



Clashing Moon

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: Two rivals. One snowstorm. An unexpected spark.

Arabella

Returning to Bluefern to care for my father wasn't part of my plan. But here I am, doing my best as the town's new vet and trying to avoid Rafferty Moon, the one person who knows exactly how to get under my skin. We were high school rivals through and through, constantly competing to be the best. Now he's the town doctor, and it feels like no time has passed—as if the years haven't erased the tension that crackles every time we're in the same room. But when a snowstorm traps us together, I start to see a different side of him, one that I can't ignore. Maybe he's not just my old rival; maybe there's more to him than I ever allowed myself to see.

Rafferty

Arabella Collins. The name alone still stirs something up inside me, something sharp and undeniable. High school was a battlefield, and she was my biggest competition. Now she's back, all fire and determination, caring for her father and running her vet practice, and somehow, we're right back to butting heads. But as we're forced together by circumstances neither of us can control, I begin to wonder if there's more to her than I thought—more than the smart, ambitious girl I used to try to outdo. I start to see her warmth, her resilience, and suddenly, I want more than just a fleeting spark.

Clashing Moon by Tess Thompson, USA Today Bestselling Author, is a heartwarming story about letting go of old rivalries to discover a love worth fighting for.

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ARABELLA

My father claimed Montana doesn't care about the men or women who try to tame her. We're on our own under the big sky. It was up to an individual to find the grit with which to survive. During a season of harsh midwinter months, February was the cruelest of all. Short days gave way to dark evenings so quickly that one often felt they were living through one endless night.

On just such a morning, I trudged outside and headed across the yard to collect logs for a fire. Cold air stung my cheeks. My fingers numbed despite my gloves. The temperatures had dipped into the teens while I slept, freezing the fallen snow so that it crunched under my boots. I hated early mornings. Collecting wood before I'd had my coffee seemed like an unfair punishment. Regardless, we needed a fire. The furnace was out. Again.

Our farmhouse stood at the end of a forgotten driveway, surrounded by rolling hills that stretched as far as the eye could see. Tire tracks from a recent vehicle had left dark, muddy ruts in the driveway, quickly freezing over as the temperature dropped further. The sky presented as a cool bluish hue. Shadows, long and delicate, stretched across the ground in soft, blurry lines that brought a quiet serenity, a stillness that made the world feel frozen in time. Or perhaps it was only me frozen here in time, living the life meant for someone else.

I sniffed the air, which smelled slightly of woodsmoke from a neighboring ranch. But it held the promise of a storm, too. That pregnant feeling of something pent up,

wishing for release, permeated the atmosphere. The forecast had added a winter advisory, predicting a blizzard would roll in this afternoon. I had a feeling it would be earlier than they thought. Snow would fall in the next hour. I'd grown up here. I didn't need a weather report or app to predict a blizzard.

This kind of weather inevitably made me think of my mother. I'd been three years old when she disappeared on a February morning, never to return. I'd been too young to remember that day, but it seemed as if I did. I could imagine the way her taillights looked in the dark as she barreled down the driveway, away from a chilly, run-down ranch house and the man she'd married. Had it been the frigid weather and the stark, lonely landscape that had driven her away? If so, who could blame her? Leaving during this unforgiving time of year and my cruel father might have been an act of survival.

If only she'd thought to take her three-year-old daughter with her. Instead, she'd left me in the care of a man with ice in his veins.

I let out a slow breath, watching as it mingled with the frigid air before disappearing into the stillness. There was a harsh, raw beauty to my family's land. Yet, as a child, I'd been desperate to leave. I'd worked hard in school, graduated top of my class, and headed off to college with a scholarship that guaranteed my father couldn't ruin my chances of the future I envisioned. Yet here I was, all these years later, pulled back to the place of my roots as if my plans hadn't mattered at all.

My father was sick. Dementia had robbed him of his reasoning and added a violent unpredictability to his cruel nature. I was all he had left—his only child. Thus, I'd come home.

He'd been diagnosed with dementia during my last year at veterinary school. In combination with my debt from school and my father's struggling ranch, there had been no choice for either of us except for me to move home and take care of him.

Doing so would have been hard enough, but combining my home duties with starting a practice made it nearly impossible. All of which made me feel as old and grizzled as the man in my care.

I've often heard that making plans for one's life led to God's laughter. I'd always thought it was an odd and inaccurate saying, as the divine creator of my faith was not the type to mock those of us who tried our best to make the most of the lives we're given here on earth. However, a case could be made that God didn't want me to have dared to dream of a life outside of Bluefern and the cruel tongue of my dear old dad.

When I reached the shed, I pushed open the creaky door, hinges groaning in protest as the scents of old wood and earth filled my nose. Stacks of split logs lined the wall—enough to get us through another few months. We bought our wood these days, but when I was a kid, my father had cut and chopped trees from our land. It was not only his mind that had been robbed of strength. The toll of decades of physically hard labor had weakened his body. He was an old man now. Not the robust man of my youth.

I filled our wheelbarrow with wood and headed back outside, crossing the yard to the house where my father would soon want his breakfast. If I didn't have a fire going by the time he got up, there would be trouble.

Regardless, for a moment, I hesitated in the stillness of the morning, taking in the familiar scene. Pine trees to the west stood tall and dark against the pale sky, their branches heavy with snow, while the distant mountains with sharp and brilliant white peaks gleamed dully in the overcast light. Pastures lay dormant under a white blanket, tufts of dead grass that managed to pierce through the surface brittle and brown. Here and there, the tops of hardy sagebrush poked through the snow, their green-gray leaves dusted with frost. The creek bed was now a ribbon of ice, snaking through the property with patches of snow-covered stones marking its path. Cottonwoods that grew along its banks were skeletal, with bare branches reaching out like bony fingers.

A gust of wind sent a flurry of snow dancing across the pasture toward the remnants of the old corral and barn, reminders of a heartier time in the history of my family's ranch.

Fortunately, I'd been able to sell off what was left of my father's cattle to a young rancher down the road. We no longer had horses or chickens, leaving only the rickety farmhouse to manage. Still, between starting a veterinary practice and taking care of my father, I felt walloped and defeated.

I turned back toward the house, pushing the wheelbarrow through the snow as best I could. Our farmhouse huddled against the bitter cold, its weathered exterior barely visible beneath a thin layer of snow that had settled overnight. Icicles clung to the rafters and gutters, catching what little light filtered through the clouds.

My father appeared on the back porch, wearing his flannel pajamas and shouting for me. "Pudge, get in here and make my breakfast."

I sighed and headed his way.

Our kitchen wasn't cold enough to see my breath, but it wasn't far off. I'd woken to a frigid house, only to discover my furnace had gone out. I'd already put a call in to Dick, our heating and air guy in town, but no one had answered at his office. I'd left a message asking if he could come out as soon as possible. God only knew how much his bill would be. I just hoped he could repair it instead of telling me I needed a new one.

"Pudge, what is this?"

Pudge. My father's nickname for me because I'd been overweight as a child. Children at school had been equally unkind, bullying me about my weight and coming up with other names. Fatso. Whale. Fatty. When I'd gone away to college on

that well-earned scholarship, I'd vowed to return only when I'd shed the extra thirty or so pounds that had clung to my person since I was a child. I'd kept that promise to myself.

Strangely enough, losing the weight hadn't fixed all my troubles as I'd thought it would. Ghosts from the past were not so easily dismissed. As it turns out, they continued to haunt me even when the mirror told me otherwise. If bullies knew how lasting their words were, would it make them more or less likely to continue lambasting their victims? I suspected knowing how much influence they'd had on my self-esteem would give them endless delight.

I looked up from frying a pan of potatoes to see my father sitting at the table with both hands clenched into fists.

"What's wrong with it?" I'd made him a bowl of fruit, with slices of bananas, apples, and cantaloupe, hoping to get a few servings in him before I gave him his eggs and potatoes.

He pounded his fists against the tabletop, causing me to flinch. "I wouldn't feed this to a hog. It's rotten. Maybe full of worms for all I know." His face scrunched into a scowl. "Or E. coli."

I stifled a sigh and set aside my spatula. Dementia had made a mean old man meaner as well as paranoid. He often accused me of trying to poison him.

It was early in the morning, and I had a full day of rounds ahead of me. Time off for a small-town veterinarian in a ranching community didn't come easily. Although it was not yet eight in the morning, I felt weary. The kind of tired that seemed to have permanently seeped into my bones. Fatigue that a woman in her early thirties should not feel. At school, I'd been vibrant and quick and full of plans for my future. That person seemed like someone else. Not me. And my tired bones.

I quickly put on a pot of coffee. My father liked his as thick and dark as oil, without cream or sugar. While it brewed, I turned on a burner, placed our cast-iron skillet on it to warm, and popped a piece of bread into the toaster.

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“You need to build a fire,” Dad said. “It’s freezing in here.”

“The furnace is busted. I already called Ralph.” I’d already told him this once that morning.

“Who’s Ralph?”

Ralph was one of my father’s friend’s sons. He’d known him since he was a baby.

“You know Ralph. Billy’s son. He took over Billy’s air and heating business, remember?”

“Billy, sure. When did he have a kid? He was always running around with one woman or the other. Must’ve gotten one knocked up, huh?” Dad pulled on the straps of his denim overalls. I’d managed to get him to change out of his pajamas before he came into the kitchen for breakfast, but they weren’t much better. Those overalls had seen many winters and had patches in various places. I couldn’t convince him to get rid of them and let me buy him a new pair.

“Ralph’s my age. We were the same year in high school. He was our quarterback, remember?” Ralph, athletic and nice-looking, had been part of the popular crowd, which I was most certainly not. Dad used to enjoy the high school football games back in the day. I’d never cared much about them, preferring to stay at home and read on a Friday night rather than face the humiliation of yet another high school experience.

I cracked two eggs into the skillet. They immediately started to crackle and pop.

“Do you want me to get you a sweater?” Although Dad wore a flannel shirt under the overalls, I worried he’d grown chilled. Once the cold had seeped into one’s bones, it was hard to recover, especially in a house without a heater. With or without dementia, Dad seemed to have less tolerance for the cold.

“Nope. I’m fine. Takes more than a little winter chill to take me out. I ain’t like you, young folks. All of you marshmallows. Why’s my breakfast taking so long?”

In response, the eggs snapped and sizzled in the pan.

