again.

"That," I said. "Was me getting ready to save myself."

Connor began to ask what I meant, but he didn't get the chance to finish. Getting a glimpse of financial independence turned out to be a huge turn on.

Maddie

CHAPTER 32

I met with the girl, Sarah Jasper, about her wedding plans the following week. Her caterer, as it turned out, was the diner where I worked.

“We didn’t always live up here, you know,” Frank told me when I asked him about it after meeting with the bride. “We used to run a fancy little cafe and catering business down in the valley.” It seemed Frank and Adele had bigger dreams, too. “We moved up here for the cleaner air and a fresh start. Adele has lots of allergies and the haze in the valley wasn’t good for her. She feels better up here.”

If this was Adele feeling well, I couldn’t imagine what she was like when she was sick.

The wedding plans were set for less than a month out, and I got the job. On the previous weddings I’d worked, I’d had a couple of assistants—one with a second camera, and one with an assortment of lenses at the ready. I’d have to change up my strategy to do it solo, but I wasn’t too worried. This bride, unlike so many I’d met, seemed happy with everything I proposed and was actually more focused on the concept of marrying the man she loved than she was on the niggly little details. It was refreshing.

I went back to the trailer that night full of hope for the future. It was late, since I had stopped through the library to edit some of the photos I’d taken in the last few weeks. I was surprised by the shots I had of Cam and Jess. It’d been clear that they loved each other when I’d met them—she made my brother a

different man, but there was something in the pictures that had brought me close to tears as I'd sorted through them. There was a palpable sense of love between them, and the knowledge that their time was short was evident in every frame. Something in the way they looked at one another, the way they leaned in close. I added some filters, and knew I needed to print them. I decided I'd do it in black and white—there was enough vibrant feeling in the simple love that surrounded them in each shot that they needed no competition from actual colors. It made my heart ache to think that he would lose her.

I drove through the village feeling better than I had in months, despite my sadness over Jess. It wasn't that all my problems were solved—not at all. I still had bills I didn't know how to pay and a house I couldn't finish building. I had a brother about to lose the love of his life and the man I'd been married to was never going to give me the money he owed me. Oh, and he'd stolen a photo I'd taken and used it to malign my...*my what? My boyfriend?* Besides that, my father thought he was on a perpetual cruise and I was always in grad school in his mind. And while all of that difficult stuff was true, and it was a heavy load to bear, every one of my negatives now came with a “but”—something I could add to the statement that made it not quite so bad.

I topped the small rise where my trailer sat, and my heart beat a little faster to see the lights blazing in the trailer windows and Connor's car parked out front. I opened the door to find music playing and Connor wearing an apron at the stove top. I'd told him the night before he was welcome any time he wanted to pop by, and here he was. My heart swelled inside my chest.

“What is this?” I laughed, walking into the open circle of his arms. He looked positively gleeful as he lifted a wooden spoon in greeting.

“I'm making a cake, with chocolate ganache.” He hugged me tight and then released me, turning back to the pot on the stove.

“You're full of surprises,” I said. “Is it my birthday?”

He turned to me, eyes serious. “Oh God, it's not, is it?”

“No, silly. Don't worry, I'll advertise for weeks before my birthday. I'd never risk anyone missing the chance to celebrate it.”

His face relaxed. “Oh good. When is that, by the way?”

“April.”

“Okay.” He grinned. “No, it’s not a birthday cake. It’s an ‘I’m not under investigation anymore’ cake.”

I grinned. “I’m so glad,” I said.

He nodded his head, the grin widening and the dimples deepening beneath the light stubble around his mouth. “The police called today and confirmed that the calls and letters I’d told them about were genuine. Mr. Terry confessed.”

“You were getting calls and letters?” He’d never mentioned that.

“I get a lot of weird mail. I write dark books, it attracts crazy people sometimes.”

I nodded.

“But they got pretty specific about Amanda, and I’d given them to the police, but they didn’t think they were valid evidence since they were coming from their lead suspect.”

“That sucks.”

He shrugged. “So it’s officially over. The tabloids are still working their smear campaign,” he said. “But my agent says that’s just because I never give them anything else to write about.”

“And because you’re so hot.”

He smirked and gave me a level gaze.

“And they have my photo to prove it.”

“I guess they’re still using the photo,” he said. “But I have an idea about that.”

“You do?” I plopped down on the small couch by the window and looked up at him. Even the mention of the photo still made me feel guilty.

He nodded. “I’m going to help you sue Jack for copyright violation. That was your photo. He stole it.”

Hadn’t I threatened Jack with that? I smiled, imagining Jack’s face when he realized that I’d been serious. “That’s a good idea.”

“Or at least I’m going to threaten to sue him, and also let him know that I plan to let the magazine know that he sold them a photo he didn’t own.”

“Why just threaten?” I was shaking my head, confused.

“I don’t really want anything from him,” he said, pointing the chocolate covered spoon at me. “But you do. And if he thinks he might be able to stop the suit going forward by meeting your demands, then everyone wins.”

“Except Jack,” I said, perhaps too gleefully.

“Jack wins by not getting sued. And by realizing he can’t just push everyone around.”

“That’s a really good idea, though I doubt Jack will ever realize either of those things.”

“I’ll call my lawyer first thing tomorrow and get it going,” he said. “But in the meantime, I thought we should celebrate the fact that I’m not a predator after all.”

I grinned. “I’m so glad,” I said. “Though even when I thought you were in the back of that police car, I don’t think I ever really believed you were a predator.”

“I hope not.” His voice was serious now. He turned to face me, putting the wooden spoon into the bowl of batter first. “We’ve had enough challenges,” he said. “Maybe now we can focus on finding out what’s here between us, beyond allegations and distant memories.”

“It’s hard to take you seriously when you’re wearing a lime green apron, Betty Crocker.” I grinned.

“Oh is it?” A sexy smile spread across his face. “Well, I don’t want my ganache to burn, but when it’s done, I’m going to show you how serious I am.”

I laughed, and my body tingled in anticipation. “Promise?”

“Better believe it,” he said, winking.

I leaned back in my seat and let my head rest on the wall behind me. I was still stuck in a trailer, but now it felt more like a safe and happy cave than a cage. And I had company. Company that knew how to make chocolate cake.

Connor slid a glass of wine in front of me and leaned down to kiss my cheek. Life was definitely improving.

THE NEXT FEW days were blissful. We spent time alternately in the trailer or at Connor's house, eating, drinking, and tumbling around under warm blankets as the weather outside turned noticeably cooler.

I practiced switching lenses quickly and taking a variety of shots at various ranges to get ready for the wedding.

"You do that fast," Connor said, watching me put the telephoto lens onto the camera.

"It still takes too long," I said. "I waste time getting the other one put away. I don't want to drop it into the bag, it'll get scratched."

"You need an assistant."

"I had one of those once." That had been nice. But I could hardly afford to pay anyone to help me now.

"Maybe a lazy writer with nothing else filling his days?"

I stared at him. He was lounging on the couch with a cup of coffee in his hand, flannel pajama bottoms pulled dangerously low around his hips and a spread of auburn across his strong chest. His hair glowed in the firelight. He grinned.

"Seriously? It's not glamorous."

"Oh well, in that case," he said, mock-flipping his imaginary long hair. He leveled his gaze at me. "I don't care. I want to help. Glamor isn't really my thing anyway."

"Would you really help?" It would be so much easier to hand him the lenses and have him put them away and get the next one ready. Then I wouldn't miss an important shot.

"I really would. I'd love to, actually."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Seriously." He sat up and put his cup on the table. "You told me you like watching me write."

"I do." I'd told him that a few days ago when he'd pulled the laptop into his lap as we sat out on his deck. A veil dropped over him while he wrote, and his fingers flew. It's like watching someone completely transported by their own focus, their own mind. It was fascinating, and it was also really sexy to see him

so committed to his work.

“Well, it’s no different for me. When you have that camera in your hands, I think you see the world differently. You shift into photographer-mode, and it’s sexy as hell.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Jack had hated my camera.

“You look completely happy when you’re taking pictures, Mad.”

I stared at the camera in my hands for a minute. It felt like part of me, an extension of my fingers. He was right. “Because I am,” I agreed.

“And I’d like to help.”

“Thanks,” I said, putting the camera down and walking over to kiss his cheek. “I appreciate it.”

“Of course, you’ll have to pay me back.” He grabbed my wrist and pulled me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me and holding me there immobile so I was staring up into his face.

“What kind of payment did you have in mind?”

“Oh, we’ll think of something,” he said, his voice low and ominous. Then a serious look crossed his face. “Actually, I know.”

He released me and I sat up. “What?”

“Let me help with the house.”

I shook my head. “That’s my problem.”

“And I love you. It’s our problem.”

He had dropped those three words so naturally, I almost didn’t hear them—or wasn’t sure I’d heard them right. My heart accelerated in my chest and warmth flooded me. I couldn’t help the slow smile that spread across my face.

“Is that a yes?” he asked, the blue eyes shining in the firelight.

