

DEADLY CHRISTMAS SECRET

PEACH BLOSSOM ROMANTIC SUSPENSE SERIES
BOOK 3

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ONE

Perched on a wooden stool at the kitchen island, April Carlston lit the three candles she stabbed into a cupcake she had purchased before leaving work at the Peach Blossom Market. Two red wax sticks represented her decades alive, and the green commemorated her twenty-first year.

“Happy birthday to me.” Her singing wobbled, then faded at the end. With a forced smile, she blew out the flames, watching the smoke curl upward and inhaling the paraffin scent. A lone tear slid down her cheek when memories from happier days floated into her mind. That was when her mom was still alive and before her dad never came home from the funeral.

Her phone rang, and she tried to sound upbeat to answer. “Hi, Carol. What’s up?”

“Just called to wish you a happy birthday, sugar.”

“That’s nice of you. Thanks.”

“If I remember correctly, today kicks off what your mama used to call Aprilmas.”

“Yeah.” The word came out as a whisper. April fought

against the mist forming in her eyes. Aprilmas was a tradition her parents created to celebrate April every day during the week between her birthday and Christmas. Her parents had invited all of April's childhood friends to celebrate with them.

"Did your friends call today?"

April wiped the moisture from her cheek. "They've moved on. I don't blame 'em." She kept it to herself that her friends got a taste of city life at college, then got jobs as far away as they could get from Peach Blossom, Oklahoma. That included her worthless boyfriend, but she wouldn't bring up Kyle to anyone ever again. Not after he broke up with her in a text message.

Besides, she'd vowed to stop crying over the past and what might have been if she hadn't had to postpone her education to help care for Mom.

She shook her head and let out a hard exhale to bring her mind back to the present. *Hope* would be her word for the new chapter in her life, which she launched earlier by applying for a promotion to the position of accountant at the market Carol owned.

After removing the candles from the cupcake, she couldn't resist licking the sweet frosting from the wax and capturing the pointy top with the tip of her tongue. A firecracker boomed outside, eliciting a shaky laugh.

"What was that, sugar?"

She'd forgotten Carol was still on the phone and blew out an amused huff of air. "Firecracker, I guess. We Okies love our fireworks."

"Ain't that the truth?"

A shiver snaked through April, filling her with the familiar numb coldness she'd never understood—a sensation she equated with something disrupting the Force in a *Star Wars* movie. Seconds later, a crash jolted her. The phone and the three-dollar cupcake ended up on the floor.

A brown sedan burst into the living room—right through her mom’s maroon accent wall. Debris flew everywhere, sending April to seek shelter behind the island, her jean-clad knee squishing the cupcake. Her insides devolved into a hollow ache—akin to a rupture in the *Star Wars* Force.

Carol’s yells returned her attention to the phone. Bringing it to her ear, she peeked around the island to see that the airbag had deployed and deflated. The driver slumped over the steering wheel.

“Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.”

“What?”

“There’s ...” The sentence got stuck in her throat at the sight of the guy’s ginger waves. On instinct, she smoothed her own mass of ginger curls.

Carol’s repeated demands to say what happened only half registered in her brain as she tiptoed toward the driver. At his window, she squeaked out, “Hello?” His unfocused blue eyes lacked the sparkle of life, causing her to cringe back a step.

“What happened?” Carol’s shout finally pierced through her stupor.

“Um. A car ... crashed into my living room.” Her nose flared at the burned-rubber scent it emanated as its wheels spun. The vehicle filled up her room, resting on her broken couch, the shattered TV, and its smashed stand. “The driver looks ...” She pulled in a stuttering breath. “I think he’s dead.” She warned herself to stay calm.

“I’ll be right over. Call the sheriff.”

Carol hung up, but April was still too stunned to drop the phone from her ear. She bent down farther to see through the driver’s window at the entire front cabin. A blood-splattered snow globe lay on the floor in front of the passenger seat. Above it on the seat, a red file folder held a confusing note scrawled on a yellow paper stuck to it. She craned her

neck and squinted as if that would help her understand it better.

“Can’t be.” After crawling across the destroyed couch, she stared at the note through the shattered passenger window and confirmed that her eyes hadn’t played tricks on her. Right there on that yellow sticky note, someone had written *For April*.

While reaching for the folder, a shard of glass nicked her, but a swish outside the hole in her wall scared the pain away. She turned in time to catch the blur of a person running across the dusting of snow on her front lawn toward the right side of the house. What if they came back?

Now in melt-down mode, she ran to the knife drawer in the kitchen, opened it, but stopped when she considered how someone could wrestle it away from her.

“No, call the sheriff.” That’s when she realized she still held the phone to her ear. She dropped the folder inside the drawer to free up both hands. With the folder and its confusing note forgotten, she frantically leaned against the counter, closing the drawer.

ASSISTANT MEDICAL EXAMINER ETHAN SMYTHE—HE constantly had to explain the name was pronounced like Smith—stared at the wall in front of his desk, trying to think of some busy work he could do until his boss left for the evening.

He and Dr. Thomas Franklin had finished the last autopsy for the day, but then Dr. Franklin’s desk phone rang. Ethan never left before the doctor, a habit aimed at securing a glowing recommendation for the job of his dreams in Oklahoma City. Besides, his chest tightened at the anticipation of another night alone.

“Dr. Smythe and I should be there in about an hour.” The

doctor set the receiver on its cradle and slipped an apologetic half-grin toward Ethan. "Sorry, lad. There's a suspected murder in Peach Blossom." Rather than rely on a locally appointed coroner in a small town, Oklahoma law elevated murder investigations to the regional medical examiner. "Are you free to accompany me?"

"Of course." An adventure to his hometown sounded better than spending another evening alone in his gloomy apartment in Tulsa. "Shall I follow you in my car?" *Please say yes.* "I might visit my parents afterward, if you don't mind." Or one of his four brothers, whoever was free. He grabbed his coat from the hook beside his desk.

"Sounds like a fine plan, Dr. Smythe." The boss' light hair, rosy cheeks, and graying beard looked every bit the part of a Scandinavian Viking, the ancestry Dr. Franklin claimed. The doctor clapped a hand on Ethan's shoulder. "I like a man who honors his parents the way you do."

"Thank you, sir." Ethan enjoyed the chief medical examiner's jovial demeanor and frequent anecdotes of growing up the oldest of six siblings in Ireland. "Would you text me the address in case we get separated?"

"You betcha." The doctor composed the text and waited for Ethan's phone to signal its arrival.

Ethan glanced at his phone. "Got it." He fell in step behind the doctor down the hallway that led to the parking lot. "Do you know what we're walking into at the murder scene?"

"A car crashed through a woman's wall. County Sheriff Sal Nelson suspects foul play.

"What kind of foul play?"

"We'll know more after our autopsy and the crime scene tech's investigation."

A burst of cold air hit Ethan when he stepped outside. "Looks like we might have a white Christmas for once."

“It’s in the forecast. My granddaughter would love it.”

Ethan lowered his head and rushed through the frigid air to his car. He entered the address into the navigation app and followed the medical examiner’s van to the freeway. As expected, he lost sight of the heavy-footed Dr. Franklin within a mile. The doctor claimed he drove exactly nine miles an hour over the speed limit for a reason.

“Life’s too short to waste time getting to where you’re going,” the doctor had said the first time he noticed Ethan’s white-knuckled grasp on the armrest. Since then, Ethan fabricated excuses to take his own car to each location.

Not in the mood for the rambunctious atmosphere at the homes of his four brothers, he tapped the button on his steering wheel to call his parents, trying not to sound sluggish. “Y’all available for a quick visit from your youngest son this evening?”

“That would be lovely,” his mother said. “I was about to make dinner, but we can wait for you.”

“No, it might be a while. I’ve just left Tulsa, heading to an accident scene a few miles from you in Peach Blossom. It will take an hour to get there, about thirty minutes to pick up the victim, and twenty minutes to get to your house.”

“We’ll wait.”

He clicked off the call, and Ethan turned onto the street an hour later.

The sun had set during the drive there, making the house numbers hard to read. He spied yellow crime scene tape around a brown sedan that was sticking out of a house at the street’s dead end. A twinge of guilt sped through him when he appreciated that the accident eased his straining to identify the right address. Dr. Franklin’s van sat out front, behind a sheriff’s department SUV and a red Honda. A group of neighbors huddled across the street. A tow truck had backed up to the car

in the house, but the driver leaned against his vehicle, staring at the jagged hole in the wall.

Ethan parked on the street behind the Honda and rushed to stand beside the tow truck driver. "What's going on?"

The guy unfolded his arms. "Been waitin' on y'all to move the body so I can haul the car off. Rest his soul."

Dr. Franklin's rosy face appeared through the hole in the wall. "Ah, there you are, lad." The doctor waved for Ethan to step through the opening into a room not much warmer than the freezing outside temperature. He turned toward the sheriff. "Now you can introduce us."

The sheriff led Dr. Franklin and Ethan across a carpet littered with tire tracks, debris, and broken drywall. He approached two women sitting on stools at the kitchen island. Ethan's background in construction made it impossible to ignore the outdated kitchen linoleum floor curled at the edges in several spots. He lifted his eyes to see a thin, captivating young woman with curly red hair and striking blue eyes. She clung to a fifty-something black woman with anger in her glower. The older woman held a blanket around them both with thick, sturdy arms.

"Doctor Franklin, this is the home of April Carlston." The sheriff gestured toward the redhead.

The doctor encased April's hand with both of his. "So sorry about what happened."

April nodded, and the sheriff continued by placing a hand on the other woman's shoulder. "This is Carol, a close friend who owns Peach Blossom Market." Even the doctor's warm greeting didn't soften the older woman's glare.

The doctor turned to Ethan. "And this strapping young man is my assistant, Dr. Ethan Smythe. That's Smith, spelled with a y and an e at the end."

"I don't know why the sheriff called y'all out here rather

than use our local coroner for an accident like this,” Carol spat out. “That young man committed no crime by losing control of his car like that. With it snowing and as dark as it is outside, he was probably speeding and didn’t see that this house is at the end of a cul-de-sac until it was too late. I’m sorry about what happened to him, but how does that make it a crime scene?”

Ethan let his smile slip. “We’re just here to pick up the body, ma’am. Shouldn’t take long.” He cupped his fingers over April’s. “Nice to meet both of you.” Despite the current that sizzled through him, April didn’t lift her eyes to his. He reminded himself to stay focused on the job. “My condolences for what happened here. I’m sure the sheriff will notify this man’s next of kin.”

April’s single nod reflected a traumatized state that sent Ethan’s emotions on an inexplicable roller coaster ride. He blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. “Looks like you have some construction in your future.”

“I don’t think I can afford it.” April’s voice faltered, and her bottom lip quivered.

“I know a reputable contractor who could be here to repair that wall by the time we finish.” The doctor turned to Ethan and lifted an eyebrow while he waited for confirmation.

Ethan cleared his throat. “Yes. Of course. It’s pro bono.” He believed his service-oriented family would agree to that.

April’s big blue eyes misted. He didn’t mean to make her cry.

“Why would they do it for free?”

“Because it’s my father and brothers, and when I say I met a gor ... I mean ... you know, that you have a hole in your wall a week before Christmas, they’ll come running.” *Pull yourself together, man. You’re a professional. That was not professional behavior.* He couldn’t believe he almost said April was a

gorgeous redhead, which she was, but now was not the time to say it. Or think it.

April let a smile spread across her full lips. Her face turned a darker shade of pink, which brought out the cutest freckles he'd ever seen. *You're a professional, remember?*

Ethan sent a quick text to his father.

"Come with me," the sheriff said.

Thankful for the distraction from April's ravishing looks, Ethan followed the sheriff and Dr. Franklin to the driver's door. "This is why I called you here." He pointed to a stretch of blood that had radiated from a bullet hole in the white shirt on the dead man's chest.

The doctor leaned in for a brief examination of the victim. "Yes, I see the problem."

Ethan glanced at April, who lowered her blue-eyed gaze to the floor, furrowed her eyebrows, and cuddled closer to her friend.

TWO

April recognized Carol was trying to comfort her, but it wasn't working. They both wore heavy winter coats, and they now huddled together under a blanket. She didn't know how long it took for her to come to her senses and turn off the heater. The electric bill would break her.

"How'd your appointment with the attorney go?" Carol snuggled the blanket tighter.

April risked a peek at Ethan before answering, still unclear if he'd heard the embarrassing question.

"Dad has to be missing for seven years before they'll declare him dead."

"That means you can't sell the house to pay for college?"

"Only six and a half more years." April dredged up a weak smile.

"That's the spirit, sugar. Keep it positive."

April shivered when Ethan and Dr. Franklin zipped the dead guy into a body bag. Ethan had removed his jacket while he worked, and his arm muscles bulged under his shirt when he

lifted the body onto a gurney. She caught herself imagining ripples on the abdomen below his broad shoulders, and she pulled her eyes away, trying not to look again. Someone so accomplished wouldn't waste his time on a small-town country girl with no more than a high school education.

Carol squeezed April's shoulder. "He's a looker, ain't he?"
"Is he? I hadn't noticed."

"Mmm-hmm."

The second Ethan and his boss rolled the gurney outside, the tow truck driver finished destroying the wall, the couch, and the TV by pulling the car out of the house.

"Good thing the flowers outside that wall were already dead," April said.

"Yep." Carol wrapped her arm around April's shoulders. "Like you said when you turned in that application for the accounting position this afternoon, this is the start of a new chapter in your life. New wall. New couch. New flowers. And maybe even a good-looking new man in your life, judging by the way you two keep sneaking looks at each other."

April brought a finger to her lips. "Shh. He'll hear you. Besides, I don't know what you're talkin' about." April turned her head to hide her grin, but the debris scattered in her living room squashed the lighthearted moment.

The sheriff stepped through the opening onto the carpet, which had been threadbare but was now shredded and soaked with mud. He approached April with a slow walk, holding a clipboard against the pressed uniform that covered his fifty-something paunch.

"The crime scene techs and the medical examiner have left," he said.

Carol pinned the sheriff with a stare. "Sheriff, why are you calling this a crime scene when all that happened was a young

man lost control of his car at the end of a cul-de-sac and died because of it?"

"I'll get to that in a minute. Right now, I need to take April's statement. As soon as Deputy Gleason finishes interviewing the neighbors, we can clear out so the construction crew can patch up that hole." He lifted an eyebrow toward April and waited, a pen poised over a form attached to his clipboard.

Carol stiffened. "Can't this wait until tomorrow, Sheriff? She's been through enough for tonight."

Compassion softened his tired blue eyes. "I'm sorry, but I need to get your statement before you forget the details."

"It's okay. I'm ready." April sat up straight to convince Carol and the sheriff, if not herself.

"I was sittin' right here on this stool when a firecracker went off."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"Had anyone else been in here before I arrived?"

"No."

He scribbled a note. "Continue."

"That car crashed through the wall. I started to check the guy's pulse, but I could tell by the empty look in his eyes that he was dead, so I didn't touch him. He was leanin' over the steering wheel. While I was standin' beside the car, I looked up and could see the shadow of someone runnin' across my lawn toward that side of the house." She gestured to her right and shivered at the memory. "Where old Mrs. Williams lives. My mind went blank after that."

"Was the person you saw male or female?"

She shrugged. "It was dark, and the person was just a blur."

The sheriff scratched notes while April talked. When she

finished, he stashed the form in the compartment under his clipboard. He set it and his white felt hat on the island beside them, raked fingers through his graying hair, and hissed a sigh through his teeth.

“The firecracker sound was most likely a gunshot. The medical examiner confirmed the victim had a bullet in his chest.”

Pin pricks exploded inside April. “S ... so ... if that was a gunshot, the person I saw was the murderer runnin’ away?”

“We can’t jump to conclusions about who that person was. Could have been anyone. A witness, even. It’s safe to assume you aren’t in danger. We’ve confirmed that no one is in or around the house now. Since you say no one came inside, I’m guessing the crime occurred before the car crashed through the wall.”

A memory startled April into a run to the knife drawer. She pulled out the folder she’d found inside the car, handing it to the sheriff. “This was on the passenger seat. I took it because it had my name on it, and I cut myself on the broken passenger window.” She showed the nick to the sheriff; he scribbled a note.

He leafed through the contents of the folder and read a handwritten message, his face showing concern. “Do you know a Phillip d’Arcy?”

“No.” April leaned toward the sheriff to see what had troubled him. He handed her gloves before allowing her to hold the paper.

Dear April,

I’m sorry to introduce myself in this manner, but I find there is no choice. I have recently discovered that you are my twin sister, and we are both in grave danger. Please take extreme caution and meet me at the northwest corner of the park by your

house on Sunday afternoon at three o'clock. I will explain everything.

Warmly,

Phillip d'Arcy

The sheriff softened his tone. "Do you know this woman?" He flipped over a photo of someone with ginger hair and striking blue eyes.

The resemblance to her own hair and eyes sent a wave of nausea to April's middle. She slumped to the kitchen island. "No." She gulped down several deep breaths. "I'm not capable of thinking right now, but I'm certain that guy lied. My parents would never have given up a baby."

"We'll sort this out. I'll need to take your fingerprints and a DNA swab to eliminate yours from the investigation."

He did as he said, put his supplies away, and turned compassionate eyes toward her. "There are men out front ready to patch the wall, but is there somewhere you can stay tonight?" He looked at Carol.

Carol clasped her fist around the front of her coat. "You know I live in a tiny studio apartment, Sheriff. There's barely room for me there." She made a Vanna White gesture down the length of her generously-proportioned form.

The night closed in around April. "There's nowhere else for me to go, Sheriff. Once they patch the hole, I should be fine here."

"Then I'll stay until it's finished." Carol again tightened her motherly hold on April's shoulders.

The doorbell rang, but April was frozen in place.

"I'll get it," the sheriff said. "I told Dr. Smythe to ring the bell when his family arrived. Are you ready?"

"I guess so."

While the sheriff answered the door, April pulled away

from Carol to comb her fingers through the red curls she'd spent her life trying to tame.

Ethan walked in behind a woman carrying the biggest casserole dish April had ever seen outside of the Wednesday night church potlucks or at restaurants. The woman's silver-streaked brown bob haircut bounced when she turned toward the mess in the living room. "Good gravy."

"Looks like you're in capable hands, April," the sheriff said. "I'll be on my way." He stopped after three steps. "We're having a Christmas-themed potluck on Wednesday at the church. Be nice to see you there."

April offered a polite smile. "Thank you, Sheriff." She again tried to smooth her curls.

"I'll let myself out." The sheriff put on his hat and left.

Ethan stepped closer to the island. "April, Carol, this is my mother, Lisa Smythe. She's the brains behind Smythe Family Construction."

Lisa set her casserole on the island and pulled April into a hearty hug. She smelled of vanilla. "My condolences for what's happened to your home." She turned to Carol and offered a handshake, then a gasp of recognition. "I know who you are. You own Peach Blossom Market, right?"

Carol nodded. "Yes, but I'm more than April's employer. I'm also her friend." She angled her arm around April's shoulders and shook her. "April's our accountant."

April jerked her gaze to Carol. "I got the job?"

"I planned to tell you on Monday, sugar, but it seems like you need a pick-me-up now. You aced the math test, and the promotion and a nice raise are yours."

"Congratulations," Ethan and Lisa said together.

"Thank you." April glanced at Ethan's strong jaw covered with well-trimmed stubble, but she quickly returned her gaze to

the countertop to allow the good news to burrow through the fog encasing her brain.

Lisa opened her purse and dug inside while talking. "I've shopped at your market, Carol. Clean, well-organized, and the vegetables are always fresh. That's the way to run a business. We have something in common, April. I'm our company's accountant and chief organizer."

April risked looking up at Lisa and Ethan to flash a smile.

Lisa set a business card on the counter and slid it toward April. "We finished up a job yesterday, and we have a bunch of supplies left over. You would do us a great big favor if you let us use those supplies on your house. Would that be okay? We can put the pieces back together in no time."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am, but I can't afford that. Just patch the wall, and I'll figure out the rest later."

"I want to help you, April. Even in this time of your sadness and loss, we can help you create a beautiful space where you can experience love and create newfound connections. Us, for example. It would be against our principles as a family and a company to allow any danger to come to you because we didn't do all we could to secure your home. Like I said, these are left over materials that we already got paid for, so there's no charge. We'll do the work for free. It's part of our commitment to community service."

Carol shook April's shoulder. "Take it."

April heard car doors slamming. "I don't want to owe anyone." Her parents had taught her not to accept charity.

"Nonsense," Lisa said. "You won't owe us a thing. Please let us do the work. We're plumb out of space to store these supplies. You'd be doing us a favor."

"Take it." Carol spoke through her teeth this time, her fingers digging into April's shoulder.

“Okay.” With heat climbing up her face, April wished she could melt into the linoleum.

Lisa let out a relieved sigh and clasped her hand to her chest. “Thank you.”

Ethan stepped forward, looking like he had to press his lips together to suppress a smile. “You may hear the commotion outside. Those are my brothers. I should warn you that there are seven of us in my family. I’m the youngest of five brothers, and they’re all bigger than me.”

“And they’re all hungry.” Lisa stepped across the crushed cupcake on the floor. “Ethan, could I get you to clean this up before you call in your dad and brothers? I noted a roll of paper towels over there.” She gestured toward the sink.

“I don’t mean to be pushy, but my boys often tell me I am. That happens when you’re raising five boys.” Lisa laid a hand on her casserole and smiled at April. “Was that cupcake your dinner?”

April’s face ignited to red hot with embarrassment as she nodded.

“We have plenty to go around. Would it be okay if I used your microwave to heat this? And then we can get to know each other over a hearty meal of chicken, rice, and vegetables.”

“Sure.” April’s stomach growled as she dropped a foot on the floor, but Lisa stopped her.

“You stay there under that blanket. I’ve got this.” Lisa wedged the casserole into the aging microwave while Ethan pulled off a sheet of paper towel.

He turned toward April. “Trash can?”

“Under the sink.”

“Mind if we use your dishes, April?” Lisa clasped a door handle, causing April’s breath to catch.

“Um.” April watched Lisa open the door to a shamefully bare upper cabinet, trying to push away the humiliation of

nothing but dishes, glasses, a box of cereal, a can of tuna, and a can of green beans in the cupboard.

Lisa didn't flinch or look back as she found the plates and pulled silverware from a drawer.

"I'll get everyone else." Ethan rushed toward the door.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Carol whispered. "I would have given you that job months ago, but I wanted to let you grieve for your mom and dad before mentioning it."

THREE

Ethan couldn't believe what he'd seen and overheard. A lifetime in the construction business told him that no one had updated this house since the 1990s, when he guessed it was built. April had seemed embarrassed when his mother opened the cabinets to reveal they were bare. That explained why the woman looked so thin. Despite sunken cheeks and dark circles under her eyes, she was beautiful. He could tell from her politeness that she deserved more.

He approached his father, a six-foot eight-inch tower of kindness, bigger than the rest of the men in the family. "Why did you bring everyone just to patch a hole?"

He shrugged a shoulder made wide from decades of hauling heavy loads. "Once you called to update us on what you'd seen and heard inside that house, she declared this would be our Christmastime community service."

Aaron—the oldest of his four brothers—stepped forward, capturing Ethan's neck in the bend of his elbow and knuckling the top of his head. "You know Mom, little brother. Once she's made up her mind, there's no stopping her."

Ethan shoved Aaron away. “Cut it out.” He straightened his ruffled hair and sent a pleading look toward his father, blowing out a resigned exhale. “What happened to serving Christmas Eve dinner at the soup kitchen? Isn’t that what we had planned?”

“New plan, son. The soup kitchen has enough helpers, so this is our project. By the end of tonight, I wouldn’t be surprised if your new friend in that house is invited over for Christmas Eve dinner.”

Alarm shot through Ethan. “No. Tell Mom no. I do not want her matchmaking. I’m focused on my career.” He swung his arm in the general direction of the house. “That poor woman in there is traumatized enough.”

All five of the men in front of him raised their hands, palms out in surrender.

Dad turned to Ethan’s four linebacker-sized brothers. “Mind your manners, boys.”

As the unofficial spokesman for the siblings, Aaron said. “Mom promised dinner. I’m starved.” He headed for the door.

The others grunted their agreement and followed Aaron. Ethan hurried to get to the front of the line. “I’ll introduce you. Like Dad said, mind your manners.”

“Little brother’s got a crush,” Aaron stage-whispered.

“Shh.” Ethan led his family to the kitchen. The brothers, ranging in age from thirty to thirty-eight, marched into the house and lined the perimeter of the kitchen in alphabetical order, which was also age order.

Despite the wall of men keeping their distance, Ethan noticed April shrink back. Both her and Carol’s eyes widened. He stepped forward to position himself between the women and the other men.

“I’d like to introduce you to my father, Quint Smythe.” Dad bowed to blanket April’s hand in both of his jumbo-sized paws,

then Carol's. "Pleased to meet you, April, Carol. My boys and I will be ready to repair your wall whenever you are, but we hope you don't mind if we eat first since Ethan called us at our regular dinnertime. It should warm up in here in a jiffy after we get to work."

The microwave dinged, and Mom turned to put food on the plates while Ethan continued the introductions.

"These are my older brothers, Aaron, Brandon, Cody, and Daniel." They each nodded and smiled as their greeting, hands clasped politely in front of them.

With April's face turning red again and her shoulders stiffening, Carol patted April on the daintiest hand Ethan had ever had the pleasure of seeing. For the first time since meeting April, she presented a smile that lit the room and warmed Ethan from head to toe. He told himself to cut it out and focus on professionalism.

"It's kind of y'all to do this for me, especially when it meant you had to put off your dinner. I'll pay you back whenever I can."

"No need," his dad said. "We're using scraps from other jobs." Dad eyed the living room. "I happen to have a roll of good carpet that a customer rejected. It's more than big enough to replace what the car destroyed. Would you want that?"

"Oh, yes, please. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

Mom looked over her shoulder. "Now, you don't worry about that, darlin'. We've got it covered."

Carol helped Mom hand everyone a plate of food. April picked up her fork, but she dropped it when Ethan's dad declared he'd say grace. Carol laid a fleshy hand on April's dainty fingers.

From the mother vibe Carol emitted toward the much-younger April, Ethan wouldn't have guessed she was April's

employer. A neighbor, yes. Best friend, perhaps. Employer? That had been a surprise.

The conversation during the meal was friendly, thankfully. It was a big surprise that the brothers managed to avoid the subject of Ethan nearly destroying the family business when he was in high school.

Dad's fidgeting got the brothers outside to haul in supplies, but Dad tugged Ethan toward the destroyed wall. "You know, son, even busy people with fancy careers need to make time for love." He tipped his chin toward April.

His dad's words stripped Ethan's throat of moisture. He turned to make sure April hadn't heard. "Dad, please. I'm here in my professional capacity." Technically, he was on personal time, but he wouldn't point that out. If he let them, his family would have them married by the time the night was out.

He loved his family, and he appreciated how they kept trying to make sure he wasn't alone, but he wished they'd tone it down sometimes. It wasn't like late twenties was old. However, his parents liked to remind him that Aaron had two kids by his age.

Dad tapped Ethan's shoulder before returning to April. "We'll do some demolition first, so we can replace those boards. It will look a lot worse before it gets better, but don't worry, we'll have it fixed with the heat back on in no time."

Mom set her plate on the counter. "April, may I use your bathroom?"

"Of course, ma'am. It's down the hall on the left."

Seconds later, Mom ran up to April. "Do you know your bathroom window is broken? It looks like it was broken from the outside, so I don't think it's from the crash." She turned to her husband. "Quint, we're not leaving here until we get this place secured."

April flung her arms, and the blanket she'd clung to flew to

the floor. “This place is all I have left. What is going on?” With the Smythe clan and Carol in her wake, April rushed down the hall to the bathroom.

Ethan grabbed the back of her coat before she stepped onto the broken glass scattered on the floor.

“Boys,” Mom yelled. “Check every room and every closet in this house. And make sure no one is under the beds or in the garage.”

“I’ll check the attic.” April reached for the pull cord hanging from the ceiling, but Ethan got to it first.

“I’ll do that. You go make sure nothing’s missing.”

Carol wrapped an arm around April’s waist. “I wouldn’t recognize if anything is missing, but I won’t let you roam around this house by yourself. Anyone jumps out at us, and I’ll sit on them to squeeze the air right out of ‘em.” That last part vibrated throughout the house.

Ethan pulled down the attic ladder. A spider web tickled his nose the second he poked his head into the space. “It doesn’t look like this has been opened recently, but I’ll go in anyway, just to confirm.” He unlocked the flashlight app on his phone, his stomach roiling at the thought of what he might find in there.

“Be careful you don’t fall through,” Mom said from the bottom rung, a hand on each side of the rickety contraption. “You know how devastating that can be.”

“Yes, Mom, I’ll never forget.”

Ethan stepped onto studs separating strips of pink insulation that was so degraded it should have been replaced years ago. No wonder April’s cabinets were bare. With insulation past its expiration date, he imagined she had to spend too much of her money on the heating bill.

In the far corner, plywood created a raised floor for the storage of sagging boxes. Behind the containers would have

been the only place for a person to hide, so he carefully stepped toward them. He recoiled at the sight of a dusty sheet placed over a person. Stepping up to it, his heart skipped a couple beats. As he yanked on the sheet, he swore he heard the screeching strings of a horror movie.

A mannequin. It was a mannequin. He fell to one knee, unable to control his laughter. “There’s a dressmaker’s mannequin up here.”

“Oh, sorry,” April said. “I should have warned you.”

“No problem.” He tried to sound as if his heart weren’t trying to tear itself out of his chest. “There’s no one up here.” He noted labels on each of the boxes. *Baby clothes. Mom’s Vinyl. April. Christmas. High school memories.*

“All clear up here.” He stepped across the insulation, descended, and folded up the ladder. His mother looked like she might hug him, but Ethan backed away. “I’m fine, Mom.”

“Hey, Dad?” Cody, the middle brother, entered the hallway from the living room.

Dad stepped out from a bedroom. “Yeah, son.”

“I think there’s a footprint in the mud under the bathroom window.”

“Time to get the sheriff back here,” Mom said. “Everyone get back to the living room.”

April’s face paled, a sharp contrast to the dark skin of Carol’s arm draped around her. “What happened?”

Mom stepped up to April. “Honey. Do you have a place you can stay until the sheriff figures this out?”

“No.”

Carol asked, “What about that orchard you like? Kelsey and Greg have moved out of the guest house to their farm.”

“Yes,” April said, “but MJ and Josh moved over there to have more privacy.”

“Speaking of Josh, he has an apartment above his auto shop that he doesn’t use anymore. Could you go there?”

April turned up her nose. “That place is so creepy. Besides, they went on a Caribbean cruise to get away from the cold weather.”

“You could come to our house,” Lisa said.

April moved out of Carol’s caring embrace. “No. I’m staying here to protect my house.”

“Then we’ll be right beside you until the sheriff confirms it’s safe for you to stay here. Quint, you and the boys get that wall fixed. Cody, go cut some plywood for the window. Ethan, do you think you can cover that window once Cody brings the materials?”

His shoulders drooped at his mother’s lack of confidence in his construction skills. “Yes, I think I can handle that. Thanks for your concern.”

Mom turned to April. “April, it was smart thinking to turn off the furnace and stop heating up the outside. We’ll soon have this hole patched up and the house warm again.”

“Yes, ma’am.” April and Carol exchanged a hesitant glance.

FOUR

Sunrays streamed through April's bedroom window. Last she knew, it was two a.m., the house was still as cold as the snow outside, Deputy Zach Gleason had made a cast of the footprint under the window, and she'd exhausted herself helping Ethan cover it with plywood. She smiled at that memory.

"I'm sorry to take you away from your girlfriend," April had probed.

"There's no girlfriend, not for the last two years." He had huffed out a bitter laugh. "I took Elizabeth to a fancy restaurant to celebrate her earning her MBA. She was working at an influential law firm in Tulsa, and I was still a bellhop at an upscale hotel while I finished my medical training. She told me over dessert that she planned to marry one of the attorneys. Her parents thought the guy was more suited to Elizabeth's social status." He'd placed air quotes around "more suited."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. It's like my mom said, I'm better off without a gold digger like her in my life. What about you? Where's your boyfriend?"

“He broke up with me by text message when he finished his studies and moved out of state. What a snake.”

She and Ethan had laughed together. As her adrenaline high ebbed, she soon became too tired to hold up her head. When she had drooped against the kitchen counter, Carol insisted she lie down for a few minutes. April had agreed, but only after showing Carol where to find the guest room. She’d drifted off to the sounds of the ongoing construction and Carol and Lisa visiting. She’d slept better than she had in months.