It was ridiculous to make such a big meal every morning, but that was something in my father’s routine that had not changed. He insisted on a big breakfast. Which meant I had to make it and clean up all the mess afterward. I’d have had a cup of coffee and a piece of toast if it were up to me.

For a moment, I thought longingly of my time in the city before I’d moved home. I’d worked at a veterinary clinic after graduation that had been next door to a coffee shop. My coworkers and I had enjoyed lattes and moist muffins most mornings. I’d wanted to stay at the practice—the owners had offered me an opportunity to join as a junior partner. I would have said yes in a second if my father’s health hadn’t deteriorated so quickly.

“What were you doing outside this morning?” Dad asked. “Meeting with someone? Planning my incarceration in the funny farm?”

“No, just getting wood.” I flipped his eggs with the old metal spatula we’d had since I could remember. He liked his fried eggs cooked with a soft yolk so that he could use his toast to soak it all up. For the life of me, I could never get them quite right. They were either too runny or too hard.

“What for?” Dad asked.

“For the woodstove. The heater’s out.” I stifled a sigh.

“You were talking to someone out there. I heard voices.”

My father had gotten paranoid of late. He’d always been prone to suspicion, but with the onset of dementia, it had only gotten more pronounced. Almost every morning, he asked me if I planned to send him to the insane asylum—his words.

I always explained to him, as patiently as I could, that he was in no danger of being locked away.

“I saw that Rafferty Moon sniffing around here,” Dad said. “Just the other day.”

“He’s your doctor. He comes out to check on you from time to time.”

“That idiot’s a doctor?”

I reached for a mug from the cupboard and poured him a cup of steaming coffee, then set it in front of him. “You know he’s a doctor. I’m a vet. We’re all grown now.”

“He’s a dirty dog. One of those Moon boys. Always thinking they were better than the rest of us.”

“That’s not true.”

“Don’t back-talk me.” He banged his fist against the table at the same time the toast popped up, making it feel as if they were related.

The corner of one of my eyes twitched. I pressed my finger into it, wishing I were anywhere but here.

“The Moon boys don’t think they’re better than anyone else,” I said, except maybe Rafferty. His brothers had all been sweet and laid-back. Not Rafferty. He was like me. Ambitious and driven. One had to be slightly arrogant to decide to try for medical school. We’d known the odds of kids from a place like Bluefern making it all the way through. But we’d set our sights on our goals and not given up. As much as the man rankled me, I admired his spirit and drive. Perhaps because they were so similar to mine.

Rafferty and I went head-to-head academically from the time we were in kindergarten. We’d always tried to beat the other in whatever class we were in. Sometimes I won. Other times, he won. We were mere points apart for the role of valedictorian of our class. I’d ended up slightly ahead because he’d gotten an A-minus in an elective, and I’d never dipped below a 4.0. He’d been bitter ever since. I’m ashamed to say it brought a smile to my lips, remembering the look in his eyes when it was announced that I’d won.

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I set the plate in front of my father. He took one look at it and sent it flying across the room with a swift swipe of his hand. The plate shattered as it hit the floor. Runny yolk spilled out among the shards like blood from a stab wound.

“Why did you do that?” I asked, even though I knew there was no answer. Nothing that made logical sense that is. In his addled mind, he’d seen something wrong and taken it as a personal affront.

“You’re trying to poison me with those runny eggs. Is it too much to ask to get a cooked egg?”

“You like them like this. With a soft yolk. You have them this way every day.” At least, he had for all the years I’d known him. This was a first.

“I most certainly do not. Why do you lie to me all the time?” His mouth curved into a snarl. “Gaslighting. That’s what they call it, you know.” He’d not shaved for several days, and white hairs sprouted from his chin, giving him a grizzled appearance. If I’d seen him on the street, I might have thought he was homeless. He had that old man smell to him, too, refusing to shower when I asked him to, claiming he’d already done so. I knew better than to believe him. In his defense, he may have actually thought he had showered when, in fact, it had been days. Getting him into a bath or shower was nearly impossible.

“I’m not gaslighting you.” I was surprised he even knew the term. Most gaslighters of his generation didn’t know that’s what they were.

I knelt to retrieve the bits of broken plate and dumped them into the trash. At this

rate, I'd have to get a new set of dishes. They'd been my grandmother's. She'd brought them with her when she came to live with us. Before that, she'd lived in Bozeman with her sister. After my mother left, my dad had no choice but to invite her to live with us despite their contentious relationship. He'd had no idea what to do with a three-year-old.

My grandmother had died when I was eleven from a sudden heart attack. Only her dishes, the cast-iron skillet, and some of the ratty furniture in our house were left to remind us of the tough, mean woman who had come to Montana as a new bride. Marrying a rancher was not for the meek.

Some women couldn't take it and left after a time, like my mother. She'd met my father in high school and had gotten pregnant. I'm assuming, although I don't know much about her, she felt she had no other choice than to marry him. I had so many things I wish I could ask her. The biggest one—why had she left me with him instead of taking me with her. But I couldn't. She'd flown the coop, as my father said, and not returned to her nest. Loving me hadn't been enough to get her to stay. Or maybe she hadn't loved me at all. I'd never know. She had disappeared without a trace.

On my hands and knees, I wiped the floor with a damp towel. The mess soiled the knees of my jeans, which meant I'd have to change before I headed out to one of the local ranchers' properties to look at a sick cow. I'd promised to stop by on my way into town. My official office was just at the edge of town, but I reserved several mornings a week for the ranchers. Even though my bread and butter were folks' cats and dogs, serving the ranching community was important to me.

Before I knew what was happening, Dad had risen from his chair, and yanked me up by the collar of my sweater, and hurled me against a wall. My head slammed into the hard surface, and for a moment, I felt like one of those bobbleheads people get at sports events.

“You shut your mouth, Sally. Just shut it.”

Sally? My mother. This was a first.

“It’s me, Dad. Arabella.”

“You need to learn respect.” He raised his hand and brought it down hard across one of my cheeks. I yelped in pain.

With as much strength as I could muster, I pushed against his chest and wriggled out of his grasp. He’d grown so thin over the last year, often refusing to eat, that I could overpower him if I tried.

There had been a few days in the recent past that he hadn’t known who I was and thought I was trying to poison him. I’d come to dread mealtimes.

No sooner had I freed myself than he seemed to return to reality. He blinked and then backed away as if he’d come out of a trance. Over the last few months, we’d had more and more of these incidents. They grew closer together and more frequent as the weeks rolled by. What would I do when they’d taken over his mind completely? I had no earthly idea.

Rubbing the back of my head, grateful there was no blood, I stumbled over to stand by the sink and glanced out the window. A truck was coming up the driveway. Rafferty’s red truck. Of course, it was red. He always chose a power color. To prove a point? Or compensate? Who knew? Granted, is anyone else driving a red truck? It would just be a red truck. But with Rafferty, it annoyed me.

What was he doing here? We didn’t have an appointment. At least not that I remembered.

I gently placed my fingers against my sore cheek, hoping it would not bruise. The last time my father had pushed me, I'd landed on the back of a kitchen chair, which had left bruises on the backs of my thighs. They were easy to hide. A bruise on the face would be much harder to keep to myself.

I'd like to have said it was only the dementia that made my father violent enough to strike me, but it wasn't true. He'd knocked me around as a kid occasionally, especially after he'd been drinking. Nothing serious enough to break bones, but the times he'd shoved or slapped had left a mark on me just the same as had his cruel words. In that regard, not much had changed. I still could not predict when his rage would rise from wherever it resided and take possession of his soul.

I washed my hands and dried them on the towel next to the sink. Meanwhile, my dad had settled back at the table to drink his coffee and gobble down the untouched toast, which had been spared as if nothing had happened. In his mind, it might not have. The mysteriousness of his illness frustrated me, especially as a doctor, but there appeared to be nothing I could do as a scientist or a daughter.

I left Dad at the table and went out to greet Rafferty. He was climbing out of the driver's seat of his truck as I reached the bottom step of our rickety front porch. Everything needed mending, and I had no time to do any of it.

"Hey, sorry to come out so early," Rafferty said. "I'm on my way to take a look at the Morris's' new baby, and Mamasuggested I drop in for a visit on my way out there. How's your dad this morning?"

"About the same." Why had Stella sent him out here? Had it been that long since I'd been to church?

He drew closer, searching my face with inquisitive eyes. "What happened to your cheek? It's red."

I touched my fingertips to the spot on my face that still stung. My pop may have been old and confused, but he could still pack a punch. Or a slap in this case.

“Oh, nothing. It’s fine,” I said.

Rafferty nodded, but I could see he wasn’t buying it. “You want me to take a look at him?”

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I shrugged. “Sure. Since you’re here, it’ll save me a trip to your office. He’s gotten more and more obstinate about our appointments.”

“Let me grab my bag from the truck. Go on in. It’s cold out here.”

He was right. Even in my wool sweater, I was starting to shiver. “I’ll pour you a cup of coffee.”

“Appreciate it.”

I glanced up at the sky. Dense, dark gray, low-hanging clouds made the atmosphere feel even heavier and closer than it had earlier. The air felt eerily still, with no wind at all. “The calm before the storm” was a saying for a reason. No sooner had I thought this than a snowflake landed on my nose. Seconds later, snow began to fall in earnest.

I hustled back into the kitchen, debating if I should go on my planned ranch visits. I’d hate to get caught in the weather and leave Dad alone for too long.

Dad remained at the table, eating his toast, as docile as a lamb.

“Who’s here?” Dad asked.

“Dr. Moon. He was on his way out to see the Morris’ new baby and stopped by to check on you.”

“What for? Nothing wrong with me.”

I didn't say anything. Rafferty rapped on the door and then came inside, stomping his boots on the mat. "Morning, Mr. Collins."

My father merely grunted his greeting, watching Rafferty with a distrustful glare as if he'd never seen him before.

I poured Rafferty a cup of coffee and set it on the counter while he shrugged out of his heavy jacket. "Do you want cream or sugar?"

"No thanks. Black's fine," Rafferty said, taking the mug between two hands. "It's a cold one out there this morning. You staying warm enough?"

"Sure we are," Dad said. "Got enough wood in the shed to last me several months and a furnace when we need it."

While that was true, my father failed to mention that the heat in this old house only came on when it felt like it.