“You love me?”

He grinned. “Did I say that?”

I nodded and he pulled me to him, laying me across his lap again while he cradled me in his arms. “Then I guess it must be true. I do. I love you, Maddie Turner. Is that okay?”

I couldn’t help giggling. I nodded again. As his eyes shone, I did a quick inventory of my own feelings, and wasn’t surprised to find an abundance of

warmth and concern for Connor overflowing within me. I tried to imagine life without him at this point, and the thought left me empty and cold. I loved him, too. I hadn't thought to say it yet. "I love you, too," I said. "But the house is my problem."

He smiled and then shook his head at me. "All right, stubborn girl," he said. "But the offer stands."

Connor

CHAPTER 33

The wedding went off without a hitch, and I think I turned out to be a passable assistant, handing Maddie what she needed at the right times and even managing to take some photos with the spare rig when the reception was in full swing.

Maddie was professional, proficient, and one hundred percent in her element. It was a joy to watch.

It sounded ridiculous, even to my own mind, but I swear those days leading up to the event felt lighter, sunnier and happier than any I'd known before. I actually found myself toying with the idea of writing a different kind of book and began an adventure story about two boys in the woods—but when it turned out there was also an escaped convict in the woods, I realized I was a thriller writer and it would always be true.

I was writing on the deck and Maddie was going through the photos from the wedding on my spare laptop when her phone rang a few days later. As soon as she picked up the phone, her expression sobered, her eyes becoming wider and her mouth hardening into a line. She whispered, “Cam,” and stood to take the call.

A few minutes later she returned to her spot, her shoulders rounded and her eyes shining. “Jess is in the hospital,” she said. “He thinks this is it.”

“Should we go?” I asked, not wanting to insert myself into Maddie’s family, but unable to imagine allowing her to go without me.

We were in the car soon after. I drove and Maddie stared out the window, quiet. At one point she opened a mailer she'd retrieved from the post office on the way out of town—a photo book she opened in her lap. When she sniffled softly as she turned its pages, I took her hand.

“It’s them,” she explained. “The photos I took of Cam and Jess. I’m going to give it to them.”

We reached the hospital in Los Angeles in the middle of the night, and in the quiet confinement of the elevator, I pulled Maddie to me. “I know this is hard. I just want you to know that I’m here for you. And for Cam.”

When we stepped onto the floor where Jess’s room was, Maddie squeezed my hand and went to the room. I took a seat to wait. After a half hour, Maddie emerged again, coming to meet me. I stood and took her into my arms, feeling her sorrow like a cloud around her. I held her tightly and wished there was more I could do.

“I need to get Cam something to eat,” she said, pulling back slightly and then stepping away as a nurse approached us.

“I’m glad you’re here,” the nurse said, stepping in front of us. She wore Hello Kitty scrubs and had a petite build, but her voice could’ve come from a lumberjack’s mouth. “That one in there, Cameron, is it?”

Maddie nodded.

“He needs to eat something. And get some sleep. He’s been here two solid days and I’m not sure he’s moved the whole time. We don’t need another patient.” Her small brown eyes were trained on Maddie. “You family?”

She nodded again. “I’m his sister. This is my boyfriend.” I couldn’t help the small thrill that went through me at the word, even in these dire circumstances. I squeezed her hand tighter.

“All right. Well, my job is to take care of the patient. Your job is to take care of your brother. We got a deal?”

Maddie agreed and I turned to the nurse. “How is Jess doing?” I asked.

The woman looked at us each in turn for a second, and then cocked her head to the side slightly. “It’s just a wait at this point. There isn’t much else we can do. We suggested hospice care a month ago when she was here, but your brother

wouldn't hear of it. She's such a sweet girl. Fought longer than we expected her to." She reached out and squeezed Maddie's hand, then bustled off around the corner.

Maddie took a deep breath, seemed to pull herself together. "I need to get something for Cam to eat."

When we returned to the room with a tray of various snacks, I went inside with Maddie at her urging. Maddie introduced me in quiet tones to her brother, and I shook hands with the man whose grief was like a set of clothes he wore, heavy and drab, pulling him down.

Maddie reached into her bag and pulled the photo book out, handing it to Cam. "This is for you guys."

"What is this?" he asked, making no move to open it. He looked defeated, exhausted, and on the verge of collapse.

She reached over and opened it, placing it back on his lap. "It's the pictures I took when you and Jess visited a couple weeks ago. I edited them and had them made into an album."

Cam's eyes had brightened slightly and he stared at the first picture, where Maddie had placed a large photo of him and Jess walking hand in hand beneath a canopy of young trees with the trunks of colossal Sequoias on either side of them. Cam lifted his eyes to meet his sister's, and something unspoken passed between them, a love that was almost tangible. A deep pang of longing for my own sister hit me then, and I turned my head.

Cam turned slowly through the pages, his eyes lingering on pictures of him and Jess, smiling, kissing, holding hands. He got to the end of the book and closed it on his lap, tears running down his face. "Thank you," he said quietly.

We sat together, none of us talking. It was clear that suggesting Cam go try to get some sleep would be pointless, but Maddie squeezed my hand and gave me a weak smile when he nodded off in his chair, slumped to one side.

I scooted closer to Maddie and she closed her eyes, leaning into me.

Just as my own eyes were closing, something in the room changed.

"Cam?" Jess was awake.

Cameron bolted to her side, pulling her hand to his heart. "Jess!"

She smiled at him, the slow widening of her chapped lips revealing the effort that simple movement took. “Hi baby.”

“Hi honey. Maddie and Connor came to see you.” Tears were streaming down his face, as he turned so she could see us past his shoulder.

“Hi guys,” Jess said, looking beyond Cam for a moment. “Wow, you really are Connor Charles,” she said to me, her voice no more than a breath.

I smiled and nodded. “I really am.”

“I’m so glad I got to meet you,” she said. The words she left unsaid settled around us all.

Maddie stood next to her brother and leaned down to give Jess an awkward hug.

“Maddie,” she said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Of course,” Maddie said.

Cameron offered her some water, and she sipped it from a straw, her head lifted by his strong hands.

“Can I talk to your sister for a minute?” Jess asked Cam.

He looked stricken that she would ask him to leave, and his eyes were almost panicked as he turned to look at us. “Sure,” he whispered. He and I left the room, and he gave me a weak smile as he fastened himself to the wall just outside.

We stood near one another awkwardly, Cameron’s grief radiating from him and my own discomfort just as evident. After a few minutes, he turned to face me.

“Listen,” he said, his voice raspy and broken. “The circumstances here, well, I would have liked to have met you another way.”

I felt suddenly like an intruder, wishing I’d let Maddie come up alone. “I know, I’m so sorry,” I said.

“No,” he said quickly, reading my discomfort. “I’m glad you’re here. It’s good for Maddie to have someone. There’s something between you—I mean, something I can see. I think you’re different. Good together.” He blew out a sharp breath and lifted a hand to scrub his jaw. “I’m sorry, I’m a mess. But I’m glad to meet you, glad she found you,” he said finally.

“Thanks,” I said, and we stood there together more easily after that, both of

us waiting.

After a few minutes punctuated only by the determined movements of nurses and doctors up and down the hall, the door opened again, and Maddie's whispered voice came out. "Cam, you better come."

Cam flew back into the room and Maddie stepped out just after, pushing herself against my chest, her shoulders shaking.

Neither of us said anything, Maddie's grief answering any questions I might have had.

CONVINCING Cam to leave Jess so that the hospital staff could do the things that were required of them was nearly impossible. He wasn't hysterical, or unreasonable. He was a mountain of man, a wall of misery, and he could not be moved. He stood at her bed, holding her hand and being with her. Seeing him so raw and torn apart, and watching Maddie try to help him broke my heart, and there were moments when I wanted to run.

The entire scene, the feeling in the air, the pain that bubbled just below the surface in each of us was so familiar it almost hurt. It had been like this when Cathy died, but I'd been alone in my grief. Not for the first time, I felt thankful that Maddie and Cam had found their way back together just in time. They needed each other, and they were lucky to have one another.

I understood what Cam felt in some ways. How do you leave someone who has been such a fundamental part of your life? How do you walk away, leave the hospital and go back to your life? Just get in your car and drive away, leaving them there and returning to your life like you'd been on a visit to the grocery store or the barber? I didn't know how to do it, and so I wasn't much help to Cam. But I was there. And Maddie and I weren't going anywhere until he did.

It was the tenacious nurse who finally pulled Cam away from Jess's bedside and moved him backward so the staff could get close enough to do the things they needed to do.

"She's gone, Cameron. And it's time for you to let her go," she said, standing

in front of him with a practiced sympathy on her face. The fact that she had probably done this many times didn't make her words sound less true, though. "There's no need for you to stay here. She's free to come with you now. She's not bound by the body that was failing, or by the pain. Now she can stay right here with you. She'll always be with you." She put a small rosy hand on his heart, her fire red nails glowing against his black shirt. "She's here now."