The house was now so warm she turned onto her back with a satisfied sigh. While staring at the lavender wall across from her full-sized bed, she listened to voices wafting from the kitchen. Voices weren’t the only thing drifting from the other room. Coffee. Her smile slid away with dismay that they may have used her last tablespoon of grounds.

Another sniff revealed a second tantalizing scent: bacon. She didn’t have any bacon. The only thing in her refrigerator was the quarter cup of milk she’d saved to moisten one last bowl of cereal. Pay day was next Wednesday, and she’d rationed the milk to a half cup a day to save enough to pay the electric bill. On day 13, she dropped the carton, spilling much of the milk.

Bacon was too much of a splurge.

Without thinking, she jumped off the bed and dashed down the hall to investigate. Sliding to a stop on her socks, she caught sight of Ethan leaning against the kitchen island, resembling a weary Greek god. Lisa stood at the stove. To her dismay, Carol wasn’t among the group.

“Oh.” April tried to smooth her wild curls.

“Good morning.” Ethan’s smile accentuated his dimples. She’d been too overwhelmed to notice that last night. He lifted his chin to direct her attention toward the living room.

She turned to see all the walls intact and painted off-white. Gone were her crushed couch and TV. Quint waved from a

sofa she'd never seen, then went back to watching a newer TV than the one she'd owned. The electric fireplace was still in place.

Lisa joined her. "Turned out nice, didn't it?"

"Yes, it's beautiful, but I can't pay you for this. If you've looked in my refrigerator—"

Lisa cut in. "That sofa and TV have been sitting in our basement waiting for Quint to donate them to a thrift store. I hope you don't mind taking them off our hands."

"I guess not."

"The paint was left over from a job we did a few months back, and the client said he didn't have room for it in his garage, so he gave it to us. There's enough left for you to cover the rest of this area if you'd like us to leave it."

The Smythe family was either off-the-charts kind or stalking her. The idea gave her a smile. Last week, she may have believed the latter. With her new attitude toward life, she chose the former.

"Confirm but verify," her dad had always said. Later, she'd use the computer at the library to look up Smythe Family Construction.

"And what about the food you're cooking? Where did that come from?"

"Quint and Ethan are starving after all the construction and heavy lifting they did through the night. The rest of the boys went home to their wives. Since we had to buy groceries to make breakfast, we decided to bring it back here and make sure you were all set before we went home. Carol had to leave, but she said to tell you good morning."

A mixture of emotions overwhelmed April. Tears gathered, but she refused to let a bunch of strangers see her cry. "Excuse me."

She rushed down the hall to the bathroom. Gone was the

plywood she and Ethan had secured over the window. New glass had replaced it, and there was no draft coming from it as had been the case with the old window. The vanity supported her back as she slid to the floor. She couldn't *not* accept what they had done. The items were installed, and the work was done. Everything must have cost over a thousand dollars. Her parents had told her to never get herself indebted to anyone. They would expect too much in return.

What did the Smythe family want for all they had done for her?

A knock on the door made her flinch.

"Are you okay in there?" It was Lisa's voice, and she sounded concerned, not demanding or sneaky.

"Yes. It's just ... I can't ... why are you doing all this for me?"

"Despite an accident a few years back that almost bankrupted us, we're blessed. We're giving back some of what we've received. One of the ways our family lives out our faith is through community service. That's all we're doing: helping a lovely young woman in the community get back on her feet after a few too many tragedies in her life."

April stood and cracked the door open a mite.

"You're wasting your efforts on me. If God had cared about me and my family, he wouldn't have let my mother suffer so much." April swallowed the lump in her throat and pressed her fingers to her eyelids to push back the tears. "Her last breath ..." She stifled a sob at the memory of her mother, as white as the pillow holding her head, struggling to pull in air, then giving up. "And then my father left me alone to face the bills on a cashier's salary, not to mention the looks of pity I still get after six months."

Lisa's brief pause allowed April to control her breathing.

"Has God ever blessed you?"

"I'd have to think back a long time to remember."

“I miscarried my first child, our only girl. I was so mad at God for letting that happen, and I felt alone and abandoned. I imagine that’s how you feel.”

She nodded. “Pretty much. How did you get past that?”

“I made a list of my blessings. The first day, I could only think of Quint, but I added something every single day until my list filled one whole side of the paper. Maybe you should try that.”

“I might.”

“Breakfast is ready if you’d like to join us.”

“I’ll be there in a minute. I just have to ... to ...” She touched her mop of hair. “To do something with my hair.”

“You look fine, dear. Ethan described you as captivating.” Lisa’s warm smile helped settle April’s nerves. “We’ll wait to say grace when you join us.”

“It’s okay. Go ahead.”

“We’ll wait.”

Only a shower could get these curls under control, but April envisioned her three visitors, each tapping a foot as they waited for a well-deserved meal. She took an elastic band from the drawer. With her hair pulled into a ponytail, she splashed water on her face, straightened her slept-in clothes, and returned to the kitchen. *I’m captivating.*

When she entered the kitchen, Lisa waved her toward the table. Ethan and his mother each grabbed one of April’s hands, and Quint offered a quick prayer, ending with, “Good grief, let’s eat.”

Lisa had cooked more food than April had seen in her kitchen since before Mom’s cancer diagnosis three years ago.

“April, honey, we’re kind of in a hurry to get to a job today. Would it be too much trouble to leave the rest of this food with you?”

“You mean for you to pick up later?” There went her hopes of never seeing these people again.

Lisa fluttered her hand. “No, for you to keep. We bought more than we can use at home with just the two of us.”

April turned to Ethan. “Can’t you take it home with you?”

“I would except I plan to stop by the gym on the way to Tulsa and don’t want to leave it in my car. You keep it.”

“Oh, you live in Tulsa?” The wave of disappointment surprised her.

“I do, but I make it out this way regularly to visit my parents and for church. Would you like to meet for coffee sometime?”

April tried to ignore the grins Quint and Lisa flashed. Sudden warmth warned her that her face had pinked, which meant her freckles would practically glow. “I’ll think about it.”

Quint’s and Lisa’s shoulders drooped in defeat, and Ethan’s face turned as red as hers must have been.

“Well, we’ll be going, then.” Lisa curled her arm around Quint’s, turning back when Quint opened the door. “We’ll have Ethan follow up with you later to make sure everything is okay with our work.”

“I’m sure it is. There’s no need.”

“Our company policy is to follow up. Please give Ethan your number.” Lisa followed Quint out the door.

Ethan hadn’t moved from his spot in the kitchen. “I’m sorry about my mother. We tell her all the time not to be so pushy, but it’s just who she is. She has a big heart.”

An uncomfortable silence followed. April filled by explaining her behavior. “I’m overwhelmed by your family’s generosity. And embarrassed.” Looking down, she grimaced at a hole in her sock that revealed chipped toenail polish. “I don’t even know y’all.”

“I understand. We’re a service-oriented family. It’s just

what we do. If you give me your number for the follow-up call, I'll be on my way."

"Hand me your phone, and I'll put it in."

With the exchange made, Ethan sent her a text. "There. Now you have my number in case you change your mind about joining me for coffee. Say ... after church this Sunday?"

"I'll think about it, but ... I'm just so ... last night is a blur, and I have research to do at the library, and I still haven't cleaned out my parents' things. And I hope to take the college entrance exam."

"It's just coffee, April. From what little I know about you, I wonder if you need a friend to talk to who isn't the boss who just gave you a promotion."

He seemed to get her, and his saying her name felt like a soothing balm on her shattered life. "I might like that. I'll let you know after I finish the things I have to do today."

Her phone buzzed, and she looked down to see Carol's number. "I have to take this."

"I'll let myself out. Talk to you this evening?"

"Hi, Carol." She nodded at Ethan and locked the door behind him.

"Hey, sugar. I left early this morning so I could run a background check on that Smythe family. Every person in that family came back squeaky clean. Lisa and Quint have lived in the same house on the outskirts of Tahlequah for thirty years, and they're pillars of the community. If you're interested, four of the five brothers are married with children. Ethan's the only single man in the bunch, and he's a doctor with a clean record."

"Thanks, but why did you do that? I had planned to go to the library soon to check them out."

"I can do a more thorough check than you can on social media. The way you and that Ethan were looking at each other last night, I wanted to ensure your safety if he asked you out."

“He asked me to go have coffee with him, and I said no. Sort of.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I said I’d think about it.”

“Why wouldn’t you go out with him? He’s quite the catch.”

“I’m just a homely country girl with curly red hair and freckles and no college education. He’s ... sophisticated. I’m not. It wouldn’t last.”

“Might I remind you he grew up around here? He’s as much country as you, and you are as beautiful as the day is long. Whoever said you were homely lied. Who was it? I’ll give ‘em a piece of my mind.”

“It was my mother.”

“I knew your mother, and she would never have said you were homely. She was proud of you.”

“True, she never said, ‘hey, April, you’re homely.’ It was everything else she ever said about my hair and my freckles. She was always trying to tame my curls and suggesting I dye ‘em brown.”

“She was just being a mother. Sugar, why didn’t you tell me you didn’t have any food in the house?”

“It was my issue to deal with. My promotion should help a lot.”

“If it doesn’t, you let me know. Anyhoo, since you told Ethan you’d think about it, I assume you gave him your phone number.”

“Yes.”

“Good. When he calls, you go have coffee with him. You need this and deserve it more than anyone I know. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Okay, then. Your training starts at eight a.m. on Monday.

Don't be late. Not that you ever have been since I hired you at age sixteen."

"See ya." April stashed her phone in her pocket and ambled down the hallway to her parents' bedroom. At the closet, she opened the door and peered up at the box her mother had always said held her secrets.

"Sorry, Mom, but I have to open your box of secrets now."

FIVE

Ethan waited for April at a table facing the windows at Grinders, a coffee shop and bakery that April had said made the best breakfast in town. The place smelled like it too. He'd waited for her before ordering, but his stomach complained louder with each passing minute.

When she opened the door, it seemed appropriate that sunbeams encircled her head like a halo. She removed her gloves and stuffed them into the pockets of an ankle-length red winter coat. The cable knit beanie stayed on, and ginger-colored spirals peeked out from underneath to frame her delicate face. When she shed the blanket of a coat, he struggled to hide the pain that surfaced upon seeing her baggy jeans and sweater. His mind drifted back to the memory of her bare cupboards.

He stood to hold the chair for her. "You look lovely this morning."

Her smile radiated through him. "Thank you." She glanced at the case positioned next to his chair against the floor-to-ceiling window. "Yours?"

“I didn’t want to leave my guitar in the car, so I brought it in.”

“Why do you carry a guitar with you?” She gracefully unfolded her napkin onto her lap. A soft smile adorned her face, sending a sense of joy through him. He hadn’t realized how much he missed this kind of easy companionship.

“I play with the worship team at church.”

Her smile slipped away. “My mother played the drums at our Peach Blossom Community Church until the chemo made her too sick.”

“You still attend that church?”

She leaned back as if to stop the conversation. “No. God and I aren’t on speaking terms anymore.”

It devastated him to hear her say it. His faith had seen him through so much. “Sorry to hear that.” The euphoria of her beauty-queen entrance left him. The whole restaurant must have heard his growling stomach. “I’m starved. Shall we order?”

“I’ll just have coffee.” She averted her gaze, fixating on the tabletop.

“Nope. My mother would give me what she calls ‘a strong talkin’ to’ if it got back to her that I didn’t buy you the best breakfast in town. Believe me, everything gets back to her. She has several friends who live nearby, maybe even in this restaurant.”

They both looked around for suspects.

A perky brunette approached the table, her baby bump bulging. “Hey, April. It’s good to see you. Sorry about the loss of your mama.”

“Thank you, Tiffany.” April gestured toward Ethan. “This is my new friend, Ethan Smythe. Ethan, I’ve known Tiffany since high school.”

Tiffany’s eyes brightened. “Any relation to Smythe Family Construction?”

“Yes, that’s my family.” He shot April a *see-I told-you-so* grin.

“They’re so nice.” She pulled a pad and pen from the big pocket in the front of her apron.

“Thank you. I like them.” He locked eyes with April. “Do you know what you want to order? I’ve been eyeing the menu. It all looks so good. It was a tough choice to make on a Sunday morning.” He beamed up at Tiffany.

April ordered a crispy potato bowl with a poached egg over an assortment of fresh vegetables. Ethan chose a Denver omelet. Both meals came with a melt-in-your-mouth blueberry muffin and smooth-as-silk coffee.

He finished his meal long before she did, so he leaned back with a satisfied sigh and sipped his coffee. “Excuse me if this is prying, but what were you celebrating with that cupcake Friday night?”

“I turned twenty-one.”

“Happy birthday.”

She expressed her gratitude with a grin, but a touch of nostalgia seemed to intervene. “This was my first year of celebrating alone.” She pondered for a moment, as if deliberating on how much to share. “My birthday started a week of celebration that ended on Christmas Eve. For as long as I can remember, my parents called it Aprilmas. Mom would bake a red velvet cake. Ever since I was five years old and had to use a footstool, she let me frost it and decorate it in a Christmas theme. Until my friends left for college, my parents would invite them over every day during Aprilmas. We’d gather around the island and eat cake while I opened one more gift.”

She pressed her lips together before shrugging a shoulder. “My friends who didn’t get married right out of high school left town. I had planned to, but my mom got sick. We didn’t have insurance, and the bills that piled up made it impossible for me

to afford it. Mom died six months ago. My dad couldn't deal with everything, so he left."

"I'm so sorry." He needed to lighten the mood. "Tell me what happened at the end of Aprilmas. Christmas Eve, right?"

She nodded but didn't smile. "Church."

"Sounds nice." He lifted his water glass in a toast. "Happy Aprilmas."

April's grin made his heart stutter, but the cheerful atmosphere didn't last.

"This morning I bagged up my parents' clothes to take to the thrift store. I thought about keeping my dad's things since I don't know for sure that he's dead, but I need to move on with my life. If he comes back, I'm sure he'll already have different clothes."

He wasn't sure how to navigate through her moods. One minute, she was a delight to be around, and the next, his soul ached for her. Avoiding a cliché platitude like *I'm sorry for your loss*, he grappled with finding the right words to genuinely comfort someone with her understandable grief and confusion. It must have devastated her to lose both of her parents within a few days of each other.

He couldn't claim to understand her sorrow, so he squeezed her hand and left it at that.

Myriad emotions crossed her face in the companionable silence that followed. She, at last, let out a swoosh of air. "For the first time in my life, I looked through my mom's box of secrets. It felt strange, like I was committin' a felony or some-thin'. I had to stop before I got halfway through it, but there were pictures and love letters from my dad."

"Sweet that she kept the letters."

Her tender smile widened. "It was. We had a good life before it went haywire. My dad's arthritis cost him his job as a

machinist right before my mom got cancer. It was nice to remember those times by lookin' through her mementos."

"What kinds of mementos?"

"Those letters from my dad were the best. She had a year-book from their senior year of high school. They got engaged before graduation, and he wrote her a mushy note about it on a page with a picture of them dancin' at the senior prom. There were lots of pictures." Her grin lit up her face.

Images of the boxes in her attic floated through his mind. "As their only child, I imagine they kept tons of pictures of you."

"Of course."

"When I was in your attic, I saw several boxes that looked like they'd been there a long time. They had labels on them, and one said *From Highschool*. One with your name on it. Another said *Scotland*. Do you remember a Scotland vacation?"

She set down her fork and furrowed her brows. "No, but there was this one picture that confused me. It was of a woman with curly red hair like mine. The same woman that was in the folder I took from Phillip d'Arcy's car. Her blue eyes bore right into me. Mom had written on the back: *Scotland*, with my birth year, but they'd never mentioned a trip to Scotland."

"Risky to take a trip like that when she was pregnant, especially with twins."

"That's what I thought. Mom told me she had a hard time gettin' pregnant, so it surprised me she'd throw caution to the wind like that." She shrugged and picked up her fork. "Guess it worked out since here I am. Anyway, I'd like to know what was so special about that woman, or why Mom saved a picture of her in her box of secrets. And why Phillip had a picture of her. It would be nice to find that I have family out there somewhere

who actually looks like me.” She pulled on a curl escaping her hat.

“Wouldn’t your parents tell you if you had family?” In response to her shrug, he offered, “I’d be happy to bring those boxes down from the attic for you. Could give you another way to work through your grief.”

A pensive nod was her answer. “Enough about me. Tell me about you.”

She was humble. He liked that.

“I’m twenty-eight and enjoying my job with the medical examiner’s office, but I hope to end up at a research hospital in Oklahoma City.”

A brief flicker of something that resembled surprise flashed across her face. She recovered and changed the subject. “*Hope* is my word for next year. If I’m able to save enough money and get a scholarship, I hope to attend the University of Oklahoma in a year or two.”

“We’ll be neighbors.” The idea felt right.

“Not hardly. I’ll live in a ratty old apartment or on campus with a bunch of noisy teenagers, and you’ll live in a fancy gated community with servants and all.”

He shuddered and tried not to scoff. “Not me. I’ll buy acreage outside of town and have a horse and at least three dogs.”

“And a wife and five kids, like your parents?” It was the first time he’d heard a genuine laugh from her. “Sounds like a good life.”

“Maybe a wife and two kids, a boy and a girl. I love my family, but I’d rather not have as many children as my parents had. You have to be there to appreciate the chaos when we all get together. There was never any privacy or peace in that house. My mom likes our free-for-all style, but I like quiet more than the rest of them.”

“As an only child, I can say with no doubt that you need at least two kids to keep each other company. Five seems a bit much, though, especially boys the size of y’all. It must have cost a bundle to feed y’all.”

“We worked for it, believe me.” Remembering put a knot in his stomach.

She finished her food, dabbed the napkin against her lips, and took her time arranging her silverware inside the empty bowl. “So, what’s the word on Phillip d’Arcy?”

“My part of the investigation is the autopsy. A colleague mentioned there was blood from three people in the car.”

She gasped. “They can use it to identify the murderer?”

He lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “Could be. They’ll know more when the test results come back. Someone’s blood was on a snow globe, and another person’s was on a shard of glass from the passenger side window. It’s suspicious.”

Something flashed in her eyes. “Thanks for breakfast. I have some things I have to do.” She put her coat on but didn’t button it, and she didn’t bother pulling on her gloves before rushing to the door.

“Can I call you?” He wondered what he did wrong.

Without answering, she ran out to the parking lot, her red coat billowing behind her as if it weren’t freezing cold outside.

SIX

April tumbled from her car in the driveway, protecting her face against the icy air and wondering how she'd explain her hasty exit from the restaurant. She'd sensed something she couldn't explain, and she'd had to leave.

Her hand shook so hard she couldn't get the key into the lock on the front door, so she supported it on her other forearm. The door crashed against the wall, and she slammed it shut before discarding her coat, hat, and gloves on the entryway tile.

She'd told the sheriff about getting cut on the car window, so her blood showing up on the glass didn't surprise her. The suspicion that the murderer's blood was in the car rattled her. The idea that Phillip's killer had been close enough for her to witness him running away sent a shudder through her. Was that the person who broke her bathroom window? Would he come back?

The image of the redheaded woman from Phillip's folder and her mother's box of secrets blasted through her brain while she ran to her parents' bedroom to look at it again.

Red lettering on the mirror over the dresser stopped her in

her tracks. *Back off or you'll be next*, it said. Someone had strewn Mom's mementos across the bed, and the empty cardboard box lay on its side under the window.

Her heart jackhammered in her chest. She backed out of the bedroom, looked both ways, and shivered from a cold draft blowing toward her from the bathroom. Three steps in that direction revealed that the new window the Smythe family had installed was open. When she'd admired her new window before she showered earlier, it was closed and locked; she'd checked.

She pivoted and ran. "Oh no. Oh. Oh."

On the way out the door, she scooped up her coat, hat, and gloves, then hightailed it back to her car, burning rubber as she careened out of the subdivision. It didn't matter where she went, so long as it was away from the house that someone obviously wanted to rob. What could be so valuable that they'd break in twice in three days? And go through Mom's stuff? Threaten her?

"And kill someone over it." She voiced it with a shiver, lightheaded from breathing so hard. "Call Carol." She pulled her phone from her pocket. "No. Don't give her a reason to take back the promotion." *Who then?*

The sheriff. That's who she should call. Before she could, the phone vibrated in her hand. A text message. *Everything okay? The way you ran out worries me.* "Ethan." She pulled into a convenience store parking lot and stopped in front of the windows to stay visible in case someone tried to hurt her. *Or you're next.* A sob escaped. "Don't faint."

She dialed Ethan and didn't wait for him to say anything before shouting, "Someone was in my house while I was gone. My blood is on the glass. I told the sheriff. There was a strange note too. They said I'm next if I don't back off, but back off from what?"

“Slow down.”

She heard tires screech and a horn honk on the other end of the connection. Ethan must have made a U-turn in front of traffic or something.

“Did the intruder cut you with glass?”

“No! On glass from the car.” Her chest heaved.

“Take deep breaths and get out of the house.”

“I’m at the QuikTrip down the street.” She leaned against the headrest and pulled in a deep breath.

“That’s it. Sloooow breaths.” He breathed in, held it, then blew it out. She followed his example. “Now start over and tell me what happened.”

“At Grinders, you said there were three people’s blood in Phillip’s car. One was mine because I cut myself bringin’ out a folder with a note from Phillip saying I was his twin and in danger. I don’t know who the third person is, but now I’m being threatened. What if the killer is stalkin’ me?”

He hesitated a beat. “I’m near your neighborhood. Tell me how to get to you.”

She gave him directions to the convenience store. “Before I could open the folder next to Phillip, I saw someone run across my lawn, and my mind just shut down.”

“I’m here. Is that your silver Ford?”

“Yes.” She hung up and pushed out of the car.

His blue Camry rocked to a stop; he met her at the back of the car, wrapping his arms around her. She dug her face against his chest and sobbed.

“There was a message written on the mirror in Mom and Dad’s bedroom. It said to back off, or I’d be next. Is someone going to shoot me like they did Phillip? And why?”

A gust of frigid wind prompted him to lead her to the passenger side of his car. He helped her to sit and turned the heater to full blast. “Did you call Sheriff Nelson?”

“Nooo.” It came out in three syllables punctuated by weeping.

“Let’s start there. Do you have his direct number?”

“Yees.” Another three syllables, spoken through uncontrollable blubbing. She handed him her phone.

He scrolled through her contacts, clicked on a name, and waited. “Sheriff Nelson, this is Ethan Smythe. We met at April Carlston’s the other night.”

The sheriff said something April couldn’t make out, causing Ethan to nod. “Someone broke into April’s house, and April’s scared. We had breakfast together after church, so I was already in town. Could you meet us at her house? We’ll wait for you in the driveway.”

He hung up and handed the phone back to April. “You’re too upset to drive. We’ll come back for your car.”

“No. I’m better. It isn’t far.” She opened her door.

Before she could close it and move to her car, he said. “I’ll follow you.”

THE SHERIFF INSTRUCTED them to stay locked in Ethan’s vehicle while he cleared the house, then motioned for them to enter. He sat beside April on the couch and pinned her with his blue-gray gaze. “What’s that message on the mirror about? Have you been investigating?”

“No.” She turned to Ethan, who was still standing. “Would you go turn off the furnace? I don’t know how long that window was open, and I can’t afford to keep heatin’ the outside.”

“Sure.” He moved to the thermostat in the hallway.

The sheriff didn’t miss a beat. “Let’s take it one thing at a time. Are you sure you left the window closed?”

“Of course! When I showered this morning, I checked to make sure it was locked.”

“Did you leave any other doors or windows unlocked?”

“No. I don’t use anything except the laundry room door and the front door.”

“Does the laundry room door go to the garage?”

“Yes.”

“Do you lock that door?”

“No. Why would I? The garage door is down, and the only way to open it is with the clicker I keep in my car. It’s usually in the garage when I’m home. You need to check for fingerprints on that bathroom window. That’s the only way they could have gotten in.”

The sheriff scribbled a note.

Ethan appeared from the hallway. “I turned the furnace down to sixty. You don’t want it to get too cold in here. It’s bad for the plumbing.”

The sheriff nodded but kept his gaze on April. To stop her nausea, she bent over her legs and gulped in deep breaths, feeling the warmth of Ethan’s hand on her back. Her mind had been too muddled the other night to face what the note in the folder had said. She had to face it now.

“Phillip said he was my twin brother,” she whispered. With the wave of nausea gone, she looked up. “That can’t be. My parents would never have given away one of their children.”

The sheriff and Ethan exchanged a look. Questions that had simmered in her mind since childhood bubbled up to the surface and spilled out in an unstoppable flood of emotions. Denial. Anger. Confusion. Soul-crushing sadness at the loss of a twin brother she never knew, and back to denial.

She directed a questioning look to the sheriff. “You knew my parents. Did they give up a baby?”

The sheriff sat beside her. “It’s true that I knew your

parents, but mostly through church. Your parents didn't come to church much during her pregnancy. I became aware that you'd been born when they brought you to church at about two months old."

Ethan paced to the kitchen and back, then stood in front of April, rubbing his chin. "There's another explanation." He took a deep breath and blew it out, his shoulders drooping. "I'm not trying to be insensitive in asking this, but is it possible you were separated at birth by two sets of adoptive parents?"

Another rush of emotions surged over her. She felt lost, alone, and confused, as if someone had ripped away her sense of identity. She couldn't allow that to happen, not when she was just now beginning to find her way in life.

Jumping to her feet, she yelled, "No!" Anger boiled to the surface as she asked herself how could this person, who knew nothing about her, dare to suggest something so ... so ... outrageous? She told herself to cool down, knowing she was acting unreasonably. "They would have told me." Her voice sounded too fragile, pleading, childish even.

She swallowed the burning lump in her throat, the effort sapping so much energy it forced her to bury her face in the couch cushion. Her admiration and love for her parents felt crushed. Pain and grief that she'd tried to push away by celebrating her birthday and applying for a promotion once again overwhelmed her.

No way would she crumble into a pitiful mass of sobs in front of these two. She sat up and watched the sheriff and Ethan tip their heads. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find a smile.

"I never saw your mother pregnant," the sheriff repeated. He brushed a hand down her arm. "It's possible they adopted you."

As a new rush of conflicting emotions surged through her,

she fought to hang onto the resolve for a new life she'd celebrated seconds before the car crashed through her wall. She just wanted to be alone. "Please go away. Both of you." She knew the anger boiling inside her was unfounded, but she couldn't stop it. When they didn't budge, she jumped up and wagged a finger at them. "Go. Now."

The sheriff locked eyes with Ethan and lifted a chin toward the door, a silent communication for Ethan to leave. He lifted his hands in surrender. "Fine. Sorry to have tried to help. I won't bother you again." He closed the door softly as he left.

Great. Now a new emotion swamped her: shame. She hung her head and pushed out the words, "Sorry. I feel so awful. Ethan is a good person. He worked through the night on Friday to help fix my wall, then he bought me breakfast this morning. I should go apologize to him before he leaves." Her legs refused to let her stand.

"He'll be fine," the sheriff said. "You call him later. I'll leave you to sort through your emotions as soon as I am convinced you're okay. Should I call Carol?"

"Thank you, but no. I can't go running to my boss every time life gets overwhelming." She couldn't help herself from slumping over her knees. "I'm not sure I'll be able to pay my electric bill."

"There's a fund at church. If the bill is too high, just ask the church secretary for help." He moved toward the door but stopped. "I've asked the ME to rush the DNA results."

SEVEN

Ethan had been blindsided by April's outburst. Sure, the realization she could be adopted shocked her, but she didn't have to bite his head off when all he did was state the obvious. He'd be better off focusing on landing the job in Oklahoma City and getting away from April.

They'd seemed so compatible when they met at Grinders. Not only that, he was the person she called when she was scared, and she'd clung to him as if he were her lifeline. Was it just an act?

"Good thing you found out what she was really like before you fell for her," he said to the air inside his car. His family would be disappointed. They liked her. He'd put off telling them until he was ready to deal with their lecture about settling down.

The memory of ex-fiancé's frequent rants about his shortcomings swam through his brain. Whenever Elizabeth didn't get her way, she'd accuse him of not caring about her. Like everyone else, he'd made mistakes, but he'd never deserved

Elizabeth's tirades. He shuddered at the thought of going through that again with April.

"Dodged that bullet."

His phone rang, the display on his dash showing it was April. Ignoring the call would do nothing but delay the inevitable. He didn't have the energy to deal with her emotions, but his parents had taught him better than to ghost her.

He tapped on the steering wheel button to answer. "Hello."

"I'm sorry. Dozens of emotions slammed through me all at the same time, and I took it out on you."

"I understand, and I'm sorry for all the loss and confusion you've experienced recently. I wish you all the best as you sort it out." He hovered his thumb over the button to disconnect, but the idea of never seeing her again constricted his lungs.

"If you aren't too far away, I would appreciate it if you'd come back and get those boxes out of the attic for me."

"You don't need me for that. You seem capable enough."

"True, but I'd like it if you did it." Her voice sounded thick with emotion.

How could he ignore that? "Okay, but I can only stay a few minutes. I have to get ready for work tomorrow."

ETHAN DROPPED down another box to April. She stood at the base of the attic ladder, catching each disintegrating box as he dropped them to her. The bottom of one opened, showering her head and shoulders with baby clothes.

He imagined April's mother folding her daughter's tiny garments with care, placing them into the box to await a second child who never arrived. A grunt escaped when he lifted the box labeled *Mom's Vinyl*. This one was taped up better than

the one holding baby clothes, but he wanted to be careful. He anchored his arm along the bottom seam.

“This last one is too heavy to drop,” he said to April. “I’m going to slide it down along the sides of the ladder, but I need you to help hold the weight against the ladder and ease it to the floor. Then I’ll climb down.”

With the box on the floor, he rubbed his hands together to wipe off the decades of attic dust. The stairs retracted with a crash.

“Thank you,” she said. “You and your family have been so kind to me, and I appreciate it. The last few days have felt like a roller coaster ride.”

“I can imagine.”

She didn’t seem to notice his comment. “At first, I was just shocked about the car and the person runnin’ across my lawn. I’ll admit that Phillip’s similarity to me sent my mind roiling. Then that note saying he was my brother sent me back to feeling lost. Since my mother’s death, I can’t find my way out of this soul-crushing grief. It felt like more than the loss of both parents, but I couldn’t put it into words to describe it to anyone, so I kept it inside. Knowing I had a twin somewhere out there explains so much. I wish I’d known him.”

He squeezed her shoulder. She grasped his hand as if he’d thrown her a rescue bouy. When she closed her eyes, he did the same, allowing himself to breathe along with her and to count his heartbeats. A connection formed, and a sudden realization sent a wave of sadness through him. This was a relationship he wanted, but he’d almost pushed her away forever.

She pulled in a heavy breath and patted his hand before walking toward the living room.

“Anyway, I won’t bore you with my troubles. I apologize again for the way I acted earlier, and I won’t keep you here any

longer. Thank you for comin' back, despite me actin' like a lunatic."

"First, of course, I accept your apology. It's natural that you would feel off after everything you've been through in the last several years. Then a dead person crashes their car through your wall, and then my enormous family shows up and takes over. Anyone would be overwhelmed by all of that. You aren't a lunatic. Second, I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have blurted out that you could have been adopted. That was insensitive. I've been so focused on my career that I've spent too much time alone. I may have lost some of my people skills."

"It's just ..."

The emotion in her voice pulled at him. It took courage for her to call him back to her house. If he read her right, she felt the connection a second ago as much as he did. He wasn't ready to give up on her.

"Tell me," he said.

"You sure? It will sound even more idiotic than you've seen me actin'." The beguiling glint in her beautiful blue eyes warmed him.

"Maybe, but it seems you need someone who isn't a big part of your life to confess some secrets to."

"It's that obvious?"

"Mmm-hmm."

April sighed. "Okay. Don't judge."

"Cross my heart." He made the gesture across his chest. "But I won't finish that saying by hoping to die. I have too much I want to accomplish before that happens."

Her laugh reminded him of when his father taught him to fish. *Don't pull on the line too quickly, son, Dad had said. Wait for the fish to take the hook, then pull on the line to set it before reeling in your catch.* April had set the hook when she'd smiled

at him on Friday night, then she'd reeled him in when she'd held his hand minutes ago.