Had Rafferty noticed how cold the house felt? Even with the woodstove going in the other room, it felt chilled in the kitchen.

"Our furnace has been acting up," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rafferty said. "Seems they always go out right when you need them. You want me to take a look before I go? Pop taught me a few things about furnaces. No guarantee, but I can certainly try."

"It's better than waiting for Ralph. So yes, thank you." I doubted he'd know how to fix my furnace, but it was worth a try. Rafferty's father was well known in town for being a master at remodeling and flipping houses. "If you have time."

“I can spare a few minutes.”

“They’re saying a bad storm is coming this afternoon, but I think it’ll be here earlier than that,” Rafferty said. “I’m going to head back to town after I visit the Morrises and walk to the office.” Rafferty rented a house a few blocks from his medical practice. “You might think about getting home early, too.”

Why was he being so nice? Usually, our interactions were strained, with mutual contempt just below the surface.

“I can show him where the furnace is,” Dad said, interrupting. “This is still my house, if you recall.”

“No, stay and finish your toast,” I said quickly. “I’ll take him down to the basement.”

For once, my father didn’t argue.

2

RAFFERTY

The truth of it was this. Mama had insisted I stop by the Collins place this morning. Apparently, Arabella hadn’t been to church in “a month of Sundays,” as Mama put it. She’d felt sure there was something afoot and wanted me to check it out for myself. Thus, I’d come by unannounced, which I knew wouldn’t be exactly welcomed by Arabella. Our dislike of each other was so deeply embedded that I couldn’t even remember what I didn’t like about her. Other than she was smarter than me.

That was just the truth.

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I'd made the mistake of telling Mama that Arabella had canceled the last checkup scheduled for her father. She'd told my nurse he was stable and, therefore, the appointment wasn't necessary. I'd fretted about it. Mr. Collins was deteriorating at a rapid rate. Although I'd tried to convince Arabella that she needed to find a memory care facility in Bozeman for him, she was unconvinced. "With what money?" she'd asked me, clearly hot.

When I'd conveyed this to Mama, she'd suggested Arabella think about selling the ranch and using the proceeds to pay for a facility in which he could live full-time under close supervision of professionals well-versed in Alzheimer's and dementia. It was an easy solution on paper. Emotionally, not so much. Letting go of land and a house that had been in a family for generations was like cutting off a limb or destroying a vital organ. It was a tie not easily explained to outsiders, other than to say the land lived within us.

Look at me, for example. When I was a kid, I'd wanted nothing more than to get out of here, only to find out once I was gone how much I missed it and my family. One day, sitting in a busy coffee shop in a bustling city I'd never grown accustomed to, it hit me with a clarity I'd rarely felt in my lifetime. I wanted to go home to my loud, somewhat interfering but always loving family and the town that had helped raise us.

I'd made the move after I finished my residency a few years back. Our town's doctor had recently expressed a desire to retire and had sent word via Mama that his practice was for sale if I was interested. Strangely enough, it hadn't taken a lot of thinking or reflection. It was pure instinct to say yes. In fact, I'd called him within minutes of my mother's call and asked if we could talk over the details. Before I knew it, I'd secured a loan, moved back to Bluefern, and taken over the local medical practice. With it, I'd

inherited several nurses, an office manager, and a receptionist. Now, I happily serve our community under my terms. I did house calls when needed. I could always be reached in the middle of the night if someone had an emergency, which rarely happened, but when it did, I felt proud to serve the most vulnerable in our area of the world.

In my job in the city, the hospital administration demanded that we spend no more than ten minutes with a patient. They wanted people in and out without considering the softer side of medicine. Most people wanted a chance to ask questions or get advice about health concerns, like weight management or lifestyle changes. Owning my practice meant I could do things the way I wanted. I was a Moon brother, after all. For good or bad, we had a certain way we liked to live. The number one thing on our list? Independence.

Except from one another, of course. We lived by the mantras of Slurfpig and always would.

I followed Arabella down to her basement.

“Here we go,” she said, pointing toward the furnace.

I opened the bulky box-like metal casing to peer inside. Right away, I noticed the pilot light had gone out, which would prevent it from igniting. The blower compartment housed a large, belt-driven fan, which seemed to be working fine. However, the air filters were clogged with dirt and debris.

“Pilot light’s out,” I said. “And air filters should be replaced. Easy fixes.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I’ll ask Pop if he’ll pick up some filters for you and come out to replace them

this morning before the storm moves in. He can get the pilot light lit for you, too.” Pop had every tool imaginable, including a long-reach lighter to ignite the pilot light. “I don’t have a lighter long enough to reach it.”

“I hope you’re right. I really don’t have the money to fix this right now.” Arabella had her long brown hair pulled into a high ponytail and fidgeted with it now, tugging at it as if she wanted to let it all loose. To my surprise, I imagined doing so myself, just to feel if the strands were as soft as they were shiny.

It would be a lot easier to continue my dislike of Dr. Collins if she weren’t so devastatingly beautiful. I flushed, feeling ashamed of myself. I could almost hear Mama chastising me that women should be judged for more than their looks. Unlike myself, Mama was a big fan of Dr. Collins, like everyone else in this town. When we were kids, she’d often invited Arabella over to the house for dinner or cookies. One time, in a snit, I’d asked her why she kept inviting her over when I disliked her so much.

Mama had given me one of her looks and clucked her tongue. “You must never forget that she lost her mother when she was very small. Then her grandmother moved in with them, and if that woman ever had anything kind to say to anyone, including Arabella, I sure never heard it. Her grandmother died when Arabella was only eleven, leaving her alone with that snake of a man. That father of hers might be an adequate rancher, but when it comes to loving his little girl, he comes up way short. If we can show her what it’s like to be in a loving family and know she always has a soft place to land here at our home, then we will do it. You must always choose compassion, Rafferty, instead of judgment. We never know what it’s like to walk another’s journey. All we can do is control our own actions. And that means that Arabella Collins is always welcome in our house.”

I have no idea what I’d said to that, but I can bet it was an apology of some kind. No one could evoke guilt like my mama. Rightly so. When it came to me, anyway.

Today, the moment I'd walked into the Collinses' kitchen, I'd noticed how cold the house felt. This was not good for Mr. Collins. His arthritis didn't respond well to the chill, causing pain. In turn, that pain manifested into agitation and temper. I felt certain the redness on Arabella's cheek was not from the chill but from her father's hand. She wouldn't admit it to me, but I had strong suspicions that his temper led to outbursts of violence. So far, he hadn't appeared to harm his daughter in any serious way. But a smack across the face gave me concern. As much as I wanted to hold on to old grudges, my oath to heal the sick was stronger. If I could get her to talk to me and tell me what was really going on, I might be able to help.

"Are you sure it's not too much trouble for Mr. Moon?" Arabella asked. "I hate to put him out."

"He'll be happy to help. Since he retired, he's had too much time on his hands. I think he might be driving Mama a little batty at this point." I wasn't sure that was true. Since she'd married him after my biological father's death when I was nine, the two of them had been virtually inseparable—a love story of all love stories. I wished I could have one of my own, but so far, I'd been too busy getting through school and now focusing on work to spend too much time looking. Within the last few years, all my brothers had met their true loves—soulmates, really—and I couldn't help but feel a little behind. My brother Atticus had given me a hard time when I'd mentioned it to him, saying I shouldn't be so competitive about every little thing. "Your time will come when it's supposed to."

I'd replied, "Easy for you to say. You're married to a gorgeous, talented woman who just gave you a baby boy." Not to mention that my brother was now a billionaire after selling his software creation to a big company. Even though I hated myself for it, I was jealous of his success. I'd thought becoming a doctor would be the success story of my family. Instead, Atticus created a genius app and sold it for more money than he could ever spend in this lifetime. That is, as long as he didn't go buy an island or a bunch of vineyards like that guy who played the pirate in those movies my brothers

and I had been obsessed with as boys.

Arabella gestured toward the stairs. "I should get back to him."

She turned to go, but I touched her shoulder. "What happened to your cheek?" Blunt, yes, but I couldn't think of how else to ask.

She looked up and to my right, obviously trying to think of a good lie.

"Did he hit you?" I asked.

"It's fine."

"Is that a yes?"

"Rafferty, just leave it alone," Arabella said.

"Are you safe here?"

"It's nothing I can't handle."

I wanted to press her further, but I knew it was useless. The woman was as stubborn as a mule.

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“Fine. Whatever you say. But if you show up in my office with a broken arm or leg, I’m going to have to report it.”

Her eyebrows lifted, and she gave me a look of utter disdain. “Report it? You’ve got to be kidding. None of this is your business.”

“Tell that to my mama.”

The mention of my mother gave her pause. Regardless of what she felt about me, she loved Stella Moon, just like everyone else in town.

“What are you saying exactly?” Arabella asked.

“Mama sent me out here to check on you. Says you haven’t been to church.”

“Have you?” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing, I guess.” She drew in a breath, holding it for a moment before letting it out slowly as if she were fighting with herself to stay calm. I brought out the worst in her. That much was obvious.

I purposely softened my tone. “You’ll let me know if you need help, right? If it gets too much?”

“Yeah, fine.”

I knew she was lying but let it go. For now.

By the time we returned to the kitchen, Mr. Collins was no longer at the table. And the kitchen door was slightly ajar.

Arabella cursed under her breath. “He must have gone outside. I’ll have to go look for him.”

“Put your jacket and gloves on,” I said, sounding like my mother. “And I’ll go with you. It’s started snowing.”

She nodded and grabbed a jacket from a peg by the door, as well as one for her father. “Just in case he’s wandered a ways.”

I donned my jacket and at the last moment, thought to pick up my medical bag. If he’d wandered far, he might be hurt. But really, how far could he get? The man was feeble at best. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Together, we left the kitchen to search the yard. Since my arrival, the sky had darkened even further, and a heaviness hung in the air, dense with moisture. There was an ominous quality to the wintry light. If I weren’t mistaken, temperatures had dropped since I’d been in the house.

A gust of biting wind seemed to come from nowhere. I drew in a deep breath through my nose. It smelled of a coming storm, sharp and metallic. I’d known that smell my whole life, and I knew what it meant.

“Storm’s coming,” I said.

Arabella didn’t answer, seemingly too intent on finding her father to pay me much mind. She pointed to footprints in the thin layer of snow on the ground. “Looks like

he just went out to the barn. Old habits die hard.”