Cameron stared at her, and then nodded. He thanked her quietly, placed a final kiss on Jess's lips, and then walked out of the room.

Cam stopped walking and turned around, and Maddie's shoulders fell. He was never going to leave the hospital. He headed back to the room.

We watched him, neither of us sure what to do.

Cam turned as he got to the door. "I forgot the book," he said. He went inside and then reappeared, clutching the photo book to his chest.

That night was hard. We took Cam to his house, where Jess was everywhere around us. Her prescriptions were lined up on the kitchen counter, her green crocheted slippers next to the chair in the living room. Her knitting lay abandoned, a scarf half-finished, in the seat of the chair.

Cam sat at the kitchen table, turning through the pages of the book Maddie had given him. We sat with him, and I made coffee and pancakes. Cam ate a few bites and finally rose. "I'm going to get some sleep," he said.

We both nodded.

Cam turned around a few feet from the table. "You don't have to stay, Maddie."

Maddie stood up. "I don't have anywhere else I need to be. I'll be here when you wake up."

Something softened in the lines around Cam's mouth, and he turned without saying anything else, disappearing down a hallway. I heard a door shutting in the back of the house, and tried not to imagine how hard it would be for him to be in the room he shared with Jess, surrounded by her personal things, laying down in a bed that smelled like her. Then again, I wondered if that might be a comfort to him.

Once Cam was gone, Maddie seemed to crumble. She laid her head on her

arms at the round white table and let the tears come. I sat next to her and stroked her back as she cried. After a while, I pulled her against my chest and held her.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” she whispered softly, as if afraid that hearing the words could cause Cam any more pain than he must already feel. “I can’t believe I barely got to know her. I missed the wedding,” she said, looking into my eyes as I took her hands. “I missed everything. All the big moments. And my mom... everything.”

“You got to know Jess,” I said, knowing she felt guilty about missing her mother’s death, about letting Cameron handle it by himself. “And if your mother were here, I can’t see any way that she wouldn’t forgive you.”

She shook her head, unwilling to forgive herself the things she couldn’t change.

“Maddie,” I said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about this.”

“About my family?” She looked confused.

“And mine. And you and me. The river, the past.” I took her hands and tried to channel warmth and love through my own. Her hands felt so small, so delicate. “I think we’ve made some mistakes,” I told her. “By letting the singular moments in our life define us. I’ve lived most of my life struggling with the failures I’ve known—my inability to save the people I loved. And so I let that day with you on the riverbank, and all the failures that followed, determine who I would be. I believed that those moments in time described me completely. Defined me.”

Maddie nodded, and I saw a light of understanding in her eyes.

“But I’ve been wrong. I think so many of us are wrong. The big moments in our lives? They don’t define us. What makes us who we are is the way we spend all those little moments in between. The things that we do every single day... those are our opportunities, and those reveal us in ways that our reactions in the big, adrenaline-fueled moments never could.”

She stared at me, waited for me to finish.

“I think what happened that day on the riverbank has been controlling both of us in some way. I live every day, hanging on to the one time in my life when I felt that I was in control...but if you look at the rest of my life, I’ve been in

control all along. And I've been making choices each moment that left me where I was when we met. But I couldn't own them. I was too busy focusing my energy on the things I'd done wrong, the places I'd left, the people I'd failed, and on that one moment where I believed I'd been a success."

Maddie nodded. "I think I see what you're saying."

I smiled. "I don't think we should forget the in-between time anymore."

She leaned into my arms, and I felt lighter somehow. After a few moments, she stood and wiped her face. "I think there are probably some details that need to be handled."

I nodded and we got to work.

Maddie

CHAPTER 34

Jess had known she was dying, and so she'd left specific and detailed instructions for the way she wanted things to be handled. She didn't have much family, but a few aunts and cousins needed to be called. She had prepared them all ahead of time, so there was little surprise from the other end of the line when I made those painful calls, just a lot of sadness. There would be a small service, and Jess had chosen a plot beneath a big shade tree in a cemetery beneath the Hollywood Hills.

Cameron didn't cry again, at least not that I ever saw, though I'm sure in his darker moments he wasn't the stoic pulled-together man who walked through the service with haunted eyes.

When it was over, we took him out to eat, the three of us sitting silently around a table in a busy restaurant near Cam's house.

"Thanks for everything you've done," Cam said, holding his beer bottle at an angle and pulling at the label, not meeting my eyes.

"Don't even say that," I said. Even though I thought Connor was right—that the things we'd failed at in our lives shouldn't define us, but should be another thread in the tapestry of our lives—I felt guilty for the ways I'd let Cam down in the past. "I will always be here when you need me."

He glanced up at me, his dark eyes uncertain.

I'd have to win his trust back, I knew that. It hurt, but I'd lost it, and I'd have to do the work to regain it, no matter how long it took.

“What are you going to do now?” Cam asked me.

I stared past him out the plate glass window to the busy street beyond. What was I going to do?

“Will you stay in the mountains?” he asked.

I nodded without thinking about it. “I want to build the house,” I said finally. “And see where things go with Connor.” I took Connor’s hand across the table, hoping the little gesture of affection wouldn’t somehow injure my brother who had lost the love of his life.

Cam switched his intense focus to Connor, and then nodded, a small smile on his lips. “I like that idea.”

Connor grinned at us both, and then tempered the bright smile by picking up his drink and taking a swig.

“I’m happy to see you guys happy,” Cam said. “You never looked happy with Jack. Even at your wedding. You looked worried.”

I thought about that. I had been worried. I’d been worried that if every little detail wasn’t perfect, Jack might change his mind. Nothing ever felt certain about his love for me, and I was constantly worried about accidentally losing it. “I wasn’t happy.”

Cam narrowed his eyes at me, his head tilted slightly to one side. “I thought maybe we could go see Dad,” he said.

I’d talked to my father on the phone weekly for years. But I hadn’t seen him in just as long. I’d stayed away, feeling like that was Cameron’s territory. And if Cam wasn’t speaking to me, I didn’t want to accidentally bump into him on his turf. I’d been a coward. I nodded. “I’d like that.”

“I can find ways to entertain myself,” Connor said.

“No,” I shook my head, squeezing his hand. “I’d like you to meet my father.”

Cam nodded.

“Do you think that will confuse him?” Connor asked.

I looked to Cam to answer.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. He met Jess. He liked her. He might not have understood exactly how she fit into our lives, but he was kind to her.”

“Will you come?” I asked Connor.

“Of course,” he said.

I looked at the man beside me, and experienced a brief flash of awe. He held my hand in his strong grip, but his unmoving strength was at my side—a comfort in itself. He was kind and generous, smart and insightful. And his broad shoulders and chiseled jaw didn’t hurt either. A strong wave of love washed through me suddenly, and I leaned toward him, bumping his shoulder with my own.

He smiled and put an arm around my shoulders, squeezing me to him.

Cameron raised his bottle to us silently, and then turned his eyes away as he drank.

IT WASN’T a short trip from Cam’s house in LA to the place where Dad was living up north, but Cam wanted to go. He didn’t feel like he could go straight back to work in light of everything that had happened, so he made a few calls while we put our things together the next morning, and then we all set out. Connor and I drove, and Cam insisted on following on his bike. I gave up trying to convince him to ride with us when Connor suggested that the mind-numbing ride up Interstate 5, coupled with the wind and vibration of the motorcycle, might be a good thing for a man with a lot on his mind.

I checked repeatedly behind us, and Cam was always there, the dark helmet, leathers, and dangerous-looking motorcycle, giving me unwanted flashes of Mad Max movies I’d seen as a kid. Cam’s bike was some Harley hybrid thing. He’d explained it when Connor had asked him, calling it a Zero-T5. Connor had looked impressed. At least Cam was talking. I had been a little worried he might send us away and sink into himself.

It took the whole day, but eventually we pulled up outside a long low building with a glass atrium pushed out front and manicured bushes reaching out on either side toward the parking lot. The building was lined with wide grassy walkways that held benches, flowers and plenty of folks sitting and strolling in the late afternoon sun.

Cam fastened his helmet to his bike and led us inside.

“Visitors for Bill Turner.”

The woman behind the desk smiled at Cam, despite the fact that he looked like some half-crazed mercenary with his leathers on and his face lined with dirt from the exhausting ride. The dead look in his eyes didn’t help. “You’re, uh, family?”

I nodded and stepped up. “We are. Daughter and son. And friend.” I grasped Connor’s hand.

She made a quick call, pointing us to a set of chairs. A few minutes later, a man appeared, wearing jeans and a button-down shirt. I didn’t know if he was a doctor or some kind of orderly. He looked like he might be visiting another patient.

“Hi Cam,” he said, clearly having met my brother before. “I’m Alex.” He stretched a hand out for me to shake.

I stood and took it. “I’m Maddie, I’m Cam’s sister, and my boyfriend Connor.”

“Good to see you. Cam, glad you’re back.”

We all stood.

“You chose a good day. Bill’s been lucid for the last few hours. We thought about calling you actually, Cam, but with the long drive, we were worried that you’d get here and it’d be too late. Your timing is incredible. Come on back.”