"I had a good childhood," she said. "But I've always felt like a part of me was missin'. Until my dad lost his job and our health insurance, and then mom got sick, we were a happy family. Ours was the house where my friends liked to get together. I couldn't have asked for better, more lovin' parents. If I was adopted, and I plan to look through my parents' stuff to find clues, I hit the jackpot with them."

"But there was always something missing?"

"Yes. I get these weird sensations. Sometimes, it's sadness or happiness that I can't explain. There was this one time, I think I was in middle school, I was sittin' in my room studyin' when all of a sudden, my wrist bone hurt, and I wondered if I was having a panic attack. I screamed, and both my parents came runnin'. They even took me to the ER. Gah. That sounds so kooky."

The light lilt in her voice had vanished, replaced by a thickness that twisted his heart.

"I felt it again the instant before Phillip's car crashed through my wall. I thought I was havin' a heart attack or anxiety or somethin' like that. And then, gah, I think I felt him die. I know that sounds so ... out there. It was like the earth tilted on its axis, and my insides emptied out. I had the deepest sense of loneliness I've ever felt, even worse than watching my mother die, which was so hard."

He reached for her hand. "I can't say I've ever felt anything like that, but I imagine it made you uncomfortable and maybe as if something were off about you."

"That's for sure." She sniffed, then let go of his hand to snag a tissue from a box on the coffee table his parents had given her.

He watched her take the two layers apart and stuff one back into the box before dabbing at her nose.

“You’re a doctor. Is it possible that, even though we weren’t identical twins, Phillip and I were connected spiritually or somethin’?”

“I’ve read that it’s possible for twins separated at birth to have similar likes and personality traits. I’ve read studies about the kind of empathy you’ve described, especially with identical twins. You and your brother—”

“If he was my brother.”

“Right.” He had to force himself to avoid telling her she was headed back to denial. “We still don’t know for sure if his note to you was true. However, if you were fraternal twins, you were formed from different eggs and sperm, meaning you’re less similar than identical twins to connect that way. There was a study by a researcher who was a fraternal twin. She found that even fraternal twins separated at birth could have similar preferences and personality traits. I suppose you could have a spiritual connection from when you were in the womb, if that’s what you’ve been feeling all your life.”

“Another thing ... my parents both had dark hair. Mom had dark eyes. We went to several family reunions on both my mom’s side and my dad’s side. There isn’t another ginger in the bunch. I’m the only one. Most have brown eyes, and that’s the dominant gene, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve read that my hair and blue eye combination is rare. I know you didn’t want to show it, but I could tell when you were zippin’ Phillip into that body bag. You saw how much we looked alike.”

“The ME and I noted that you share the relatively rare genetic traits of red hair and blue eyes, yes.” He told himself to stop sounding so clinical.

“As much as I don’t want it to be true, havin’ a twin explains so much.”

“I hope you find some closure.”

“Yeah. Um. So. I was thinkin’. The sheriff swabbed my mouth for DNA to compare it to Phillip’s, and he asked your boss to put a rush on the results. Is there any way you could get the report ahead of ... just so I’d know if ... you know.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond, and he was afraid that if he said something wrong, he would make it worse for her. Sudden sadness washed over him as he envisioned how difficult April’s life had been. He could imagine the loneliness she must have felt throughout her life.

He finally found the words he needed. “I don’t think you’re in any trouble from taking evidence out of the car, if that’s what you’re wondering. I have a friend who may agree to show me the report. It won’t bring Phillip back, but at least you’ll be able to have some closure, knowing that he was a part of you, and that’s the reason for the strange feelings you’ve had your entire life. I’ll do what I can to help you work through this.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

At that moment, he knew he needed to help her. The importance of her safety and peace of mind was inching its way up to a close second to his career.

EIGHT

April walked ahead of Ethan toward her front door, opening it enough to let in a cool waft of winter air. He stood in the entryway, beaming at her with those irresistible blue eyes. She hoped her swoon wasn't visible to him. "Goodnight. Thanks for your help today."

He nodded before backing away, then turned to walk toward his car parked on the street. Her mother had once told her how much it meant to her that her father always looked back at her before leaving. "It shows me how much he cares," Mom had said.

Just before opening his car door, Ethan turned and waved. His gaze lingered as he took her in, filling her with a warmth and a sense of security that she hadn't felt in a long time. She threw him a wide grin while waving back.

With her hand on the closed door, she pictured his face where it had been just moments ago. A thought of what it would be like to kiss him hovered in her brain, but she shook it away.

"Stop it," she demanded of herself.

Ethan would realize soon enough what a social misfit she was. She sighed and made herself walk toward her bedroom to pick out clothes appropriate for her new position at the market. The boxes Ethan had taken from the attic stole her attention.

The ones labeled *Mom's Vinyl* and *April* intrigued her most. She tore the tape from the lid of the *April* box and glanced inside. It was full of three-ring binders that held sheets of pictures. She'd seen many of them before and smiled at the memory of the day she and her mom packaged them up and asked Dad to put them in the attic. She'd go through them later and analyze them more closely.

Was she ready to expose the lie that may have been her life? Not yet. She wanted to start her new position at work feeling uplifted, not depressed for what might have been, so she moved to the *Mom's Vinyl* box.

Dust tickled her nose as she lifted the lid. She'd expected to find leftover flooring from when her dad had updated Grandma Carlston's lake house to sell it after she died from a massive stroke. Instead, the scent of old paper made her sneeze. The sight of classic record albums elicited a gasp. She nudged aside a large manilla envelope labeled *Sands of Tomorrow* to pull out a record album branded *The Beatles/1962-1966*.

"Grandma's old music?" She puffed out a delighted laugh, images of her grandmother dancing in the kitchen while making brownies uplifting her spirit.

What if these record albums were worth money? There was an entire box of them. But had the heat and cold in the attic damaged the records? She checked. Her parents had stacked them upright and tight against one another. None appeared damaged. Hope for the new year blossomed as full as it had when she turned in the application for the accountant job.

She unlocked her phone. Did she dare waste valuable data

by searching an auction website? “Do it.” Someday, she’d get a less restrictive phone plan. Throwing caution to the wind, she rushed to a site to use up as little data as possible.

Someone had listed the same Beatles album for almost seventy dollars. Another album, like one of her grandma’s, was listed for a thousand, and another for two thousand.

If she sold them, she could keep her furnace on sixty-eight degrees instead of sixty. She could afford a less restrictive phone plan and take the college entrance exam. As she waltzed down the hallway with the album in her hands, she imagined keeping the cupboards, refrigerator, and freezer full. What would it feel like to buy clothes that fit, and to replace the gas she’d siphoned from her mother’s car—and to spend money on an ad to sell it?

Floating was the only way to describe how she felt while walking back to the boxes in the hallway. She’d take an inventory tonight of the albums and go to the library after work tomorrow to research which were the most valuable.

She hummed one of her grandmother’s favorite songs while sitting cross-legged and opened the folder labeled *Sands of Tomorrow*. It contained a two-inch stack of computer paper with a cover sheet that repeated the title with her father’s name under by.

“Dad? You wrote a book?”

Another sheet contained what looked like a template her dad had used to write letters to literary agents.

SANDS OF TOMORROW follows the story of two unlikely friends, Aiden and Mariah, who are forced together in post-apocalyptic Oklahoma. Aiden is a young preacher trying to bring hope to people struggling in their new reality. Mariah is a mysterious steampunk inventor with a passion for using her technical skills to help others. When a mysterious force from outer space threatens, Aiden and Mariah must join forces to save

the world from certain destruction. Along the way, they face monstrous sandworms, a sinister cult, and an ancient evil. Along the journey, Aiden's faith is tested, while Mariah discovers a newfound respect for the power of faith. In the end, Aiden and Mariah must put their differences aside and find the courage to save the world and restore peace.

At the back of the folder was a strange plastic device. Yellow. About three inches square. Then it hit her. In her high school computer class, the teacher had explained the history of storage devices. The item her father had placed with his novel manuscript was the second- or third-generation floppy disk. At three-and-a-half inches, it was smaller than the earlier generation of eight-inch square devices.

She thought she remembered the teacher saying that USB flash drives were introduced in 2000, three years before April's birth. That would mean her dad had stored whatever was on the floppy disk when he was in his early twenties.

"Did you put your book on this, Dad?" The realization won a smile.

Excited to have found something so unique belonging to her father, she set the device aside to take with her when she visited the library the next day. She pushed away the worry that the library may not have the equipment to read an antique such as her dad's disk. In the two hours before bedtime, she hoped to create a complete inventory of Grandma's vinyl record albums to take to the library.

A SCRAPING SOUND WOKE April from a deep sleep. The screen of the cell phone sitting on the nightstand said it was three twenty-seven a.m. Was the noise part of a dream, or was someone in the house? She stayed perfectly still, her heart

pounding and her eyes peering into the darkness of her bedroom.

Was it her imagination, or could she hear someone breathing?

She inched out of her bed and crept to the doorway. Shuffling sounded in the kitchen. With her heart racing, she tiptoed down the hall, took a deep breath for courage, and peeked around the corner. A figure wearing a knit beanie, gloves, and a heavy coat moved around in the darkness, rummaging through cabinets and drawers. April drew back, but fear froze her in place with her back against the wall. She knew she had to do something, but she was too afraid to make noise by moving.

When the tap of footsteps meant the intruder was walking toward her, she backed into her bedroom and closed the door.

As quietly as possible, she plucked her phone from the nightstand and took it to the closet to call for help. With trembling hands, she dialed and waited an eternity for someone to answer.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

April wanted to shush the woman. She took a deep breath and whispered, “Someone is in my house. I’m hiding in the closet, and I need help.”

“What is your address? I’ll send help right away, but stay on the line with me and don’t make any noise.” The operator’s calm voice did nothing to slow April’s galloping heart.

She rasped out her address, followed by “Shh.”

The laundry room door opened. She knew it was that one because of the squeak. “The person went to the garage.”

“Stay where you are. A sheriff’s deputy is one minute away and will search the perimeter before ringing the doorbell. You’ll know it’s him because he’ll give you three short rings and wait for you to ask who it is before he identifies himself as Deputy Zach Gleason.”

“I know Zach.” She remembered him as tall, with broad shoulders, always wearing a crisp tan uniform and black cowboy boots.

The operator reminded her to stay in the closet until the doorbell rang three short bursts.

April held her phone in a death grip while waiting for the doorbell. When it rang, she sprang up. “He’s here.”

“He’s at your door, but make him identify himself before you open it.”

She sprinted to the door and screamed, “Who’s there?”

“It’s Deputy Zach Gleason.”

She recognized her friend’s voice: deep, with a firm tone that filled her with confidence. He’d graduated from high school before she’d entered, but she’d rung up his groceries at the market numerous times. Pulling the door open, she flung herself into Zach’s arms.

He stiffened but held her for the brief moments it took her to calm down, then led her to the couch while he checked the house. When he returned, his questioning was polite yet direct and respectful. Did she recognize the intruder? Was the person male or female? What was the person looking for? She didn’t know the answers.

He raked a hand through his short brown hair. “How did they get into the house?”

She told him about the broken window on Friday night and the open window last night, Sunday. “They went out to the garage.”

He nodded and headed to the garage. When he was done inspecting in there, he stroked his trimmed beard and asked, “How do you know the intruder went to the garage?”

“The door squeaks.” She looked into his warm eyes and took comfort in the concern she saw there.

“Wait here.” As he always had at the market, Zach moved

confidently and with precision while checking the perimeter of the house.

April's thoughts went wild. What if she'd only imagined the intruder going out to the garage because that's where she had wanted them, with her safe in the house? Was the person still inside, and she'd stopped the deputy from checking by telling him they were in the garage? She shivered on the couch while she waited an eternity for Zach to return.

"The service door to your side yard was open. I closed and locked it. That's probably how they got in."

She shook her head. "I never use that door. It's been locked for months."

Zach glanced skeptically at her and clasped his hands in his lap as he sat beside her. "I checked, April. There was no forced entry."

Didn't he believe her?

Zach sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Is there anything missing?"

"Oh." She hurried to the kitchen. "Oh. The folder."

Suddenly aware that she wore pajamas, embarrassment flooded her with the memory of how she'd flung herself at Zach. She folded her arms across her chest, but had to unfold them again to check the kitchen cabinets and drawers.

Phillip's folder, with his note to her and the photo of the redheaded mystery woman, was gone.

NINE

Early in the Monday morning darkness, Ethan arrived at the office, his slip-resistant shoes echoing off the sterile walls. He turned on the lights as he entered the lobby, then continued flipping switches in the morgue, the forensic lab, Dr. Franklin's office, and his space.

After donning a white lab coat over the scrubs he'd ironed the night before, he entered the break area to make coffee for the few staff who reported to Dr. Franklin. With his hands wrapped around a steaming cup of joe to warm them, he sat at the round table, waiting.

The click of Forensic Scientist Marisol Lopez's confident footfalls preceded her into the room. The thirty-something's characteristic sleek black ponytail swished as she waved, flashing an astonished smile.

"You're here early." As expected, she plucked a paper towel from the roll, spreading it on the counter. She dug a spoon from a drawer, then lined up a mug, the spoon, and a packet of sweetener as if this were one of her experiments.

"Thought it was my turn to make the coffee," Ethan said.

“Good of you. I need this pick-me-up after the weekend I had.” She followed her morning routine of pouring half a cup of coffee and tapping the sweetener twice before adding it to the brew.

“Trouble on the home front?”

“My five-year-old thought it would be fun to ride her bike through the garage door. Sprained her wrist. Skinned her elbow. Cried so loud the entire neighborhood came running.” Marisol stirred in the sweetener while filling the mug to half an inch from the brim.

He scrunched up his face. “Ouch.”

“But you didn’t come in early to make coffee. What’s up?” She washed and dried the spoon and dropped it into the drawer before joining him at the table and staring at him through the steam as she sipped.

“Dr. Franklin and I collected samples from a murder scene last week, and I was wondering when you might have DNA results.”

“Something unusual about this one?”

He tried not to smile, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Ah, the boss was right when he asked for a rush on the samples. This one is personal for you.” She pushed up from the table. “It takes at least twenty-four hours, and that’s when we aren’t backed up.”

“Are we backed up?”

“Not too bad. Dr. Franklin said to move this one to the top of the stack, so the weekend tech got it started on Saturday. The county sheriff went out of his way to bring a swab sample and fingerprints, and we’re comparing the DNA to samples found in the car. Not sure why. We should have results soon.” She pressed his shoulder as she walked past him toward her domain, the lab. “We take care of our own here. You know that.”

APRIL LEFT work at the Peach Blossom Market with a spring to her steps. She'd lost her energetic walk during the last six months. Was it possible God had finally remembered who she was? Not only would she make enough at her new job on Carol's management team to pay her bills, but Carol had also handed bonus checks to each employee today. She could afford groceries, and she'd buy Carol a Christmas gift. And finally pay her electric bill.

Despite the break-in the night before, life was still good.

She drove to the library, excited to look at the files on her dad's floppy disk and to research the value of her grandmother's vinyl albums. Quiet greeted her inside the automatic doors of the small building, the scent eliciting a nostalgic sigh. Books. Magazines. Comforting memories washed over her as she thought of her mother bringing her here to find Nancy Drew books or to complete homework assignments.

At the front desk, she offered a grin at a librarian with waist-length gray hair and an ankle-length tie-died dress. This was a perfect person to ask about the long-forgotten relic she needed.

"Do you have a floppy disk drive?"

The woman flashed an astonished smile. "I think I've seen one in the back. Wait here." She disappeared behind a door, coming back minutes later with a rectangular device about four inches square and one inch high. "It's been decades since I attached one of these. Let's see if I remember how."

She led April to a deserted alcove with four desks containing computers. "You can sit there." She gestured to a chair behind the second computer, then searched the back for a port to plug in the device. "Here we go. Muscle memory, I guess." She giggled as she set the device next to the monitor on

the desk. "Let's hope this thing still works." When she toggled a switch, a light on the front came to life.

April stared at the device. In response to her confused gaze, the woman asked for the floppy disk and inserted it into a slot, showed her how to search the contents, and returned to her spot at the front desk.

Dad's manuscript for *Sands of Tomorrow* was the largest file. April sent a quick thank you to the universe. Microsoft had invented their Word program when Dad wrote the book. It was the only word-processing program on the computer. She opened the document and read the first paragraphs her father had written.

Aiden kicked his worn leather boot against the flat rock that served as his stage. He mounted and looked out at his congregants, set against a background of sand dunes. Barren soil had replaced the forest he remembered from his childhood in Oklahoma, all of it destroyed during The Big War. As a young preacher, Aiden's mission was to bring hope to a world that seemed lost. He held fast to his faith despite the destruction, believing that the world could be restored.

He glanced behind the dozen people gathered to hear his message to see a young woman dressed in tattered clothes. Aiden figured she once fancied her style to be steampunk.

He knew her by reputation, learning from congregants that Mariah had taken refuge in the Oklahoma wasteland when bandits chased her from her home in Arkansas. Barely more than a teen, Mariah had used her remarkable technical skills to survive. A mechanical wiz, she constructed gadgets from ancient technology. She focused her skills on protecting the innocent and helping those who were struggling with the new reality.

Little did either of them know they would soon face a mysterious force that would put their beliefs to the biggest test yet.

April closed the file and opened a spreadsheet bearing the

name Agents. Along the top of the worksheet, her father had labeled the rows: *Agent Name*, *Contact Info*, *Date Submitted*, *Date Rejected*, *Date Accepted*. There were one hundred fifty names, but only a few dates in the *Rejected* column and nothing in the *Accepted* column.

Tears prickled her eyes at the depressing sight, but she preferred to hang onto the elated mood she'd enjoyed when entering the library. To make the best of her time there, she unfolded her inventory of her grandmother's vinyl albums.

With three windows open in the web browser, she compared the selling prices of the same albums on different auction sites, adding the results next to each title in an Excel worksheet. When she summed up the numbers two hours later, she tipped her head back and would have hooted if she hadn't been in a library looking directly at a sign asking for quiet.

She printed out the details and emailed the file to herself. Her phone buzzed with a call from Ethan. She rushed past the main desk, thanking the librarian on her way out the double glass doors.

"Hi, Ethan. This is a pleasant surprise."

"You sound chipper."

She told him about her research.

"Are you sitting down?" he asked.

"No, I'm on my way to the car."

"Let me know when you're inside."

She did. "What's this about?"

"The DNA results from the blood in Phillip's car came in today."

She heard a woosh inside her ears. Stars appeared in front of her eyes.

"There is a fifty percent DNA match between Phillip and your sample that the sheriff brought to us over the weekend. Yours also matches what was on the broken window glass."

“What’s a fifty percent match mean?”

“Phillip was your brother. Identical twins would bring a hundred percent match. We can’t determine if you’re fraternal twins without both original birth certificates, but the headline is that you are his sister.”

“Wow. I don’t know how to feel about that. How can I find his birth certificate?”

“We’ll work on that, but there’s more.”

She inhaled a steady breath. “Okay.”

“When we had breakfast on Sunday, I mentioned a snow globe with blood on it.”

“I remember.”

“There was another person in the car. The blood on that also is a familial match. Could be a half sibling, an aunt, a grandmother, or a niece. We don’t have enough information to make an educated guess about which it is.”

She stared at the lights inside the library building, her mind spinning, her heart unable to decide if it wanted to drop or skip right out of her chest. To stop her freezing hands from shaking, she tried stuffing them into her gloves. The walls closed in; she couldn’t breathe.

“What?” she croaked. She tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry.

Ethan repeated the news.

April gripped the steering wheel, wondering how her hands could be so clammy and still be cold, sensing that the rubber-coated circle in front of her was all that kept her from floating away. “Okay,” she said, her voice hardly above a whisper. Ethan said something else, but April couldn’t hear him. Her mind was too busy racing, trying to process the news.

“I have a family.” *A family!*

“Looks like it.” Why was there no smile in his voice? “But ...”

“But what?”

“The person—your half-sister, aunt, niece, or grandmother—might be out there injured or kidnapped. Or ...”

“Ohh. You think she could be the murderer?” Her stomach pitted into tight coils. “It’s too soon to give up on her, right?”

“Right. She could be a victim or a suspect.”

“Surely she wouldn’t kill her own flesh and blood. She has to be a victim. I have to find her and get her the medical assistance she needs. Can you help me find her?”

His silence seemed to last forever. “I’ll help where I can without breaking the law or the ethics of my job.”

The idea of working together with him sent a ribbon of excitement twirling inside her. “Thank you. What an unexpected Christmas present it would be to find that I have a family!”

“I can imagine.” He cleared his throat, sounding as though he was raking away uncertainty. “Speaking of Christmas, my mother has invited you to join our family on Christmas Eve.”

The ribbon of joy from seconds earlier morphed into a rope tying her stomach into a knot. “That’s kind. I got a raise and a bonus today, but there’s no way I have the money to buy presents for you and your enormous family. I’ll pass.”

“Mom made a point of saying there would be no presents on Christmas Eve, and you don’t need to bring anything but a pea salad if you can afford it.”

The stomach binding untangled. She wondered what it would be like to be part of a family again, whether the Smythe family or the woman whose blood they found on the snow globe.

“I have a family,” she repeated.

TEN

At the helm of his vehicle, Ethan disconnected the call with April, concern trickling through him. While he agreed it would be amazing to help April find her biological family, she was in denial again. Why was the half-sister, aunt, niece, or grandmother in the car? What happened to her? There wasn't enough blood on the snow globe or pooled in the car to indicate the woman had died, but who had hit her? Phillip, or the person who owned the other set of fingerprints? And what would compel Phillip to clobber a biological relative he'd obviously been looking for? If it was Phillip's murderer who hit and drew blood from the woman, April's only known living relative could be lying in a ditch somewhere.

He turned the key in the ignition. *Please, God, prepare April's heart to deal with whatever happened to that woman.* With the prayer said, he navigated to Woodland Hills Mall to buy her a Christmas gift. Something special but inexpensive to avoid embarrassing her. Platonic. Nothing to give her or his parents the wrong idea about his intentions. She was a friend

who needed help. After what he'd done to his family's business, he owed it to them to keep his career his priority.

Rays from the setting sun pierced his eyes. While pulling down the visor, he noted clouds gathering, a testimony to Dr. Franklin's prediction of a white Christmas. The memory of snowball fights with his brothers and topping a snowman with his father's fishing hat gave him a smile.

The speakers on his dashboard jingled. Caller ID said it was his mother.

"Your dad's watching the weather report," Mom said. "Looks like we'll have a white Christmas. Did April say she'd join us for dinner on Christmas Eve?"

"Yes, but only after I told her there'd be no gifts."

"But you'll buy her something, right?"

"Headed to the mall now."

"Good boy. Let's make it an early dinner so she doesn't get caught in the snowstorm. And I'll warn the boys to hold back on commenting about the chemistry flashing between the two of you. Tell her two o'clock."

"That's lunch, and there's no chemistry. I'm concentrating on landing that job in Oklahoma City. Long-distance relationships don't work."

"Lunch, dinner. Chemistry, attraction, whatever. Call it what you want. There's chemistry."

Besides, he pondered while turning into a parking spot. *With April's emotions all over the place and fragile, she's in no condition for a long-term relationship.* He appreciated her intense focus on rebuilding her life, finding her relatives, and selling her grandmother's vinyl albums. They both had other priorities, and his must remain on landing the job of his dreams.

"What's April up to this evening?" Mom's voice dripped with more probing than the question she'd asked.

"When I was at her house, she asked me to help her take

boxes from the attic. One of them held a treasure trove of vinyl albums. She's researching their value in hopes of selling them to finance her education."

"Is she looking into Oklahoma State University?" Satisfaction—or was it confirmation—filled her tone.

"She seems intent right now on dreaming about her future."

"That poor girl needs a break. I shudder at the idea of having no family left."

He told her about finding evidence of a half-sister, aunt, niece, or grandmother in Phillip's car. "She missing."

His mother gasped. "We need to find her. And I can help her set up an account at an auction website to sell those albums."

"The authorities are taking care of finding her relative. I'm at the mall and need to figure out what to buy April."

"A scarf. Blue would bring out her lovely eyes. Ta-ta." She hung up.

He followed his mother's advice and bought a blue scarf. While waiting for the young brunette at the courtesy counter to wrap it for him, he got a call from Marisol.

"Wanted to give you a heads up," his co-worker said. "We've analyzed the fingerprints on the snow globe found in Phillip's vehicle. Did your girl say anything about touching it?"

The question spiked him with adrenaline. "April? She isn't my girl, and she said nothing about touching it."

"Well, she did, along with the victim and a third person."

"Can you get DNA from the third person's fingerprints?"

"Working on it. Anyway, the county sheriff is on his way to your girl's house to question her about it. I'd be careful about getting involved with her if I were you."

"Thanks, but I don't have time for getting involved with anyone. See you tomorrow."

His neck and shoulder muscles coiled into a knot as he wedged his car into heavy Christmas shopper traffic on Seventy-First Street. His mind swirled with questions. Had April's innocence been an act? He dialed her number.

"Hey." He tried to sound cheerful rather than give away the doubts circling through him. "Why didn't you mention that you touched the snow globe in Phillip's car in addition to taking the folder with your name on it?"

"I touched nothing but the folder." She sounded defensive. "I cut myself, saw a figure on my lawn, and ran to the kitchen to get a knife to protect myself." His throat constricted with her quavering voice that descended into little more than a whisper at the end.

"April, your fingerprints are on the snow globe." Heaviness pressed down on him.

"No, I didn't touch it."

He wanted to trust her, but the evidence told a different story. "Then how'd your fingerprints get on it?"

"That's for you researchers to figure out." It sounded more like a plea.

The silence that followed shoved hot teeth of betrayal into him.

"You believe me, right?" Emotion had returned to her voice.

He held a hand to his heart. "I don't know what I believe, April." He heard her doorbell ring in the background. "That's the sheriff. He's going to ask you how your fingerprints got there. Act surprised. I wasn't supposed to tell you."

"Thanks for warning me. Please trust me." She seemed to swallow a sob. "I don't know how my fingerprints got on that snow globe. Someone must be trying to set me up. Why would they do that? I didn't even know Phillip existed until he drove through my wall."

“Answer your door, and we’ll talk later and try to figure it out after you talk to the sheriff.”

With a whirlwind of doubt swirling around him, he sent up a prayer for wisdom and discernment.

ETHAN UNLOCKED the door to his apartment, grasping the Christmas gift he had bought for April. Hesitant to enter the barren place he once considered his sanctuary, he inhaled a steadying breath. With a heavy heart and knees made of rubber, he stepped inside and slid the present onto the kitchen counter. The sound of it scraped at the logic he’d clung to since the first biology class he’d loved in middle school.

Thoughts racing in circles, he slogged to the coat closet and reminded himself he was a man of science. The science said April had lied, yet the anguish in her voice reminded him of first seeing her cowering in her kitchen, looking scared and small, blanketed in the protective arms of a friend. Had he mistaken a guilty expression for grief?

He hung up his coat and moved to the middle of his stark living room. Which did he feel more: confusion or loneliness? He used to think of the emptiness as simplicity, but now walls with no pictures called up the image of an icebox. *Frozen*. He felt frozen to the carpet in the center of a tiny room that held nothing but a black leather couch and a TV on a stand he bought from Ikea.

His gaze wandered back to the gift on the kitchen counter. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to give it to April anymore. And why did he sense a strange need to protect her?

His phone startled him. Caller ID said it was April. He rooted for the right words to say, the best explanation for how

he felt, but nothing surfaced, so he answered with a simple “hello.”

“The sheriff just left. At first, he didn’t believe I didn’t touch the snow globe. You don’t, either, do you?” Her snuffle suggested she’d cried before calling, and that tugged at his heart.

He swallowed hard to dislodge the lump forming in his throat. “I admit to being confused.”

“While we talked, I remembered that Carol bought Christmas snow globes to sell. She asked me to help her stock them right after Thanksgiving. Until I started training the new cashier two weeks ago, I checked out almost everyone who bought things at the market, including employees. As busy as we’ve been, I’ve chatted with customers less. He’s going to confirm all that with Carol.”

Relief swelled his lungs, and he sank to his couch, its chill putting goosebumps on his skin. “Sounds like a reasonable explanation. I’m glad you remembered it. I’ve wracked my brain looking for a scientific way your fingerprints could have gotten on that snow globe, but this makes way more sense than anything I came up with.”

“Do you still want me to go to your parents’ for Christmas Eve dinner?”

Guilt over his doubts about her scorched him. “Of course. The weather report calls for snow later in the day. My mother decided on an early dinner, so you could get home before the roads get dangerous. Dinner is at two, but you should come around one so you can get used to the anarchy my family will hoist upon you.”

With her voice back to a whisper, she asked, “Do you think my missing relative is alive?”

“There’s no way to know that from the blood sample on the snow globe, but I want to help you find her if I can.”

“Thank you.” She strung out the last word as if she had more to say. “I’ve sorted through my emotions about being adopted. I was mad at my parents at first for not telling me. That would have given me so much peace growing up. But they thought they were doing what was best for me.”

“And for them.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She blew out a heavy sigh. “If I’d ever told them about those strange feelings I used to get, they might have told me.”

“No doubt.” A smile spread across his face, relaxing his taut muscles.

“The more I think about it, the more I believe my father was the one who wanted to adopt me. Mom was always trying to change my looks.”

“Let’s get you some answers by finding your missing relative.”

ELEVEN

April put down the phone after speaking with Ethan, her mind careening through images from her childhood and special occasions she'd celebrated with her parents.

She picked up the Christmas gift her bonus had allowed her to buy for Ethan. An engraved money clip. Kind of an old-fashioned thing, but it seemed to fit his personality. It had cost more than she should have spent, but she'd wanted to give him something special after all he'd done for her. Even thinking about him put a flutter in her stomach. She told herself to stop. They were friends; he'd made that clear.

With a sigh, she looked at the boxes Ethan had brought down from the attic. She skimmed her fingers across the top of the one labeled *April*, then opened it. Nestled inside was the birth certificate with Rhonda and Will Carlston named as her parents. They'd used a notarized copy of that document many times. To enroll her in school. To get her driver's license. To apply for a passport when the family vacationed in Canada one summer.

A photo was paper-clipped to this copy of the certificate:

the redheaded woman in Phillip's car and her mother's box of secrets. She turned it over. *Sarah*, her father had written on the back.

Beneath that was an airline boarding pass from the year April was born. Her dad had gone to Ireland at the beginning of the year she was born? She blew out a swish of air, then returned to digging for answers in the contents of the box.

She rifled through report cards and photos, finding a notebook from a writer's retreat in Ireland. As it had at the library, her heart ached for her father. He'd put a lot into trying to publish his manuscript, with no results. She had a vague memory of seeing a Sarah on Dad's list of agents he'd contacted. She'd check it later. When her life was back on track, she'd try to do something to honor Dad's effort. Maybe she'd try to find the Sarah agent. Considering it another few minutes, she wondered if his abandonment of her disqualified him of her efforts. No, he was her father, and she loved him. He'd never been good with tension, and Mom's illness had caused him to do things he wouldn't have otherwise done. She patted the manuscript. If he'd met Sarah at the writer's conference, and Sarah had rejected his manuscript, she'd follow up, and then she'd leave it in the past.

Still, she stared at the documents, dazed by the questions they raised and the tasks required to figure out what had upended her and Phillip's lives.

What about the person who kept breaking into her house? She cringed at the idea of losing these important clues to her life. She retrieved her keys from her purse, carried the box to the garage, and secured the box in the trunk of her car. With extra care, she relocked the door between the garage and the house when she was done.

Preparing for bed, she reminded herself to laser in on the love she had for her job, the bonus that allowed her to go shop-

ping for the first time in a long time, and selling Grandma's vinyl albums. She didn't dare hope a university would accept her after being out of high school for so long, but she'd check into it the next day. She lingered for a few seconds, trying to put words to how she felt about Ethan, then shook it off. He was out of her reach.

As she nodded off, her last thought was that she would have the courage to take on the challenges that faced her.

What seemed like seconds later, she startled awake to still darkness and a greasy smell. The clock on her phone read two a.m. She didn't usually crave a cheeseburger, but she sure did now. She slipped out of bed, following the scent. It clung heavier in the air around the living room. She shivered. The Smythe family probably ate takeout while they worked in that room.

But why did she just now notice the scent? She tiptoed to the kitchen and pulled out a knife, then turned on every light in the house to search the rooms and closets. The cheeseburger odor had dissipated. *Did I imagine it?* She retraced her steps, turning off lights on the way to her bedroom.