The two of us traipsed through the icy snow. As we approached the barn, I expected to see his footsteps stop at the door, where he would have gone in, perhaps thinking horses and chickens remained. Instead, the tracks went toward the right, toward the dense forest. The Collinses’ ranch nestled at the foothills, with the valley sprawling out in a vast, open expanse before it. Behind the house and barn, the terrain rose sharply, the steep incline marking the beginning of rugged highlands.

Arabella stopped, peering in the direction of the tracks. She glanced at me, her eyes wide with surprise. “He went toward the trees?”

“Let’s check the woodshed first,” I suggested.

We hurried over to the structure, yanking open the door and peering inside, using the flashlight on my phone to get a better view. No one.

“Come on. He couldn’t have gotten far. The hill’s steep in that direction.” I led the way, following the indentations in the snow, with Arabella right behind me. We walked for a good five minutes, deeper into the forest until suddenly the tracks stopped.

“Where did he go?” Arabella asked.

“I don’t know.” I squinted, peering in every direction. It was dark in the forest and hard to see. Just then, the wind seemed to change direction, whipping through the trees. Snow dumped from the sky, landing on my lashes and cheeks. We should turn back before it got any worse. However, I dared not suggest it. She wouldn’t give up until we had her father in hand.

“Why would he be out here?” Arabella asked. “It makes no sense.”

I didn't answer, knowing whatever I said would offend her. I'd been saying it for months now. He needed a care facility.

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“Which way should we go?” I asked.

She clasped her gloved hands together. “He might have gone up to the little cabin.”

“Cabin?”

“It’s the log cabin they built a hundred years ago when my family first bought the ranch. No one’s lived there in a long time, but I go up there to get away from my dad occasionally. I’m sure that’s where he went. I don’t know why, but who knows with him these days?”

“Makes sense.” We started out, calling his name as we went deeper into the forest.

The wind picked up, howling through the trees. I had to hold on to my cap with one hand while clutching my medical bag with the other. Our breathing turned labored as the hill grew steeper. We kept on for another five minutes. The snow fell heavily around us, making it harder and harder to see.

At one point, she stopped and turned to me. “It’s that direction. I know it by the trees. Follow me.” She pointed toward the right.

We didn’t get much farther before the snowstorm hit us like an avalanche. One moment, the world was still recognizable. The next, it was as if the sky had dropped, and we were swallowed whole by a wall of white. I couldn’t see more than a few feet in any direction; everything beyond that was lost in the storm. The flakes didn’t just fall from above—they were hurled at us from every direction, stinging my face, blinding me, making it impossible to tell up from down, earth from sky. My hands,

despite my gloves, were numb with cold, and my legs ached.

The wind was the worst of it. I'd been in blizzards before, but this was something else. It shrieked and wailed, whipping the snow into a frenzied weapon. In minutes, the snow began to pile up around us—two inches, four, maybe more, in what felt like the blink of an eye. My boots sank into the deepening drifts with every step, the snow clinging to me, weighing me down. The wind funneled through the trees, carving out strange patterns in the snow, piling it high in some places, stripping it bare in others. Every step became a struggle. I don't know how much time passed. It could have been five minutes or an hour. I was so disoriented that I had no idea.

I called out to Arabella, but my words were swallowed up by the storm. She continued to take the lead, treading forward as if she knew where she was going. But did she know where we were? Because I couldn't see a darn thing. The snow had turned the forest into a maze. I'd never felt so disoriented, so lost. I tried to keep my bearings, but it was like trying to navigate blindfolded.

We pushed against the wind, heavy and wet, making it feel as if I were wading through quicksand. My muscles burned, and my lungs ached with the effort, but we couldn't stop. We had to keep moving.

Arabella lifted her arm, pointing in front of her, indicating that I should continue to follow her. I nodded and followed, staying as close to her heels as I could.

Cold sliced through my clothes. I knew we didn't have much time. The wind chill was deadly. We had to find shelter, and soon, or we wouldn't make it long.

We kept moving through the blanket of white. I had no choice but to trust Arabella. But she was a Montana girl. Tough and savvy. If she said we were going in the right direction, we probably were.

Finally, I noticed a shadow, a faint outline of a structure. Could it be? We continued toward it until it appeared as a vague, dark shape. Another minute and perhaps eight more steps, and we were there. I'd never been so happy to see a crude log cabin in my life.

Arabella pushed open the door, and we practically fell inside, almost losing our balance before I slammed the door behind us. For a moment, I couldn't see. Soon, though, my eyes adjusted. Other than a door that led to a tiny bathroom, the cabin consisted of one room. A rickety table and a few chairs took up one corner. A woodstove, looking about a hundred years old, stood in another. Near the only window, someone had left a pile of books on a beat-up old trunk.

Best of all, a stack of wood near the stove would last a few days. I also spotted cans of chili and ravioli stacked on a shelf near the stove. A few plastic cups and bowls sat on a shelf near the stove. How often did she come up here?

I peeked my head into the bathroom, relieved to see a sink and toilet. A quick turn of a knob brought forth water into the sink, cold, but at least we wouldn't be thirsty. I didn't know how long we might be here, but by the looks of that storm, it could be until tomorrow morning.

I'd been thinking too fast to realize that Arabella expected her father to be here. He was not.

She sank into one of the chairs and buried her face in her gloved hands.

I knelt next to her. "We don't know anything, okay? He's probably somewhere warm and safe."

She met my gaze but didn't say anything. The defeated expression in her eyes told me exactly what she thought about my suggestion.

“Do you come up here a lot?” I asked.

“When I was a kid, I used to come to get away from Dad and study. In the spring and summer, I’d spend days and days here—reading, taking walks, splashing in the creek. In the fall and winter, I’d hole up here and hit the books. Eating whatever I wanted.” She gestured toward the canned goods. “He didn’t like me to eat anything like that because of my weight.”

“This was your spot to be free.” The thought made me sad. For a moment, I imagined what it would be like to have someone scrutinize your weight and eating so closely. As a family practitioner, I had patients of all ages struggling with their weight. There was so much shame around it, which made no sense medically. Some folks had slower metabolism than others. Body types were varied, yet the women who came to me always seemed to compare themselves to a stick-thin model or actress, as if everyone should look the same. My youngerpatients especially struggled. With the influx of social media they’d grown up with, it was only getting worse.

Arabella continued. “Like I said, this was the original house when my family first settled here. They quickly realized that building in the foothills was a much better idea. But the cabin remained. Over the years, it became a sanctuary of sorts.”

“Thank God you could find it in the storm. I couldn’t see a thing.”

“I know the landmarks like the back of my hand. This tree and that tree, a boulder near the creek. Still, I wasn’t sure of what I was seeing. At least I wasn’t positive. I had to go on my instinct.”

“It worked. Here we are. Safe.” I sat in the other chair and peeled off my wet gloves. “Please tell me the woodstove works.”

“It does.”

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“How long do you think it’s been since it’s been used?”

“I’ve been up here recently, actually. One night, I hired someone to take care of my dad, and I headed up with my sleeping bag and a bunch of stuff I never let myself eat plus a bottle of vodka, some wine.” She chuckled, shaking her head. “I must sound so pathetic, but I just had to get away from him and drown my sorrows and stuff myself with chips and ravioli.”

“Not pathetic at all. You’ve been dealing with a lot, and all on your own.”

Her shoulders rose and fell as she let out a breath. “Thanks. You don’t have to say it, but I appreciate it just the same.”

“I’m going to make us a fire, and then we can come up with a plan,” I said.

“Yeah, fine.”

While I found a pack of matches and some newspaper left in the bin next to the wood stove, she put together a cot that had been folded up and stacked against the wall.

One cot.

I really hoped we weren’t here all night.

She moved the books from the chest and opened it, pulling out a sleeping bag and an almost full bottle of vodka as well as bags of chips. “I know. I’m a bad person.”

“You’re not scared staying up here by yourself?” I asked.

Her forehead wrinkled. “Why would I feel scared?”

“I don’t know. Coyotes and bears, maybe?”

“But I’m inside where they aren’t invited in.”

I looked around the room. It didn’t seem terribly secure, what with the thin front door.

Hopefully, the storm would cease this afternoon, and we could walk out of here, but for now, I would make a fire and get us warm. I knelt near the woodstove, opening the chute and peering inside. There were a few charred bits that would be useful as kindling in combination with bark. I crumpled some newspaper and built a teepee with the bark and charred wood, then lit the paper on fire. Once I had that going, I placed a thin log on top, hoping it would catch. The flames fluttered and threatened to die out. I blew on them to get them going. Fortunately, it worked, and the log caught. It was helpful that the wood was so dry. “How long have these logs been in here?”

“I always bring some in before I leave in case the stack outside is covered with snow.”

“You really do come up here a lot?”

“Not lately. He’s been so bad. I haven’t wanted to leave him alone.”

I wanted to give my opinion on the subject, but I didn’t. She already felt bad. I didn’t need to pile on.

I waited for a minute or two before putting another couple of logs on. Soon, the fire

was going strong. I shut the woodstove door and opened the vents to make sure the flames had enough air.

In the meantime, Arabella had spread the sleeping bag out over the cot and was now at the window, peering out at the storm.

“At this rate, we’ll be snowed in here for days,” she said.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. No signal. Not surprising. We had notoriously bad cell phone coverage even in town. Out here and with the storm, it was unlikely we’d have any.

I’d sent Mama a text when I got to Arabella’s. Maybe she would assume I stayed there to let the storm pass. “I hope Mama isn’t worried when she can’t reach us.”

“I know,” Arabella said. “I’m so mad at myself. I should never have left him alone.”

“It was only for a minute. Don’t beat yourself up.”

She turned from the door and crossed the room to sit at the table, tapping her fingers against her knees. “If he got caught in this...” She trailed off, clearly unable to bring herself to say out loud what we were both thinking.

“Maybe he returned to the house before it started. Or maybe he never left at all.” Even as I said it, I figured it was a long shot. Arabella knew her own house. If he’d remained inside, she’d have known. If he had indeed wandered off, he would have been as surprised by the blizzard as we were. It wasn’t often we had sudden storms. Maybe once a year, if that. Regardless, this one was the worst I’d ever seen. “I’ve never seen one come so fast, have you?”

“Not of this magnitude, no.”