He waved a badge at the doors beside the desk and they opened for us. We walked down a hallway and then through a well-furnished and stylish lounge area that looked like a huge living room where many people sat playing cards, knitting, and watching television. While we walked, Alex talked about Dad, and about how well he was doing.

Soon we came to another hallway, and Alex led us to a doorway. Through the open door, I could see a man sitting outside the room on a small exterior patio, his back to us. There were two other people out there with him, and they were all laughing together. A shock of recognition went through me as the man turned his head slightly. It was my dad, but it wasn’t. I could only see him in profile, but I would recognize the chin and nose anywhere. The thing that shook

me was that his familiar features were set beneath a shock of unruly white hair, and the lean in the frail shoulders was nothing like the strong man I remembered, the man who'd swung me around in the air.

I hadn't seen Dad in the same three years that Cam and I had been apart. And he had changed a lot. My heart threatened to crumple from the weight of guilt and sadness, but I took a deep breath and determined to be strong.

Alex went out and spoke to him while we waited, and Dad turned to gaze through the open doorway, a look of wonder on his face. I heard him exclaim, "I don't believe it!"

Shame at my absence flooded me as he came inside, moving slowly, to pull me into his arms and bury his face in my shoulder.

"Maddie! My Peach. I'm so happy you came."

I found Connor's eyes over Dad's shoulder as I hugged him, and tried to push away the regret that was washing through me when I thought about how much Dad had changed in so short a time.

"And Cameron. Son." He stepped back and then pulled Cam into his arms. "You aren't eating enough. You look terrible." He grinned at us as he released Cam and then turned to Connor. "Aren't you that writer fellow?" To my surprise, Dad turned and picked up a book from a side table. Connor's face gazed out from the back cover, and Dad nodded at it.

Connor smiled and put out his hand. "I am. Connor Charles, sir."

"This is my boyfriend, Dad," I said.

"Your jerk of a husband okay with that?" Dad asked, waving us to sit down.

This was the first time Dad had referred to Jack at all since our wedding. Every time I'd spoken with him recently, he'd rewind time and had me back in grad school. Before Jack.

"We're divorced," I said.

"Well that's a relief," he laughed.

"You're a Connor Charles fan?" I asked him. I hadn't thought of Dad reading at all, let alone gritty thrillers.

He smiled. "Truth? Something about them reminds me of you. The curly haired girls always live."

Connor laughed and the sound ran through me like fire. I took his hand and pressed my thumb against his palm.

Cam and I exchanged glances. Dad was actually here, he didn't think he was on a cruise today, and he knew exactly who we were. It was like the last three years had never happened.

"How are you?" I asked my father, wishing that question could contain so much more than a simple pleasantry.

He smiled and for a minute, we were back in time. He was young and strong, my daddy, my hero. I saw his wry sense of humor and the strength that shone from him. "I'm old, Peach, and I have to tell you, it's not all fun and games. But I've got some friends here," he glanced back out the door to the two other men who were slowly crossing the lawn, headed away from us. "And life is good. Time passes, you know?"

I wanted more for my father than just time passing, but in the face of age and dementia, I had no real way to give it to him. I vowed silently to visit. Regularly. Often. All I had to give him now was myself, and I wasn't going to be afraid anymore.

"Got a new book coming out soon?" Dad asked Connor. "I feel like I've been waiting forever."

Connor blushed and grinned. "I do, sir. I'll make sure you get an early copy."

Dad picked up the book he'd set aside and handed it to Connor. "If you sign this one, I'll be like a celebrity around here, you know."

Connor looked around for a pen, finding one lying on a small table, and signed the inside cover of the book. "It's an honor to meet you, sir." He handed the book back.

"Honor's mine. I'm not the famous one here." Dad spoke to Connor, but his eyes had landed on Cam after he'd set the book in his lap. The watery old eyes narrowed and he seemed to know there was something wrong.

"Where's that cute little blond wife of yours, Cameron? Jess?"

Cameron's eyes dropped and he missed a few beats. Dad's face changed as he watched him, and I could see that he understood that something had happened.

“Jess died two days ago,” Cameron said.

“I’m sorry, son.” Dad had lost his wife, too, and I saw that thread of understanding float between them. Dad seemed to think about this more, and something in his eyes dimmed. He rocked back and forth slightly, and I wondered if he was comforting himself somehow, after the thought of Mom’s death had come back to him so unexpectedly.

“You okay, Dad?” I asked.

He turned his head toward me—a beat too late—and I knew he’d disappeared again. “Maddie, you’d better get going before the ship leaves port.” His voice was soft, almost like even he didn’t believe his words.

“Dad...” I wanted to say something to bring him back. I was angry at him for switching off like that, for leaving us sitting here while he went off to wherever it was he went when the world was too much. I shook my head and pulled my hand from Connor’s, balling my fists in my lap.

“We’d better get going,” Cam said, rising.

“Thanks for the visit,” Dad said, a false cheer in his voice, the kind you used with people you barely knew. “Think I’ll take a little nap till we’re underway.”

“Sure,” I said, choking on tears that were suddenly clogging my throat. “We’ll see you later.”

Connor’s arm went around my shoulders as we left him there, rocking slowly and re-embarking on his never-ending cruise. We thanked Alex on the way out and then found ourselves back in the parking lot.

“He was right there,” I said, “and then he was gone. Just like that.”

“It was the mention of Jess,” Cam said, not making eye contact, but staring off into the distance. “He didn’t survive the pain of losing Mom. He shoved it into a box and decided to never open it again. The lid popped off when I told him about Jess.”

We stood in silence for a moment. I wondered how much of my father’s condition was self-wrought. Was it possible that if something was painful enough to think about, a person might choose to turn off their entire mind to avoid it? Was my father really that weak? Or had his love for my mother really been that great? Would that happen to Cam? To me?

“I was thinking,” Cam said, breaking the difficult silence that had settled on us like a heavy cloak in the early fall warmth. “What if I came back up with you?”

I stared at him, and then found myself nodding. I didn’t know if we could share the trailer, but I was willing to try for Cam. I could sleep at Connor’s.

“Are Chance and Sam Palmer still the local crew?” Cam had worked with the brothers during the summers when he was in high school and college, building cabins, fixing decks, and doing whatever odd jobs they brought in.

I nodded.

“Think they could use some help now?”

“What about your job?” I marveled that Cam could walk away from his career in Hollywood.

“I’m in between projects. I took time off when Jess got sick.”

“Then yeah,” I said. “Come up. We’ll find out.”

“Maybe we could work on your place,” he said.

I nodded again. “They’ve been trying to get me to let them winterize it at least,” I said.

Cam nodded and we moved back toward our vehicles, ready to make the climb back to Kings Grove.

CONNOR and I agreed that it would make the most sense for me to stay with him while Cam got settled. I spent half my nights at his house anyway, and he had an extra laptop that he’d put photo editing software on as soon as we’d discovered the root of the picture-stealing incident.

We settled Cam in the trailer. He didn’t have any clothes, so Connor went home to get some things for him to borrow.

“Will you be okay up here by yourself?” I asked him as he walked us back to Connor’s car.

He looked around at the trees, the half-built house, and nodded. He took a deep breath and stretched his arms wide. “I think so,” he said. “In a lot of ways,

this feels like coming home.”

I smiled. I knew what he meant. This place was in our blood. “It’s yours too, you know.” Jack had casually disregarded my brother’s claim on this property. And when we’d asked him about building, he’d been so angry with me that he’d accepted whatever ridiculous amount of money Jack offered him. The less he’d had to speak with me, the better, I guessed.

But the thought seemed to be growing legs now. Cam’s eyes narrowed at me, and he turned around slowly, as if seeing the sham of a mansion for the first time.

“I’ll track down the Palmer brothers in the morning,” he said. “We’ll see what we can do about this mess.”

I nodded. It made me happy to believe that someone might take action where I’d been able only to muddle around in my indecision.

I DROVE over to see Cam on my break from the diner the next day, and was only a little bit surprised to find the Palmer Construction truck parked at the top of the hill. Sam and Chance sat with Cam at the picnic table, a roll of drawing paper spread between them.

Cam was talking excitedly, and the brothers were nodding along.

“Hey boys,” I said, stepping out of the car. “Looks like you’re plotting something.”

“Maddie, come sit down,” Cam said. He was smiling. “I have a proposal for you.”

I had no idea what he was going to propose, but the fact that the idea made him smile had me ready to agree to just about anything.

“Let’s build the cabin that should have been here in the first place. For you and me.” His dark eyes gleamed, and I glanced at the brothers.

“I’d love to, but...” I didn’t want to talk about my financial problems in front of Sam and Chance. They knew enough based on the fact that I’d called off construction the first time. “If I could afford to do that, I would have done it,” I

told him in a low voice.

“Don’t worry about that,” Chance said, chuckling. “Your brother pledged himself to us as slave labor for the next three years.”

“He did what?” I gaped at Cam.