Her hand lingered on the switch in her bedroom. *Don't be a baby.* She toggled it down, wedged the knife under the mattress, and crawled into bed. With wide eyes searching the darkness surrounding her, she eased out a breath to stop her heart from racing. Still unable to close her eyes, she lay motionless, listening for breathing or footsteps, sniffing but no longer detecting that odor. Silence, except for her pounding heart. No fragrances.

The sheriff and his deputy had both checked all the windows and locked the doors. No one had a key but her. She told herself to relax, but she kept her eyes wide, watching.

Heavy eyelids soon won out, and she drifted into a light sleep until something bumped against her bed. A shadow

descended, and a cat purred. She had no cat. Her eyes wouldn't open. Her mind insisted she was dreaming.

In her dream, she suddenly was outside in the warm summertime. She squinted into the darkness surrounding her. All seemed still and silent until scraping and pulling filled the dead of the night. Her eyes were drawn to her elderly neighbor's house, where a faint light glowed from one of Mrs. Williams' windows. Mrs. Williams used to babysit April while her parents worked.

The light moved. It now radiated from the woman's vegetable garden, a few yards from April's window. Unable to move, April stood rooted in place, transfixed by the mysterious light and the odd noises coming from Mrs. Williams' garden.

Mrs. Williams murmured to herself as she hoed weeds from the furrows between large plants of lettuce, broccoli, tomatoes, and green beans. When the woman finished, she waved to April with a friendly smile before floating to her house. The lock on the woman's back door clicked into place from inside the house.

With an abrupt shake, the spell was broken, and April was now awake in her bed, her eyes wide, dread and confusion pressing down on her chest until sleep once again claimed her.

APRIL YAWNED and stretched herself awake at seven a.m., a smile spreading across her face at the idea she wouldn't have to go to work hungry and endure the tantalizing food scents at the market. While getting ready, she laughed at the dream from last night, wondering if old Mrs. Williams would appreciate hearing about it. She'd buy two cupcakes at work today and take them over this evening to share with her old friend.

She walked into the kitchen with her heart swelling with joy and her mouth watering at the anticipation of slathering a

bagel with cream cheese, something she couldn't afford just a few days ago. Then she glanced toward the living room and stumbled to a stop against the island.

Someone had rearranged the pictures on the wall. The cheeseburger scent wasn't a dream or the overactive imagination she thought she'd inherited from her father until she discovered she was adopted.

Someone had violated her and her home while she slept. The sounds in the dream were real, and she'd slept right through it. Panic washed over her. She rushed to the front door, the back door, and the garage door. They were all locked.

Her stomach was too upset for her to eat, and she didn't know if the intruder was still in her home. She ran to confirm the box of vinyl albums was still in the trunk of her car. They represented her bright future. An education.

She climbed into her car and backed out of the garage, cowering under her coat behind the steering wheel, watching the garage door close before calling the sheriff.

A creepy feeling overcame her while she waited for him to arrive. Did the intruder watch her getting ready? She turned the heater to full blast and called Carol to tell her she'd be late.

"Carol, I'm sorry. I know this is only my second day as your accountant, but someone broke into my house again and rearranged my pictures while I slept. The sheriff insists I wait for him. I'll be at work as soon as he finishes."

"No, you won't. Someone is terrorizing you, and you need to go somewhere else until the sheriff catches them."

"But ..."

"No buts, sugar. You've worked for me since you were sixteen years old, and you're due for a vacation. Take the rest of the week off, and I'll see you next Monday."

"But ..."

She made a *stop-right-there* sound. "I'll fire you if you show

up here this week. Lisa Smythe told me she'd invited you for Christmas Eve dinner. Did you accept?"

"Yes."

"Good. You should call her to see if you can go there now."

"I hardly know them."

"Good way to get to know them. See you next week." Carol hung up.

From the side pocket of her purse, April dug out the business card Lisa Smythe had given her on Friday night. She couldn't impose on these people, so she put it back.

When the sheriff parked on the street in front of her house, she got out of her car to meet him at the end of the driveway.

"The dispatcher said someone rearranged your pictures while you were asleep."

In response to April's nod, he told her to show him. She unlocked the door and allowed him to enter ahead of her before gesturing toward the living room.

He pursed his lips and took a form from the compartment under his clipboard. "Doors were locked?"

"Yep."

"Windows?"

"Been too cold to open 'em."

With April following, the sheriff inspected every inch of her house, opening doors, tapping walls, and peering into closets. He climbed the ladder to the attic and stuck his head through the opening.

"What's covered up with a sheet over there on the far corner?"

"My mom's sewing mannequin. She had my dad put it up there and covered it up when I was a teenager and refused to wear the clothes she made. We converted her sewing room into a guest room." She wanted to smile at the memory, but growing anxiety made it impossible.

In the living room, he stood in front of the electric fireplace. It stood out from the wall at an odd angle.

“That’s the entrance to our storm shelter.” Too bad Phillip plowing through the opposite wall didn’t destroy that eyesore. She would have asked the Smythe family to replace it with a reinforced door.

“Hmm. Did you open it?”

“No.”

“How does it open?”

She showed him the lever on the mantle.

The sheriff slid his hand into the crack between the wall and the fireplace, created when the intruder undid it and didn’t close it all the way. He pulled it open and bent from the waist to look inside. “I didn’t know you had a basement.”

“My dad thought he was real smart and had it made special. In my entire life, we’ve only used it a few times. I never think about it anymore.”

The sheriff flipped a switch and looked around. “If you never go in there, why is there a takeout bag sitting on the table?”

April nudged him aside. “I smelled a cheeseburger last night. The person was in here.” It felt like bugs crawled on her skin; she swiped at her arms and legs.

She followed the sheriff down to the small room that contained a bench long enough for a brief stay by April’s three family members. He confiscated the bag on the drop-leaf table as evidence. She’d never seen the rocking chair stuck in one corner, but she remembered stocking the one shelf with her favorite mystery books.

“We didn’t plan on having to stay down here long, so we weren’t concerned with the furnishings.”

The sheriff slid a finger along the bench, the table, and the shelf. “How often do you dust this place?”

“Never.”

“There’s no dust.”

The bugs-on-her-skin feeling returned. “The intruder dusted?”

“Looks like it.”

“Did they live down here?”

The sheriff shrugged.

“Dad used to come down here occasionally when he needed *some peace and quiet*.” She deepened her voice for the last four words and put air quotes around them.

“How long has he been gone?”

“Six months.”

“You don’t s’pose it’s him?”

“Why wouldn’t he show himself?”

The sheriff shrugged again and looked around the room, his face expressionless. He turned to April and said, “Well, it looks like someone has been using this room, and it could be your intruder. Who else knows about it?”

She shook her head. “Other than my dad, no one. We don’t talk about it.”

“I’ll get a locksmith out here to change these locks for you.” The sheriff rushed out her door before she managed to tell him she couldn’t afford a locksmith. “And put bells on those doors so you hear if someone opens them during the night again.”

April’s mind whirled to the night the Smythe family had worked on the living room and insisted she go to bed while they finished.

TWELVE

It was the first autopsy of the day, and Ethan's mind refused to stay focused, bouncing between subjects as if Dr. Franklin weren't extracting organs from the deceased man in front of them.

"Ethan?"

Ethan sensed Dr. Franklin's voice as an echo in the back of his mind, buried under questions about facial recognition. Should he suggest the tactic to Sheriff Nelson? Did the Sheriff's Department have the resources to identify the woman in the photo April had found in the items her twin had brought to her house the night he died? Would his co-worker, Marisol, agree to do it as a favor to Ethan?

"Dr. Smythe."

But what about the other strange things happening at April's house? The shadowy figure running across her lawn the night of the murder. The broken window in her bathroom. Had someone entered the house while his family was there, and the Smythe clan was too preoccupied to hear the person? His family had made a lot of noise. Someone could have slipped

around them unnoticed. April had been so out of it and confused that she could have missed it.

Maybe he should take some time off to ensure her safety. His father had taught all the boys about protecting the women close to them.

Was April close to him?

A metallic clank startled him. With a flinch, he looked up to see that the doctor had whacked a specimen bowl against the autopsy table.

“Oh. Doctor. I’m sorry.” He couldn’t believe he’d let his mind wander during an autopsy.

“Where were you, lad? I’ve been blabbering away about my granddaughter’s enthusiasm for Christmas, and I seem to have shared with no one but myself and the deceased.” He pulled the stomach from the body and plopped it into the specimen bowl. “Let’s see if Marisol can determine what this man had for his last meal. That might give us a location for his personal belongings. Pack it up, label it, and take it to the lab, would you?”

“Of course, doctor.” Ethan retrieved the items he needed from the secure storage room, aghast that he’d been so unprofessional during such an important autopsy.

“You never answered my question. What’s on your mind? It certainly isn’t on this autopsy.”

“Remember the woman we met when the deceased here crashed through her wall on Friday night?”

“Ah, yes. Reminds me of my own British Isles ancestry with her lovely red waves and striking blue eyes.” Dr. Franklin looked down. “And this young man.”

“Yes. As you suggested, my family repaired the damage to her house. We’ve struck up a friendship with her, and I was thinking about how that night changed her.”

“Young love?” The doctor’s brief stare into the distance

suggested his mind had traveled back to the days when he dated his wife of more than thirty years.

“I wouldn’t call it that. It’s more of a new friendship.”

The doctor returned to his work while Ethan ignored the stomach’s combined scents of rotting flesh and lasagna while packaging the specimen. It took unusual concentration to pay attention to his boss’ ramblings.

“The attraction between you two was too magnetic for anyone to miss. I’m a big believer in love at first sight. That’s how it worked with Wendy and me. The second we met, BOOM! We were married six months later. What does the lovely Lisa Smythe think about you and April? Your mother is quite the force in your family.”

“If I so much as hint that there’s more to it than there could be because of our different priorities, my mother will pull out her bridal magazines and start planning the wedding.”

With a chuckle and a flick of the wrist, Dr. Franklin shoed Ethan toward the door. “While you’re at it, see if Marisol has completed her isotope analysis. It will tell us where he’s from so Sheriff Nelson can inform this young man’s relatives of his demise.”

As Ethan punched the cold elevator button outside the autopsy room, he heard the doctor finish his statement. “Relatives other than your sweet April Carlston, that is. Did you know that surname originated in Ireland? Most Europeans didn’t adopt surnames until around the thirteenth century.”

The elevator door rattled open, and Ethan stepped inside, holding in his amusement about the doctor’s wealth of trivia knowledge.

BACK AT HIS desk after Phillip d'Arcy's autopsy, Ethan noticed he had two calls and a text from April.

Did your family go into my storm shelter? she had asked two hours earlier.

Confused, he answered, *you have a storm shelter?*

When no response came for ten minutes, he considered whether he should call her or go to lunch. He picked up the bag containing his sandwich and an apple, opened it, and sniffed in the mouthwatering scent of honey-baked ham.

"Doctor, I think I'll head outside to eat my lunch," he said.

"Don't freeze," the doctor said. "The weather report says the storm is almost here."

Ethan's computer alerted him that an email had arrived, with the subject line of *Snow Day*. "All employees should leave the building before two o'clock, when a major snowstorm is forecast to hit the Tulsa area," the email said. "If you're traveling for the Christmas holiday, consider doing it today rather than waiting. Ice will make driving hazardous beginning tonight. Wednesday will be a snow day, and Thursday and Friday are holidays. Enjoy the time with your family!"

Dr. Franklin rolled his chair away from his desk. "Time to go home, lad. The weather outside is frightful." He snickered. "That reminds me of the Christmas classic song 'Let It Snow.' Did you know it was written in 1945? Some of the greatest voices of all time continue to put their own spin on it. My wife is fond of the Michael Bublé version."

Ethan donned his coat and gloves. "I didn't know that." The doctor continued to drone on about Christmas music while they walked to the parking lot. Before parting ways, the doctor gave Ethan's hand a hearty shake. "Merry Christmas to you and yours, lad. I hope you decide to make the drive to your parents' place this afternoon instead of Christmas day."

"Merry Christmas to you, Dr. Franklin. It sounds like you'll

have fun with your granddaughter. And, yes, I believe I'll take off as soon as I can pack a bag for the next four or five days until the weather clears."

Inside his car, Ethan pressed the call button on his steering wheel, instructing the system to call April.

She sounded out of breath when she answered. "Where have you been?" Breathless may have been too mild of a description for how she sounded.

"I was tied up with an autopsy," he said. "Is something wrong?"

"Did your family go into my storm shelter the other night?"

"I answered your text a few minutes ago. Sorry it took so long. No, we were unaware you had a storm shelter. We stayed in the living room with occasional trips to the bathroom. Did something happen?"

"There's a door behind the electric fireplace. Someone has been down there. They ate fast food down in my basement. If it wasn't your family, then who was it?"

Surely, she didn't expect him to answer that. "Where are you? You sound out of breath."

"Someone was at my house again, so I drove around trying to think of where I could go, but I didn't want to waste gas, so I hung out at the park. I brought a sleeping bag and blankets, but my feet still froze. Going for a run didn't warm them. Now I'm afraid someone is watching me, so I'm headin' back to lock myself in the car. It's snowing."

"Who's watching you?"

"I feel it more than see it, but there is one other vehicle in the parking lot besides mine. No one is in it, though."

"Trust your instincts. Go to my parents' house. I'll pull over and text you the address, then I'll call them to say you're coming. I'll pick up some things at my apartment, then meet you there in two hours."

“I can’t impose on ‘em like that. They hardly know me.”

“My mother would have my head if she found out I didn’t send you to them. I’m texting the address now. Go there, but drive carefully on the slick roads.”

ETHAN APPROACHED the freeway near his apartment, unsure if it or the side streets presented fewer hazards. Pellets of ice and snow now showered his windshield. With more traffic to clear the freeway, he figured it was the safest route. As he entered the on-ramp, the snow became large, puffy flakes coating his windshield.

He gripped the steering wheel, leaned forward as if that could increase visibility, and squinted through the glass. Within twenty minutes, visibility had dwindled, making the merge from I-244 to I-44 treacherous. Lane markers faded in and out of view. Ice formed under the wiper blades as they swished on full blast. His defrost wasn’t keeping up, and his knuckles ached from his tense grip on the steering wheel.

Nearing the town where his parents lived, he exited the freeway, braking at a stop sign. His tires spun, and automatic traction control tried to help, but his car slid into the middle of the intersection. An oncoming car fishtailed, then bumped onto a curb, where it stopped. He recognized the Ford.

“April?”

He finished his turn and parked on the shoulder of the road, ice and gravel crunching beneath his tires. *Thank you, God, for gravel and traction.*

While he waited for a blue SUV to pull around April’s car, she gunned her engine, resulting in her tires spinning and slush spraying from behind. He trudged to her window. At his tap on the glass, she cowered, then turned wide eyes toward him. The

tenseness in her shoulders eased when she recognized him and powered down her window.

“Did you see that blue SUV run into me?”

He turned to search for the SUV. “No. Is that why you fishtailed?”

“Yes. I’m stuck. There was a blue SUV like it at the park.”

His heart lost its rhythm. He looked down the street in the direction he’d seen the vehicle drive away. It was gone. The fear in April’s eyes rattled his bones. He had to get her to safety.

“You’re sure it was the same SUV?”

She tsked in an indignant breath. “Of course. It had a rental company decal on the rear windshield.”

“They seem to only want to scare you.”

“They’re doin’ a mighty fine job.”

“Let’s get out of here in case they come back. Put it in reverse. Ease down on the accelerator when I push from the front.” He situated his hands on the hood. “Ready?”

Her shoulders hunched with her nod. After a few rocks back and forth, the car inched back into her lane. He checked to ensure her wheel wasn’t ruined, then hurried to her window.

“We don’t usually get snow like this. Are you comfortable driving in it?”

“I’m right as rain.”

“Follow me.” He swiveled his head while running back to his car, searching for the SUV responsible for April’s accident. He would have preferred to drive April to his parents’ house and then come back for his car, but he didn’t want to risk having the attacker come back and tracing him by the license plate number on his car.

Had the attacker already identified him by his license plate? He dialed 911.

THIRTEEN

April sat at one end of the Smythe's wraparound couch, cradling a mug of hot chocolate in her hands, and basking in the warmth from the fire crackling in the fireplace on the other side of the room. She tucked her feet underneath her for extra comfort and exhaled a contented sigh. Her anxiety evaporated like the steam rising from her mug.

"Thanks for this," she said to Ethan, lounging at the other end of the sofa.

"For what?"

"Peace. It's somethin' I haven't felt in a long time. Phillip drivin' through my wall made it tons worse."

The wind howled outside. Sportscasters' voices and cheers from football fans came from the game on the TV downstairs. A gust of wind traveled down the chimney to cause the flames in the fireplace to bend.

Ethan set his mug on the large coffee table in the middle of the room. With a poker he pulled from a toolset on the hearth, he rearranged the logs. The fire flared, and a brief curl of earthy smoke stung her nostrils.

She looked around at the spacious room with high ceilings painted a darker gray than the soft gray walls. Light from the fire reflected off the hardwood floor and the tile surrounding the mantle. She imagined the windows behind the large, white shutters let in plenty of natural light during the day.

“This can’t be the couch your parents had while raising five boys. It’s in too good of shape.”

His dimpled grin put a flutter in her stomach. “It collapsed under one of Aaron and Brandon’s wrestling matches. They had to trash it. And the next one. They replaced it after we all moved out with the one they put in your house. It wasn’t big enough for our family gatherings, so it got sent to the basement to make room for this.” He gestured to three wingback chairs. “And those.”

Her gaze scanned the plants, a Christmas tree lacking ornaments, and myriad decorations scattered around the room. The inviting scent of pine spread a nostalgic feeling of warmth, comfort, and anticipation through her. “This is a cozy area, even if it is bigger than my kitchen, dinin’ room, and livin’ room put together.”

“It’s always been my favorite spot in this house.”

“Your mom goes all out with her Christmas decorations. It must take her forever to do all this.”

“She has five sons, four daughters-in-law, and seven grandchildren. You’ll meet them tomorrow. We all come over for what Mom calls her decorating party on the first Saturday of December. She has an efficient assembly line worked out.” He snickered. “It would make Henry Ford proud. Then we eat pizza.”

“Why are there no ornaments on the tree?”

“That’s a job we save for Christmas Eve. After we decorate the tree, my dad dresses up like Santa. I don’t expect he has anyone fooled, but it’s a lot of fun.”

“Is there an un-decorating party?”

He pulled an *are-you-kidding* face. “January first, of course.”

“Pizza?”

He feigned a gasp with a hand over his chest. “Is this your first New Year’s Day in Oklahoma? We have black-eyed peas, greens, cornbread, and ham. That brings us—”

“Wisdom in the new year. I know the routine.” April leaned her head against the pillow behind her and closed her eyes. “A good ritual for me to take part in this time; I could use some wisdom. I thought I was a goner when that SUV hit me from behind. It was a good thing you came along when you did.”

“It was a God thing.”

“God doesn’t take care of me.”

“Sure he does. You just haven’t noticed.”

“Your mom suggested I write down my blessin’s.”

“We all had a blessing book when we were growing up. I still do. I’m sure my mother would be happy to supply you with one.”

She straightened and frowned at him. “You’ve mentioned several times somethin’ you caused that almost destroyed your family’s business. Where was the blessin’ in that?”

He huffed out a tight laugh. “It took me a while to see it, but it was there. We were all expected to join the family business, but construction wasn’t my thing. I liked science, reading, and math. My brothers teased me about it, but I suspect they resented that it made me different. Aaron, my oldest brother, told me recently that they all admired my intelligence, but they thought I lorded it over them.”

“I can’t imagine that. You seem humble to me.”

“Thanks, but I’ll admit it. They were so much better at

everything else that I compensated by showing off my smarts too much. It was all I had, but I way over did it.”

“Can you tell me about the incident, or is that private family stuff? We had lots of private family stuff at our house.”

“I dreamed of becoming a doctor ever since I dissected a frog in middle school.”

“Ew. I let my lab partner do that.”

“So did mine, and I was happy to do it. Not only did I enjoy it, it sort of made up for me being the runt of the family. In case you haven’t noticed, my brothers were all burly jocks.”

“I’ve noticed. I wouldn’t say you’re a runt, though. They’re just huge.” With the heat of embarrassment climbing into her face to expose all her freckles, she wished she hadn’t said that.

“I tried to be more like them. I really did. I can play flag football with the best of them, but my brothers still make sure I don’t forget they could tackle me to the ground if they wanted.”

“Is there a blessin’ in there?” She tried not to stare at the round muscle on his forearm.

“Yes. I’m stronger than your average science geek.”

He smiled and held her stare for a heart-throbbing moment. “Have you thought of a blessing from Phillip ramming through your wall?”

She shrugged, sipped, and stared at the fire. “It’s been lonely since my mom died. If I have a family, I’d like to find them. I’m scared, though, after all the strange things that have happened. Can we change the subject back to your incident?”

With a heavy sigh, he leaned back and cut his gaze away from her. “One day, my dad asked me to train a new employee on the fine art of building a roof. We were friends from high school. I explained what I wanted him to do and then started daydreaming about saving enough money for medical school and telling my parents what I wanted to do. When I dropped a board, Ian reached out to catch it. I yelled for him not to, but it

was too late. He fell off the roof. He's now a paraplegic. His family sued and nearly bankrupted my parents."

"But they've recovered now?"

"Yes. We had a family meeting after it happened. Everyone agreed I should choose a different career. Despite their financial troubles because of the accident, my parents paid for me to go to college. They helped when my job as a bellhop didn't cover all my bills while I was in medical school. There's no doubt my brothers still resent that. I owe my family everything, and that's why I have to stay focused on my career."

"Do they expect you to give up on your own life so you can be the best doctor in the world?"

"No, but they deserve it. So does that boy whose life I destroyed. Ian."

"You didn't destroy Ian's life. It was an accident. My dad used to say that forgivin' yourself is the first step toward true healin'."

"Your father had a way with words."

"I used to think I inherited his creativity, but ..." She let the sentence hang there, knowing she hadn't inherited anything from either of her parents.

"Are you a writer like your dad wanted to be?"

"Not really. I can spell, though. I almost won a statewide spellin' bee once."

"That must have made your parents proud."

"They weren't there."

He angled his head and widened his eyes in disbelief.

"Yeah." She felt her upper lip curl. "They said they'd be there. When I couldn't find them in the audience, my heart busted in two. It was like instant confirmation that they didn't believe I was smart enough to accomplish anything. I got so discombobulated I misspelled a word I knew how to spell. At home that night, they made up excuses for not takin'

off work, but I felt like they were just glad they didn't waste vacation time to see me lose. Knowin' I'm adopted explains so much."

"I've met loving adoptive families. Maybe your parents never learned how to show love."

"Don't get me wrong. They had their ways. Mom made clothes for me. She was always available for a hug. Dad taught me to fish and hunt. They made sure I was a happy kid with lots of friends."

"Do you see the blessings in there?"

She ignored the question. "Dad was usually the more supportive one. Mom never seemed to believe in me. She always wanted to change how I looked. Now I know why." She didn't dare wonder if her biological family would have been more supportive.

Ethan seemed to read her mind. "We need to find your biological family and see what happened."

"That sounds nice, but someone wants to scare the livin' daylight's outta me, so I won't do that. I never knew 'em, so it might be safer to stay away if they're that dead set against meetin' me."

"Success is failure turned inside out—the silver tint of the clouds of doubt."

"You're quotin' the poet Edgar Guest."

"You're well read."

She dipped her head in agreement. "My superpower."

"I'm just suggesting we could find them surreptitiously, without anyone knowing. That would allow you to assess the situation before making any contact."

"Spoken like a true science geek."

They shared a brief laugh, followed by another drawn-out stare into each other's eyes.

"The blessin' from Phillip driving through my wall was that

I got to meet you.” She realized what she’d said the second it left her lips. “I mean as friends.”

“Friends, yes.” He looked equally unconvinced as her of that being all there was between them. Thankfully, a cheer floated up from the basement, giving them a reason to break the spell they’d cast on each other.

“Sounds like Mom won the game of pool,” Ethan said. “Mom and Dad will be up any minute.”

Seconds later, Lisa popped her head around from the gourmet kitchen. “Who’s up for hot chocolate and cranberry biscotti? We can eat while we create April’s retro vinyl album online store.”

April hoped beyond reason that Grandma’s albums would be the elixir that changed her life forever.

FOURTEEN

Ethan paced the living room, his eyes darting from the window to the kitchen. He wasn't sure which scraped at his nerves more: questions about how his brothers would behave when they arrived, or the subject of the intense conversation between his mother and April.

He turned back to the window. It was unusual to see icicles hanging from the eaves. Recent winters had seen less snow and ice. He thanked God for showing him such beauty. But what did that mean the roads would be like?

Please, God, get my brothers here safely.

Mom's voice brought his attention back to the kitchen. "Well, now, see. That's a blessing." She put a hand on the back of April's shoulder to nudge her toward the stairs to the basement. "Let's go down to my office and get you a blessing book. You'll want to record it before you forget it." Mom had kept a supply of blank journals on the bookshelf in her office for as long as Ethan could remember.

If anyone could help April recognize how God had blessed

her life, it was his mom. He prayed that God would prepare April's heart to see she'd been blessed.

The crunch of car tires sent him back to the window. You could always count on Aaron's family arriving precisely at the agreed time. Ten o'clock on Christmas Eve morning.

"Let the Smythe family pandemonium begin." Ethan stepped out the front door to welcome Aaron, his wife of sixteen years, and their three children.

Aaron, the oldest brother, tread cautiously around the back of the car on the slippery driveway. He opened the passenger door for Jennifer. Their children, ages eleven, eight, and six, tumbled out of the back. Aaron led the family to the trunk, piling presents into each of their arms.

The youngest child, six-year-old Harper, slipped on the ice, sprawling on the ground with colorful gifts scattered around the howling child. Ethan rushed to help, but his gut clenched when a blue SUV slowed on the street in front of the house before moving on as two more Smythe family cars arrived.

The stranger's SUV looked the same as the vehicle that had bumped into the back of April's car the other day. He told himself to stop being so paranoid.

Jennifer bumped Ethan's shoulder. "A little help here, please." She plopped her load of gifts onto Ethan's arms. She picked up Harper and rushed inside, followed by three more brothers, their wives, and four more children.

Ethan walked to the end of the driveway, checking both ways to ensure the SUV hadn't returned. Satisfied, he stepped inside, blowing onto his now frozen hands to warm them. April stood on the foyer tile, watching him.

"All's clear," he said. "Come meet the family."

Each of the brothers and their wives greeted April with a handshake. Jennifer, another only child who had recovered years earlier from her first encounters with the family, said,

“Don’t worry about us. You’ll get used to it. And no one expects you to remember all of our names.”

Anh, Brandon’s wife—who, despite her Asian-American heritage, had never learned the concept of personal space—pulled April into a bear hug. “Welcome to our family.”

April hugged back, then tried to back out of Anh’s embrace. “I’m just a friend.”

Anh held her hands on April’s shoulders, their noses six inches apart. “Hah. Funny. I’m Anh. Pronounced like Ann; spelled A-n-h. My family came to America in the 1970s. Boat people. Heard of them?”

April opened her mouth to speak, but Anh waved her hand and continued.

“Lots of people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos escaped persecution after the Vietnam War.” She snickered. “We Vietnamese call it the American War. I was born here, went to school here, met my husband Brandon after high school.” She gestured toward Ethan’s second oldest brother, who stood beside their nine-year-old son, Noah. Brandon winked. Noah waved before leading a stampede of children down the stairs to the game room in the basement.

With her grasp still on April’s shoulders, Anh scrutinized April from head to toe. “Girl, you’re too skinny. Don’t worry, we’ll get some meat on those bones.”

“Oh. Well.” April’s cheeks flushed in a rosy hue, her cute freckles standing out in stark contrast. She turned her head to the side as if she didn’t want to breathe on Anh. Ethan didn’t blame her.

Anh fluffed the mass of curls that April had tried to control with Ethan’s gel. “I love the hair, though.”

April smoothed her halo of red waves.

Anh abandoned April’s shoulders and picked up her hands to inspect the nails and cuticles, tsking. “Come to my salon on

Monday. We'll fix these." She patted the back of April's shoulder before making the rounds hugging everyone else.

April, still speechless from the encounter, let out a drawn-out exhale. Ethan moved toward her, but Cody, his third oldest brother, detoured him. "Hey, little bro. Mom says you and I have assembly line duty."

Mom put a hand on April's back and whispered something into her ear. April nodded and allowed a tight smile before following Mom to the kitchen.

"Don't worry," Cody said. "Mom will make your lady comfortable."

"She isn't my lady. We're just friends." *Or are we more than friends?* He'd never experienced this level of protectiveness with his ex-fiancé, Elizabeth. He admired April's resilience after losses he could only imagine and hoped never to experience. Despite her anger at God, there was a spark of faith. His mom would help April rediscover that.

Cody's voice cut into his thoughts. "Sure, little bro. Keep telling yourself that. Not too long, though. You don't want to lose her because you're too stubborn to admit what everyone else sees. Let's go get the boxes out of the attic."

Unlike April's attic, with a ladder to get into it, exposed boards, and thin insulation, Ethan's parents had finished their upper level. A staircase led up to a pinewood floor and drywall painted off white. The space used to be Aaron and Brandon's bedroom suite, complete with a bathroom. Mom and Dad primarily used it for storage now. Christmas decorations—once relegated to the basement until the oldest brothers moved away—now resided in the far corner, where Ethan and Cody approached stacks of clear plastic boxes. The family had emptied several of the containers when they decorated the inside and outside of the house. Tradition required them to save the tree decorating for Christmas Eve.

Ethan picked up the container of lights for wrapping around the tree. Cody hefted two boxes of ornaments.

To Ethan's relief, when he returned, April was sitting on the kitchen floor, legs in front of her and crossed at the ankles. Little Harper sat beside her. Together they strung popcorn while carrying on what looked like a serious conversation. He stepped closer to eavesdrop.

"What's it like being in such a large family?" April asked.

"It's so much fun." Harper explained how to navigate the Smythe family.

Satisfied that April was in good hands, Ethan joined Cody in arranging the boxes in an efficient assembly line.

Lisa clapped her hands. "Everyone. It's decorating time."

It sounded like elephants clamored up the basement stairs. The children's laughter filled Ethan with joy, especially the pride on Harper's face when she and April carried over the popcorn garland they had made.

Mom approached the box closest to the tree. "Quint, Daniel. You string the lights while I organize the children."

Ethan watched April move to the window, scanning in all directions before turning back. He caught her eye. "It's okay," he mouthed.

With a single nod, she returned to the decorating crew.

"April, Jennifer. You're with me," Mom said.

April followed Mom to the kitchen, where they began the process of making peppermint popcorn, the family's traditional post-tree-decorating treat.

With the tree decorated, April knelt on the kitchen floor with four children surrounding her. She handed each child a plastic bowl of popcorn. In a chorus of happiness, the kids each politely accepted their bowl before running to the stairs to return to whatever they had been doing in the basement.

April's genuine smile squeezed his heart. "They're so dang fun."

"April, you're good with kids," Daniel said. "Why aren't you married?"

Ethan groaned.

"Yeah," Cody teased. "Why hasn't someone snagged a keeper like you?"

At the reference to fishing, Ethan wanted to crawl under the table and hide.

Seconds of deafening silence followed. April's chest expanded. She blew out a breath and lifted an eyebrow, putting on a playful expression. "I don't do a lot of nibbling on the hook." She winked at Ethan. "I'm waiting for that one special lure to float past."

An explosion of laughter eased Ethan's uneasiness. His four brothers gathered around him, each pointing to the top of Ethan's head. "Here's some unique spinner bait for you to consider," Cody said.

Thankfully, the buzz of Ethan's phone stopped the teasing.

He glanced at the screen to see Marisol's name. "I need to take this." He turned his back to his family, walking into the hallway that led to five bedrooms and two and a half baths.

"Hi, Marisol. What's up?"

"Good news," she said. "Facial recognition turned up a name for that picture you gave me."

"You're working on Christmas Eve?"

"The program runs on its own. It alerted me on my phone when it found a match. I thought you'd want to know the results right away."

Ethan nodded to himself. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

He heard the doorbell ring behind him. It took a few seconds for anyone to respond. April's voice rose above the

racket of a house filled with chatter and laughter. "I'll get it." She sounded upbeat. That was good.

Marisol's words interrupted his thoughts. "The redhead in the photo was a Scottish citizen. The widow of a wealthy businessman. Sarah ... the last name escapes me at the moment, but I'll email you the report as soon as we hang up."