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The room was already warming from the fire. I shrugged out of my jacket, hanging it on a peg near the woodstove to dry. Arabella did the same with hers. I put our gloves near the fire as well.

“Are you okay?”

She gave me a look that reminded me of Mama. Like Mother, there was something formidable about this woman. Not intimidating, exactly. She possessed a quality that was more difficult to pinpoint than I had the vocabulary for. One she'd had since we were kids. Somewhere between guarded and aggressive. Seeing her with her father these last few months and the way he treated her, I understood better why she'd worked to make a life for herself outside of this town and away from her father's cruelty.

I took a second glance at the two jackets hanging side by side, struck by how nice they looked together. They were the same dark blue, puffy style, only hers was significantly smaller than mine.

My watch told me it was nearing ten in the morning. I was grateful I wore the old-fashioned kind instead of one connected to a smartphone. We'd not been out here for long, even though it had felt like an eternity.

“What do we do now?” Arabella asked.

“Wait it out, I guess.”

ARABELLA

“We could play cards. Take our minds off of things?” I suggested, even though my heart wasn’t in it. The urge to curl into a ball on the cot seemed much more appealing. “There’s a deck of cards in the trunk. Some puzzles, too.”

“Will it help you? Or would you rather just curl up on the cot and rest?”

His question surprised me. How had he predicted my thoughts? “Am I that obvious?”

“You’re worried about your dad. How could you not be? And you’re exhausted.”

I sank onto the cot, wishing I could lie down but sitting instead, resting my back against the wall. “He’s been so awful lately. There have been many times over the past few months that I wished he wasn’t...here.”

“I know it’s been hard on you. You’ve done really well with him.”

“Coming back here has been difficult. I had a lot of plans for my life, and none of them involved moving home to take care of a mean old man.”

Rafferty sat in one of the chairs by the table. “What did you want to do?”

“I had an offer to join the practice where I worked in LA. I would’ve loved to and would have if my dad hadn’t gotten so bad so fast.”

“I’m sorry your dreams have been put on hold.”

“Except for my dad, it hasn’t been bad. Turns out I missed Montana. Even though there’s a lot of bad memories here, it’s still home.” I curled onto my side, resting my head in the crook of my arm. “What about you? What made you come back here? I

would've figured you for a city guy. You know, working for a big hospital or something."

"Yeah, I thought I wanted to be a surgeon, but I changed my mind and decided a general practitioner of a small practice was better suited for me. I don't like people telling me what to do."

I smiled. "That tracks with what I know about you."

"I figured out I only wanted to be a surgeon because it was the hardest path, not because I really wanted to. What I enjoy about being a doctor is interacting with patients. Then I found out the doctor here was retiring and selling his practice, and I thought maybe it was a sign."

"You don't seem like the type to follow a sign," I said.

Rafferty lifted one shoulder. "I guess I am. Pop taught me that. Anyway, here I am."

"No regrets?" I asked.

"No, not really."

"What's the not really part?"

"It's great to be back with my family, but the social scene here isn't exactly thriving."

"You mean there are no single women?" I asked.

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“Right. It’s time for me to meet the right person and get married.” He flushed and reached under his collar with his fingertips as if he were suddenly hot. “I’m feeling a little behind if you want to know the truth.”

“All your brothers marrying? Having kids. Except for you.”

He flashed a sheepish grin. “I know, it’s not a contest or anything. But I didn’t think I’d be the last one. Not a prospect in sight, either. It takes a special woman to want to move to the middle of nowhere. Not to mention my obnoxious family.”

“They’re not obnoxious.” I couldn’t keep the wistfulness out of my voice. The Moon family had long been a source of envy for me. When I was eleven, I was in town with my father when I saw them all enjoying breakfast at the diner. I’d stood outside the window, looking in on the happy clan sharing a meal, and had filled with aching jealousy. My father had come to town that morning to buy a part for his tractor, and he’d been angry all morning about one thing or another. Cursing about his run-down tractor, then giving me the silent treatment as we drove into town as if I’d been at fault for his troubles. I’d learned how to make myself as small as possible at home. Despite my father calling me a fat pig, he’d made me feel insignificant and small. At school, I’d kept to myself, focusing solely on my studies so I could get out of here. Funny how things turned out.

“My sisters-in-law seem to be holding up so far,” Rafferty said. “So, I guess we can’t be that bad.”

“Actually, I was surprised to hear you were still single.”

“Yeah?”

“I figured you’d have met someone during school,” I said.

“I had a few girlfriends, but medical school’s rough on relationships.”

“Same for veterinary school. No time for romance.”

Rafferty got up to put another couple of logs in the stove and then closed the vents.

“Let me know if you start to feel cold, but since we don’t know how long we’ll be here, I figure it’s best to conserve wood as best we can.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. Outside, the wind continued to howl.

“This place is pretty cool,” Rafferty said. “I never knew it was out here.”

“My great-grandparents built it the first summer they settled here.” When I was up here, I often thought of the two of them sharing this small space during a Montana winter. One room plus the tiny bathroom must have been tough. Had they gotten on each other’s nerves? I couldn’t imagine otherwise.

Rafferty went to the window, peering out. I got up to stand slightly behind him. Not much had changed. Snow continued to fall heavily. It looked as if about a foot had accumulated. If it kept on like this, it would be three feet before long. Still, we could walk through snow to get home if we had to. As long as it stopped at some point, we could get out of here. But what about my dad? Was he lying somewhere in the woods with a blanket of snow over him?

We left the window and returned to our spots. I curled into the fetal position, feeling suddenly more weary than I’d ever felt in my life. This was not how I’d expected to spend my day.

“You should take a nap,” Rafferty said as he examined the stack of books on the desk.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, irritated. He was so bossy.

“Because you look tired. You always do.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I don’t mean it that way,” Rafferty said. “You’re beautiful. But I know you burn the candle at both ends.”

Beautiful?

“My dad’s like having a toddler. Last night, he was up three times, thinking there was someone in the house, not remembering the time before.” I sighed and closed my dry, stinging eyes. “Maybe I’ll just sleep for a minute or two.”

“Get inside the sleeping bag and rest. There’s nothing we can do about anything at the moment.”

“What will you do?”

He wandered over to the stack of books that were now on the floor. “I’ll find something to read.”

“There’s nothing but romances,” I said, feeling sheepish.

He grinned and looked as if he was going to say something to tease me, but didn’t. “I love romance.”

“I didn’t see that coming.”

He sat at the table, opening a book.

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I closed my eyes and did fall asleep. The next thing I knew, I was waking to the sound of a metal spoon scraping against a pan. Rafferty was at the stove, stirring what smelled like chili. He looked over at me. “Hey, sleepyhead. You hungry?”

“A little, yeah.”

Yawning, I sat up and swung my feet onto the floor. “I’m going to use the restroom.”

“Go for it,” Rafferty said, not looking up from his task.

The bathroom was essentially a toilet and a sink. I did my business and washed my hands before rejoining Rafferty. He had dished up two steaming bowls of the canned chili and set them on the table. We ate in silence for a few minutes. Although my stomach was tied in knots, I forced myself to eat. Who knew what kind of trouble we were facing? I would need my strength.

The storm still raged on, with the shrieking wind a constant. There was no way we were getting out of here before dark. It was already one in the afternoon. Complete darkness would come before five this time of year.

Under the table, I twisted a paper towel between my fingers, trying to keep the agitation at bay. I’d had panic attacks in school and a few in the months since I’d been home. I really didn’t want to have one in front of Rafferty.

“We’ve got plenty of food, thanks to you,” Rafferty said. “Try not to worry. We’ll get out of here eventually.”

“My dad, though. I wish I knew where he was.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

His eyes softened with sympathy, which strangely touched my heart. I’d not thought it possible to feel anything for the man other than hostility. Rafferty Moon had been my archnemesis for as long as I could remember. Thinking of him in any other capacity was a foreign concept.

I ducked my head and finished the rest of my chili. Rafferty had made short work of his as well. I gathered the bowls and plastic spoons and rinsed them in the bathroom sink. We would have to boil water if we wanted anything sanitized. For now, rinsing would be sufficient.

“Thanks for letting me nap,” I said. “I’m amazed I could fall asleep. What kind of daughter am I?”

“Getting caught in a storm can take it out of a person,” Rafferty said gently.

“How are you doing? I should have asked already.”

“I’m good. Don’t worry about me. I’m a Moon.”

“Which means what exactly?” I sounded snarkier than I meant to.

“I’m the middle in a family of five boys. I had to be tough.”

I smiled, conceding to this truth. “Can’t argue with that.”

“What should we do?” Rafferty asked. “You want to play cards now?”

“No, but there’s a puzzle or two in the trunk there. We could pull one out.”

“I love puzzles,” Rafferty said. “I’m really good at them, so be forewarned.”

I smirked. “Why am I not surprised?”

He ignored that and went over to the trunk, pulling out two puzzles. “These are both one thousand pieces.” He held up the boxes. “Which do you want? We can slam one of these out in an afternoon, don’t you think?”

“Implying we get out of here tonight?”

“Or the morning,” Rafferty said. “I think we’re here until the morning.”

“It gets dark early, so yeah.” I sighed, fighting tears.

“I know you’re worried, but you have to have faith.”

To hide my emotions, I focused on the puzzle boxes. “These are great. I forgot I had them in there.” They were both covers from *The New Yorker* magazine. One was an illustration of New Yorkers at the beach. The other was a depiction of a farmers’ market.

“Let’s do the beach,” I said. “Maybe it will help us to feel warmer.”

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He brought the box over to the table and returned to the trunk, kneeling to peer inside. Seconds later, he chuckled as he hauled up my bottle of vodka.

“What?” I said, slightly embarrassed. “I told you I brought that up here last time.”

“No judgment from me,” Rafferty said. “I’m pleased to see it.”

I did a quick swipe of the table with a paper towel to make sure we didn’t have any crumbs on the surface before he dumped all thousand pieces onto the table. We turned them over and then began to put together the edges. Neither of us said much, commenting occasionally when we found success.

After we had the edges all together, I started to work on the section of the blue sea. After twenty minutes, I’d only connected four pieces. He was doing much better with his corner. Almost all of the snack shop was in place. Of course, he was as good as he’d said he was. What couldn’t this man do?