“I don’t want to go back to LA,” he said. “I need to start again. But first, I need to do something. Something that will burn me up every day so I can sleep at night. Something that will pull every ounce of energy I have in me. I remember how tired I was, those summers that I worked up here. I need that. It’ll keep me moving forward. I just...” he looked down at the table. “That’s what I need for now,” he finished quietly.

I nodded. “But if you’re so busy working on other projects, how will you get anything done here?”

“It’s our filler project,” Sam said. “When we’re slow, we’ll work on it. When we’re slammed, we put it aside. Can’t be much worse than it is now.”

I smiled. It was a good plan. “Okay,” I said.

“One thing,” Cam said, looking at me again. “I need somewhere to live in the meantime.”

“Right.” I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. I wasn’t giving up the trailer, not yet. Things with Connor were great, but we weren’t ready to officially move in together. “And...?”

“So the first thing we do is build the guest house. Two bedrooms,” he said, pressing the roll of paper between them flat. “These guys are slow right now. We’ll have this built in three weeks—at least enough to live in.”

I couldn’t help that my jaw dropped open. “Why didn’t I think of this plan? I’ve been living in this stupid trailer forever.”

“You’re the younger sibling for a reason,” Cam quipped. “I’m the smarter, more seasoned sibling. I’m the one with the good ideas.”

“Oh, I see.”

Chance and Sam grinned at me, Chance’s blue eyes sparkling in a way that made me wonder how the hell he was still single, and understand what had Miranda speechless half the time.

“Can you stay with Connor for a little while?” Cam asked.

“I’ll need to ask him,” I said. I doubted there would be an issue. And if was indefinite, I didn’t feel like I was trapping him into anything. “Guess you guys better get to work, then,” I said, rising. “And I need to get back to the diner.”

I drove back into town, my heart lighter. Cam would be okay, and one of my biggest problems had been lifted from my back.

WHEN I MENTIONED Cam’s idea to Connor at his house that evening, his bright eyes glowed. “Of course you can stay here. As long as you want to.”

“Are you sure I won’t be in your way? I mean, now that you’re working again and everything?” I sat on the floor across the low coffee table from him, a mug of tea between my palms.

He shook his head. “I work better when you’re here,” he said.

“I’m not going to distract you?” I asked. I hated the idea that I had invited myself into his life—maybe further than he would have done on his own.

“I was kind of hoping you might distract me a little bit,” he said, raising a playful eyebrow. His lips pulled into his sexy half grin.

“Well, I *was* thinking of taking up the drums,” I said, laughing.

He stood up and walked around the table, pulling me to my feet. “Oh really?”

“I’ve always admired Keith Moon.”

He nodded, laughing, and pressed his lips to mine.

“Phil Collins, too,” I said, my words smothered against his smiling lips.

“Are you done?” He asked.

I nodded. “That’s all the drummers I know.”

He shook his head. “I guess we’ll have to spend some of our time giving you an education in great rock drummers, too, then.”

“I guess we will.”

“You are pretty distracting,” he said, leaning in to kiss me.

“Good.”

“So you can stay here and distract me as long as you’d like.”

I grinned at him and he pulled me into his arms and kissed me fiercely as my heart swelled. I fell asleep in the comfort of his arms, and awoke early the next morning to a smoldering fire god looking for even more distraction, which I was happy to provide.

Maddie

EPILOGUE

Cam was as good as his word, and his crazy-ambitious plan. Our two-bedroom guesthouse was completed in a month, and my brother and I settled ourselves there comfortably. Cam had made arrangements to put most of his stuff in storage, relying on some friends to pack things away and sell the house for him. They shipped his important items—clothes, guitar, and a few of Jess’s things that he wanted to keep. But overall, his footprint in our tiny cottage was small. And since I’d been living in a trailer, so was mine. We had the trailer hauled away, and I gave the driver excellent directions to my old house in San Diego, letting him know that parking the monstrosity in the center of the driveway would be perfect. I could imagine Jack’s face when he came home to that. I told myself that this one small revenge would close that chapter of my life, and it really felt that way to me.

The big house was underway, too. We’d spent long hours talking with Sam Palmer, who was an architect by trade, and we came up with a plan that would work perfectly. I couldn’t wait to see it done, and to have something there that would fit the landscape, augmenting its beauty rather than competing with it.

Jack’s lawyer had been in touch. Connor’s threat to sue him had worked just as we’d thought it might. The joint account was released to me, along with the proceeds from the sale of the photo.

“I’m not sure how I feel, having my financial security ensured by Jack’s sale of that picture,” I told Connor one evening as we ate at the diner in town. “I

mean, really, that's me making money off something that hurt you."

He shook his head. His stubble was grown in and he looked adorably disheveled. He was at the very end of the book he was working on, and he barely took a break to sleep. I'd had to drag him from the house to go find food. "It's not like you went out and sold it yourself," he said. "And it's amazing, really, that something good can come from it." He took my hand across the table. "I'm happy about it."

I nodded. He was right. Though if the money should go to anyone, it probably should have been him. Fortunately, he didn't have the kind of immediate need I did.

My photography business had grown, and I was often down in the valley for shoots, but I did all my editing in the comfortable office Connor had set up for me in his house. We worked side by side, me trying to concentrate on getting things right, while the fire god tapped away at his keyboard only feet away from me. Sometimes neither of us managed to avoid distraction.

In the end, the house took almost a full year to complete. In that time, Cam got what he'd been hoping for. He worked hard, and almost constantly, pushing his body to its limits every day so that he could fall into bed and sleep, with little energy left to think about much. I know he missed Jess. There was one picture of her in the bedroom he used in the cottage, and he often paged through the book I'd given him when he thought I wasn't looking. But I thought maybe he was doing better. He spent time with Connor and I sometimes, playing board games or going down to the valley to catch a movie.

We went to one other movie, too—Connor invited both Cam and me to be his guests on the red carpet at the premiere of his movie, *Twisted Knife*, in Los Angeles. For Cam it was almost a reunion—he knew half the movie people in attendance. For me, it was another world, rubbing elbows with people I'd only read about in magazines and seen on the big screen. The premiere was exciting, and the movie was a great success for Connor. His agent, Andrew, told him he could write whatever he wanted now—his career had been sealed.

The winter wasn't a bad one, despite the predictions of massive snow. As a result, construction continued almost without stop throughout the winter, and

Cam showed up at the diner at the end of my shift in the late summer.

“You getting off soon, sis?” He asked from the other side of the counter as I refilled ketchup bottles. I didn’t need the money from the diner much now, but I enjoyed spending time with Miranda, and it was a good opportunity to keep tabs on the news in town.

I nodded. “Why? What’s up?”

“Connor and I have a surprise for you,” he said. He almost smiled as he said it. The light hadn’t returned to his dark eyes, and he looked more broody than pleased most of the time. But he seemed almost happy today.

“Okay...” I was not a big fan of surprises at this point. Life was best when I knew where it was headed.

“Just come to the house when you get off, okay?”

“Our house?”

Cam nodded. “Our house.”

I watched him walk out and get on the motorcycle parked outside, wishing I could find a way to make him really happy again. But that would take time. If I thought life had put me through the ringer, then my brother had been steamrolled, and it took a lot to recover from that.

I drove up the hill to the house slowly, not sure what to expect. As I topped the rise, I was surprised to see it lit up, bright golden light spilling from every window of the two-story structure that stood beneath the tall trees. I parked, marveling at all the little touches that had been completed since I’d last stopped by. Despite the fact that I technically lived here, I spent most of my time at Connor’s, giving my brother the space he seemed to need. But now I saw that I’d missed a lot.

The wooden structure blended well into the environment, all shades of brown and dark green accents. A huge deck stood out to the side and off the back, giving incredible views of the hillside and stream below. The front door stood wide open tonight, and music wafted toward me, along with an incredible smell. Someone was cooking.

I walked in slowly, wondering where my brother might be. And those first steps into the living room would stick with me for the rest of my life. The room

glowed from firelight and the LED candles that were lit on every surface. Connor and Cam both stood on the other side of the long dining table, grinning like crazy people.

“It’s amazing!” I walked slowly into the room, turning slowly to take it all in. The high ceilings, the natural wood railing that edged the lofted second story where the bedrooms were. The rugs and pillows and curtains—none of that had been here the last time I’d walked through. “Incredible,” I breathed. “It’s finished!”

Cam nodded and came over to pull me toward the table where Connor stood. Connor was still grinning, though he looked uncomfortable and nervous.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Why isn’t he saying anything?” I asked my brother, nodding at Connor, who still hadn’t moved.

“I think he’s nervous.” Cam pounded Connor’s shoulder with his fist in a playful punch. “Hey man, wasn’t there something you wanted to, uh, say?”

Connor snapped out of whatever spell he’d been under. “I made your favorite dinner,” he said.

“Chicken piccata,” I said. “It smells amazing.”

Cam was popping a bottle of champagne in the kitchen, and pouring three glasses.