"You said *was*?"

In the background, almost lost in his family's laughter and conversation, he heard April say, "Hi. What are you doing here?" Her lighthearted mood had vanished.

A woman's voice came from outside, but the only word Ethan understood was "Carol."

He looked behind him to see April grab her coat from the closet opposite the front door. She mouthed, "Be right back."

He gave her a thumbs up and turned his attention back to Marisol's voice. "She died recently under suspicious circumstances. The estate is tied up in the Scottish version of probate. They call it confirmation."

At a burst of laughter from the other room, Ethan plastered his hand against his ear so he could hear Marisol.

"Sounds like you have a houseful, as do I," she said. "Check your email later and enjoy the rest of the holiday."

Ethan sighed and returned to the living room, glancing out the window. Red taillights at the end of the driveway drew his attention. The sight of the silver Jeep squeezed his lungs. When the vehicle sped off, he told himself not to jump to conclusions. The vehicle that had rear-ended April was a blue SUV, not a silver Jeep. But April had said she'd be right back, not that she was going somewhere.

"April?" His neck muscles contracted into a spasm, but he took no time to stop and massage it. He rushed into the crowd of celebrating family members. "Has anyone seen April?"

His mother gestured toward the kitchen. “She’s right—” Mom turned, her eyes wide. “She was right here.”

Ethan rushed down the basement stairs. “Is April down here?”

None of the children answered, but April clearly wasn’t there.

He grabbed his keys from his pocket and headed outside. In his rush, he slipped on the sheet of ice and skated on his behind toward his car.

His tires had been slashed.

One of his brothers helped him up; he wasn’t sure which one.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but you’re not chasing after that trouble without backup,” Aaron said.

“Look,” Daniel said. “The tires on all our cars are slashed.”

FIFTEEN

From the passenger seat of her co-worker's Jeep, April shivered, not from the cold but from the concern tightening her muscles. She wrapped her coat tightly around her.

"What did Carol say happened?" April asked the friendly brunette she had trained and who replace her as cashier when April was promoted.

Vanessa raised her shoulders. "She slipped on ice and fell down the stairs at her apartment and broke her ankle."

April winced. "Ouch."

Vanessa nodded, grimacing as she glanced at April, then turned back to the road ahead. "Yeah. Her insurance card is in her wallet. The last place she remembers seeing it was at your house. She wanted us to find it and meet her at the hospital."

"Wonder why she didn't call me." This didn't feel right. April and Carol were friends, and Carol wouldn't have hesitated to call her. Carol had become April's confidant during her mom's difficult illness and her dad's disappearance. They'd memorized each other's phone numbers in case of an emergency when they didn't have their cell phones to rely on.

Vanessa shrugged and shook her head. “You didn’t answer, I guess. She sent me to get you from Ethan’s house.”

“I told Carol I’d be there this afternoon, not this morning. How’d she know to send you here?” Her heart faltered, and she felt her face scrunch up in confusion.

Vanessa turned the Jeep onto April’s street, but April hadn’t given any directions.

Cords pulled tight through April’s center. “How do you know where I live?”

At Vanessa’s hesitation, April’s stomach became a sinking stone. “Carol told me. I checked your place first before going to Ethan’s.”

“But you said she sent you to Ethan’s.”

“What’s with the interrogation? I’m just trying to help our boss.”

“It’s just ... you see ... I’ve cleaned my house since Carol was there last Friday, and I didn’t find the wallet.” A memory flashed through April’s brain. On Tuesday, Carol had asked April to make a coffee run to Grinders. She’d pulled a twenty out of her wallet and handed it to April with a smile.

“Carol just wants us to look.” Vanessa forced a smile. She looked at April with such evil in her eyes that April’s hand instinctively moved to the door handle.

“Let me out.”

Vanessa released a drawn-out exhale. She reached into the purse beside her on the floor and pulled out a pistol. “Sorry. Can’t do that. I’d hoped we could do this the easy way, but ...”

Was she about to rob April? Of what? Her eyes locked onto the barrel as Vanessa waved the gun from April to the road and back again. She gasped, unable to control her flinch, nauseous from the scent of gun oil, still tasting the peppermint popcorn of what might become her last meal.

She knew the power the gun had and the pain it could

cause. Her father had shown her what happened when a bullet hit a person. She was ten. The scene played out for her in the seconds it took to watch Vanessa's finger wobble on the trigger. Dad had driven a long dirt road and stopped at his favorite shooting spot in the wilderness. It was a meadow surrounded by dense forest.

Dad had set a watermelon on a rock and clamped sound-retardant muffs over April's ears. She could almost feel them now, a vice grip that gave her a headache even today.

Did Vanessa know how to handle a gun? The way she held it said no. April's dad had taught her.

"Knees bent," Dad had said. He helped her use her left palm to cup her right hand, the one holding the pistol. "Right arm straight, finger along the trigger guard until you're ready to shoot." He showed her how to aim. "Count to thirty while you slowly pull back on the trigger."

The recoil had scared her, and the exploding watermelon made her scream. She never wanted to shoot again.

As she had then, she impulsively scraped her hand against her ear. Then, she was pulling off the ear muffs. Now, it was to gather her thoughts. Then, she had tried to stop her chin from quivering and her tears from flowing. Now, she closed her eyes and pictured the watermelon exploding.

"This is what happens to a person," Dad had said. "Keep your finger off the trigger until you plan to shoot. Don't ever play with a gun or point it at anyone unless shooting them is the only way to protect you or someone else. If that happens, don't hesitate. Aim for the heart, not the head. The chest is a larger target."

Was April's chest about to explode like that watermelon had?

Her hand reflexively moved toward Vanessa's jittery hold on the pistol to tell her to be careful. She yanked it back and

wrapped her arm around her middle, unable to stop trembling. *God, tell me what to say.*

Words seemed to take on a life of their own. “You don’t know much about gun safety.” She tugged in several deep breaths, telling herself to remain calm if she wanted to live. “Unless you plan to shoot me right now, you should take your finger off the trigger.”

Vanessa glanced at her hand. “Eye.” She slipped her finger to the frame of the gun, causing the breath that had caught inside April’s chest to escape.

But eye? *What does that mean, God?*

More memories poured through her brain. Her father used to say *eye* sometimes when he was in a teasing mood. He had said it meant “yes” in Scotland.

Images zoomed through her mind. The old boarding pass she’d found in the box from her attic, but that was an Ireland trip. The redhead in the picture from the folder she’d taken from Phillip’s car. Phillip’s body slumped over his steering wheel. Her father chasing her and saying, “I’ll get ya,” differently than he normally spoke. Back then, April screamed in little-girl delight, not understanding the change in speech pattern or why her mother always looked angry when Dad talked that way.

She peeked at the gun again. Phillip had been shot before he crashed into her wall. Was that her fate? The idea was too much to bear, and her throat tightened. The dark abyss she saw inside the barrel of the gun made her eyes sting with tears she didn’t want to shed.

“We wouldn’t be doin’ this if you hadn’t changed your locks.” Vanessa’s southern drawl had always struck April as not from Oklahoma, but this sounded more fake. That aside, how dare she imply April had no right to protect herself and her property?

A momentary wave of anger splashed through her. “Who are you? And stop with the fake accent.”

A smile spread across Vanessa’s face. “Caught me. I’m here on your dear aunty’s behalf.” There was a tiny flutter of the tongue when she said the “r” sound of the words *here* and *dear*.

April’s anger morphed to understanding. “Oh. So this is about Phillip d’Arcy, not Carol falling and breaking her ankle.” She eyed the yellowish-green bruise on Vanessa’s forehead. It surrounded a scab. “You said you cut yourself when you walked into a tree limb at the park. You said you were texting and didn’t see it. But it really happened when Phillip hit you with a snow globe from the market, didn’t it?”

Vanessa moved her right forearm so she could steer with it, briefly touching her forehead with the left hand. “Aye. It hurt like a hammer blow. Made me see stars.”

The car fishtailed.

April wanted to grab the steering wheel. “I’m not familiar with wherever you’re from, but you need to keep your hands on the steering wheel in icy conditions like this.”

Vanessa snorted. “We get ice in the Highlands of Scotland.”

“Why did Phillip hit you?”

Vanessa shrugged a shoulder and lifted the gun toward April. “This. It was his own fault. If he hadn’t hit me, the gun wouldn’t have gone off.”

“Why were you holding a gun on him?”

Vanessa turned into April’s driveway and stopped the Jeep. “We’ll get to that. For now, let’s just worry about going inside your house without alerting the neighbors.”

“How did you get inside my house all those other times?”

“You leave your purse in plain sight at the cash register in the market. It was easy to borrow your key and make a duplicate while you took a break. You came back early and saw me

making it. I said it was to my apartment, and you never questioned it.”

“I trusted you.”

She lifted a dismissive shoulder. “Your poor judgment.”

“If you had a key, why did you break the window and then leave it open?”

“I didn’t have the key with me the first night. I broke the window to get in, but that Lisa woman came in and ruined it all. It was easy to get back out with all the noise they were making. The next time, I did it to warn you that I could get to you any time I wanted.”

“Why? What have I ever done to you?”

Vanessa scoffed, putting the gun in her coat pocket. “Let’s not let the neighbors see this. They’ll get suspicious. My hand will be on it, so don’t try anything. Get out. Let’s go find what I need in your house.”

Except for the involuntary prayer for wisdom a few minutes earlier, April hadn’t prayed since before her mother died. But now, she sent a plea into the universe in case God was in the mood to listen to her for once. *Please send someone who will know this Jeep doesn’t belong here and call the sheriff.*

WITH VANESSA’S gun following her every move, April hauled the boxes marked *April* and *Scotland* into the living room.

Vanessa was back to waving the gun around, making April more nervous.

“Empty them.” Vanessa shook the gun toward her new carpet.

April did what she was told, scattering decades-old mementos on the floor.

“Find your birth certificate.”

April tsked. “If you’d said that’s what you want, I wouldn’t have had to make this mess. It’s in my room.” She took a step toward the hallway, testing Vanessa’s reaction to her leaving the room.

“Go.” She waved the gun. “Don’t try anything.”

She retrieved the paper and showed it to Vanessa. Vanessa grabbed it, read it, and tossed it away. “Not that one. The one that says my ...” She cleared her throat. “It names your biological mother and says you were born at the Raigmore Hospital in Inverness, Scotland.”

“I was born in Scotland?” April couldn’t stop her confusion from scrunching her face.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m sure it’s a real shock for you. That’s not my concern. Find the original birth certificate. I know it’s there somewhere. She gave each of the adoptive parents a certified copy, photos of herself, and a few other things.” She swung the barrel of the gun toward the clutter in the living room, then back at April.

April gasped and backed away. “Trigger.”

Vanessa moved her finger back to the guard. “Stop stalling.”

The doorbell rang. *Thank you, God.* April stared at the front door, wishing it had a remote control to make it fly open and let in whoever was behind it.

“Get rid of them.”

April gulped in a calming breath and sighed it out while walking to the door, digging up a sweet tone. “Who is it?”

“Deputy Zach Gleason.”

Relief washed over April. “What can I do for you, Deputy?”

“Open the door.”

April looked to Vanessa for permission. Vanessa moved her back to the wall and motioned for April to open the door. “I

won't hesitate to shoot you and him if you tell him I'm here or if you let him in."

April inched open the door and stuck her face through the crack, staring at her lanky friend. "Hi, Deputy."

"I noticed a Jeep in your driveway. It isn't yours, and the sheriff said you were staying elsewhere. We've been patrolling this area, making sure your house is secure."

"Right." April tried to point in Vanessa's direction by sliding her eyes to the right. "It's my boyfriend's. We were kind of in the middle of something. You know. It's okay. Thanks for checking." She thought hard, hoping the deputy would sense her thoughts. *Please don't go away.*

"You're sure everything's okay?"

She gave a tiny shake of her head. "Right as rain." She didn't smile, sliding her eyes to the right again. *Please understand what I'm trying to tell you.*

"Okay, then. I'll be on my way."

She sensed her breathing quicken. "Thanks, Deputy." She heard defeat in her voice.

He backed up a step, his eyes searching the surroundings. "Bye."

"Bye." She closed the door and heard his footsteps rushing away on the sidewalk. Her forehead fell to the door. She clung to the word she'd chosen for the new year: *hope*. Would she live a week to greet the new year? She would have liked to get to know Ethan and his amazing family better. *Please, God.*

She turned back to face Vanessa. "If my mother wasn't April Carlston, who is she?"

"Was." Vanessa waved the gun toward the papers on the floor. "Find the certificate, and I'll be on my way back to Scotland. You'll never see or hear from me again."

If Vanessa was an assassin, April was certain she would die regardless of if she found the original birth certificate.

SIXTEEN

Ethan reported the vandalism on his family's vehicles to 911 before leaving a message for Sheriff Sal Nelson. While pacing from one end of the living room to the other and back, he listened to his father and brothers making call after call in an unsuccessful attempt to find a tire store open on Christmas Eve. The more time that passed, the more antsy he became.

His phone buzzed, and caller ID said it was the sheriff returning his call.

"What do you mean April has disappeared?" Ethan was beginning to understand that the sheriff always got right down to business.

Ethan explained what he'd heard and seen during his phone call with Marisol. "I got the impression April was just stepping out for a moment to speak with someone she knew. But that's not all. She came to my parents' house after she saw someone in a blue SUV watching her. We got to their neighborhood around the same time, and I saw a blue SUV bump into the back of her car, then it passed the house earlier. I think someone is stalking her."

The sheriff whooshed out a long exhale. “Did the driver stick around after hitting April?”

“No, they drove off when I got out of my car to help April.”

“But that wasn’t the vehicle you saw leaving your driveway?”

“No. But ...” Ethan didn’t know how to explain his certainty that the two incidents were connected to Phillip’s death. “It just seems too coincidental that this stuff started after her unknown twin brother was murdered.”

Another whooshing exhale. “Since you’re on the case from the forensic end, I guess I can discuss this with you. I found the hotel where Phillip d’Arcy was staying. He had an original birth certificate for himself.”

“Did it name his birth mother as Sarah ...” Ethan put the sheriff on speaker while he searched for Marisol’s email naming the mother.

The sheriff finished the name for him. “Aikman.”

Ethan scanned Marisol’s email. “Yeah, that’s the surname my records show. I just had to look it up. Sarah Aikman was the widow of a wealthy Scottish businessman.”

“Right. Seems Phillip contacted Mrs. Aikman one day before she died under suspicious circumstances.” Ethan heard the sheriff shuffling papers on the other end of the line. “There’s a sister. Brittany Hannibal. Forty, never married. Scottish authorities say they’ve attempted to notify her of her sister’s death, but she apparently is on a cruise ship somewhere. Phillip’s phone records show he contacted Ms. Hannibal on more than one occasion. His calendar has an entry for a meeting he had scheduled with her and April. They were to meet at the park near April’s house at three o’clock on the Sunday after he died.”

Ethan gasped. “The DNA from Phillip’s car could be Brittany’s.”

“But she’s on a cruise.”

“But what if she isn’t? What if Phillip talked Brittany, his biological aunt, into ditching the cruise vacation so she could meet the two of them—a niece and nephew she never knew? She may have been excited to meet them. That’s why she was in the car with Phillip that night. Phillip’s murderer could have bashed her in the head with a snow globe before shooting Phillip and taking her.” Ethan heard someone say something on the other end.

“Just a minute.” The sheriff put Ethan on hold.

After what seemed like forever, Ethan was about to hang up when the sheriff came back.

“My deputy drove by April’s house, and there was a silver Jeep in the driveway. She answered the door, saying she was with her boyfriend, but she acted strange.”

“She told me she didn’t have a boyfriend.” A sense of loss rolled over Ethan. “I saw a silver Jeep leaving my driveway.”

“We may have a hostage situation on our hands. Gotta go.” The sheriff hung up.

Ethan turned around to see his entire family watching him, including the children. “I’m going to April’s even if I have to ride my bike.”

“In the snow?” Mom’s questioning look included raised eyebrows and an outstretched hand pointing toward six inches of snow out the back sliding doors.

“Yeah. The sheriff thinks she might be in trouble.”

“I’m coming with you.” Aaron followed Ethan out the door as he headed for the shed.

Ethan pulled the closest bicycle from the stack.

“I’ll take that,” Dad said. Ethan’s four brothers huddled around Dad. Mom ran from the house, handing out ski masks, goggles, and gloves.

The children seemed to take the opening of the sliders as

an invitation for a snowball fight. “Last one standing wins,” Lisa yelled as she picked up a handful of snow and ran toward the children.

“Watch out for the icicles.” Dad pointed to dripping columns of ice clinging to all the trees and the eaves.

“This isn’t my first winter in Oklahoma.” Mom threw her snowball at Harper, and Harper gladly returned the assault.

All the guys—other than Ethan—kissed their wives good-bye, then they mounted their bikes. On the way to the driveway, they each endured a wallop of snow launched by the kids.

Ethan still heard the melee as he slid down the driveway. He soon found traction on the road and took his place in the line as had been assigned to him since childhood. First dad, then Ethan, followed in reverse age order by Daniel, Cody, Brandon, and Aaron.

HOURS HAD PASSED, and Vanessa’s rising level of frustration scared April. The woman kept forgetting to keep her finger off the trigger of that pistol she waved around. Each time April needed to remind her, she became more convinced that Vanessa’s ignorance about guns meant she was no assassin.

But who was she then? Vanessa had long-ago stopped trying to hide her Scottish accent, and she’d said she represented her biological aunt. Was she a lawyer? Couldn’t be. April didn’t know much about the legal system anywhere in the world, but she was sure this kind of behavior was frowned upon everywhere. It made more sense that she was Phillip’s murderer and that she’d killed her aunt along with Phillip.

The idea filled her with grief. How could she mourn for people she’d never met? She’d wanted a sibling her entire life

and now knew she'd sensed Phillip's existence. That had never helped ease her loneliness.

Since the loss of her parents, she'd yearned for a family and had briefly hoped for one she'd never met. She'd even wondered what it would be like to be part of the amazing Smythe family. But those dreams died the moment Vanessa pulled a gun from her purse.

She felt hollowed out. The pine scent of the Christmas candle she'd bought suddenly assaulted her. Even without burning the candle, its odor filled the house. Was this her last Christmas?

She told herself to stop. She'd fight Vanessa with all she had before she'd allow herself to wallow in self-pity.

A shiver snaked through her as she spoke to Vanessa. "I know I've said this before, but I'll say it again. This would go faster if you told me what we're looking for."

"I already told you. It's a jiffy bag. It contains your original birth certificate, some photos, and some other things. I need them to ... never mind."

"It's easy to see there are no bags in this mess." April gestured toward the clutter in her living room, mounds that had grown to include the contents of drawers and every box she could find. "What's the bag made of? Fabric? Paper? Plastic?"

Vanessa rolled her eyes and slumped her shoulders. She walked over and kicked the stacks of debris, then picked up the envelope holding the electric bill April had planned to pay after Christmas, now that she had the money. "It's one of these, only bigger. And yellowish brown." Her Scottish accent had thickened during the past few hours.

"An envelope?"

"Yes. The big ones. They're yellow."

"A manilla envelope?"

"I guess."

It took all of April's concentration to not show the sudden understanding that crept over her. The memory of a conversation with her mother zinged through her brain.

"Always remember this," her mother had said after April's first day in kindergarten. "I bought this painting when your dad and I vacationed in Scotland. Information about where the scene is, who the artist is, and its value is inside this envelope." Mom taped a manila envelope to the back of the painting and hung it near the electric fireplace.

Now, April tried not to smile at her mother's brilliance in telling a five-year-old where she would eventually find something this important. "I'm tired, and I need to rest. Would it be okay if I sat on the couch with a glass of water for a few minutes?"

Vanessa snorted out an annoyed breath, but then nodded and waved her pistol toward the kitchen. "Get me one, too." She let her hand fall, pointing the gun at the floor for the first time since she had trained it on April hours earlier.

April filled two glasses and handed one to Vanessa. They each sat on opposite ends of the couch Ethan's family had donated to her. *Please, God, I want to see Ethan again.* She dared not pray to be part of that family for fear of jinxing it.

With a casual glance at the painting, she said, "My mother told me a long time ago that she bought that painting to remind her of a fabulous vacation she and my father took when she was pregnant."

"Mmm. That's by the artist Eileen Donan." Vanessa sipped her drink. "It's a painting of an island in the western Highlands. That castle was built in the twentieth century. It's a reconstruction of the one that once protected landowners. It attracts visitors from all over the world. Your parents must have bought the painting when they picked you up. I suppose they might call that a vacation."

The memory of her mother's dying breath flared. Mom's last words were, "Remember the painting." It had confused April then, but now she understood. Something she needed to see was in that envelope behind the painting. The only way to get out of this alive was to not let Vanessa catch on.

"Why would my aunt hire you to kill Phillip and me?"

"I'm not going to kill you if you give me what I want. I mean, what your aunt wants."

"That isn't what I asked. You killed Phillip, and now you're holding a gun on me. I was taught to only point a gun at someone if I planned to shoot them."

"I already told you. If Phillip hadn't attacked me, the gun wouldn't have gone off. Break's over. Where else can we look?" Vanessa stood and motioned with her gun for April to get off the couch.

April avoided the painting, instead taking Vanessa to her parents' bedroom. "I haven't spent much time in here, but it seems like the most logical place to keep something that valuable."

SEVENTEEN

Ethan's legs and lungs burned. The wind penetrated his ski mask, leaving his nose and cheeks tingling from the frigid air. Cycling through snow was harder than he remembered, but he caught himself each time the bicycle slipped on ice, despite muscles tightened by both tension and the cold. The sheriff's words drove him forward. *We might have a hostage situation.*

Who would take April? Why? Equally disturbing, why had April told the deputy she was with her boyfriend? A wave of doubt crashed over him, causing his foot to slip from the pedal. His bicycle slowed so much that Daniel nearly ran into him before he took a sharp turn to come up beside his brother.

"Watch it, little bro."

"Sorry." Everything inside him told him to put his foot back on the pedal and pump as hard and fast as he could.

What if he didn't get there in time? Would he ever see her alive again? He passed his father. "I have to go faster, Dad."

He had to work his muscles harder to get to her before there wasn't another opportunity. The thought made his heart

feel as if it might burst. How could he have been so foolish as to focus all his energy on his career? April's beauty went far deeper than her looks. His entire family had seen it. They had tried to remind him life was too short to spend it trying to get ahead, but he wouldn't listen. He almost pushed April away because of his near-sighted attitude. And now ...

Fear consumed him, bringing with it tears that blurred his vision. Spray from his tires had dampened his jeans and back, the chill now matching his dread as he got closer to April's house.

It took too long of muscle-burning pumping to get to April's subdivision. A Sheriff's Department SUV blocked the entrance. Ethan was about to navigate around it on the sidewalk when a deputy in a crisp uniform, shined boots, a heavy jacket, and gloves exited his cruiser.

"Hold it," he said.

"What's going on?" Ethan motioned for Dad and his brothers to stop.

"Hostage situation." The deputy stood with his feet apart and his hands across his puffed-up chest. A power stance. "I can't allow anyone into the neighborhood."

"April." The word slipped from Ethan's dry mouth, squeezed into a whisper in his tight throat.

The deputy eyed Ethan, then looked around him as his family stopped behind him, huffing to get enough air into their lungs. "Yes, sir. Are you related?"

"Not yet," Dad said. His father clasped a hand onto Ethan's shoulder. "This is her boyfriend."

The deputy tensed. "She said she was with her boyfriend in the house."

"I don't know who she's with, but it wasn't me." Ethan set the kickstand on his bike so he could shake hands with the

deputy. "I'm Ethan Smythe, the one who called Sheriff Nelson after I saw April leave my parents' house in a silver Jeep. I'm with the Regional Medical Examiner's office."

The deputy accepted the handshake. "Deputy Zach Gleason. I remember you from the night the car crashed through April's wall. There's a silver Jeep in her driveway. Do you know who it belongs to?"

"No." Ethan's nerves danced inside him, but he forced himself to show no emotion. "I saw one leaving the premises where April was staying."

Gleason spoke into a microphone on his shoulder, receiving an inaudible reply. "Sheriff says to let you through. Who are all these other people?"

"My associates."

Gleason snickered. "Right. I'm sure six Medical Examiner staff rode bicycles through snow all the way from Tulsa on Christmas Eve."

"We were in town for the holidays."

Gleason stepped aside. "Be careful, and keep your distance. We don't know what's going on in that house, and we're short-staffed. It's quiet now. We're waiting on the closest hostage negotiator to arrive. She's coming from Muskogee."

"WE'VE ALREADY BEEN IN HERE." Vanessa surveyed April's parents' bedroom. "Do you think they had a secure box?"

"I haven't seen one, but we could go to their bank." April prayed Vanessa wouldn't know she couldn't access a safe deposit box without being a co-signer and without a key.

"It won't do any good unless you have a key and your signature is on file. We can think about that option later. Search for a

cuddle-book. If that doesn't work, we'll think about the bank option." Vanessa gestured toward Mom's Bible on the nightstand. "Start with that."

"Is that what you call Bibles in Scotland? A cuddle-book? It makes sense. My mom used to cuddle up with her Bible every night before going to sleep. When I was little, we cuddled on the couch to read the Bible together."

Vanessa heaved a frustrated sigh. "No. It's a book that's hollowed out to hide valuables."

"Oh. I've never seen anything like that in this house."

"Doesn't matter. If it was a secret, they wouldn't show you. Open the Bible."

April winced. "Isn't there some kind of rule against desecrating a Bible?"

Vanessa sneered. "It isn't desecrating it to just look inside. And there's no rule like that."

April picked up the Bible, opened it, and flipped through the pages to show Vanessa it was just a book. A piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Vanessa stepped toward it, but April beat her to it. Folded in two places, the paper was crisp from age. "It's a letter to me."

"Read it aloud. It might say where the certificate is."

My dear baby daughter,

You are two days old, and I met you for the first time today at a hospital in the Highlands of Scotland. I resisted at first when the social worker put you in my arms. I'm mad at your father, not you. Your scent will always be my favorite. When I touched your delicate skin, its velvety texture drew me in like a moth to fire.

Fire. That's the color of the wispy curls that cover your head, copper the color of the freckles sprinkled across your tiny nose. Your striking blue eyes remind me of the blue jay that's made its

home on my windowsill at home. I can't seem to take my eyes off of you.

You smiled at me the moment I cradled you in the bend of my elbow. It was infectious and so full of innocence. As it has my soul, this smile will brighten every room you enter for the rest of your life. You will bring warmth and joy to the people around you. Of this, I am certain.

While you are the result of an affair between the man I adore and a stranger he met at a writer's conference in Ireland, my love for you has deepened in the few hours I've known you. I promise that I will love you, cherish you, and protect you even if it means my own death. I will pray for you daily.

The social worker handed us an envelope containing a photo of Sarah, your original birth certificate, and a few other items. She said if she is able, she will leave you an inheritance. We don't count on that.

Sarah Aikman gave birth to you, but you are my daughter. She communicated with your father privately after her husband refused to accept a child that wasn't his. When the attorney and the adoption agency complete our adoption, there will be another certificate naming me as your mother and Will Carlston as your father. He is your blood relative.

It doesn't matter that I didn't give birth to you. You are now part of me. I fear, though, that your resemblance to Sarah will forever remind me of how your father betrayed my trust. I will do my best to overcome this resentment, but that doesn't stop me from wishing you had dark hair and eyes like me. This will be the one burden to overcome as I shower you with my unwavering love and affection. I believe great things are in store for you, and I hope to be at least one reason why.

With all my love,

Your MOTHER

"Dad is my biological father. My mother believed in me."

April tried holding in her tears, but they burst out anyway. She stumbled to the bed. “Now I know why she wanted me to dye my hair. I wish I had.”

“Stop.” Vanessa’s voice sounded as thick as April’s throat felt. “That’s a nice letter, but it isn’t what we’re looking for. Look through all the books in the house.”

April ignored her. “My whole life was a lie until Phillip crashed through my wall. Why did you kill him? Do you already have his certificate? Is that what you’ll do to me once I find mine?”

“Shut up and look for a cuddle-book.”

“Why would a biological aunt send you to kill us? We’re blood relatives. Doesn’t that mean anything?” April shook the letter toward Vanessa. “My mother said Sarah wanted to leave me an inheritance.”

Vanessa’s face flushed an angry red. “You didn’t earn it.”

Pin pricks danced across April’s skin. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? The inheritance Sarah wanted to leave her children?”

Vanessa lifted the gun toward April’s chest. “I can go through the books myself. If you make me, I will shoot you.”

“Yeah.” It took all of April’s remaining strength to begin flipping through books wherever she found them in the house. Her mind floated between subjects.

She held back the tears that burned her eyes as she wondered what it would have been like to know her biological mother and brother. A prayer of thanksgiving for her dad melted her anger at him for abandoning her to deal with Mom’s death and the bills alone.

“I forgive you,” she whispered to her father.

“I don’t need your forgiveness,” Vanessa snarled.

Thank you, God, for the good life you gave me with parents who loved me.

An idea stole April's breath. She picked up the largest hardback book on the shelf in front of her and got a good grip before backing up to get as close to Vanessa as possible without alerting her kidnapper. With a deep breath, she swung as hard as she could at Vanessa's head.

EIGHTEEN

A Christmas wonderland met Ethan when he turned onto April's street. Snow covered the rooftops and lawns, and icicles coated the trees and hung from the eaves. Most houses had decorations in the yards and on their houses, with colorful lights glistening off the snow. He allowed himself to appreciate the serenity of the scene and the meaning of the season.

Thank you, God, for this reminder that you're always there.

Sheriff Nelson met Ethan and his family at the end of the street, walked on the sidewalk beside them as they wheeled their bikes to the sidewalk in front of April's house. "I see you brought the whole crew."

Ethan brushed off the statement. "What's the situation?" His face felt numb from the ride in the cold.

"April isn't answering her cell," the sheriff said, his posture rigid, but no emotion on his face. "After my third attempt, it started going straight to voicemail. Ran the license plate on the Jeep. It belongs to Vanessa Jones. She's the new cashier at Carol's market. I left a message on Carol's voicemail saying I

need a cell number for Vanessa. We're in wait-and-see mode until the hostage negotiator gets here from Muskogee."

Dad stepped forward. "What do you want us to do?"

"Stay out of the way."

Dad pulled his wallet from his back pocket, opening it to show Nelson a Sheriff's Posse badge. "May I remind you that we all regularly volunteer to help law enforcement? We usually do crowd control every year for the Rocklahoma Music Festival. We've also assisted with search and rescue. We can help block the rest of the entrances into the neighborhood, inform the neighbors, or whatever else you want us to do."

The sheriff's chest expanded with a deep inhale. "Thank you. Are all of you trained?"

Dad nodded. "We're a service-oriented family. Joining the posse was a rite of passage when each of my boys turned eighteen. Show him, boys."

The brothers flashed their badges, followed by the sheriff stationing everyone but Ethan at the remaining entrances to the neighborhood. "I need you with me in case things go sideways," he said to Ethan. His phone interrupted whatever he was about to say next.

"Nelson."

Ethan was sure he recognized Carol's voice on the other end, but he couldn't understand what she said.

The sheriff slipped a pen from his coat pocket and removed a glove to scribble a phone number onto his hand. "Got it, thanks." He disconnected and turned to Ethan. "I'll leave it to the hostage negotiator to call Vanessa. She must be the one holding April for some reason."

A police cruiser arrived, and a middle-aged officer approached the sheriff. She introduced herself as Gonzales and asked for an update, copying the number from Nelson's hand

onto a sheet of paper. A younger male officer stayed with the vehicle, watching.

“Ethan, you’re with ...” The sheriff flicked a finger at the man by the cruiser. “Whoever that is.”

“Perkins,” Gonzales said. “And who is Ethan?”

“Medical Examiner.”

“Why do we need the ME? No one informed me of any deaths.”

“He’s on a different case involving the homeowner. I need to keep him safe.”

“Got it.” Gonzales dipped her head, motioning for Perkins to allow Ethan into the back of his cruiser. “Why don’t we all get in there until we need to be out? It’s colder than Neptune out here.”

A pang of guilt threaded through him. His family would have to stay out in the cold guarding the entrances to the neighborhood while he stayed relatively warm in the car.

“Sorry, Dad, bros,” he whispered as he slipped into the back. He felt helpless to do anything to assist April. The detective’s calm tone annoyed him. She dialed Vanessa’s number, and Ethan heard several rings before voicemail answered.