I surreptitiously studied him as his head was bent over his work. Occasionally, he bit his bottom lip, which I knew meant he was focused. I’d spent a lot of my childhood and teenage years sitting beside him in class. I knew all his “tells.” Maybe I should suggest poker? But what would we play for? When we were in high school, there had been a notorious party in which a heated game of strip poker had been played. From all accounts, Rafferty was the only one still dressed by the end of the night. I, of course, hadn’t been invited. I’d heard all the popular kids gossiping about it on the Monday morning afterward. As I always did, I sat apart, merely observing rather than being part of the conversation.

“Do you remember that party when we were in high school? The infamous poker playing party?” I asked.

Rafferty glanced up, his brow furrowed for a moment before the memory clearly took hold. “Oh yeah. I remember. Sherry Winters was not a good player.” His eyes danced with mirth. “Matching bra and panties—scattered with pink hearts.” He coughed. “If I recall correctly.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did you expect her to be? A good player, I mean?” Sherry had been our head cheerleader, and as unkind as it sounds, she fit the stereotype. Blonde and slim and not the brightest student ever. Her intellect had been of no consequence to the male population. She’d been drooled over by most of the guys in our class.

“Her poker skills were not necessarily on our minds,” Rafferty said, laughing.

“I wouldn’t know. I never got invited to stuff like that.”

He tugged on an ear, cocking his head to one side. “Why was that?”

I glared at him, annoyed. It was just like him to lead me to an answer that would make me feel bad. “You know why.”

“Was it because your dad was so strict? I remember people talking about how scary he was.”

“Yeah, right,” I said, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. “That was it.”

“What do you mean?” He blinked and stared back at me with innocent blue eyes.

I knew better. Rafferty was too smart not to know that I was not invited because I’d been the fat girl. The nerdy fat girl. “You know it wasn’t because of my dad. I was fat

and awkward. No one liked me.”

He grimaced and narrowed his eyes. “I don’t remember you being heavy.”

“Sure, you don’t.”

“No, really. Caspian and Soren were always talking about how pretty you were.”

“You’re a liar.” My tone was as frosty as the snow outside the cabin.

“I’m not.” He placed his hand over his heart. “Promise.”

My temper flared. Why must he be so difficult? Could he not just agree with me for once? Especially since the facts were the facts. “I was chubby. Trust me. My dad could tell you all about it.”

Rafferty pressed his fingers into one of his thick eyebrows. “You’re being serious.”

I stared at him, my certainty slipping. Could it be possible he and his brothers hadn’t seen me that way? Hadn’t Caspian said something about it to me recently? I’d dismissed it as him being kind, but Rafferty wouldn’t bother sugarcoating it for me. In fact, he’d probably do the opposite.

“I was heavy back then,” I said. “Thirty pounds heavier than I am now.”

“Okay, well, that’s not how I remember you. Granted, I was too busy trying to figure out how to beat you on every test we ever took. Which I did not do, by the way.”

“I remember.” I couldn’t help but smirk at the memory. How satisfying it had been when I won out by a point or two. That was all it ever was, though. We were neck and neck forevery academic achievement possible and close competitors in every

subject except for PE. Sports had never been my thing. Obviously.

“I’m sorry you felt that way,” Rafferty said. “I mean about the parties and stuff. I doubt it was intentional.”

“What? Not being invited? Or the sneers behind my back?”

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He shook his head, seemingly bewildered. Could I trust that he was telling me the truth? He was a lot of things. Infuriating. Arrogant. Superior. But he wasn't a liar. As far as I knew, anyway. "If there were sneers, they weren't from me. I was just trying to keep up with you."

"Yeah, fine. Doesn't matter now. It was a long time ago." I picked up another puzzle piece as if I were super focused on it, hoping he didn't see the hurt that still lingered from those days. Not only had I been awkward and chubby, I'd never had the right clothes. While everyone else came to school in the same basic attire, Levi jeans, and T-shirts, my dad had forced me to wear dresses or skirts. He had had this thing about women and jeans as if it had been the 1940s or something.

"It still bothers you," Rafferty said simply.

"No, it doesn't."

"Now who's lying?"

I sighed and rubbed my left temple, wishing we could get off this subject. But Rafferty was not ready to let it go.

"Did people really talk about you behind your back?" Rafferty asked. "Because I don't remember that at all."

He had a point. Rafferty had always been one of those kids who didn't care what other people thought of him; therefore, he might not notice what was right in front of him. He'd always been so confident and secure, as well as focused on making

something of himself. We'd had that in common. The confidence part? Not so much. While I'd put my attention on proving to my father and myself that I was more than just the fat girl, Rafferty had seemed to enjoy the competition. He was made for the world. Good-looking and smart, with a family that celebrated his accomplishments. On the other hand, my father had seemed to take sport in making me feel inadequate. To make himself feel bigger? Maybe. But there was more to it. I'd not examined it carefully in the years I'd been away. I'd simply assumed I was never coming back thus I could just move along as if I hadn't suffered greatly from my father's abuse.

The word abuse still sounded like an exaggeration, even though I knew now that it wasn't. Regardless, acting like a victim was the last thing I wanted. Being back here, though? I could not escape the memories or the truth. "Guys like you wouldn't notice a thing like that," I said finally.

"Guys like me?"

"Everyone loved you. You were great-looking. Smart. Charming. It would never occur to you that life wouldn't just roll out the way you wanted."

He set aside a piece of the puzzle and moved his hands to his lap, leaning forward slightly as people do when they're cold. "You might think that's true, but it wasn't the whole story. My dad—my real dad—was a bad guy. He was running away with my mother's best friend when he was murdered by said best friend."

My stomach dropped. He was right. That had been horrific. In the years since I'd nearly forgotten about it. Naturally, it would have affected Rafferty and his brothers and, surely, did not fall under the category of easy. Rafferty had been young—seven if I remembered correctly. I think we'd been in second grade when his father was murdered by his girlfriend, who then took her own life. I hadn't really understood any of it at the time, but it had been the talk of the town for years afterward. Nothing like that had ever happened in Bluefern, and it wasn't soon forgotten. Thinking about it

now, I remembered snippets of conversation between my father and his ranching buddies. They'd not thought well of Rafferty's real father. Even before the scandal had ripped apart their family, my dad had been disdainful of the newcomer who had come to Bluefern and been "given" his wife's family's ranch, only to run it into the ground. Trash. Lazy. Con artist. Those were the words thrown out about Stella's first husband.

Later, when I was old enough to understand that a murder/suicide had robbed two families of a parent, my dad told me the whole story. After Stella married Jasper Moon, my father railed against him, too. Jasper Moon had managed the bank and turned my dad down for a loan. That was never forgiven or forgotten. Any grudge my dad ever felt remained with him. To him, forgiveness was for sissies.

"I know what was in papers when your father was killed," I said slowly, hoping it was all right to speak about. "I heard my father talking about it with his friends. I was smart, so I pieced it together in the way kids do. It was hard to understand, though. Since I became an adult, I've heard more about it from your brothers and their wives. To be honest, I'm surprised it doesn't haunt all of you more. Do you think about him much?"

"I think about him, yeah. Not with fondness, I can tell you that. If things hadn't gone down the way they did, I don't know what would have happened to my mom or my brothers. I don't remember that much about him, but I can remember the feelings he evoked whenever he was around."

"Like what?"

"Fear mostly. He had a wicked temper."

"Like my dad?"

“Yeah. Cruel like that, too. He loved to make my mother feel bad about herself. He was hard on Atticus and Caspian too. Especially Caspian. He had trouble in school, and he got raked over the coals for it.”

“You remember that?”

“Vaguely. But Caspian’s talked about it since then, too. We’ve all talked about those times, especially over the last few years. Pop seems to believe they didn’t encourage us enough to process it all, which is just like him. Taking the blame when it was our biological father who damaged us. It was Pop who loved all the trauma away.”

Rafferty looked at the wall over my shoulder, his eyes slightly glazed. “Before my father died, I remember my parents fighting a lot. He had a bad temper and was always exploding on us or Mama. The day he left, Mama sat us all down and said he was leaving and most likely not coming back.”

“Did you understand that he was running off with Mrs. Armstrong? Or that she’d killed him?”

“No, she didn’t tell us any of that until we were much older. The night he was killed, I was upstairs looking out my bedroom window. Maybe I was hoping he’d show up. I’m not sure. But I was at the window when I saw a figure stumbling toward the house. It was only when he got close enough I could see in the light of the porch that it was him. He was all crumpled over like he was in pain. Then he disappeared under the awning. I heard the doorbell ring, and Mama running to answer it. After that, the next thing I remember were the cops showing up. Red lights reflected in the snow. That image stayed with me.”

“Hard for a child to understand.”

“It was, yeah. The whole thing was. Mrs. Armstrong was my mother’s best friend.

She and Annie were always at the house. And then she was gone, and my dad was gone—both of them dead. It was impossible for any of us to really comprehend except maybe Atticus. He was mature for his age and tried to shelter the rest of us. Which, looking back, was too much for his young shoulders. Mama told me she used to worry about Atticus taking on too much of the burden our dad left behind. But then Pop kept coming around, and pretty soon, it was obvious he and Mama were in love. They got married, and everything in our world changed for the better. Pop loved all of us. I don't know how, but he did. Just took us all on without complaint. I never once felt like he wished he hadn't had to take us on just because he fell in love with Mama."

Rafferty got up to get us each a glass of water. Upon his return, I asked him if he wanted something stronger? "You want a real drink? There should be some cans of orange soda in there."

He returned his attention to the trunk. "You have a lot of things stuffed in here." He hauled out the six-pack of soda, two trashy magazines, and a box with individual bags of various potato and corn chips.

"It's my secret stash of everything my dad disapproves of," I said.

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“Well, let’s say a cheer for a secret stash. Comes in handy during a snowstorm.” He held up two bags of chips. “Plain or salt and vinegar?”

4

RAFFERTY

Imade us drinks with orange soda and vodka and brought them to our puzzle table. A quick glance out the window didn’t give me any hope of getting out of here any time soon. Not only did the wind and snow continue, it was growing dark. With one cot and one sleeping bag, one of us would be sleeping on the floor with just their jacket for warmth. Of course, I would insist it be me. Mama raised me to be a gentleman. One night on the floor wouldn’t kill me. I just hoped it would only be one night. If we were trapped in here for days, our families would be worried. In addition, Arabella was understandably fretting about the well-being of her father.