“Champagne?” I shook my head in wonder, grinning along with the boys and their happy surprise. “I guess we should celebrate the house finally being done.”

“Among other things,” Cam said.

“Like what?” I asked. Connor seemed to have gone catatonic again.

“Connor, c’mon, man.” Cam put a glass on the table in front of Connor. “Can we get this over with so we can eat? I can’t handle you being this fruity all night.”

I looked back and forth between them, getting a small idea what was going on. But until Connor spoke, I couldn’t be sure.

He took a deep breath and then stepped around the table, dropping to a knee in front of me.

“Oh my God,” I said, clapping a hand over my mouth.

“Maddie,” Connor said finally. “I’ve spent my life believing that I saved you

that day. I thought that when I'd pulled you from the river, and put you down right on this very spot, that I'd saved your life."

"You did," I whispered. The room had disappeared, and all I saw were Connor's bright eyes, his perfect lips.

He shook his head. "No, not really. I mean, yes, maybe I did. But in the past year, I've come to realize something else. All those years I spent, all the time I searched for meaning in my life, I think I was really looking for you. And it wasn't because you were the one I saved. It was because I needed you to save me. And you have."

I felt tears building in my eyes. They weren't the forced tears I'd squeezed out when Jack had proposed because I'd thought I was supposed to cry. They were tears of genuine wonder that this incredible man was on his knees before me, saying the words that I'd only ever want to hear from his lips. They were tears of realization that this was right.

"Maddie Turner, will you marry me?"

I felt myself nodding and dropped to my knees facing him, and pulled him into a kiss that made the room spin.

When I pulled away, I heard clapping, and remembered that my brother had been standing there the whole time, witnessing this moment. I hugged Connor again. "Yes, of course I will!"

I got to my feet and stepped around the table to Cameron. I was worried that it might have hurt him watching that, being forced to witness someone else's happiness so intimately while his heart was surely still in pieces.

Unshed tears shone in Cam's eyes, but there was something else in them, too—the light that had been missing this past year. The gleam that I remembered from childhood. I reached for him, and his arms went tight around me.

"I'm so happy for you, Mad," he said. "Congratulations!" He broke away and raised his glass, handing me mine as Connor retrieved his.

I'd been worried that my happiness might hurt my brother, but now I saw that having him there in that moment with me was perfect. As screwed up and imperfect as my world usually was and would certainly be again, it was perfect in that moment, with my brother at my side as I began the next chapter of my

life.

I smiled at the men I loved more than anything else in the world and let the tiny bubbles in the champagne fizz on my tongue as I basked, glowing, in that single moment of perfection. Maybe Connor was right, that the little in between moments were the ones we needed to really focus on living, but this big single moment would live in my mind and heart forever. In this moment, as the pieces of my life solidified, I realized that I'd managed to rebuild it—my life, my love, my family. I sipped champagne and smiled in wonder that it was even possible. And as Connor and Cameron smiled back at me, I knew I'd finally found the place where I belonged.

I would never leave Kings Grove. It was where I'd been happiest as a child, and though I'd spent most of the last couple years trying to escape it, it was the place I'd rediscovered myself as an adult. Kings Grove was home, and I was finally the woman I was meant to be.

THE END

Sneak Peek - Open Your Eyes

MIRANDA

“**R**emember, it’s all about getting the corners lined up.” My mother’s voice floated toward me when I walked into the house, and my stomach clenched.

Oh God. I thought we’d gotten past this.

“Just flip that second corner over the first one on your right hand.” She giggled maniacally after this line. I could deliver this entire thing from heart, getting every single inflection exactly right, I’d heard it so many times.

“Mom, not again.” I walked into the living room to find Mom standing in front of the television, a fitted sheet dangling from her hands and tears running down her face. On the television in front of her, she stood in exactly the same position, a brighter, younger version of herself. “I thought you’d made peace with this.”

She gave me an apologetic shrug and turned back to the television, where her younger self was just beginning to run into trouble.

“It’s just this third corner that is always so difficult, but I promise you, everyone—once you get this one, it all just falls into place. You’ll have beautifully folded sheets from now on and that linen closet will finally be neat and orderly.” A false brightness had crept into TV Mom’s voice, along with a sharp edge of panic. I hated watching this part.

“Mom, we should turn this off.” I walked to the television and reached to stop the DVR, but Mom stopped me.

“No, I need to see it. I just ...” As Mom’s TV self started to flail miserably and blush furiously while she tried time and again to fold that bright red fitted sheet into submission on *Wake Up Kings Grove*, real-life Mom had folded her sheet into a perfectly tidy little square. “How could I have done that?” Mom asked me, setting the sheet on the coffee table and patting it. She sank to the couch. “How did it go so wrong?”

I sat down beside her, dropping my keys on top of her sheet. We watched the rest together, painful as it was.

“Maybe if you try again, slowly?” Angela Sugar, the host of King’s Grove’s morning show was trying to help TV Mom fold the sheet. “I’m sure you do this all the time successfully ...”

TV Mom snapped, “I do!” Her voice was high and warbly. “I do this all the time. I’m a professional goddamn organizer. What is wrong with me?” The sheet that filled the TV screen almost blocked out Angela’s shocked face, but not quite.

The segment was nearing its awful end, my mother next to me wracked with silent sobs. “It ruined me,” she was moaning. “It was supposed to launch my business, and instead I’m the organizing laughing stock.”

“You’re overreacting.” She wasn’t, really. The last part of the segment, where Mom began to flip out and her face turned bright red as she flung the sheet this way and that, had gone viral on the Internet not long after it aired. Her desperate attempts to demonstrate how easy it was to fold a fitted sheet became a meme that had even popped up on my Facebook feed. And since half of Mom’s business revolved around her blog, it didn’t take long for her to catch wind of it. When that happened, she definitely overreacted. I thought it would have been great if she’d owned it, and used her flub to promote her business—“Even a professional organizer struggles to get things in order sometimes...”—something like that. But Mom had tried to pretend it never happened. Except at home, where she watched the segment on endless repeat, practicing the skill that had “ruined” her. Our linen closet was extremely tidy.

“You can turn it off,” she sniffed as TV Mom ran from the stage, the sheet bundled in her arms and her wailing voice following behind her as Angela

smiled into the camera with wide what-just-happened? eyes.

“No, I like this next part,” I said. I put an arm around her and patted her shoulder. Angela introduced the next guest.

“President of Palmer Construction, and the man who’s singlehandedly saving the Kings Grove campground cottages ... Please help me welcome Chance Palmer!”

My heart raced as gorgeous Chance Palmer strode confidently across the stage to give Angela a warm hug. His dark hair was waved over his forehead, cut short around the sides, and the perfect teeth showed as he smiled at her with a warmth I envied. He arranged his long limbs into the chair next to her and looked out into the camera. This was the part where I always pretended Chance was looking out at me, smiling that perfect smile at *me*.

Angela leaned in when Chance got close and tried to share a knowing giggle with him as my mother’s wailing cry floated back onto the set, but Chance shook his head. “You know, I cannot fold one of those for the life of me. I usually end up in tears, too,” he said. “I think I’m going to call Esther to come take a look at my linen closet. It’s a disaster ...” He smiled and there was something so sincere about him I had no doubt every person watching fell in love with him just a little bit right then. I fell in love with him a little more every time I watched him try to make my mother’s humiliation just a little bit less horrid.

Angela was clearly won over. She smiled a moony smile at him. “Tell us about this latest project, Chance. Is it true you’re renovating the Kings Grove cottages out of the goodness of your heart?”

Chance laughed, his low honeyed voice stirring something in my blood to life. I was warm all over as he began to speak. “I don’t know that I’d put it that way, Angela. Those cottages are part of our history—Kings Grove history. They’ve stood for almost a hundred years, and I just can’t stomach the state of disrepair they’ve fallen into. Palmer Construction has a not-for-profit foundation in addition to our primary business—and this is just the latest project for the Foundation.”

“That’s wonderful, Chance. You’re really preserving a piece of Kings Grove history then, aren’t you?”

Chance nodded, a lock of dark hair falling across his forehead. “That’s the idea,” he said. “My great grandparents came up here as visitors in the early 1900s, and these big trees got under their skin and they stayed. I know lots of folks now who come up here as guests every summer, and those cottages are part of their experience, their family memory. I want to be sure that future generations will have the same opportunity—if not to live up here, then to have a way to visit every year.”

I’d fallen into a kind of trance, watching Chance Palmer in the unguarded way I wanted to stare at him in real life. In front of the television I could study him, notice the way the fine lines crinkled at the corners of his eyes, focus on how he lifted his chin just so when he made a point. I could stare at him forever. But when he came into the diner where I worked, I could barely form two words, and I usually spilled something on him just to seal the deal.

“Miranda.” Mom was staring at me.

When Chance’s segment ended, I turned to face her, eyebrows up in question.

“Honey, enough. You can’t stay up here your whole life mooning over that boy and working in a diner. Look what’s become of me.”

“I think you’re being a little dramatic. Besides, I’m working on my degree. And then I’ll decide what to do.”