“I’ll wait five minutes and call again.” When Vanessa didn’t pick up a second time, Gonzales redialed, still with no answer. She pocketed her phone. “Guess we’ll start this conversation with the megaphone.” Gonzales opened her door and sliced Ethan with a stern glare. “Stay here.”

She removed the megaphone from the trunk and leaned against the hood as she brought it toward her mouth. “Vanessa Jones. We know you’re in there. The house is surrounded. You can’t get away. Answer your phone, and we’ll talk about how to get y’all out of there safely. We can work out whatever you need. I understand you’re scared and angry, but please, let

April and Brittany go. No one else needs to get hurt.” She dialed her phone again.

Ethan held his breath. He closed his eyes and willed Vanessa to answer. His frustration was growing. Didn’t Gonzales realize there was no reasoning with Vanessa? The woman was a kidnapper who had to understand they’d either arrest her or kill her as soon as she released her hostage.

He clenched his fists and fought off the urge to retch from the smell of sweat and body odor that enveloped him in the back of the cruiser. The odor reminded him of working construction in the heat of a humid Oklahoma summer. Images from the day Ian fell off the roof overwhelmed him. Reaching out to catch his friend as Ian tripped, then tumbled to the ground. Watching his friend’s terrified eyes as Ian fell, his hands stretched out toward Ethan.

He couldn’t breathe. *Only your heart condemns you. I have forgiven you.*

“Stop,” he whispered. “I don’t deserve anyone’s forgiveness. *Only your heart condemns you.*”

Was that true? He’d spent half of his life trying to make up for his carelessness the day of Ian’s accident. Now that he had someone in his life who complemented him, he wondered if he’d wasted those years by trying to get his family’s approval. He’d focused all his energy on a career to be worthy of all Ian and his family had lost. But Ian’s life didn’t end. It turned out different than he’d planned. Ethan had rarely seen Ian’s family at church until after the accident. They seemed happier now.

And his family ... yes, their business was different than it was before the accident, but it was better. They had worked together as a cohesive unit, never worrying about whether Ethan was up to the task. His family had cheered him on as he finished his medical training. He’d never lost their approval, so why did he focus so much of his life on gaining it back?

Yes, he'd dropped the board that resulted in his friend falling off the roof, but he had told Ian not to reach for it. Ethan had tried to catch him. Ian had admitted it had been an accident and that Ethan had tried to warn him, then save him.

But Ethan had refused to forgive himself. He'd felt unworthy of the blessings he wrote in his journal while his friend was confined to a wheelchair. Ian had gone on to be a successful website developer, but Ethan held onto the guilt of destroying his friend's life. His life was fine. He was married. They'd adopted a child. He had a career, and the entire family was more into church than they'd ever been.

Adversity had changed them, not destroyed them.

Ethan gulped in several deep breaths, admitting for the first time that his career didn't make him who he was. It didn't absolve him of the accident, but he'd been forgiven by everyone but himself.

Thank you, God, for forgiving me. Help me forgive myself.

He wanted to pursue a life with April, to see if what he'd sensed during the past week would last long enough to deepen the relationship. Taking deep, open-mouthed breaths saturated his tongue with the awful odor in the back of the car. He leaned forward to speak to the officer in the front. "Perkins, I need fresh air."

Perkins got out and opened the door for Ethan. "Stay behind the car."

Ethan leaned against the trunk, his hands on his knees, forcing his starved lungs to take in the frigid air, trying not to think of the *what ifs*. What if Vanessa didn't let April go? What if the police forced a shootout, and April was injured ... or worse?

He focused on compelling his tight chest to expand with air.

When the police alerted, he looked back toward the house. *Save her* was all he could think of to pray.

Then he saw her. His heart dropped to the pit of his stomach. April stepped out, her hands held high, her beautiful red hair tangled and flying in all directions. She slipped on the icy sidewalk. Ethan took a step toward her, but Perkins pushed him back.

“Don’t shoot,” April yelled. “It’s me. Vanessa is gone.”

Police swarmed her, while others ran toward the sides of the house. Ethan rushed to her, his heart swelling with relief, then thumping wildly when he looked at her haggard face and the dark circles under her eyes.

The sheriff nudged Ethan aside, grasping April’s shoulders. “You okay?”

She nodded, her lower lip quivering.

“Where’s Brittany?” The sheriff looked into the house beyond them.

“Brittany?” April’s eyebrows knotted, and she bit her lower lip. Tears welled in her eyes. “It was just Vanessa and me. She said she represented my biological aunt.”

“Brittany’s still missing,” the sheriff yelled as he joined the pack of law enforcement officers flowing into the house.

Ethan threw his arms around her, the weight of his dammed-in emotions sinking into his skin. Both of them let out their emotions from the harsh reality of the day’s events. Ethan didn’t know when this moment would end, but for now, he thanked God that April was safe and he had his arms around her.

Ethan wanted to drive her to his parents’ house, to remove the fear from her eyes by telling her that everything would be okay. Since he had no vehicle, he stood back, watching as officers filed out of the house.

When the sheriff approached, he touched April's shoulder. "Where is Vanessa?"

She shrugged and shook her head, rounding her shoulders. "No idea." Disbelief filled her voice. To get her shaky voice under control, she looked to the sky and again bit her bottom lip, tears streaking her face. "I hit her with a book, and she hit me so hard I was stunned for a few seconds. When I came to my senses, she was gone. I don't know how she disappeared so fast. I was still searching for her when I heard the lady on the megaphone."

"Was there another woman with you?"

"No. It was just the two of us. She has a gun ..." She threw her arms around Ethan's neck, burying her face in his chest as she sobbed and shivered against him. He held her close, hoping his warmth would soak into her.

"You're safe now," Ethan whispered, holding her close. He wished he could promise that nothing else like this would happen, but with Vanessa still out there, he knew he couldn't make that promise. He could only vow to try to keep her safe.

"We need to get your statement." The sheriff led April inside, her arms locked around Ethan's waist.

NINETEEN

April was drained after telling the sheriff her story and watching the police check every place a person could hide in and around the house. She held onto Ethan and walked outside to watch a tow truck haul off Vanessa's Jeep for forensic analysis.

Her heart swelled with each hug she received from Ethan's father and brothers. When two pickups arrived with the Smythe women, she felt overwhelmed with so much love.

"Aren't those the neighbors' pickups?" Quint looked around, confused. "Where are the kids?"

"Borrowed the trucks since the tires on our vehicles were slashed. Left the children with the neighbors before rushing here. Figured you'd want a ride home rather than bicycling all that way again." She stepped to April. "You need a hug."

April clung to Lisa and sobbed while the men stacked their bicycles in the beds of the trucks. When they finished, Lisa pulled away and stared compassionately into April's eyes. "Tell us what happened."

The family gathered around April while she recounted her

story. The more April told of Vanessa's demands, the more Ethan tensed. He was sure his face had paled two shades.

Aaron tapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, little brother, you need a distraction." Aaron turned toward April. "Sorry to interrupt, but where do you keep your snow shovel?"

"Garage. There are two."

AARON SCOOPED up a shovel full of snow from the sidewalk and dropped it into the yard. "You know you're in love with April, right?"

"That can't be. I've only known her a week." Ethan got to work on the driveway with the second shovel.

"I knew Jennifer was the woman God had chosen for me the second I laid eyes on her. We married six months later." He chuckled. "We only waited that long because her mother insisted on a big church wedding."

"How did you know Jennifer was the one for you?"

"There was physical attraction, of course, but it was as if my spirit reached out to hers and said, 'There you are. I've been looking for you.'"

Ethan leaned on his shovel. "That's exactly what happened when I saw April. I wanted to deny it because a relationship would get in the way of my career, but today has me all tripped up."

"In what way?"

"I wanted to pay Mom and Dad back for what I did to their business. I made a pact with myself to be the best at everything and land the ideal job in Oklahoma City. Knowing April might not survive changed everything. It was like I had a mini-revival meeting inside myself today. It was strange."

"You did nothing to their business. There was an accident.

That's all it was. No one but you blames you, not even that kid, Ian."

"It's been difficult to forgive myself. It was hard watching the anguish on Mom's and Dad's faces. And seeing how hard y'all had to work to save the business. It was a relief to leave for college, so I didn't have daily reminders of all that guilt."

"We've all healed. The business is booming. Let's hope your internal revival meeting will bring the healing you need."

Ethan listened to the scraping sounds the shovels made on concrete while April finished telling her story to the rest of the family. Once he and Aaron had cleared April's sidewalk and driveway, he noticed delicious scents wafting from other people's houses. Ethan's stomach rumbled.

As they put the shovels back in the garage, Ethan leaned against the wall. "I never had that spiritual connection with Elizabeth. I proposed to her because we seemed compatible on a physical and an intellectual level. In a year of knowing her, I never shared with her the secrets I've shared with April."

"What you had with Elizabeth was a surface-level love. What you have with April is deeper already. Let it develop, little brother. If it's meant to be, it will be, whether or not you end up at that fancy job you want in Oklahoma City."

"That's all I've worked toward since I was sixteen years old. Even graduated from high school early so I could get started on my medical training. I don't know what else I would do."

"You always had to make your own way. Much more than the rest of us. When you rode your bicycle ahead of Dad today, it reminded me of when we were kids. If we headed to somewhere you wanted to go, Dad would have to remind you to slow down. When you were just okay with where we were going, you stayed in line like we were supposed to. If you didn't want to go, I'd hear Daniel telling you to speed up, or he'd ask Dad to tell you."

Ethan thought back. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.

“You’re still like that. The job in Oklahoma City is something you’ve chased since you were a kid. Considering the spiritual connection you have with April, maybe there are other options you should consider. I’ve heard old doc Sanders is retiring soon. What about buying his practice so you could stay close to home?” Aaron shrugged away from the wall. “Or she could go to Oklahoma City with you if the time is right. Pray about it. Let it happen in God’s timing.”

When they stepped into the house, the sheriff was talking on his phone. “Well, ain’t that just the cat’s meow?” He disconnected and looked at April. “I’ve been in touch with the Scottish authorities about your Aunt Brittany. She supposedly went on a long cruise after her sister’s death, but her fingerprints are all over the inside of that Jeep we towed off today.”

Ethan feared Vanessa had already killed Brittany.

Mom’s gasp cut into Ethan’s thoughts. She strode to April and looked into her eyes. “You’ll stay with us until they catch that woman.” She turned to the family. “I’m sure dinner is ready, and we’re not blowing off Christmas Eve for a criminal.” She turned back to April, softening her tone. “Bring what you need for at least a week. Quint and I will take you to work and pick you up every day. No more answering the door or being alone.”

April let loose a waterfall of tears. “Thank you.” She pulled Mom into a powerful hug.

If Vanessa had already killed Brittany, Ethan sensed that protecting April at work wouldn’t be enough.

TWENTY

April used her fork to trail turkey through her mashed potatoes and gravy, the thought of eating causing her gut to twist. The scents that drifted toward her made it worse. She set down the fork and stared at her hands folded on the Christmas-themed cloth napkin on her lap.

So many members of the Smythe family had labored all day to prepare this meal. Her post-hostage stomach was still in knots, her remaining shock reducing the lively conversation around the table to an annoying buzz. Efforts to focus proved ineffective. Her brain seemed numb, covered with a thick film that kept words from getting through. All she could think about was the news the sheriff had delivered before taking her and Ethan to the Smythe family home.

Scottish authorities had shared with him somber details of the will of April's biological mother, Sarah Aikman.

"She was a wealthy woman," the sheriff had said. "She left her entire estate to you and Phillip. The attorney—they call them solicitors in Scotland—wants you to call for details." He

had handed her a phone number and reminded her to be mindful of the six-hour time difference.

With heavy limbs and slogging motions, she helped clean up after the meal, attempting smiles if someone addressed her. When at last she hung her dishtowel on the oven handle, she hugged Lisa and whispered, "Thank you for all you've done for me and for including me in your family's celebration, but I'm exhausted from what happened today. If you don't mind, I'd like to go to my room and decompress."

"No one would blame you for needing a nap after all that happened," Lisa said.

Ethan met her at the entrance to the hallway that led to the wing of bedrooms. "Are you okay?" He searched her face. "You look pale."

"I'm not sure about anything. I need to be alone for a while. Your family's great, but I've been by myself for so long that I find it overwhelming, especially after today."

"I understand." He draped an arm across her shoulders. "Once everyone leaves, would you like to come back out for a fire and hot chocolate?"

"Oh, they don't spend the night here?"

"No, we get together on Christmas Eve and exchange gifts, and then everyone spends Christmas day either at their own house or with the wife's family. It's a system that works for us."

The smile spreading across her face loosened the tension in her muscles. "Hot chocolate, a fire, and peace sounds wonderful. I have to call Sarah's attorney. Apparently, she left me a little money. I'll take all I can get right now."

Secluded in her bedroom, April tried relaxing on the bed. Each time she closed her eyes, images of Vanessa's threats overcame her. Vanessa's finger that kept finding its way to the trigger of her gun. The stacks of memories spread across her

living room floor. Wondering if her life would ever make sense again.

She feared sleep would be impossible tonight. Pushing out a ragged breath, she found the paper the sheriff had given her and tapped in the number but hesitated before touching the icon to connect. Her brain finally clicked into motion, blasting questions for which she had no answers. What if Sarah had left nothing but more bills she'd have to pay? Would there be taxes due that would make the small inheritance more of a burden than it was worth?

She set down the phone, the number still visible. If she never contacted the attorney to claim the gift, would she still owe money? Or would interest and penalties pile onto each other until one day, someone arrived at her door to foreclose on her house? Did they do that? Would she end up losing what little she had left? She pressed her hand against her pounding chest and told herself to get it over with.

With a hissing sigh, she punched the button to dial the number.

"Good day, this is Olivia MacLeod." The woman's sophisticated Scottish accent temporarily untied April's stomach.

She cleared her throat, straightened her back, and lifted her chin. "Hello, Ms. MacLeod. This is April Carlston, Sarah Aikman's biological daughter. I never knew her and only recently discovered she existed. You've spoken with County Sheriff Sal Nelson, and he said I should follow up with you."

"Ah, yes." The woman's voice was friendly, and April could tell she smiled as she acknowledged April. "I knew Sarah for decades, and it broke her heart when her husband insisted on giving up you and your twin brother. Her husband was very traditional."

April held back a groan. There would be too many strings tied to this. She wanted to hang up and hide under the covers,

but she told herself that knowing her fate was better than shying away from her new reality.

“Sarah’s estate is quite substantial. There will be some formalities to take care of before you can claim it, as I told your sheriff.”

April’s stomach dropped. She had trouble swallowing. “What kinds of bills or taxes or stuff like that will I owe? I have no money.” Her voice trembled. “I didn’t even know her.”

Olivia’s tone softened. “I’m sorry, April. I know this must be difficult for you. Sarah didn’t realize the state of her finances. Don’t worry, though. There’s no need for you to come to Scotland. I’ll take care of everything for you. We can handle it all by email or the postal service.”

April managed a weak nod, though Olivia couldn’t see it. “Thank you.” It came out as a whisper. She needed water. “I’m not sure what I should ask you.”

“That’s what I’m here for. There’s a sister.”

“I have a sister?” Her heart leaped, and she sat up on the bed.

“Sorry, no. Sarah had a sister. Your biological aunt. Brittany Hannibal. She’s contesting the will.”

“Yes, the sheriff mentioned her. I’m afraid whoever killed Phillip either has Brittany or has murdered her. Is there someone else who could profit if none of us survives?”

“A charity for orphaned children.”

“Someone from that charity is after us?”

“That’s one possibility.”

The enormity of the situation felt like a lead weight on April’s limbs. She slid from the bed to the floor. Not only had she lost the parents who raised her, but she’d lost the family who had wanted to know her. And there were bills she had to figure out how to pay, not to mention the fact that someone from a nonprofit organization wanted her dead.

“Is there just money in the estate, or do I need to deal with a house as well?”

“We’ll talk after the holidays. I’ll call you after the first of the year.”

They ended the call, leaving April leaning against the bed, trying to make sense of the direction her life had spun in the last few days. One week ago, she’d collected all the coins she could find just to buy an expensive cupcake for her birthday. She had rationed her gallon of milk to last a month. She’d just recently had enough money to pay her electric bill and to buy a few Christmas presents.

Now? The attorney hadn’t been much help in resolving April’s questions. Was she about to inherit money, a house, or more bills? She clung to her word for the new year: *hope*. Despite that, it was too much to take in. It felt like the next call with the attorney would be a century away, not a weekend away. She allowed herself to slip to the floor and thought of Ethan.

She’d considered herself beneath him. He was more educated, more sophisticated, and smarter. Would her new situation push him away? Shame about thinking of him that way pelted her. She would discuss it with him over hot chocolate later.

But was he better than her because he was more educated? Why had she allowed her mind to go there? She was a good person. Sarah trying to leave her an inheritance showed that April had been loved by two mothers. Her father had adored her. So why did he leave her to face her grief and the bills on her own? He wouldn’t do that to her. Everything inside her had always known that, but her anger at him had kept her from grasping it. She needed to find out what had happened to him.

An idea formed, but she needed to focus on other things.

He'd been missing for six months. Another few days wouldn't make a difference.

For now, she wanted to know what was in the envelope Vanessa was after. Vanessa had said she represented Brittany, and the attorney had said Brittany would contest the will. Did Brittany want her dead? A chill swept across her shoulders and down her spine. No. Vanessa was working on her own. Brittany was a blood relative. She may have hired Vanessa to find April, but she was unaware of what Vanessa was doing to Brittany's only remaining relatives. Brittany wouldn't want to harm April or Phillip; she was sure of it. But was Brittany already dead?

"No. I can't believe that."

She pulled out the envelope she'd taken from the back of her mother's painting before the Smythe family caravanned back to the house. She'd been too overwhelmed to open it after being held hostage, but now she lifted the flap. Inside was a birth certificate, photos, a lock of curly red hair, and a document confirming that Will Carlston was April's biological father.

Sarah hadn't named April, listing her as Baby Girl Aikman. Her name was Baby Girl. She chuckled to herself.

The mother listed on the document was Sarah Aikman, and the father was Will Carlston of Peach Blossom, Oklahoma. Attached to that record were adoption papers and a new birth certificate. She assumed it was the original of the one she'd used to get her driver's license. The adopted mother was Rhonda Carlston, and Will Carlston was still her father.

Photos taken in the hospital stirred fondness for the woman she'd only knew for a few moments on the day she was born.

As with April, Sarah's hair was ginger colored, curly, and unruly. She held only one baby in her arms, her hand caressing the head covered with a pink beanie. Phillip's parents must have received a similar picture with just him in Sarah's arms.

Why didn't she want the two babies raised in the same household? April would never know the answer to that. Unless ... Sarah may have explained it to her attorney. In Scotland. She could call and ask the attorney, but she needed closure. She wanted to see her birthplace. Would she need to travel to Scotland to find closure?

She'd discuss it with Ethan. And her boss, Carol. And maybe Ethan's mom.

April's gaze lingered on Sarah's eyes. *Your striking blue eyes remind me of the blue jay that's made its home on my windowsill at home*, her adopted mother had written. Had Mom had met Sarah? April ran her finger across Sarah's eyes, the same color as her own. The woman's expression looked loving, tired, and sad all at the same time.

"I wish I'd known you."

A single sob escaped. Yes, she wanted to go to Scotland. She needed to see the hospital where she was born and the house where her mother had lived. She'd been comfortable with her adoptive parents, but she'd always felt as if something was missing.

She pulled another photo from the envelope. Her parents. They were young. Together, they held a swaddled baby wearing a pink beanie. April. Mom looked lovingly at April, and Dad held them both as if they were delicate treasures.

These were her parents. They'd loved her, nurtured her. Memories glided across her brain. Mom doctoring scraped knees. Dad teaching her to fish and shoot. Her family and friends celebrating her birthday and the following week of Aprilmas. Maybe it wasn't that she hadn't felt like she belonged with them so much as sensing on a spiritual level that something else was missing. Another mother who had loved her. A brother who would have loved her.

God, I haven't talked to you much lately except to yell at you

or ask you for help, but I'd sure appreciate it if you could just tell me what is happening here.

Laughter wafted in from the living room. It sounded like people were getting ready to leave. A knock sounded on her door.

"April?" It was little Harper.

"Yes."

"Can I come in?"

April stood, smoothed her clothes and hair, and opened the door.

"We're leaving, but I wanted to say goodbye to you. Will you marry Ethan?"

A giggle replaced the erratic feelings she'd been experiencing. "He hasn't asked, and we're just friends, but I'd like to be your friend. I hope to see you again soon."

Harper hugged her. "Me too. Bye."

April followed a dancing Harper down the hall and was greeted with a flurry of hugs and goodbyes.

She wanted a family like this, and Brittany was all she had left if she was still alive. She wasn't about to let Vanessa take that from her.

TWENTY-ONE

Ethan's heart danced while he watched April say goodbye to each of his family members. Her voice remained soft, exuding the calmness of a summer breeze. Those brilliant blue eyes held a warm twinkle that must have made her customers at the market feel appreciated. While she'd only known his family a short while, she remembered every person's name. With a handshake or a hug, she said something kind to each of them, showing that she'd observed them and recognized how blessed she was to meet them. His chest swelled with pride at her genuineness. Or was it love?

He turned his attention to the puddles where ice had covered the driveway earlier. Little Harper followed her brothers to the back of Aaron's car, only to turn around and run back for one last hug from April.

"Don't forget our talk." Harper's exaggerated wink at April tickled him. He would have liked to have witnessed whatever conversation that was.

"Never." April tweaked Harper's nose before nudging her back to the car.

With the last of the relatives gone, Mom leaned against the door, closed her eyes, and exhaled hard. “What a lovely visit. I’m so glad it’s over.” She turned to Dad. “Quint, how about a fire and some hot chocolate?”

“Sounds like a perfect end to a challenging day that turned out pretty good.” Dad smiled at April, then nodded for Ethan to join him at the fireplace.

April’s shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry my issues almost ruined your family’s celebration.” In a matter of seconds, she’d gone from warm and playful to remorseful. Her mouth contorted, he assumed to fight off an urge to cry.

“Nonsense.” Mom pulled April into a sideways hug, then looked straight into her amazingly blue eyes. “No matter what happens between you and Ethan, you’re part of our family now. Don’t forget that.”

April crumpled against Mom, losing the battle to hold in her sobs. She said something, but Ethan found it impossible to understand through the blubbering. She and Mom embraced and talked while Ethan and Dad got the fire going.

“Let’s go make the hot chocolate, son.” Dad led Ethan to the kitchen.

Ethan lowered his voice while collecting the ingredients. “Dad, I don’t know what to say to April after all she’s gone through. Her troubles didn’t start today when Vanessa took her, and not even when Phillip’s car crashed through her wall. She’s grieved and struggled financially for the last six months since her mother died and her dad disappeared. The last few years since she gave up her dreams of an education to help care for her mother. Then she got stuck with what must be astronomical medical bills.”

Dad squeezed Ethan’s shoulder. “Take your time, son. Don’t make her talk if she doesn’t want to, but let her talk all she wants without offering any advice.” He poured milk into a

pan, and Ethan followed with vanilla, cocoa, and sugar. “I learned that the hard way with your mom. Sometimes, a woman just wants to be listened to, not have her man try to fix things.” He leaned against the stove, stirring the treat while it warmed. “April has been through more than most people endure in a lifetime. When she’s ready, she’ll open up to you.”

Ethan held the mugs while Dad filled them, then they each sprinkled mini marshmallows onto the top. As they splashed down, the fragrances of chocolate and vanilla wafted up. “Thanks, Dad.”

They each picked up two mugs. “Just show her you care and will do all you can to keep her safe.”

“Will do.”

The two men approached the living room with caution. Mom had moved to the couch, strategically placing April on the loveseat perpendicular to the sofa.

The fire crackled, and a soft orange glow filled the darkened room. The four of them sat in silence, sipping their drinks, but Mom seemed antsy. She crossed one leg, then changed to the other, watching through the steam curling up from her cup while April slowly relaxed, then leaned against Ethan. When April dropped her head to Ethan’s shoulder, Mom couldn’t contain herself any longer.

“April, I checked the auction site. One of your albums sold for fifteen hundred dollars.”

The second April lifted her head from Ethan’s shoulder, a sense of loss swamped him. The absence of her warmth seemed colder than the temperature inside the house.

April’s jaw dropped. “No.” Her voice was husky with disbelief.

“Yep, and there’s a bidding war going on for the Led Zeppelin.”

“Thank you for helping me with that.” A tear escaped her

eyelashes. She dabbed at it. "Sorry. I thought I'd shed all the tears I had inside me. I'm not used to bein' so grateful, sad, and happy all at the same time."

Mom reached over to lay a hand on April's leg. "Are you sorry you put something so personal to your grandmother up for sale? If they have more sentimental value than you thought, we could take them down."

April wiped the moisture from her face. "That isn't it." She set her mug on the coaster in front of her. "When I was in the bedroom, I called an attorney in Scotland. I'm not sure if I have money coming to me or more bills." She stared at her fingers as if debating whether to say more, then she looked up. "My Aunt Brittany is contesting Sarah's will."

She trembled against Ethan, hiding her face against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and sent his father a lifted eyebrow and a *help-me-out-here* stare.

Dad leaned forward. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Kinda." April sniffed. "I've already told you about what went on in the house, but I was so afraid every time she slipped her finger to the gun's trigger." She described the emotions brought on by the sight of the gun's barrel pointed at her. "Once she told me what we were looking for, I realized my mother had given me a clue when I was five years old. It took everything in me to keep it to myself." She closed her eyes and pulled in a steadying breath, blowing it through her teeth before continuing. "Then I spoke with Sarah's attorney."

Ethan swallowed a lump in his throat as he watched April's emotions while she spoke. He sniffed the chocolaty essence from his mug, trying not to intrude by pulling her into a hug.

Mom and Dad remained silent. April looked increasingly overwhelmed while she talked. When April finished, Dad quickly composed himself. He set down his cup and faced April. "When I met you one week ago, you were so broke that

we bought food for you. Do you think maybe this is the Christmas blessing God had planned for you all along?"

April shrugged. "I haven't thought about it. Blessings from God aren't somethin' I'm used to."

"Sure you are," Mom said. "You just haven't recognized them as such."

April found a tired smile. "I'll have to watch more closely. A good blessin' would be finding out what happened to my father."

"Well, let's pray for that." Mom led them in a touching prayer that left April with tears dripping onto her lap.

Ethan grabbed April's hands, weaving his fingers around hers.

"I found what Vanessa wanted." April's voice was barely above a whisper. "I'd like to show you."

She checked for nods from the three of them before rushing to her room and returning with a large manilla envelope. "My name was Baby Girl." Her laughter splashed warmth over Ethan. She pulled a photo from the envelope. "This is my birth mother, Sarah Aikman." She handed the photo to Mom.

"Oh, my gosh. She looks just like you." Mom showed the photo to Dad, then handed it to Ethan.

"This is what I've been lookin' for my whole life. I didn't even slightly resemble my mom, and I could tell it bothered her as much as it did me." She took the photo from Ethan and stared at it. "My parents thought they protected me, but I think I would have found more peace if they'd told me about Sarah. Seeing this stuff explains so much."

"What it doesn't explain is why there was no Phillip in the photo," Mom said.

"The attorney said Sarah's husband didn't want us. I wonder if he wanted to punish Sarah even more by makin' sure

Phillip and I got separated.” April again wiped tears from her cheeks.

Ethan couldn’t hold himself back this time. He nudged closer to her and wrapped his arms around her. “You need closure, don’t you?”

“Yes.” She laid her head on his shoulder.

“I’ll help you find it.”

“We’ll all help you,” Lisa said.

“Y’all have been so kind to me. Thank you.”

Ethan rubbed her arm, mesmerized by the scent of her apple shampoo.

“Of course,” Mom said.

“The attorney said she could handle it all without me ever leavin’ Oklahoma, but I think the closure I need is in Scotland. At least for that part of my life. I also need to find out what happened to my dad.”

“We’ll get started on all of that right after Christmas.” Mom patted April’s leg, then took Dad’s hand. “Let’s give these two lovebirds some privacy.”

He told himself to be careful. From the way April spoke, she might move to Scotland, leaving his life shattered beyond hope if he allowed himself to go down the *lovebird* path.

TWENTY-TWO

As the fire crackled and the scent of Christmas filled the air, April watched Ethan check the time.

“It’s five minutes after midnight. Technically, it’s Christmas day, so ...” He left the loveseat and approached the tree decorated with colorful blinking lights, reaching to the back against the wall. He snagged a shiny red package from the stack of gifts that spilled well into the living room, then returned and perched on the edge of the loveseat beside her.

His clean mountain air scent enveloped her with a sense of safety and security, something she hadn’t experienced since her mother’s cancer diagnosis when she was a senior in high school.

He placed the present in her lap. “I know we agreed not to exchange gifts, but I saw this and thought it matched your eyes, and I couldn’t help myself.” He worked his jaw. “If you don’t like it, we can return it. I didn’t know if you wear stuff like this.”

How could she respond to something so romantic? He’d thought of her while out somewhere. *Thank you, God, for finally lookin’ out for me.*

Her hands trembled as she unwrapped the beautifully-

wrapped box with a large red bow. Gently removing the lid, she unfolded the tissue paper. Nestled underneath was the most beautiful scarf April had ever seen. She picked up the delicate fabric, her heart snagging an extra few beats as she marveled at his thoughtfulness. "It's perfect."

Ethan's soft smile drew her like moths to her porch light. The idea of kissing him sent rivulets of warmth through her.

"I'm glad you like it. I wanted to get you something special."

She placed her palm on his jaw stubble, joining him at the edge of the pillow to wrap him in a hug. Her insides fluttered. She could spend the rest of her life like this, her body next to his, his warmth seeping into her. When he hugged her back, she felt protected for the first time in so long that it turned her muscles to mush.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice muffled against his chest. She lifted her head to gaze into his kind eyes. She wanted to kiss him but pulled back. "I broke the rule too. Be right back." She jumped up and ran to her bedroom, returning to find him exactly where she'd left him.

"Carol gave us all a Christmas bonus, so I spent some of it on you." Her heart raced at the thought he might not like it.

"You shouldn't have."

"Yes, I should have. It gave me joy to spend money on a gift and have enough left over to pay my electric bill on Monday. You and your family have been beyond kind to me, so I wanted to get you something special."

Unlike her careful unwrapping to preserve the paper, he tore his off, then stopped before opening the box and turned his attention to her. "Well, I guess you're rich now, so you can buy whatever you want."

A giggle escaped. "I could be rich, but I could be in worse shape. Tonight I'm feeling rich, so that's what counts. I'm

hopeful the inheritance will be the blessing Sarah thought it would be. I'm trying to keep both my anxiety and my expectations under control."

"No matter what, it will be okay." His gaze lingered on her until she thought she might melt. "I should ..." He gestured toward the box he hadn't opened.

She watched his eyes. They were where you could see people's genuine feelings. Her heart flitted in her chest when Ethan's face lit up at the first sight of the silver money clip she'd had engraved with his name. "April, it's beautiful. And so sophisticated." He held the money clip as if it were England's crown jewels.

April smiled so wide her cheeks hurt. A sudden burst of shyness had her looking at her lap. "I'm glad you like it."

He used an index finger to tip her head up, staring into her eyes. She tried to read meaning into the affection his expression contained as his gaze traveled down to her lips and back up. "I love it. Thank you." He ran his thumb down her cheek, sending shivers of joy across her skin. "I will cherish this for as long as I live."

Kind of dramatic, but okay.

Since he didn't kiss her, she leaned over and softly touched her lips to his. He wrapped hungry arms around her and deepened the kiss. For a moment, he was all there was in the entire world. When he pulled away, it seemed he'd pulled the rug from beneath her.

She felt cold, as abandoned as when her father disappeared.

He paced between the loveseat to the tree and back. "I'm so sorry. That was inappropriate."

"Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who kissed you."

"Yeah, but ..." He propped a foot on the fireplace hearth, picked up the poker, and stabbed a log. "We'd better stop

before we end up doing something our relationship isn't ready for."

Frustration bubbled inside her. She'd wanted him to declare undying love for her, just like they do in the movies. But this wasn't a movie, and she was a homely redhead with a face full of freckles. And she suddenly wanted to cover them up. Instead, she turned away from him.