I hadn’t let myself think about him too much since we’d gotten here, mostly because I assumed the worst. If he had been caught in this storm, we would not find him alive. The only hope was that he’d ducked inside the barn or back into the house. However, he’d deteriorated rapidly in the last few months. He may have been too confused to act quickly enough to get back to the house.

Arabella took a sip from her drink and smacked her lips appreciatively. “I forgot I even had this up here, but I’m glad I did.”

“When was the last time you were here?”

“It was right before Christmas. My dad had had a rough day and was lashing out. I finally had enough and called a caregiver to stay with him overnight so I could have a break. I came up here and drank and read a romance novel and felt sorry for myself.”

“You need help with him.” It was out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

She set aside her drink and looked me in the eyes. “I know that’s what you think. I also know I can’t afford to. There’s nothing in his savings. God knows I’m in debt up to my eyeballs from school.”

I had an awful thought then. Wouldn’t it be better for her if her father had perished in the storm? The moment I thought it, I pushed it out of my mind, feeling ashamed of myself. But the man was mean as a snake. From their interactions during our appointments, I could see pretty clearly how he treated her. It was no less than abuse.

“Do you think your family’s worried?” Arabella asked. “Will they know you didn’t make it to work?”

“Yes, and so will all my patients. I did talk to Mama on my way out the door this morning. She knew I was stopping by to check on you. She probably assumes I stayed at your house and am fine. Other than she won’t be able to get me on my phone.”

“I’m sure they’ve canceled school,” Arabella said. “No one will be out in this looking for us. Hopefully, your mother won’t be too worried.”

“She probably will.” I smiled, thinking of my beautiful mama bear. “No matter how old we are, she still worries about us.”

Arabella nodded but didn’t comment further. A sad, slight frown turned her mouth downward. She had a nice mouth: full, firm lips and straight white teeth. I’d noticed

before, of course. But sitting here with her now, really looking at her, her beauty took my breath away.

I'd already gone through my bag of chips by then and got up to grab a few more. When I tried to hand one to her, she shook her head. "I shouldn't."

"This is an unusual day, so I think it's all right." I tossed the bag over to her.

She laughed. "Fine, but don't tell my doctor about my weaknesses."

"We all have them. Things we can't resist." We locked gazes for a moment. Something passed between us, like an electric charge. Even the air itself seemed ripe for trouble.

I looked away first. Flirting with the enemy? Was that a condition brought on by extreme weather? A hike that almost killed us? Or maybe it was the vodka.

Yes, that was it. We weren't attracted to each other. We hated each other.

Wasn't that the story we'd believed for so long?

"Why did we dislike each other so much?" I asked out loud.

"I'm not sure we really did. We were just supercompetitive with each other, which led to animosity."

"I wonder if we would have been as successful had we not had each other to push us?"

She rested her chin in one hand, clearly thinking through what I said. As much as she'd irritated me over the years, I'd never doubted how fine her mind was or how

thoughtfully she considered things. Jealousy had sometimes clouded my perception and convinced me that she was annoying when, really, down deep, I admired her.

“I don’t know that we would have,” Arabella said. “Maybe we owe each other more credit than we would have thought.”

“What did you think of me back then? In high school, for example?”

“I thought you were amazingly smart and articulate.”

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“But? There’s a but coming.” I smiled to let her know it was fine to say whatever she wanted to say.

“Not really a but. It’s that you made me feel bad about myself. You were good at everything. Sports. School. Everyone liked you even though you were obviously super ambitious.”

“How do you mean?”

“Kids liked you even though you were not like the rest of them. A boy can get away with that. A smart girl’s usually not well-liked. Especially if we don’t bother to hide it.”

“I never cared if people liked me. What’s that saying? Your opinion of me is none of my business.”

“See, right there,” she said, tapping the tabletop with her knuckles. “Most teenagers care about what their peers think of them. You were obliviously carefree. You were always yourself, as far as I could tell anyway. Maybe you were just a good actor.”

“No, your assessment’s true. The only people I ever wanted to impress or cared what they thought were my parents and my brothers. That’s still the case, actually.”

“I think that might have been the quality I was most jealous of,” Arabella said. “I cared what everyone thought. The sneers and exchanged glances between kids when I had to do a presentation or when I was the only one who knew the answer to a question. I saw them all. They worked their way inside me like a disease. Most kids

saw me as my father did. A chubby, geeky freak.”

A freak? That made my chest ache for her. What a despicable man. Who would ever want their daughter to feel that way about herself? “You were not a freak. Anyway, you have had the last laugh. Look how well you’re doing compared to most of them.”

“I guess so,” Arabella spoke softly and with a fair amount of sadness. “I still feel totally alone most of the time. I miss my friends from school. Out here, with my dad, feels pretty isolating.”

“Even with all your patients?” I asked.

“They’re not friends. Except for the dogs, of course. I’d love to get one of my own, but there’s no way. Adding a puppy into my already impossible schedule would be a disaster.”

Again, my chest ached for her. Was it possible I’d softened to Miss Collins after all these years? I tried to muster some of the old animosity, but the well seemed dry.

“Tell me about your life before you came home,” I said. “Was medical school as rough for you as it was for me?”

“God, yes.”

“For sure. There are whole months of time I can’t remember because of the sleep deprivation. But I loved my colleagues from day one.”

“Yes, I have two best friends from medical school,” Arabella said. “Intense programs like that bond you with people in a way I’d never experienced before. I can remember pinching myself because I had real friends. People liked me. I didn’t have to pretend to be anyone other than myself. I was admired for being smart instead of mocked.”

She looked down at the puzzle, moving a piece from one side of the table to the other.

I placed a piece into the puzzle, completing the snack shop portion of the picture.

“Do you ever think about what you’ll do after your dad...” I trailed off, realizing too late how insensitive the question was. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, it’s okay. I think about it a lot, actually. Sometimes, I daydream about what it would be like to finally be free. Isn’t that awful?”

“I’d say human. I’ve seen how he treats you,” I said.

“He’s always been mean, but the dementia’s made it worse.” She placed a piece into the puzzle and looked up at me with a satisfied gleam in her eye. “There, got one. Finally.”

“Don’t feel bad that I’m better at this than you,” I said, teasing.

“Very funny.” She picked up another piece and looked at it carefully. “But seriously, how are you so good at everything? It’s annoying.”

“I can imagine how jealous you must feel.”

She tossed a puzzle piece at me. “You’re a bad person.”

I laughed. “I’m just joking. I’m not good at everything.”

“Tell me something you struggle with.” She glared at me and crossed her arms over her chest. “Come on, admit it. You can’t think of anything.”

“I can’t cook. I never make my bed. I’m sometimes impatient with my receptionist.”

“Norma? Well, how could you not be? She’s the slowest human that’s ever lived,” she said.

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An image of Norma, with her frog-like face and permanent sneer, played before my eyes. “I inherited her when I bought the practice. Mama said it would be wrong to let her go. But she’s the worst. The other day, I found her eating the leftovers that I’d brought to work to enjoy. A small thing, granted, but seriously, who eats someone else’s lunch?”

“That’s terrible. Lunches brought from home should be sacred.”

“Right? And she had the nerve to deny it was mine. She said she’d brought it from home that very morning. I was so flabbergasted at her gall that I just walked away. I had to go down to the diner to have lunch, fuming the whole way and thinking very unkind thoughts about Norma.”

I don’t know if was the vodka or if she found me funny, but she let out a very feminine giggle. Quite adorable, actually.

“What about your staff?” I asked. “Do you have a good team?”

“I inherited a few, too, but so far, they’ve all been great. My predecessor was a great manager. They’re all independent and very supportive of me. I wasn’t sure they would be, given their loyalty to their first boss.”

“Norma is not what you call supportive. Every time I ask her to do something, she sniffs and mumbles under her breath that the former doctor would never have done it that way.”

“That’s annoying. You really should fire her.”

“When we get out of here, maybe I will.” I raised an eyebrow. “Although I hate to get on Mama’s bad side. No one can make a person feel worse about a selfish act than my mother.”

“Your mother’s a great woman.”

The wistfulness in her voice gave me pause. “She is.” Since we were talking about such personal subjects, I decided to ask about her mother. “How old were you when your parents divorced? Three?”

Her face whitened, and she pinched her bottom lip between her thumb and finger before answering. “That’s right. She left when I was three. I barely remember her.”

“Have you seen her since?”

“No. I have no idea where she is. My father says she never wanted to be a mother. You may not remember my grandmother, but she came to live with us after my mom left. She helped raise me. But she died when I was in sixth grade. Sudden heart attack.”

Sixth grade. That was about the time I’d started competing with Arabella for the top of our class. I’d had no idea she was going through all of that. “I didn’t know. Were you close with her?”

“She was like my dad. Quiet. Kept to herself. She wasn’t as mean as my dad, but not by much.”

The hurt in her voice saddened me. “I had no idea. About your home life, that is.”

“How could you? We weren’t friends.”

True enough.

“After she died, it was just the two of us. I pretty much took over the household chores and cooking—all the things my grandmother had done. My father kept me on a tight leash. But he never interfered with my studying. That was the one thing he was supportive of.”

“Were you trying to please him? You know, by being such a good student.”

“No. I was trying to please myself. All I wanted was to get out of here and start my own life. I knew from the time I was in high school I wanted to be a vet. Animals are so often better than people.”

“True enough.”

A crash outside the cabin startled both of us. Heart thudding, I ran to the window, peering out into the white world. A tree branch had broken off a tall fir not far from the cabin. “Snow must have gotten too heavy,” I said, feeling Arabella standing right behind me.

“I really hope one doesn’t crash into the roof.”

“Me too. But think of it this way—this cabin’s been here for a long time. It’s lasted through a lot of winters.”

I turned away from the window in time to see her shiver.

“You cold?” I asked.

“A little.”

“I’ll put another in the log in the fire. It’s about time to heat something up for dinner anyway.”

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The room had grown almost too dark to see the puzzle. Arabella suggested moving it to one side so we would have room to eat. “I’ll light the lamp so we can see what we’re doing,” she said, gesturing toward the kerosene lamp on a small table in the corner of the room.

After I tossed a few more pieces of wood into the fire, I searched through the cabinet for something to open for dinner. There were cans of ravioli, chicken noodle soup, chili, and baked beans. “You want ravioli or soup?” I asked.