She shook her head. “Interior design isn’t something folks need a lot of in the mountains, honey.”

“Maybe I can start a blog, make a living like you do.”

Dad had wandered through the living room, eating a sandwich, and overheard this last part. “She used to make a living,” he said. “But since Sheetgate ...” He grinned.

Mom began to cry again.

I stood. I’d had enough. “I’ve got work, guys. Are you coming in for dinner tonight?” My folks liked to eat at the diner once a week when I was working.

Dad nodded. His olive green uniform was covered in dust. “Just gotta get cleaned up.”

“You’re a mess, Dad.”

“It’s so dry out there,” he said. “There are just clouds of dust floating around the trails in some places—especially if you run into horses.” Dad was a park ranger, and he spent his days working at the visitor center, leading hikes, and working on the trails around the National Park.

I grabbed my Kings Grover Diner shirt and headed back out the door.

“See you at the diner!”

Sneak Peek - Open Your Eyes

SAM

“Chance, I’ll see you at the office,” I called behind me as I opened the front door of the house I’d lived in since I’d been born. “See you,” he called back, lifting a coffee cup my way and staring down at his phone. “You stopping by Carolynn Teague’s place? She called the office three times yesterday.” He looked up and grinned at me.

I blew out a breath and gave him a level look. “Yes.”

His grin spread wider. “Got a ladder?” He was enjoying this too much.

“I have the ladder. I’m just going to go fix her imaginary leak, and then I’ll be in.”

He chuckled and returned his gaze to his phone. “Have fun, Sam. Don’t let her get you as you climb down ...”

It was a valid warning. Mrs. Teague had what might have been described as ‘a thing’ for me; she called me out to her cabin at least once every two weeks to repair shingles that weren’t broken, patch pipes that hadn’t burst, and rehang doors that were perfectly hung. It was our thing. And I put up with it for two reasons—one, Mrs. Teague was a nice old lady, even if she did get a little handsy now and then; and two—she always paid for the work.

Today I found myself climbing up to the roof, Mrs. Teague insisting that she needed to ‘hold the ladder’ as I went up. I could feel her eyes boring holes into my butt as I climbed above her, but she was mostly harmless, so I just swallowed hard and hustled to the top. With a normal job, I’d send one of the guys out, but

Mrs. Teague had been asking for me specifically since high school, and I'd been coming down here to help her long enough to know the whole situation was benign.

"Right up here, Mrs. Teague?" I called down, choosing a random spot on her perfectly intact shingled roof to repair.

She had stepped out a few feet, so she had a perfect view of me as I knelt on her sloped roof. I smiled down at her while simultaneously trying to make sure I didn't slide off. Death wasn't on my agenda today. "That's perfect, Sam," she called up. "My, you're so strong and capable."

Working for Mrs. Teague should have been an ego boost. She definitely appreciated my, uh, assets. And it was nice to hear sometimes, but the compliments would have been more appreciated coming from someone else. Specifically Miranda George, who I was pretty sure hadn't actually looked at me since we were six. Miranda had decided about then that she was in love with my older brother Chance, and while everyone said we look alike, Miranda didn't seem to share that opinion, or she just didn't care. I doubted she'd really ever even noticed the similarities, because she was too blinded by Chance and his glittering perfection. Chance was all charm and personality. I was ...well, I was just me.

"Yep, I think I've got it just about patched up here," I called down to Mrs. Teague.

"Was it a big hole, Sam?"

"Big enough," I lied, hammering in a fresh shingle to replace the perfectly good one I'd removed. "This ought to do it." I scooted back down the roof toward the ladder, tucking my hammer into the tool belt at my waist.

"Oh, careful now!" She called up, and I could tell that she'd moved back to 'hold the ladder' for me again. I swallowed my pride and climbed down, wishing she'd take a few steps back as my butt ended up pretty much in her face at the bottom.

It was a surprisingly hot morning, and sweat was already beading on my forehead. I wiped at it and rolled up my sleeves when I hit the ground. Mrs. Teague's appreciative eyes followed every motion.

“Iced tea, Sam?” She smiled sweetly at me.

“That’s awfully nice of you, Mrs. Teague, but I need to get on into work. My brother will be expecting me,” I told her.

She nodded and continued smiling at me. “You boys work so hard,” she said. “All that hammering and nailing and ...drilling.” She blushed and I tried not to cringe, turning instead to pull down the ladder and get it hooked back to the truck.

Chance and I didn’t do a lot of actual construction at this point, hiring out crews for most of the labor, but she didn’t need to be corrected. Mrs. Teague was all by herself up here, and I didn’t really mind dropping by now and then if it made her ... happy.

“Okay, well,” I said, pulling my keys from my pocket. “I think we’re all set here. You take care, Mrs. Teague, and give me a call when you need me.” I dropped one arm over the old lady’s shoulder and leaned down to kiss her cheek. She giggled and grinned like a girl, blushing furiously.

“Thank you, Sam,” she said. Her voice was breathy and high, and her eyes didn’t leave me as I climbed into the truck and gave her a final wave.

I got back to the office a few minutes later, and Chance called out as I came through the front door, “Did you get out of there okay, little bro? Chastity intact?”

“Shut up.” I threw my bag into the corner of my office and sat down at my desk. I guessed that was one of the differences between Chance and me. He would never have gotten into a situation like the one I was in with Mrs. Teague because he would have charmed and avoided. And I would never get out of it because I didn’t have that skill set. I was pretty much just me—what you see is what you get. And I didn’t have it in me to disappoint little old ladies.

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MIRANDA

The familiar smell of bacon grease and Pine-Sol greeted me as I flew through the diner door, Adele on guard at the podium to shake her head at me as always. I knew deep down she really liked me, but she did her best to hide it.

“Twelve minutes late,” she said.

I gave her a grin and went to the back to clock in. There was no point arguing with Adele. She and her husband Frank owned the diner, and had run it as long as I’d been there—Adele with a firm hand and Frank with a soft smile.

“Hey you.” Maddie Turner greeted me when I came back out, a pot of coffee in her hand and a smile on her face. Behind her, her fiancé Connor shot a hand up in greeting before returning to the laptop on the table in front of him.

“Hey yourself,” I said. “Busy?” I looked around at the almost-full restaurant.

Maddie nodded. “Yeah, it’s nice to see things picking up after such a slow winter.”

“Winter’s always slow up here,” I told her. “Even when there’s no snow.” And there hadn’t been more than a couple feet this year—nothing like the snowfalls I remembered growing up. We had pictures from my childhood of me standing on the roof of the house while Dad dug a tunnel down to the door. In those photos, the house was so buried it looked like a log or a boulder under feet of soft snow—not like a two-story house. We hustled around until lunchtime, getting only a slight break before the midday crowd began trickling in.

Maddie's eyes had landed on someone just over my shoulder and then she whispered, "Your table."

I turned to see Chance Palmer and his brother Sam standing at Adele's podium, looking around the crowded restaurant. Adele sat them in Maddie's section.

"Go ahead," Maddie urged.

My head spun every time I saw Chance. He was gorgeous when I watched him trying to make up for my mom's humiliation on television, but that had been a year ago. He was even better looking in real life. I'd thought so since high school, and heaven knew he'd only improved with age. Both brothers looked like they'd been working hard, their work shirts rolled up to the elbow and dusty jeans brushing the tops of steel-toed work boots.

I took a deep breath. I could do this.

I walked to their table, order pad in hand, and celebrated a minor victory when I arrived without tripping. "Hey guys." My voice was higher than I would've liked. I cleared my throat and pushed my glasses up my nose. "What can I get you to drink?"

Both brothers turned to look at me, and two sets of deep blue-gray eyes made me feel like I was under a microscope.

"Hey Miranda, how's it going?" Chance said and then turned his attention back to his menu.

"Good," I managed, trying to force my voice to remain in one octave.

Sam's eyes stayed on my face, and I wished he would return to his menu, too. Sam Palmer had never been my favorite person and he wasn't my favorite Palmer brother by a long shot. "How's school?" he asked.

I shrugged, waving the order pad in front of me. "Fine. I still have a ways to go."

"Probably get more done if you weren't hanging out in a diner." He cleared his throat. "I mean, you'd have more time for school."

"Iced tea, please," Chance said before I could even address Sam's jab. I wished Chance would look at me again, but his eyes remained on his menu.

"Make that two," Sam said. "Unless you're feeling off-balance today. Then

I'll just have water." A grin spread across Sam's face, making his eyes dance. "Tea leaves a stain."

Anger bubbled in my stomach and embarrassment made my skin heat. "I think I'll be fine," I said, my voice low.

Unfortunately, Sam had witnessed many of my clumsier moments, here in the diner and back in school. In fact, Sam had been at the root of the event that I still relived when I found myself alone in darker moments—it was one of those defining high school turning points that sets in your mind who you are destined to be in this world. I blamed Sam almost completely for the humiliation and self-loathing I'd suffered through for years as a result of that one. And just when I'd almost recovered from that—but hadn't forgiven him by a long shot for the role he'd played, he'd been front and center for a wardrobe malfunction of epic proportions on the stage at senior prom. That last one might not have been his fault, but both events were humiliating, both were tied inextricably to Sam Palmer, and both were things I'd rather never have to think about again.