"There's somethin' else. I brought your parents Christmas presents, but I didn't bring 'em in because I didn't have one for everyone in your enormous family. There wasn't enough room for them in the duffle bag I brought from home. They're in the trunk of my car. I'll go get them and put them under the tree." Her aloneness slithered in, taking up all the room she'd previously filled with Ethan's reaction to her gift.

"It's cold out."

"You stay here." She retrieved her coat from the closet near the door.

He grabbed her arm. "Stop. I can tell I hurt you by moving away. It's just that I respect you too much to take advantage of you. It's late. You've been through so much. You're vulnerable. I don't want to exploit you that way. Believe me, I want you with everything that is in me, but it isn't our time yet."

A lifetime of feeling excluded evaporated. "Such a romantic." She donned her coat and waited for him to do the same. "Let's go get those gifts."

When she opened the door, crisp air and a sky full of twinkling stars met her. She led him to her car, then turned to take in the serene scene. Lights adorned every house in the neighborhood, along with the bushes and trees in their yards. Much of the snow had melted, but what was left sparkled in the moonlight, colored by the Christmas decorations.

Ethan wrapped a warm arm around her waist, and she stepped to the end of the driveway.

“Careful,” he said. “With Vanessa still out there, we don’t want to wander too far.”

April heard the roar of an engine before seeing a vehicle swerve toward them, its headlights blinding her. Panic thundered in her chest. Acute awareness amplified every sight, sound, and smell around her—the cold air, the fluffy snowflakes silently drifting to the ground, the spicy scents of Christmas—she prayed more fervently than ever before. *Save us!*

In slow motion, Ethan pushed her out of the way, and the sudden bite of the icy ground scraped against her knees. Tears stung her eyes, but before she could even gasp for breath, she glimpsed the barrel of a gun resting on the open window frame of the SUV idling beside them.

“Merry Christmas, you two lovebirds,” Vanessa yelled from the SUV that had pushed April’s car to the curb on Christmas Eve.

“Ethan duck!” Everything she valued hung in an awful balance as she willed herself to act. Love for Ethan forced instinct to kick in.

She vaulted forward, throwing her body between Ethan and the gun. A blast echoed through the neighborhood. Her back and chest burned as she lurched forward, her head spinning and her limbs too heavy to block her fall. In a horrifying flash, Ethan fell in front of her, cushioning her landing. To her horror, the love of her life clutched his chest, blood seeping through his fingers.

Her vision went in and out of focus, her breathing felt jagged in her throat. She glimpsed Vanessa’s vehicle fishtail down the street. In a moment of clarity, she mustered enough strength to force herself to her feet, tucking her arms in Ethan’s armpits. The air became still and silent as she pulled. When her pain got unbearable, she fell to her knees.

“I’m sorry, Ethan.”

She sensed movement around her and threw herself across Ethan to protect him, trying to draw in a breath, but her lungs locked up.

“Ethan!” It was Lisa, her voice full of anguish. “You’re shot.”

“April saved me.” Ethan voice sounded too weak, but he was alive. For now. *Thank you, God.* Pain seared through her.

Hands rolled her off of Ethan to the sidewalk. Cold wetness seeped through her clothes. Quint’s scent hovered over her. His large hands lifted her head and slid something soft under it before lowering her back down.

“Bug.” It came out as a wheeze.

“What did she say?” Lisa’s voice echoed.

“She’s worried about bugs.”

“It’s too cold for bugs, honey.” Lisa didn’t understand.

“Birds.” April’s mind was too muddled to find the words. The harder she tried, the more she couldn’t breathe.

Quint cupped her hand in his. “Don’t try to talk, sweetheart.” With Quint’s trembling, she looked up at him. His eyes were closed, and his lips moved as if in prayer. He patted her shoulder. “Stay with us, sweetheart. You’re going to be okay.”

He didn’t seem to believe it.

“Van ...” She wanted to tell him who did this and that there was a listening device somewhere, but her pain had her breathing in short, shallow gasps. Her lungs wouldn’t fill.

Voices gathered around her, their fear and confusion evident in their tone. The warmth of her own blood drew her attention. Would she bleed out and die? Would it hurt more than she already did?

A siren shrieked in the distance. When she moved her head, the world began to spin.

“I don’t want to live without her.” Ethan’s voice echoed

somewhere between the siren and Quint. Everything sounded as if they were lost at sea with fog encasing them.

“Stay still, son. The ambulance is almost here.” Lisa meant her encouragement for her son, but it gave April a second of comfort. “Quint, how is April?”

“Alive.” Quint’s gravelly tone sounded thick. “Delirious.”
Then everything went black for April.

TWENTY-THREE

Ethan struggled against the paramedic who tried to pull Ethan's hand away from his chest. "I need to get to April." He tried to sit up, but the burly man's muscles barely flexed under his black T-shirt when he pushed Ethan back against a gurney.

The dark-haired man pulled something from a pocket in his cargo pants. "April's in good hands." He placed an oxygen mask over Ethan's mouth and nose. "She's in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. You need to worry about yourself right now." A blurred image of the man's nametag caught Ethan's attention.

Ethan lifted his mask. "Ryan, I'm a doctor. I know this isn't a life-threatening wound, even though it hurts like the dickens. I'm too weak to whip a gnat at the moment, so I'll stop struggling. But I need to know if April is okay."

Ryan repositioned the mask back over Ethan's nose and mouth. "I'll radio the other ambulance if that will help you settle down."

Ethan nodded off as Ryan and another man in a similar uniform loaded him into the ambulance. He jolted awake when

the vehicle rode over a bump. Confused, he lifted his mask and asked about April.

“She’s being prepped for surgery. She has a collapsed lung.” Ryan replaced the mask, this time holding it in place until Ethan dozed again, his dreams replaying the attack and the urgent tones of the paramedics as they took April away.

Worry and guilt swirled inside Ethan. She took the bullet for him. Who does that?

Right in the middle of his dream, the paramedics pulled Ethan from the vehicle and into a curtained cubicle surrounded by medical equipment. A nurse with a pink-lipped smile yanked the curtain closed, asking about Ethan’s pain level, taking his vitals, adjusting his bed, and asking him to sign papers giving them permission to treat him. After what felt like hours, a doctor arrived.

“Hello, Dr. Smythe. I’m Dr. Oliver. May I look at your wound?” The doctor assessed the injury, ordered tests and a sedative, and said he’d return with news about April after he had a better feel for what they needed to do with Ethan.

An orderly wheeled Ethan to an operating room, where Dr. Oliver waited. “We can get the bullet out of you with no problem. It’s barely more than a surface wound. You’ll be good as new in no time. Sound good?”

Ethan nodded, prompting the doctor to lift his chin toward a woman Ethan hadn’t noticed. A second later, Ethan was out.

THE NURSE WHEELED Ethan to the waiting room to find his entire family: four brothers, Mom, and Dad. He assumed his sisters-in-law were at home with the kids, waiting either for word on Ethan or to greet him with hugs and kisses when he got to his parents’ house. His heart swelled with gratitude,

then his mood deflated, knowing that April had no such entourage.

“I’ll get the truck.” Dad took a step toward the automatic glass doors.

“No.” Ethan used the toe of his blood-stained sneaker to tip up the footplate, causing Dad to stop. “I’ll walk with you.”

The nurse pressed down on his shoulder. “Rules are rules, and I can’t let you stand until you’re getting into a vehicle with a responsible driver.”

Dad threw a thumb toward the doors. “I’ll go get it.”

The brothers followed dad out the door.

Ethan sucked in a deep breath to hold in the frustration bubbling inside him. *It isn’t their fault*, he reminded himself.

Mom put a gentle hand on Ethan’s forearm. “Calm down, son.” She leaned down to whisper in his ear. “April made it through the surgery and is in her own room.”

Surprise flared, and he turned to mumble to his mother. “How do you know that? They won’t tell anyone but family.”

“I have contacts.” She stood straight and smiled at the nurse before turning her attention back to the doors.

When Dad arrived with the pickup, they rolled him toward it. Mom rushed to open the back passenger door, then helped to steady Ethan as he wobbled inside. The nurse disappeared into the building, and Mom got into the pickup.

Dad looked at Ethan in the review mirror as he parked in the first slot he came to, still in the hospital lot. “So, here’s the plan, son.” He shifted into park and turned toward Ethan. “You just had surgery under moderate sedation. Even though this became outpatient surgery for you, you’re in no shape to go gallivanting around. Your mom would have my hide if I let you do anything but sleep.”

Mom nodded.

Sleep sounded good, but Ethan’s concern for April kept his

wearry eyes from closing.

“You lean back and get comfortable. The boys and I have talked to Sheriff Nelson. He should be here any minute. You tell him what happened, then he’ll visit with April while you rest right here in this parking lot.”

Dad covered Ethan with a blanket, then looked down at his phone. “Mom’s contact says April’s room is 210. She’ll be asleep for another hour or so, then we’ll take you up to her, but only if you promise to do nothing but rest.”

Ethan blinked, and the next thing he knew, Sheriff Nelson was sitting beside him with a clipboard in his lap.

“Ethan, are you awake?” The sheriff touched his shoulder.

“Kind of.” His voice sounded scratchy.

“Who shot you?”

“Vanessa.” He couldn’t get his eyes to open.

“April said something about bugs, birds, and a van,” Mom said. “Do you know what that was about?”

Thinking was so hard. Ethan closed his eyes and willed his mind to work. Insight slipped forward. “Mom, what was it you said right before turning in for the night?”

“Well ... I don’t know ... I think I said something about leaving you two lovebirds alone.”

Ethan puffed air through his swollen lips. “Birds. Bugs.” He eyed his dad, then his mom. “Which one of you was with her? Did she say bugs or bug?”

Dad’s eyes widened. “She said bug.” He stared at the sheriff. “Was April trying to say our house is bugged?”

The sheriff made a note. “I’ll get that checked out. We should also check her clothes, which is more likely. I assume they’re in her hospital room. I’ll go get those clothes.”

Ethan rolled his head to look at the sheriff. “I’ll go to her house and bring her other clothes to wear home.”

“Oh, no, you won’t, mister.” Mom wagged a finger at Ethan

—her motherly warning to behave. “My daughters-in-love brought everything to our house that April will need for the next few weeks. At least until we get her recovered and safely home.”

The sheriff cleared his throat. “Anyway, Ethan, was the shooter in a van?”

“No. April must have been trying to say Vanessa. She shot us from an open window in the blue SUV that keeps showing up to harass April.”

“Vanessa drives a Jeep. We impounded it. You’re saying she has another vehicle?”

“She was in a different one this time, so I guess she does.”

The sheriff pulled out his cell. “I’ll call to get Deputy Gleason and his new K-9 out here. They’ll stand guard outside April’s door.”

Dad held up a hand to stop the sheriff. “Hold up, Sheriff. There’s no need. Don’t forget you’ve got five Sheriff’s Posse members at your disposal. My boys can take shifts standing guard.” He glanced at Ethan. “Could you use your influence to get a reclining chair in April’s room so Ethan can stay with her? In his shape, he won’t be any good in a fight, but at least he can stop worrying about her and get some sleep.”

ETHAN SNUGGLED UP in the recliner beside April’s bed. She looked pale, but that was to be expected. Mom covered him with a blanket.

“You go on to sleep now. Your big brother Aaron is on duty outside your door. He’ll check on you a few times, and then Brandon will take over, then Cody, then Daniel. The nurses will take good care of April. There’s no need for you to worry about anything.”

Ethan gave her a sleepy smile. “Why did you name us in alphabetical order?”

Mom shrugged. “We knew we’d have a bunch of kids, and it seemed like the way to go.” She kissed his cheek, then April’s.

The love of his life opened her eyes in response to the touch of Mom’s lips to her face.

“Well, hello there, bright eyes,” Mom said. “Ethan’s going to stay in here with you for a bit. Is that okay with you?”

April shifted droopy eyes toward Ethan, giving a smile that settled warmth into his heart. “I’m sorry.” Her whisper sounded weak. A tear slid down to her pillow.

He grabbed her hand, and her fingers wove around his. “Never apologize for the actions of others. This isn’t your fault. We’ll figure it out together.”

The door inched open, the sheriff peeking in. “Is this a good time?”

“Sheriff.” Mom’s lips pursed into a straight line.

“It will only take a couple of minutes.”

“Come in.” April’s voice sounded hoarser than Ethan’s had at first. She turned her gaze to Mom. “Water?”

Mom lifted a sweating pink pitcher and positioned the straw between her lips.

Sucking seemed to drain April’s energy. “Questions, Sheriff?”

“In as few words as possible, tell me what bug, birds, and van mean to you.”

April retold the story from her point of view, which matched Ethan’s version.

Ethan’s heart froze in his chest as she described protecting him.

“I’ll be on my way. I’ll be in touch.” The sheriff closed the door behind him.

TWENTY-FOUR

April opened her eyes and panicked at the unfamiliar surroundings. She turned to sit up, and pain had her collapsing back on the bed, holding her chest. Her breaths came in short bursts. She looked up and saw the breathing tube a nurse had taught her to use.

Oh, yeah. Hospital. The scene where she ended up shot flooded her mind. She lay staring at the ceiling, cradling her chest. When the pain eased, something in her peripheral vision sent her pulse tapping in her ears. She turned to see Ethan asleep in the recliner beside her bed.

She gingerly touched his shoulder.

He jolted awake and righted himself in the recliner. “Hey.” His soft smile caused her stomach to flutter. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better. Still tired. Thanks for bein’ here.” She eyed the bandage peeking out from under his T-shirt. “I can’t believe she shot us.”

“The bullet went through you and barely lodged in my chest. It was relatively minor compared to your collapsed lung.”

Dr. Oliver knocked on the door and entered. He'd wrapped Christmas elves around his stethoscope. He nodded to Ethan before checking April's incision. "We'd like to keep you overnight for observation. Bummer way to spend Christmas, I know. But you can go home tomorrow. Do you have someone to drive you home and care for you?"

"I will." Ethan sat straight in the recliner.

The doctor looked at him over his glasses. "I know you're a doctor and all, but we need someone who didn't just undergo surgery himself."

"My parents."

"Good. I understand you'll stay with her, and you've got a bodyguard outside the door."

That was news to April. She turned questioning eyes to Ethan.

"My brothers are taking turns."

She smiled. A sudden wash of emotion swept over her. This wasn't her family technically, but she relished the way they cared for her.

The doctor kept his attention on Ethan. He explained April's condition in technical terms she didn't understand, but Ethan seemed to. Dr. Oliver turned to April with soft compassion in his expression. "You'll be as good as new in a few weeks. In the meantime, your body will heal better and faster if you rest, drink plenty of water, and eat a healthy diet. Do some slow walking, but don't overdo it." He picked up the breathing tube she was supposed to blow into every hour. "Keep using this. It protects against pneumonia."

"I'll be taking care of her." Ethan cupped her hand in both of his.

"Good." The doctor gently laid a hand on April's forearm above the needles poking out of the bend of her elbow, then

shook Ethan's hand. "You both need to rest now." He left the room, and Ethan's brother Daniel peered in.

"You two okay in there?"

"We're going home tomorrow." Ethan sent a bright smile to his brother. "I'm sorry you're spending Christmas away from your family."

"I'm not. We're doing three-hour shifts today. It's all good. Go to sleep, you two."

The click of the door latching lifted anxiety from April's chest. "I love your family, but I'm glad we're finally alone."

Ethan brushed her hair away from her forehead and gently placed a kiss there. "One thing this ordeal has shown me is that I love you. I've been so focused on my career that I almost missed how my spirit reached out to yours when we first met."

Her face warmed, and she was sure her freckles bloomed, which served to embarrass her more. Despite the awkwardness and continuing to wonder if she was good enough for a well-educated man like Ethan, she smiled. "It's kinda early for us to decide that, but my feelings for you get stronger with each passing day. Can we really identify those emotions as love though? We've been through an awful lot this past week."

She stuffed down her desire for it to be love.

"I'm sure about my feelings, but you take your time." He laid his head on her mattress and held her hand.

Tears welled in her eyes. A scene from years ago floated through her mind.

"Don't ever let anyone tell you that you're less than enough for them," her mother had said after her boyfriend broke up with her because he needed a more educated wife to keep his interest. "All that means is they don't deserve you, not the other way around."

An "aha" moment struck. Her parents had taught April that

being made in the image of God made her special to God, and that meant people's opinions, while they could hurt, didn't matter. In the last months of her mother's life, she'd often reminded April about her high grades in school. She made April promise not to waste the life insurance money on a fancy funeral but to use it for going to the University of Oklahoma, as April had dreamed. The money went toward medical bills instead.

"With grades like yours, any university would be happy to have you," Mom had said. "God will bring you the right man one of these days. When that day comes, you'll know it."

She missed her mother. There were so many things she needed to talk to Mom about right now. Things like the moment she met Ethan. Despite her typical reaction of embarrassment over her freckles, it was as if something inside her reached out and connected with him in a super strange way. The experience filled the void she'd felt when Phillip died.

Wow, God. Couldn't you just say somethin' like, "This is the one for you?" Or left her mother alive so they could discuss these things?

While she pondered, Carol burst into the room and set a huge vase of flowers on the bedside table.

"These beauties are from all of us at the market." April's boss scooted a chair next to the bed, across from Ethan, who was now sitting upright in the recliner. "How ya doin', sugar?"

"Okay, considerin'."

"I won't stay long. I just wanted to let you know we're all rooting for you. Also ..." Carol let her sentence hang while she seemed to consider how to word what she wanted to say next. "The sheriff visited me at my apartment today."

April's mood took a nosedive. "I'm sorry he disturbed your Christmas."

Carol flicked her wrist to wave away the comment. "It's no bother at all. He asked if I knew anything about the snow globe

that was in Phillip's car. It looks like the ones I carried in the store as part of the Christmas inventory."

"Yeah, I told him that, but he had to confirm it." April tried to sit, then winced, clenching her chest. "Oh. Oh. Oh." She slowed her breathing, and her heart rate eventually followed. "Vanessa asked me to ring up one of 'em for her." She tried not to cough, then waved her hand toward the pink water pitcher.

Ethan poked the straw between her lips so she could sip.

"Lookie here, sugar. You've got no need to worry about that tramp Vanessa. I went to the address she gave when she applied for the cashier job. It's the Cherokee Nation Museum in Tahlequah. I doubt she lives there. She even created an online identity for herself that got past my background check. I haven't seen her in a few days. The sheriff is talking about sending out his new K-9 unit—that's Deputy Zach Gleason and the cutest Malinois shepherd I ever laid eyes on. They're gonna use that dog to figure out how the tramp's been getting into your house and where she disappears to. It must be close. It's like she's gone in seconds. Anyhoo, I gotta go, sugar. There's a Christmas turkey waiting. You two take care, ya hear?"

"Take care," Ethan said while April sipped water and lifted her chin as a goodbye.

No sooner had April closed her eyes and Ethan leaned back in his recliner than Sheriff Nelson returned. His deep frown put a knot in April's chest.

Always one to get right down to business, the sheriff said, "The authorities in Scotland called to inform me that Vanessa's fingerprints I sent them two days ago match those of your Aunt Brittany."

April's throat tightened. "My own flesh and blood tried to kill me?"

He nodded. "Sarah Aikman left her sizeable estate to you unless you're no longer alive or can't produce some required

items. In that case, it goes into a trust for Brittany. She's disputing Sarah's will but getting nowhere. Going on an extended vacation was a diversionary tactic. She's been planning this for a long time, and it's possible she slowly poisoned Sarah."

"That snake." April caught herself. "Sorry, but that is a terrible thing to do to your own sister."

"She's an addict." As if that was all the explanation needed. "The authorities in Scotland said Brittany has been in and out of rehab many times. Drugs. Alcohol. Legal issues. You name it."

"Too bad she didn't save the money." Ethan shook his head in disbelief.

The sheriff shrugged. "That kind of irresponsibility is what caused Sarah to write the will the way she did. Brittany used forged documents to fly to America, rent a small house out in farm country, pay cash for the Jeep we impounded, and rent the SUV that's been following you."

Ethan's face scrunched up with disbelief.

The sheriff continued. "Our new K-9 unit figured out that she goes through your front door as if she owns the place. You know anything about that?"

"She told me when she held me hostage. I usually leave my purse in plain sight, and when I went on a break, she made herself a key." April felt her face flushing again, and she used all the control she could muster to keep from hiding her freckles with her hands. Instead, she resolved to lock that purse up in her desk from now on.

The sheriff shifted in his chair. "We figured she somehow got a key. Glad you could explain it." He scrawled a note before continuing. "The dog picked up her scent leading to the storm shelter at your neighbor's house."

“Mrs. Williams? Brittany must have scared that old woman half to death.”

The sheriff shook his head. “She’s hard of hearing and had no idea what was going on. We encouraged her to put a lock on the door latch.”

“She’s told me more than once that she doesn’t because she’s afraid she won’t have time to unlock it if a tornado touches down. There hasn’t been one the whole time I’ve been alive, but that didn’t change her mind.”

“We covered that with her.”

The sheriff’s words faded when a memory almost had April gasping again. She stopped herself in time to avoid another painful coughing fit. “I thought it was a dream. Mrs. Williams was out gardening in the middle of the night and then went into her storm shelter for supplies. It must have been Van ... Brittany.”

The sheriff nodded. “That about does it for me. You two get some rest. I’ve got to find Brittany before she causes any more trouble. Don’t leave this room for any reason. Your brothers won’t let anyone in.”

TWENTY-FIVE

A hand touched Ethan's head, startling him awake. The second he sprang to his feet, pain burned his incision, and memories of the shooting flashed across his vision. He fell back into the recliner in April's hospital room, holding his chest, his heart hammering his ribs. "Ow."

"Sorry." April's hoarse whisper soothed him. "I didn't mean to scare you. Go home so you can sleep comfortably."

He wove his fingers around hers. "I can't relax if I don't know you're safe."

"Your brothers are like football players. They take turns standing guard in the hallway. I'm safe. Go home. Sleep."

A tap sounded on the door, then Mom peeked inside. "I brought y'all homemade chicken soup."

"Thank you. Lisa, would you please take Ethan home so we can get some rest?"

"That's the plan." Mom rolled the over-bed table to April and adjusted the bed so April could sit up. She removed the lid from a thermal bowl, and broth-scented steam curled up, making Ethan's mouth water. While

handing April a spoon, she said, "They said you could have this."

Mom turned to Ethan with a second thermal container. "You need better sleep, and we have things to discuss."

"Is it concerning me?" April took her time savoring her first spoonful of the soup. Her eyes brightened with joy, then she closed them in what looked like pure delight.

Mom looked satisfied at April's reaction to the soup she often had made for her boys when they were sick. Ethan wasn't too proud to admit he missed that part of living at home. "April, honey, don't you worry about what I need to talk to Ethan about on the way home."

"Eat," Mom said to Ethan.

Ethan grabbed his spoon and let the hot liquid soothe his parched throat. He doubted he'd ever tasted anything so good. "This is just what I needed." It seemed to even comfort his soul.

His mother smiled and patted his hand. "I knew you'd like it. I wanted to make sure you had something special to make you feel better."

Fifteen minutes of eating and visiting later, Mom packed up her serving dishes before leaning down to kiss April's forehead. "You've got your color back. It'll be nice to get you home so I can pamper you back to health."

Moisture glistened in April's eyes. "Thank you." Her bottom lip quivered. She raised her head and gazed at Mom. "Can you help me start plannin' my trip to Scotland to settle Sarah's estate? That attorney, Olivia MacLeod, said she'd do it all, but I want to be there."

"We'll get to that." Mom's smile was too tight. Something was up. She tapped Ethan's shoulder. "Come on. Let's leave this girl alone so she can come home with us tomorrow."

Ethan stood, wanting to stay but sure it was best for him to go. He kissed April's cheek. "See you tomorrow." His heart felt

heavy approaching the door behind his mother. He greeted his brother, Daniel, as he stepped into the hallway.

“Did you tell him, Mom?” Daniel’s furrowed brows worried Ethan.

“Not yet.” She gestured to Ethan to follow.

Ethan tried to keep up with his mother as he walked the buffed hallway floor, but she seemed antsy to get him to the car so she could spill whatever had everyone looking emotional. At a turn toward the lobby, he looked back at April’s room, feeling her presence in the air. Bowing his head, he watched his feet while following his mother to her car.

Mom took her place behind the steering wheel and allowed Ethan to get settled before turning to him and looking straight into his eyes.

“I ran a background check on Olivia MacLeod, the attorney in Scotland that April consulted about her mother’s estate. “I don’t believe she’s who she claimed to be.”

Ethan’s heart sank. “What do you mean?”

“The background check gave me Olivia’s social media accounts. April told us Olivia claimed to be a lifelong friend of the biological mother in Scotland, Sarah Aikman. The pictures I saw tell a different story. Olivia parties with that tramp who shot you two.”

Blood whooshed from Ethan’s face; his body drooped against the center console. “The attorney is in cahoots with Brittany.”

Mom nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

She cranked the ignition, and a chill raced down Ethan’s spine. He’d never felt so weak and hopeless.

“I printed some articles you can read, and I thought you might have contacts who can dig deeper than I did. This whole thing smells fishy to me.” She scowled toward the windshield. “It stinks.”

ETHAN FINISHED READING the first article his mother had given him. Never in his life had he been as grateful for gossip columnists.

To say Sarah Aikman had been married to a wealthy businessman was the understatement of the century. Fifteen years Sarah's senior, Sinclair Aikman was a heavy drinker who believed the way to live life was full speed ahead. While that may have resulted in wealth that allowed him an enormous mansion, a yacht, worldwide travel, prostitutes, and luxuries not available to ordinary people, it also resulted in a fatal heart attack ten years ago.

Ethan had to catch himself from saying Sinclair got what he deserved. *God, I give you this bitterness.* Calmed, he turned to the next article.

Sarah had suffered from clinical depression brought on by a lengthy illness contracted while visiting Ireland the same year April and Phillip were born. *Yeah, she "contracted" pregnancy while in Ireland.*

Sarah's biography said Sinclair had isolated her in their Highlands mansion during her "illness," and she never regained the energetic zeal that had marked the first half of her life. "Something inside Sarah broke," a friend had told the reporter. "Everything about her changed. She used to throw grand galas, but no more. She wore bright colors and fashionable clothes. Look at her now."

All the photos Ethan found showed Sarah wearing black. Shocking before and after shots shown on Brittany's social media chronicled the sad transformation of a happy socialite who at least tolerated her husband and sister. In pictures that captured the couple together, Sarah typically glared at Sinclair in disdain. She'd gone from a high-spirited person who enjoyed

tennis, archery, and sailing to a gaunt woman with no smile, a bitter expression, and dark circles under her puffy eyes.

Why didn't you just leave him?

The next article Ethan read, all about Brittany, may have answered the question. Sinclair and Sarah had spent a bundle cleaning up after Brittany's antics. The best Ethan could figure, Brittany lived in one of two guest houses of the couple's Highlands estate. She'd been in and out of rehab, and social media posts suggested Brittany spent more time on Sinclair's yacht than Sarah did. Ethan's suspicion of something going on between Brittany and Sinclair grew with each line he read about the woman.

So, Sarah stayed with Sinclair after he'd destroyed her life, and she did it because of Brittany? To rid himself of the contempt boiling inside him toward Brittany and Sinclair, Ethan again closed his eyes and prayed before returning to the stack of papers his mother had printed.

A thousand needles prickled his skin while he read that Sinclair had been suspected of involving Brittany in a money laundering scheme. He could hardly believe what he was reading. Sinclair had hired Brittany as his personal assistant, and she'd traveled with him on business trips while Sarah stayed home. Solicitor Olivia MacLeod often accompanied them.

Brittany had expected to inherit the full estate upon Sarah's death, which apparently was what Sinclair had promised. Immediately after the reading of Sarah's will by solicitor Gordon MacIver, Brittany had screamed obscenities, then vowed to get even. She had emptied her savings account to "grieve in private on an extended trip."

Ethan stared at the name of the solicitor who'd read Sarah's will to Brittany, his imagination running wild. While pictures suggested Olivia MacLeod was Brittany's friend, it was possible she had been Sinclair's attorney. After his death, Sarah may

have tried to rid herself of the heavy-handed influence Sinclair had held over her life. Changing her attorney would have been an important part of that.

Thank you, Sarah.

A wave of anger washed over Ethan. April had been through so much already, and now Brittany—by all accounts a leach of a woman who cared more about herself than her sister—had created an elaborate plan to cheat April out of the legacy her mother had intended for her. *I won't let you.*

He sat still for a moment, a plan taking shape. His laptop sat on the desk across from his childhood bed. The sigh that escaped turned into a grunt when he stood to pick up the computer. Opening the lid, he stared at the blank search engine screen, momentarily unable to remember what he'd been about to do.

He entered the solicitor's name into the search bar. Several articles came up, but the words blurred, and he had to lean back on the pillow and close his eyes.

HE WOKE TO A DARK, quiet house. The pain medication had worn off, and for the first time since the shooting, he was hungry. He picked up the pill bottle and his laptop, then made his way to the kitchen. Christmas lights on the tree illuminated the path through the living room, but they did little to brighten the kitchen.

Movement outside the back window stopped him from reaching for the switch for the overhead light. On bare feet, he crept across the cold tile, gripping the kitchen doorknob tightly. He blew out three bursts of air, then yanked open the kitchen door and jumped out onto freezing concrete, determined to catch whoever was lurking in his parents' yard. A dark cat

hissed as Ethan stumbled forward, his throbbing chest protesting as he fell to a knee on the concrete patio.

Large hands gripped his arms. He fell back, causing stars to appear before his eyes. "Dad?"

"What are you doing out here, son? It's only thirty degrees."

"I was hungry, and I needed water to take my pain medication. Something moved in the yard, so I checked it out. A cat scared the dickens out of me."

Dad supported him while he slogged inside, then helped him ease into a chair at the table. Ethan sat still, his hand on his burning chest and his breathing quieting. His dad handed him a glass of water and a pain pill, and Ethan blew out a last puff of air before downing the entire contents.

"Want more of that chicken soup your mom made?"

"I want to chew something crunchy."

"Crackers and soup? This stuff is the elixir that will get you healed and back at work soon."

Ethan nodded, but work seemed so much less important today than it did the day before he met April. Helping her came first. "Did Mom tell you about the articles she printed for me to read?"

"Yes." Dad poured the chunky liquid into the bowl and slid it into the microwave to heat. "What did you get out of them?"

"I'm concerned Brittany's attorney is trying to lure April to Scotland to get rid of her so she can inherit the large estate. Or simply cheat April out of what Sarah wanted to give her. I've only known April for a little over a week, so I have no right to try to stop her from going there if that's what she wants. But I'm concerned."

"It's Saturday, but let's see if we can get Sheriff Nelson on the phone once the sun is up. He can do a more thorough investigation."

TWENTY-SIX

Mid-morning on Sunday, Ethan and his dad had arrived to spring April from the hospital. Now, she sat in the living room of Ethan's parents' house. On the ride there, Ethan's words had rendered her speechless. He told of articles he had read and a phone call he'd made to her biological mother's real attorney, solicitor Gordon MacIver.

"You're about to inherit a multi-million-dollar estate," he said. "Brittany and her attorney want to take it from you."

Dread mingled with her exhaustion from being shot, having surgery for a collapsed lung, and the aftereffects of anesthesia. She dug deep down inside herself to ward off her desire to forget all about fighting for her inheritance. She counted on her fingers the number of zeros in a million. Six. No matter how much she wished for it, her mind couldn't wrap around the thought of her bank account reaching six zeros before the decimal point.

Ethan settled his arm around her shoulders, and she could feel her heart flutter like a hummingbird's wings. She tried her best to ignore the persistent voice inside that questioned if she

was worthy of such a fine man as him. But as she snuggled closer, his warmth and tenderness made all those doubts drift far away in the Oklahoma breeze. She was truly thankful for the peacefulness his presence brought.

Ethan had shared sad stories of how Sarah had struggled without April and Phillip in her life. April was moved to tears looking at pictures of the vibrant woman Sarah had once been in stark contrast to the sorrowful woman she had become.

Lisa had met April with a hug when she arrived at their home. She and Quint quickly strolled away to give Ethan and April privacy to discuss their options. April was overwhelmed by the family's kindness and willingness to put themselves out to help her.

"If you end up deciding this is the path for you, I'll be your loudest cheerleader," Ethan said, causing April to cry yet again at the thought of people genuinely caring for her and wanting what was best for her. It had been so long since she felt anything remotely like the warmth and support of her late mother and absent father.

Ethan gently nudged April's shoulder to get her attention. "Earth to April."