"If you're having a stable day, then I'll have the iced tea," Sam said. His eyes were still on me, though they looked a little less cheerful than when I'd first walked up. At least he was sensitive enough to know when he'd been rude.

I turned and walked away, slowly and carefully, my mood darker than it had been before. Every time Sam made a sarcastic comment or pointed out one of my deficiencies, I felt small. He knew way too much about me, and I didn't want his jerky antics to color any chances I might have of finally catching his older brother's attention.

"How'd it go?" Maddie whispered when I was back behind the counter.

"Oh great," I said. "They basically asked me not to spill anything on them."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "Sam doesn't mean anything by it. What did Chance say?"

"I think the menu is more interesting than I am." I poured the iced tea and got ready to return to deliver it. Maddie was giving me an evaluative look, her eyes running the length of my body and landing back on my face. "What?" I hissed.

"I have a dress I think will look fantastic on you. Maybe help you catch

Chance's attention?"

My jean skirt suddenly made me feel immature and childish. I felt my face heat.

"I don't mean that you don't look great now, Miranda. That isn't what I meant at all." She was backpedaling.

I shook my head. "No, it's okay. I'm not exactly a fashion plate." Denim and flannel were pretty much my go-to uniform when I wasn't changing things up with my maroon polyester diner polo—and Maddie actually was kind of a fashionista. She'd toned down the heels and skinny black pants once she'd realized how impractical they were in the mountains, but she still looked better than most full-time mountain folks I'd ever met.

"Come over tomorrow. You can see if you like the dress?"

I nodded. "Sure. Thanks." A while ago, Maddie had offered to give me some advice about how to catch Chance's attention. I guessed she might know what she was doing, since she had managed to snag Connor Charles last fall—the guy most people couldn't even get to say hello to them. He sat pounding away at his laptop most days while she was working, pausing to smile at her sometimes. He was definitely good-looking, if you liked the Norse God look, which let's face it—most women did. He was also ridiculously wealthy and successful. His career as a novelist had taken off years ago and showed no signs of quitting.

"Hey," I ventured. "Still up for giving me some tips, too?" I asked her. "I'm not sure there's much to work with here." I'd looked pretty much the same since graduating high school four years before. Kings Grove wasn't really a fashion mecca. Some of the old timers made fun of Maddie for being on the cutting edge of fashion for this environment. I didn't need inappropriate footwear to be at the butt of jokes, though. I just needed to try to walk across a parking lot without falling down—a nearly impossible feat. I was born with the clumsy gene front and center in my genetic makeup.

She nodded once, her curls falling around her cheeks. "I'll share what little I know." She grinned at me and I turned to deliver iced tea.

"Two iced teas," I said, carefully placing the drinks in front of the Palmer brothers. I coaxed a false brightness into my voice. Thinking about Maddie

offering to update my wardrobe and give me tips about how to interact with men only made me suspect I was even more completely hopeless than I'd imagined. No wonder Chance barely noticed I was alive. "What else can I get for you guys?"

Chance had put his menu down and was staring at his phone, but when I asked this question, he turned his eyes to me and I had to take a steadying breath. "A burger sounds great, Miranda. Fries and maybe some coleslaw?"

I nodded, the force of his gaze and his deep voice combining to render me incapable of speech.

"Same here," Sam said, pulling my gaze his way. Where Chance was all suave sophistication—as much as that was possible covered in dust—Sam was just Sam. Sure, he was every bit as searingly sexy as Chance, but didn't matter because it seemed like every time I made a misstep, Sam was there to point it out, and that made me like him a lot less. I was on my guard with Sam—off balance. He was quick with a snarky comment, and honestly, I never could tell what his angle was. I wasn't sure if he really was an asshole, because it really seemed like he was only that way with me, but either way, it put me on edge.

Chance had been three years ahead of us in school. I'd only ever really known him as a distant icon of everything that was masculine. When we were freshmen, Chance was a senior, and he had been ridiculously handsome even then, long before Sam had grown into his looks. But Chance had never looked at me in school. And the one time I thought maybe the heavens had opened and somehow Chance had noticed me, it had turned out to be a cruel joke, which was part of why I couldn't trust Sam, because of the part he'd played in it.

And then Chance had gone away to college. I figured a guy like Chance would never return to Kings Grove. He had way too much going for him. But family is a strong draw, I guess, and when his dad got sick and couldn't run the business, Chance returned to do it. He had a newly minted MBA when he got back.

"I'll go put in your order," I told them, and spun around. I had the distinct feeling Sam's eyes were still on me as I walked away. I glanced back over my shoulder to see, and ran directly into my father, who'd just walked in with Mom.

“Steady there,” he chuckled, grabbing me by the shoulders and keeping me on my feet.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, forcing a smile for him as I gathered my senses together post-collision. He’d cleaned up and he smelled like soap and home.

“Any time,” he said. “Can you grab us some Cokes?” He and Mom sat down at the long counter and I went to put in the Palmers’ order, hoping that they hadn’t been watching when I’d run right into Dad.

The place was packed, so I didn’t have much time to chat with my parents, and it took all of my focus to get from one place to another without incident. When the food was up for the Palmers, I checked to be sure my path was clear before loading up with plates. Once they were successfully delivered, I let myself relax a bit as I stood next to their table.

“You planning to stay up here, Miranda?” Chance’s eyes were on my face.

Oh God, he was gorgeous.

My brain stopped working and words refused to come as the blood rushed into my face. His hair was a light brown, perfectly tousled, and he had a quarter-inch scruff over his jaw that made me want to run my fingers over it. Or maybe my tongue. His teeth were straight and white, and his broad chest was challenging the plaid work shirt he wore as his muscles bulged beneath it.

Say something. “I ... I don’t know,” I managed. *Brilliant.*

“Well,” Chance put a fry in his mouth and tilted his head, looking thoughtful. “You’re way too smart to waitress for the rest of your life.”

I nodded, then stopped myself. Agreeing with him was arrogant. I tried to keep my head still and look like I was listening and not hanging on every delicious word from his lips. His very full, perfectly proportioned lips.

“We’re looking to hire an admin assistant,” Chance continued. “Part time. Nothing big, but we need kind of a problem solver.”

“We need someone to answer the phone,” Sam said, his voice flat.

I swung my gaze to Sam and narrowed my eyes at him.

“She doesn’t want to do that,” Sam finished, looking at his brother.

“I can totally do that.” The words were out before my brain had engaged. For as long as I could remember I’d conditioned myself to say ‘yes’ to Chance

Palmer, and to hold my own with his brother if I felt like he was putting me down in some way. It turned out not to matter what Chance was asking.

Chance smiled and shook his head. “No, I meant, I thought you might know someone ... your age?”

My face undoubtedly fell as my heart sank. *My age?* He saw me as a kid.

“Uh, hello? She’s *my* age,” Sam said to his brother. “Don’t make it sound like it’s a disease just ‘cuz you’re getting all old and withered.” So it turned out Sam’s attitude wasn’t reserved only for me. That was good to know, at least.

Still, this was not going well at all. And what the hell was Sam doing jumping to my defense? It was confusing.

“I can’t think of anyone off the top of my head,” I said. “I’ll keep my eyes open though.”

Chance wasn’t asking me after all. He was hoping for someone else. I didn’t know if I should take that as a compliment or an insult.

“Thanks Miranda,” Chance said, putting another fry in his mouth. He was always so calm, so confident. I envied him as much as I wanted him. He’d go on about his day, having no idea that this simple conversation would have me stressing out and rethinking every word I’d uttered for weeks. I was hopeless.

Get the rest here!

Acknowledgments

This book has such a long story behind it. Part of it is the story of my childhood—the cabin where I grew up in Sequoia National Forest, surrounded by ancient giants that stood watch over me just as they’d stood watch for millennia. The same trees that watch over my sons when we visit my cabin in the summers now. Part of the story is about my family, about how those mountains and that location are a common thread running between people who otherwise would not see one another. It’s about legacy—the story of men lost at war whose voices can still be heard echoing between the rutted hillsides and over rocky trails in the Sierra Nevada.

And in a lot of ways, this book is about my mother, because those stories I just talked about are hers more than anyone’s.

But it’s also about my heart and my voice, and this book might be the first one that speaks authentically about me, about who I am.

I wrote this book as *Love Rebuilt* in 2017. But I think the version you have in your hands today is a better book, and I’m proud to present it to you again in its new incarnation.

Thanks so much to my mother, for giving me the mountains. Thanks to Kelly, my faithful friend, for keeping my head on straight and being a voice of sanity. Thanks to my advanced reader group - you guys are amazing and a fundamental part of my publishing journey with every single book. And thanks to every reader who has helped me share my stories. Thank you for reading.

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