She attempted a cheerful smile, but it ended up droopy instead. Taking a deep breath to pull herself together, she remembered the earnest promise she'd made to herself last week—to take charge of her life and make something out of it. Even though this situation wasn't what she'd expected, she was determined to tackle it.

"Alright." Ethan's amused gaze was full of commitment, and it made her stomach do flips.

She wouldn't trouble him with the details of the internal pep talk it took to pull herself together. Rather, she continued on with their plan of attack. She added an extra dose of sweetness to her smile and looked directly at him. "Alrighty, I'm

ready to take on Brittany. I'll let you come in on this unless fist-fighting's involved; I wouldn't want you gettin' hurt again."

He came in for a gentle embrace, and she was grateful he had avoided both of their chest wounds.

"What a pair we are, determined to fight Brittany when we can't even do a proper hug because of what she did to us."

"We'll heal." He sipped water and seemed to choose his next words with care. "Before we take on evil forces, we should pray."

"Oh." April took inventory of her feelings toward God. "I'm not sure I'm ready to forgive God for everything I've been through."

"April, your anger at God is a normal part of grieving. Being mad at God is a good thing. Not only does it mean you're allowing yourself to grieve, but also, and important to you and to our relationship, it means you still believe in God."

Oh, how she wished she could keep this guy around forever, but she feared he wouldn't care for a simpleton like her. *Honey, you deserve him.* She wasn't sure where that thought came from, but it brought her a strange sort of peace. "You picked up that piece of knowledge at med school?"

"I learned the God part from my parents, and I can tell your parents taught you the same. Medical school trains us to understand and respond to a patient's emotional and psychosocial needs though. It's a core concept of our profession." He grasped both of her hands. "Do you want me to leave you alone while you pray, or do you want to start doing it together?"

"Together sounds good. You start."

The second Ethan said the words *Heavenly Father*, April's tears flowed like rain on a tin roof, complete with thunderous sobs.

She yelled at God for letting her mother suffer. "Both of my mothers!" She pleaded with God to help her find her father.

Then she asked God to take away her bitterness, to lead her and Ethan as their relationship developed, and to guide them as they investigated what had happened to Sarah, and Brittany's role in it. "And if it isn't your will for me to have this multi-million-dollar inheritance, then I don't want it. Close all doors leadin' to it."

"Amen." Ethan tightened his grip on April's hands.

"Whew! So much weight is just gone from ... well, from everywhere, inside and out." She lay her head on Ethan's shoulder, then conjured up her best Scottish accent, mimicking her father and finally understanding so much of her life. "Let's phone solicitor Gordon MacIver."

Ethan dialed. After a short greeting, he said, "Mr. MacIver—"

"I won't call you Dr. Smythe if you won't call me Mr. MacIver. Gordon is fine."

"Deal. Gordon, I've got April with me, and you're on speaker. Thank you for talking with me this morning. Would you mind repeating what you told me? I think it's best coming from you."

"Well now, April," Gordon said in his distinctive, British-inflected Scottish accent, conveying a sophisticated air. "I have to tell you that the mother you never knew loved both you and your brother dearly. Her controlling husband—a rich and influential businessman—took extensive measures to prevent her from locating you. Sadly, he succeeded. However, I had the privilege of being engaged by your mother to ensure that should we ever find you, you would be well looked after. Despite the tragedy of your brother's passing, I remain hopeful that I can leverage Phillip's contact with Sarah just before her death to prove a sinister agenda on Brittany's part."

April shook off her grogginess to take in the realization that someone planned to ensure Brittany would pay for all she'd

done to Sarah, Phillip, Phillip's family, April, and Ethan. "I never knew Phillip, but my spirit felt him, I'm sure of that. An unexplainable emptiness overcame me the moment he died, which was about the time he crashed through my wall."

"Great scott! That must have been quite a shock."

"It was. Was Olivia MacLeod Sinclair's attorney?"

"Aye, and more, I'm afraid. After all of Sinclair's infidelities and forcing her to give up you and your brother, Sarah wanted to ensure the inheritance was passed to you before Olivia or Brittany were aware. She put measures in place to prevent any actions taken against it. As stipulated, you must make the journey to Scotland in person and bring me, and me alone, your original birth certificate showing her as your biological mother, as well as the lock of her hair she gave your parents and the paternity test proving Will Carlston as your biological father."

"Sir," April said, "Does half of the inheritance go to Phillip's family?"

"Sarah provided for that. You would have received fifty percent if Phillip had survived, which still would have been a sizeable bequest. But you're bestowed one hundred percent if you are Sarah's only surviving offspring."

"Sheesh." April pulled in several deep breaths. How would she ever get her mind around this? "Are there taxes and bills?"

"Sarah took care of all of that."

"What do I do now?"

"Ethan told me earlier today that you have sustained a serious injury, requiring surgical intervention on the festive day of Christmas, which I regret since it was wholly inappropriate for such an occasion. It will behoove you to obtain your physician's professional opinion before making any travel plans. Upon your receipt of such an opinion, I can arrange for the necessary accommodations for you and ensure that the relevant paperwork is presented and signed as required. In the mean-

time, I strongly advise you to take precautions to protect yourself from Brittany and, if appropriate, enlist the assistance of law enforcement authorities. I will also do my utmost to expedite the process on my end.”

April wondered to what universe she'd been transported. All she could manage to say was, “Thank you.”

Ethan put his arm around her again. “Thank you, Gordon. We'll be in touch.”

After Ethan disconnected, she remained silent, her mind spinning at the idea of a blood relative plotting against her. That alone made her stomach drop. When she added in memories of news reports saying how winning the lottery had ruined people's lives, she was physically and emotionally exhausted. She looked out the window, a sense of dread settling in. It terrified her to think of any repercussions her inheritance would have on Ethan or their relationship.

As if reading her mind, Ethan said, “You're going to need to stay close to God until you learn how to manage that kind of wealth. And my parents can recommend a money manager. I'll be right by your side whether or not you end up with it.”

“I want to use it to help people.”

He clasped her hand and helped her stand. “For now, you look tired. You go get some rest, and my family will help ensure that Brittany gets nowhere near you.”

She let her head fall to his shoulder, carefully avoiding his chest wound. “Whoever woulda thought how blessed I'd be one week from when the brother I never knew about introduced himself by crashin' through my wall after the aunt I never knew about shot him?”

She shifted her gaze to the floor. “An aunt who now wants me dead.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Ethan helped April to her room, then returned to the living room and laid his head back on the sofa to wait for his parents to return. When they walked through the front door, he filled them in.

“Good gravy,” Mom said. “How can one woman be so full of evil?”

“It isn’t just Brittany, Mom. Gordon suggested that the attorney April originally spoke with had an affair with Sarah’s husband. She, Brittany, and Sinclair tried to make it so Sarah could neither locate her children or leave them an inheritance.”

Mom leaned forward, her forehead scrunched up. “That tramp probably made a deal with the other attorney—Olivia, I think it was—to give her a big share of the estate.”

“That makes sense. Fortunately, Sarah was too cunning for them.”

“You’ll accompany her to Scotland, right?” Mom’s expression made it look more like a demand than a question.

Dad looked skeptical. “How’s that fit in with your career, son? And what about the time you need to recover?”

Ethan considered how to break it to his folks that his priorities had shifted. “April and I have a spiritual connection that comes along once in a lifetime. That needs to take priority over my professional aspirations.”

Mom clapped her hands together in delight. “I knew it.” She patted Dad’s leg. “Didn’t I tell you us being called to April’s house that night was a God thing?”

Dad nodded, but he didn’t seem as thrilled. “Son, you’re not giving up on your career, are you? You have to be true to yourself. You’ll end up resenting her if you don’t.”

“I’m not giving up anything. I’ll call my boss later to let him know what happened. During my prayer time with April today—”

Mom gasped and grabbed Dad’s leg. “They prayed together.” She wore a wide grin.

Dad clasped her hand. “Let him finish.”

“During our prayer time, I came to understand that I don’t need to sacrifice my personal life to impress Dr. Franklin. He wouldn’t have hired me if he weren’t already impressed. My career, while still a high priority, comes after my relationship with April.”

“And your relationship with God comes before her, right?” Dad lifted an eyebrow and waited for a response.

“Absolutely. Dr. Franklin will want me to take time off to heal. Before I met April, I may not have done it, but everything is different now. I believe he’ll understand why I need to go to Scotland with April.”

Dad’s expression remained troubled. “It’s not for the money, is it?”

“No. In fact, I won’t accept a penny from her.”

Dad nodded several times, blew out a deep breath, and the knots in his eyebrows eased. “Then let’s get Sheriff Nelson over here to talk this out.”

APRIL MADE a big deal out of going home on Monday. In keeping with the plan she'd agreed to with Sheriff Nelson, Deputy Gleason and his K-9, Rocco, came to her house late the night before.

With the sheriff's help, Gleason and his Malinois took up residence in the storm shelter behind April's electric fireplace. Before leaving, the sheriff helped the deputy sweep the house for listening devices, then they'd both driven away in their sheriff's department SUVs. The deputy parked a mile away and snuck into the house from the back.

They'd found a bug in April's coat pocket at the hospital. That's how Brittany knew where April was at all times. The woman had blown it when she drove up beside April and Ethan and repeated words Lisa had said inside the house. That prompted April to ask the sheriff to check her clothes and her house. They found a device in her bedroom and another in the kitchen.

Monday afternoon, April opened all the curtains to trumpet her arrival home. When she wasn't resting for her recovery, she walked by windows to ensure anyone watching the house would see her. The deputy and his dog stayed in the storm shelter with the door ajar so they'd get fresh air, but they avoided speaking. As sneaky as Brittany had been, they didn't want to risk Brittany hearing anyone but April in the house.

Ethan called as April closed the curtains for the night, still leaving all the lights on.

"I've spoken to my boss," he said. "As soon as I mentioned that I'd been shot, he insisted that I take next week off before I could even ask for it. I also mentioned your plan to go to Scotland, and he was even more adamant that I accompany you."

"That's fantastic."

“How are things there?”

“Quiet.” Her gaze flitted to the deputy, who was reading in the storm shelter. She bit her lip, considering whether to speak her mind. Gathering her courage, she said, “There’s something I wanna look into.”

She moved to her bedroom and shut the door so Deputy Gleason wouldn’t overhear. “My dad used to go to a special place when he was stressed. It’s a meadow deep in the woods, and he regularly went there to practice his shootin’. He took me there as a kid, but I lost interest. I wanna see if he maybe ... you know ... he had an accident or something there.”

“I don’t blame you for wanting to find your father, but ...”

“I could take the deputy and his dog with me and have them hide in the woods. You could come too.”

“Or you could send the K-9 unit and let the dog find out if your dad’s remains are there. That would be safer.”

“I wasn’t asking for permission. I’m goin’. I need closure, and I think I’ll find it by seeing my dad’s special place with my own eyes.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

APRIL SENT the deputy off before dawn the next morning. She’d agreed to wait for Ethan, and they wouldn’t leave the house for an hour to give the deputy and the sheriff time to get set up and search the area.

When the time came, Ethan ushered April to a Smythe Family Construction pickup. He opened the door for her but then turned to block her from entering.

“There’s something we need to take care of before we get into any more trouble.” He leaned down and gave her a kiss like

none other she'd ever received. Her spirit sang, and fireworks went off inside her.

"Wow, that was awesome," she whispered while slipping onto the passenger seat, noting a rifle and a handgun in the back. "I see you expect trouble."

"Just thinking ahead."

Five miles down the freeway, April glanced in the side mirror and noted a blue SUV six cars behind them. Dread filled her. "Ethan, I think Brittany's behind us." Her chest wound suddenly burned; her breathing quickened.

Ethan tapped the phone icon on his steering wheel and instructed the voice to call Deputy Gleason.

"We're all set up and looking around." The deputy's voice sounded strained. "I have something to show you when you get here."

"We're at our turnoff." Ethan signaled with his blinker, causing April's anxiety to ratchet up.

She leaned her head back and tried to slow her breathing. "I don't know if I can do this."

Ethan reached over and grasped her hand but shifted his gaze between the road and the rearview. She blew a slow stream of air through her lips.

"The blue SUV followed." How could Ethan remain so calm? April concluded it must have been his medical training.

"Be careful," the deputy said. "Rocco and I are at the east end of the meadow. The sheriff and another deputy are behind the trees where y'all will park. Stay hidden."

April directed Ethan to the dirt road leading into the woods. "There's the meadow," she said.

"I see you," the deputy said. "There's a spot to park in about a hundred yards."

Ethan navigated to the spot and stopped. "Okay, we're there, but I don't see any of you."

“That’s the idea. We’re near you.”

“I’m moving you to my handset.” Ethan stopped the vehicle and blew air between his lips before opening his door.

April stepped out of the pickup and tried to focus more on the familiar sights and earthy scents from when her father brought her for shooting practice as a child. Ethan stepped up beside her, giving her a sense of his protective presence. The feeling of safety disappeared when she heard the crunch of tires on the road.

“She’s here.” Ethan grabbed April’s hand and took cover under a tree near the meadow. The deputy said something April couldn’t make out. “Will do.” Ethan disconnected the call. “He wants us to lie low.”

A glance toward the center of the meadow sent April’s heart into overdrive. She stared at the portable target stand she’d helped her dad load into his trunk hundreds of times. It was weathered and splintered, but it bore remnants of the unmistakable red lettering she’d helped her father apply when she was young. To anyone else, the words were unreadable from this distance, but she recognized the shape of her father’s first and last names.

She took a single step toward the target stand but stopped dead in her tracks when a gunshot sounded. There was an explosion of men yelling, a dog’s aggressive barking, and a woman’s scream. Ethan tightened his grip on April’s hand and pulled her back into the cover of the trees.

“They’ve got her. That’s my dad’s. He always put it away in the trunk of his car after target practice.”

“The deputy hasn’t said it’s safe for us to move.” Ethan dialed the deputy’s number. “April thinks she sees her father’s target stand in the middle of the meadow.” He listened for a few seconds, then slowly lifted his eyes toward the target. “He says he saw it, and he’ll meet us there.”

April ran to the target, getting dizzy from the exertion. Her lungs burned. "They told me not to overdo it, but I think I just overdid it." Ethan wrapped his arms around her while her tears flowed.

"That your dad's?" The deputy's voice startled April. "Yes." She ran a finger along the red lettering. "I helped him put his name on it."

"There's something else I need to show you." The deputy stepped away, his voice low and compassionate. "Come with me."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Ethan embraced a sobbing April while she hid her eyes from a blue tarp surrounded by yellow crime scene tape. He nudged her away, and she clasped onto his arm as they walked back to the vehicles with Deputy Gleason and Sheriff Nelson. At the deputy's SUV, she stopped and glared at Brittany in the back.

Brittany pinned April with a scowl, yelling through the slightly lowered window that allowed fresh air to get to the prisoner. "You did nothing to deserve that inheritance!" Brittany tapped her own chest. "I served Sarah and Sinclair and put up with their ways all of these years."

He felt April tremble and reply. "You killed your own sister. From what I've read, she's the one who supported you through your antics. And you tried to kill Ethan and me. For what? Money?"

Brittany rolled her eyes. "That money is mine. Sinclair wanted me to have it. He loved me."

Ethan tightened his grip on April, who seemed to want to launch at Brittany. "You killed my mother and my brother. Did you kill my father, too?"

Brittany laughed, then shouted obscenities.

“Well, it was all for nothing.” April straightened under Ethan’s arm.

Brittany continued shouting obscenities as the deputy put Rocco into his crate and slipped in behind the steering wheel. Brittany turned her wrath toward Gleason, her voice echoing through the trees. He shook his head and powered down his window when the sheriff tapped on it. They exchanged words, then Gleason drove away while the sheriff stepped up beside April.

“That back there is my dad’s remains, isn’t it?” A groove slashed across April’s forehead. Her eyes glistened, and her bottom lip quivered.

The sheriff’s expression softened. “We don’t know that yet. There’s a set of remains and items that you’ll need to identify once the crime techs get through with the scene. They might need dental records.”

“I’ll arrange for that.” April kicked a rock with the toe of her boot. “Did he ...” She held her finger to her temple. “Do it to himself?”

“The crime techs will figure out the manner and cause of death.”

“What’s that mean?”

“The manner of death will determine if it was homicide, suicide, or an accident. The cause of death is what killed him. But we don’t know if this is your dad yet.”

“How’d you find the remains?” April let her head collapse to Ethan’s shoulder.

“Rocco.” The sheriff gestured toward the disappearing SUV with a tight smile. “We don’t have a big budget, so we needed a K-9 with multiple skills. He’s in training not only to take down criminals like Brittany, but also to sniff out remains and various substances.”

"I'm glad you have him. When do I go identify the stuff you told me about?"

"I'll call you when it's time. Shouldn't be long. In the meantime, go home. You're safe now."

She shared a brief hug with the sheriff, then turned to drape her arm around Ethan's waist, swelling his heart with love. They walked down the dirt lane toward the pickup. As the sheriff drove away, Ethan's insides relaxed for the first time since all this happened. He opened the door of his pickup for April. Her fruity scent made his breath catch in his throat.

Instead of climbing in, she turned and looked up at him, her brilliant blue eyes still filled with emotion. It looked like something had changed. A softness had replaced her anguished look of moments ago. "Thank you for all you've done for me."

"We aren't finished yet. We need to go to your house and buy those tickets to Scotland."

"I don't have the money yet."

"I can front you the ticket money, and I'll pay for my own."

She stepped closer, her body brushing against his. His heart raced with the anticipation of a toe-curling kiss. Her lips, soft and inviting, touched his, and all the worries of the past week melted away. His knees weakened, and he wanted to stay in this moment forever. Her hands wrapped around his neck, her fingers playing with the hair at the nape. Time seemed to stand still, and neither was in a hurry to move away.

Finally, reluctantly, Ethan pulled back, the sweet taste of April's lip balm lingering. He helped her into the pickup and closed the door, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He walked around and got into the driver's seat, feeling the warmth of her presence beside him.

They drove in comfortable silence until he pulled up at her house. He turned to her, and the emotion in her eyes made him feel like he was the most blessed man alive. She leaned in and

kissed him again, a gentle peck before she hopped out and hurried to her door. He rushed to catch up.

APRIL ANSWERED the sheriff's phone call the Wednesday after Christmas.

"Thanks for arranging for your father's dental records to be sent over. I'm sorry to inform you the remains we found are your father."

Despite expecting this news, April's knees gave out. She fell to the sofa and found it impossible to speak without sobbing.

"Would you be able to drop by to identify a ring and a gun found with your father?"

"Yes." The word squeaked out. "Now?"

"I'll be waiting."

April ended the call and buried her face in the pillow. Dad hadn't abandoned her. She'd spent six months with anger boiling through her, and he'd been dead all that time. Now that there was proof he'd died, she could sell the house. But did she want to? Her mind felt muddled. She thought of the conversation she'd had with Ethan about buying a property outside of town.

Maybe she could use this house to help others who had experienced what she had. She'd discuss it with Ethan.

He'd offered to go with her to identify her father's belongings, but this was something she needed to do on her own. She was no longer the wilting flower from a week ago. Everything in her life had changed in the span of a week—the snap of a finger, really.

She pushed herself from the couch and slipped on her coat. She'd place an ad to sell Mom's car. Right after Mom's death,

she'd spent time inside the vehicle inhaling her mother's scent, but the interior didn't smell like Mom anymore. It was time to let it go.

She drove to the sheriff's red-brick building, greeting Sheriff Nelson at the door.

"This way." He led her to his office.

"I'm glad we don't have to go to the morgue for this. I dreaded that."

He smiled and gestured for her to sit in a worn guest chair across from his metal desk.

She stared at two plastic evidence bags angled beside the sheriff's keyboard. He handed her the top one. The sight forced her to grab a lung-filling inhale. "It looks like his wedding ring."

"There's an inscription on the inside." The plastic crinkled as he flipped the ring inside the bag to show her the inscription.

Forever and always, W & R 2001.

"Yes, that's his. The initials stand for Will and Rhonda. They were married in 2001, right after high school." She shivered with a tattered breath.

The sheriff set down the bag and picked up the second one, containing a pistol. "Would you recognize his gun?"

She nodded. "He had a special grip made for it." She pointed to it. "It was supposed to reduce recoil. He thought I'd go shooting with him more if he put that on there."

"Did he ever sell it?"

"No. It was his favorite. I imagine it's registered in his name."

"Yes, but I wanted to confirm that he still owned it."

She wanted to put her head on his desk and take a week-long nap. "Have you determined the manner of death yet?"

"The bullet recovered at the scene came from the same gun that shot you and that Brittany had in her possession when we arrested her."

“So, Dad was murdered?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

Her insides shrank in on themselves. “I don’t understand why she had to kill him.”

The months that she’d struggled to understand why her father had abandoned her to deal with her mother’s death and the bills that had accumulated seemed to crash down on her. At that moment, she realized that the pain of that had been too much to bear, so she’d put off even looking for him. It was just one more thing for her to deal with, and she wasn’t up to it. But now, as she looked into the compassionate blue eyes of the sheriff, she accepted that her father had not left of his own accord. She couldn’t stop the tears she’d been holding in for far too long; they streamed down her face.

The sheriff handed her a tissue, then touched her hand in the same fatherly way Dad used to. “I’m sorry for your loss. We still have to connect some dots, but Brittany won’t be bothering you again. She hasn’t confessed to murdering him, but she said she was glad he died because she thought it would make it easier to get to you. The Smythe family ruined that for her.”

A smile twitched. “I’m glad of that.” She stood. “Thank you, Sheriff.” With a heavy sigh that belied the strange mix of relief and anguish that swirled through her, she walked toward the exit.

TWO MONTHS **Later**

April stood beside Ethan, her hand in his as she stared at her parents’ gravestones. The sun shone, but a chill engulfed her heart. She dabbed at the tears collecting on her lashes.

Taking a deep breath, she whispered, “Goodbye, Mom and

Dad. I wish you'd been here to meet Ethan. He's a really sweet guy. I think you'd approve."

She turned to Ethan, "It's been so hard." She worked to keep her voice from shaking.

She continued speaking to her parents. "I wish you had told me I was adopted so I could feel more at home in my own skin. But it's okay. You thought you were doing the right thing in keeping that from me, and I forgive you for it. It must have been hard for you to keep that secret, especially with me so self-conscious about my red hair and freckles."

She knelt down and stroked the marble curve of her father's headstone. "Dad, I'm so sorry. I thought you had abandoned me. So much had happened, and it was easier to be angry at you than to face the truth that you wouldn't have done that to me. An evil person took you away from me right when we needed each other the most. Please forgive me for being too cowardly to search for you. I think I knew all along but couldn't face it. I love you both. I'm going to find a way to help others who are going through what we did."

She closed her eyes and took a few moments to say her last goodbye. She stood up, wiped her tears, and cuddled into Ethan's strong arms. "Let's go to Scotland."

TWENTY-NINE

Ethan was tired when he and April arrived at the Glasgow airport, exhausted from their long flight but excited at the same time. The airport was bustling with travelers from all over the world, and Ethan could feel the anticipation in the air. April had her head down, her grip on her bag tight, as they made their way to customs.

“We’re almost through.” April handed the customs agent her passport.

“Good thing, too. I’m starved.” Ethan rubbed his stomach and smiled at the customs agent while handing over his identification.

The agent asked if they had anything to declare and what was their purpose for visiting Scotland.

“I’m going to learn to ski,” April said.

“February’s a good month for it,” the agent said in a thick Scottish brogue.

Once they cleared their bags, they exited through automatic glass doors, headed down an escalator, and looked for the person who solicitor Gordon MacIver said he’d send to meet

them. He spotted a hand-written sign with April's name on it and gestured toward it.

"Our ride." He nodded at the uniformed driver wearing a black suit, a white dress shirt, and a bright blue tie. The look was topped with a charcoal-colored overcoat, polished dress shoes, and a touch of elegance with silver buttons and a pocket square that matched his tie.

The driver stepped up to April. "Miss Carlston?"

April was all smiles. "Yes, that's me."

"I'm Finlay, your chauffeur for the duration of your time in Scotland."

The temperature outside was a warm forty-five degrees. "We may not get to go skiing," Ethan said.

"Yes, there's plenty of snow," Finlay said. "I've made reservations for you. Two rooms, right?"

"Right."

As the driver loaded their bags into the back of the limo, April turned to Ethan and smiled. "This is it." She looked pale; her voice sounded heavy with emotion.

Ethan nodded, taking her hand in his. He gave it a gentle squeeze, offering her a silent reassurance. "We're almost there. Then we can go out for a relaxing supper tonight and learn how to ski tomorrow."

They rode in silence for the first few miles through the busy streets of Glasgow. Tall buildings rose up to meet the overcast sky.

April pointed out the window. "There's the Glasgow Cathedral. Remember, we said we wanted to see it when we planned our trip?"

His heart lit up with her excitement at the sights around them. He held her hand, barely able to take his eyes off of her. "It's even more beautiful than the pictures."

"In spite of what we're here for, I'm so glad we get to expe-

rience Glasgow together.” Her voice was soft and sweet. She leaned over to kiss him tenderly. For a few moments, the world around them melted away until Finlay brought the limo to a stop.

April looked around and gasped in wonder, taking in the sights through the open window. “Wow, there’s the River Clyde. Thanks for insisting we study this stuff so we would recognize it when we got here.”

Finlay stopped at a tall traditional Victorian building made of red sandstone bricks, set on a slight hill, with four levels and a distinctive turret soaring at the top of the building. The high, arched windows and the grand entrance with four tall stone columns reminded Ethan of the movies he’d seen that were set in Scotland.

April stroked Ethan’s shoulder. “I’m so scared.” Her fingers bit into his forearm, tension evident in her voice.

He tried to sound less flustered than he felt. “I’m here.”

Finlay opened the door for them, and they stepped out into the comfortable sunshine. Ethan wasn’t sure why he felt as if his heart had plummeted to his stomach, other than knowing that’s how April must have felt.

“I’ll wait for you here,” Finlay said.

The pair slowly made their way up the steps to the office, apprehension filling the air around them. As they reached the front door, Ethan stopped and turned to April. “You okay?”

“Right as rain.” Her tight smile said otherwise.

He held her hand as they climbed a flight of stairs, stepping into the building’s entryway. April’s deep breath suggested she was trying to steady herself before walking through the door that would forever change her life.

They marched into the attorney’s office, an impressive space equipped with dark, polished wooden furniture, the air rife with the smell of leather and coffee. A glass cabinet full of

parchment paper and aged books held court in the corner of the room, adding to the atmosphere of refinement that the space exuded.

A young receptionist with a chic hairstyle that ended at her jawline greeted them with a smile, then requested they take a seat while she notified the solicitor of their arrival.

Solicitor Gordon MacIver strode down a hallway toward them minutes later. A friendly fifty-something man wearing a dark suit, red striped tie, and shiny shoes, welcomed them with a warm handshake. He spoke in a pleasant, comforting tone.

“So pleased to meet you both,” Gordon said. “Please follow me.”

He led them to a plush office and suggested they sit together on a leather loveseat. He sat across from them, separated by a coffee table holding several legal documents. “I trust you brought the items Sarah left for you?”

April opened her handbag and pulled out the manila envelope that would secure her future. She let out a long sigh as her emotions seemed to settle with the act of handing the items to Gordon. The attorney looked over the documents, then smiled at April. “Everything seems to be in order.”

APRIL LISTENED in pensive silence as Gordon described her biological mother. Tears threatened to well up in her eyes as if she'd known Sarah all her life.

“Sarah Aikman was a remarkable woman,” the attorney said. “We became close friends after her husband died. She lived a quiet life and never gave up trying to find you and your brother.”

He shuffled through documents and cleared his throat. “Before she married Sinclair Aikman, Sarah had been a

successful literary agent and bestselling author. April, I believe that's how she met your father, at a writer's meetup in Ireland. Her husband forced her to stop working when she became pregnant, and he kept close tabs on her after that. She was extremely wealthy."

"May I see where she lived?"

Gordon nodded with a smile. "I've arranged for Finlay to take us there today." He handed April a stack of papers. "Please read this on the trip there. If you have any questions or concerns, I'll be happy to explain. Once you've signed these papers, I'll file them with the court, and the estate will be yours."

"What happened to the other attorney? Olivia MacLeod?"

"She claimed to be unaware of Sarah's new will until Brittany approached her asking to contest it. Brittany acted on her own when she traveled to America."

"Do you believe her?"

"Yes. Sarah and I made sure neither she nor Brittany knew of the will." Gordon pursed his lips and shook his head. "Ms. MacLeod is tainted, though. I hear her business is suffering."

AN HOUR LATER, April stood in a daze in front of a mansion nestled in the rolling hills of the Scottish Highlands. It seemed surreal that this grand and intimidating place belonged to her. Tall evergreen trees lined the long gravel entrance road. The house, if you could call it that, was a two-story stone building lined with tall mullioned windows and crenelated turrets that seemed to reach the sky. Ivy-covered walls snuggled up to the side of the building, with two towers standing high on the horizon. Manicured hedges and rimmed topiaries, brown in the winter months, interrupted the sprawling lawn. April imag-

ined the place looked like an emerald kingdom in the summer, with fields of purple heather in the distance.

While Finlay waited with the car, Gordon led them to a set of wooden double doors adorned with intricate Celtic carvings. Large glass windows stood to the right of the entrance. Gordon unlocked it and waited for April and Ethan to step inside before handing her the keys.

April ventured into a bright and awe-inspiring foyer. Gilded paintings hung above two marble staircases leading to the upper floors of the manor, while large chandeliers cast a warm light on the polished wood flooring. On one side, red tapestries lined a long corridor. Gordon led them down the hallway to a chamber at the end, where a tall wooden door featured a hand-tooled brass symbol.

“You read the papers during the ride?” Gordon awaited her response with raised eyebrows and a genuine smile.

“Yes. Ethan and I have both read them, and I’m ready to sign. But I want to see the rest of the house first.”

AFTER DROPPING Gordon back at his office, Finlay took April and Ethan to an upscale restaurant in Glasgow.

“This restaurant offers innovative cuisine made from fresh, local, and seasonal ingredients,” Finlay explained. “Mr. MacIver thought you might enjoy the modern British dishes with a few classic French touches. The atmosphere is sophisticated, and the food is beautifully presented. I’ll wait for you outside and then take you to the ski resort.”

April entered the dimly lit restaurant with muted grey walls dotted with vibrant artworks by Scottish artists. Greenery around the dining room gave the area a cheerful atmosphere. The scents of various meats, vegetables, and other smells that

April couldn't identify mingled with the aroma of what she assumed were Scottish ales.

Ethan ran a hand along a wooden chair. "Tartan patterns."

Soft music played in the background as April followed the hostess to a corner table.

Once seated, Ethan leaned toward her. "Are you ready for a new kind of life where experiences like this are common for you?"

She saw the question in Ethan's eyes. "I can't do this without you, you know."

He gently grasped her fingers and kissed the top of her hand. "It would be my honor to spend the rest of my life with you if you'll have me."

"Was that a proposal?"

"I guess it was, but I'll give you a proper one when the time is right. I want to sign a prenup because I don't want you thinking I'm doing this for the money. Also, do you want to move to Scotland or Oklahoma City, or would you prefer to stay closer to home?"

"A prenup is no way to start a marriage. It doesn't matter where I live, so long as you're there. But I'm not a city girl. I'm partial to you buying that medical practice closer to home and us buying the acreage we discussed when we met for coffee at Grinders. Also, I want to see everything I've inherited here in Scotland, but I think I'd like to convert the mansion into a place where cancer patients can recover, or a place for their families to stay while their loved ones get treatment."

He swallowed hard and squeezed her fingers. "That's a beautiful way to honor both of your mothers. I'm glad you want to stay close to home. I've checked into the medical practice, and I think it's doable for me. We should stay close to my family. Our family. Will you run the medical practice with me?"

“Of course. I want to get my degree, but I can do that close to home. My sights were set on Oklahoma City because that’s where my friends went. They aren’t there anymore. At the coffee shop when we first met, you said you wanted acreage with a nice house, a guest house, two dogs, and a horse. That sounds perfect.”

“And kids? Do you want kids?”

She answered with a soft smile and a squeeze to his arm. “Yes. But not five kids like your parents had.”

“Definitely not five. In terms of my money, let’s just figure that out as we go and enjoy our Scotland vacation for now. Also, let’s keep our life simple and not spoil our children.”

“Agreed.”

She leaned back and sighed, staring at Ethan and anticipating the kind of future she’d never dared to dream for herself.

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Many blessings to you!

Karen

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