She’d lit the lamp and returned to sit on the cot, folded over with her hands around her knees. Her shoulders were shaking. Was she crying?

“Hey, you all right?” I rushed over to her, kneeling on the floor by her feet.

She rocked back and forth, her voice muffled against the fabric of her jeans. “I’m scared. What if he’s dead out there? It’ll be my fault.”

“None of this is your fault. Not your father’s illness or this storm.”

“I should have been watching him more carefully. It’s just that he frustrates me, and I get angry. This morning, he was acting awful. Belligerent.”

“Could you tell what set him off?”

“He said I didn’t cook his eggs correctly, which is ridiculous because I made them exactly how he likes them. Or how he used to like them, anyway. This disease is changing him. I didn’t think it was possible for him to get meaner, but I was wrong.”

“How often does he hit you?” I asked softly.

At first, I thought she would deflect and change the subject, but she surprised me by answering. “Occasionally. It’s been getting worse, though. This morning, he called me by my mother’s name.” She paused for a moment. “I have one photograph of her. I look like her.”

“Did he hit you when you were young?” The moment I asked the question, I knew the answer. Her veiled expression told me everything I needed to know.

“Sometimes.”

“I had no idea.”

“There were a lot of things going on behind closed doors at my house. I suppose that’s true of many families. Right?”

I nodded. “I’ve seen some things in my line of work. Especially since I make house calls.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen some things out at some of the ranches too. Usually, it’s cruelty to animals, not people.”

I realized then I was still kneeling on the floor, and rose to my feet, offering her my hand. “Come eat. It’ll warm us up to have some soup.”

She returned to the table while I fixed our dinner. When the soup was ready, I divided it evenly and brought the bowls to the table. We ate in relative silence. Outside, the storm raged, battering the walls and roof of the cabin.

After we were finished eating, we rinsed the dishes in the sink as we’d done earlier.

Not the most hygienic, but we had little choice.

It was completely dark outside by this point. We had a lot of firewood still stacked beside the stove. Enough for a few days, I figured. If we were stuck much longer than that, we would be in trouble. But surely the snow would stop soon, and we could begin to dig ourselves out in the morning.

We played cards in the light shed by the kerosene lamp. After an hour or so, I caught her yawning and suggested we get some sleep.

“About that. How do we sleep with only one bag between us?” Arabella asked.

“You sure there aren’t some other blankets stuffed somewhere?”

“No. It’s just the one sleeping bag. Usually, I’m alone up here.”

I looked over at the cot, wishing it were wider. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“You won’t sleep a wink.”

“Then there’s only one solution. We’re going to have to share the cot and the sleeping bag.”

“Share? As in, sleep next to each other?”

“It would provide warmth,” I said. “You know, two bodies. Pressed together.”

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She flushed and looked away. “I suppose there’s no other way. Feet to head?”

“Impossible. I’m too big. We’re going to have to spoon it up.” I kept my tone light, hoping to make the whole situation less awkward.

“Spoon it up? Really?” She rolled her eyes, but her mouth had curved into a half smile.

“I’m just kidding. You take the cot. I’ll sleep on the floor near the woodstove and use my jacket for warmth.”

“Thank you. That’s very generous of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m pretty sure I have some new toothbrushes in the bathroom. I’ll take a look.”

“Great.”

She didn’t say anything else, just went into the bathroom and rummaged around for a moment before returning with a toothbrush still in its package and a small tube of toothpaste, the type they sent you home in the goody bag after getting your teeth cleaned. “I brought these up from the last time I went to the dentist.”

I took them from her and went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I did my business and brushed my teeth. The mirror over the sink was old and dark around the edges from the desilverizing process, but I could still see myself well enough. I

was working on a good five-o'clock shadow by this point. My eyes were bloodshot, and the end of my nose was red from the chilly cabin. Not that it mattered. It wasn't as if I was trying to impress my nemesis.

What did she see when she looked at me?

I certainly didn't see her the same way I had when we were kids. She'd grown into such a lovely woman. It was amazing she was single. Of course, like me, there weren't that many prospects in Bluefern, or she might have married already.

Anyway, none of that mattered. I wasn't interested in Arabella Collins. I didn't even like her.

Yes, you do.

Fine. Seeing her vulnerabilities today had started to change my mind about her. Plus, she'd impressed me. Getting us to the cabin in that storm had not been easy.

I went back into the main room. To my surprise, she'd opened a bottle of wine and brought two canning jars to the table.

"Where did you find this?" I asked, picking up the bottle to look at the label. It was a decent red from California.

"It was in a box I brought up last time I was here. I'd almost forgotten about it. Don't judge. Vodka and now this. I know. The place is stuffed with booze."

"No judgment here. Although I just brushed my teeth."

"Yeah, but you can brush them again." She smiled before pouring us each a generous amount.

“If you insist.” I sat gingerly on the cot, hoping it wouldn’t collapse under my weight, but it held up just fine. “Come sit next to me? We’ll be warmer together.”

She did so, bringing our jars of wine with her. We settled in with our backs against the wall.

“This is great,” I said. “I mean, considering.”

“It’s not bad. Considering.”

“Did you ever bring a boy up here?” I asked.

She laughed. “A boy? Are you kidding? My dad would have killed me. Not that a boy would have wanted to be up here with me anyway.”

This boy does now.

Where had that thought come from?

She’d taken her thick brown hair out of its ponytail, and it now cascaded about her shoulders in a very becoming fashion. “You look nice with your hair down.”

“Thanks. I keep it back for work, but my head starts to ache by the end of the day.”

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It was no wonder. Naturally, it would tug at her scalp.

I took a sip from the wine, pleasantly surprised by how good it tasted despite having already brushed my teeth.

Feeling her eyes on me, I turned to meet her gaze. She didn't look away. "What?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking about what your life was like before you came home."

"Harried," I said. "Hectic. Stressful. Lonely."

"Lonely? That surprises me."

"You know how it is in the city. You can live right next door to someone and never meet them. The sidewalks are packed with people, yet you feel totally isolated."

"Yes, I do know," Arabella said. "I missed small-town life much more than I thought I would."

"Same here. I'm ready for the next season of life, that's for sure."

"The season of domesticity?"

"Don't say it like it's a bad word," I said, laughing. "Family life can be a good life."

"I wouldn't know." She gazed into her glass.

“It’s not inevitable.”

“What isn’t?” Arabella asked, looking up at me.

“That you’ll be as miserable as your father. He chose to be that way.”

“You think being paranoid and nasty was a choice? I mean, not now. Before the dementia.”

“That’s what Mama would say. She always told us that we must choose to be grateful and kind, even when it was hard. Pop too. The way they lived and treated other people, including us, was inspiring. Still is.”

“My father inspires me.” Her voice grew husky with her obvious bitterness. “To be the opposite of him.”

“You are. Coming home to take care of him, given how he’s treated you, is the ultimate sacrifice. Unselfish. Compassionate. All the qualities he’s never had.”

Arabella nodded, her expression haunted. “It’s not been easy. And I wouldn’t say I’m exactly compassionate. Most days, I want to run away from home.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached over and squeezed her hand. She twitched, my touch obviously startling her, but she didn’t jerk away from me. Instead, she smiled. “Thank you. For what you said. It feels good to be acknowledged.”

“Anytime,” I said, removing my hand from hers. “As your dad’s doctor, I should tell you that more often. Caregivers are often overlooked. They need someone looking out for them too.”

“What was it like working at a big hospital? Do you miss it?” Arabella asked, clearly

changing the subject.

“Not at all. I hated it.”

“Really? Why?”

“They wanted me to spend no more than ten minutes with a patient. It was actually measured, and we were evaluated negatively if we went over. I kept going over. Which meant I was always in trouble. One day, after a particularly unpleasant dressing-down by my superior, I walked down the hallway and into our lounge and made myself a cup of tea. My mother always suggested tea when you’ve had a bad day. I sat there sipping my tea, and the delightful smell of burnt popcorn wafting and the sound of my colleagues arguing about politics hit me. I don’t have to stay here. I could move home. Maybe open my practice. Then, divine intervention happened. My mother called me the next day and told me Dr. Wilson was retiring and looking to sell his practice. I jumped at the idea. And voilà, here I am.”

“Any regrets?”

“Not a one. I missed my family and this place. For years I’d dreamed of coming home, and I’ve been happy I did so.” I sipped from my jar, watching her over the rim.

“What about you?”

“Right now, I’m so wrapped up in my dad’s care and keeping up with work I haven’t really had that much time for soul-searching or contemplating if this was what I wanted for my life. But I love my job and my clients. If I’m a little lonely, then it’s probably my fault for not putting myself out there more.”

“Dating?”

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She made a guttural sound in her throat. “No dating for this girl. That’s all I need to finish me off.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t have room in my life for romance. Not now, anyway. I’m probably doomed to a life of spinsterhood.”

I seriously doubted that. This woman was a gem in every way. The man who won her heart would be one lucky guy.

Did I wish it was me?

Ridiculous. At best, she was a friend. I must keep my head and not blow it before we got out of here. All she needed was me making a clumsy advance when she was worried about her father.

“You deserve to have love in your life,” I said. “Everyone does.”

“Maybe someday. When my life isn’t so complicated, can you imagine introducing some poor guy to my dad?”

What if the man already knew her father? What then?

I kept those questions to myself.

ARABELLA

The wine and the tension of the day had worn me down. Or maybe it was the way Rafferty Moon was gazing at me as if I hung the moon. Regardless, I had no barriers left. He'd asked me earlier if I'd thought about what I wanted for my life after my father passed away. I hated to admit how many times I'd thought about when that day came over the last few months.

"You asked me earlier if I have plans after my dad passes. If I were free of him, I'd sell everything but five acres, which I'd keep for myself, and use the proceeds to build a house of my own. Nothing fancy, just a cozy place where I could have a few dogs and cats and live in peace."

He gaped at me as if I'd said something outlandish.

"What?" I asked. "It's what I want."

"That's it?"

"What do you want then?" I asked, unreasonably chafed at his response.

"I'd like a family. A marriage like my mom and pop have. To be a member of the community, not only a doctor but someone who helps others."

"Well, no tall order there, huh?"

"Are you serious?" Rafferty asked. "You think that's too much to ask for? To expect?"

"You don't?"

“No, in fact, I don’t. I’d love to build a house too,” Rafferty said. “The rental’s okay for now, but I want my own home. If money were no object, right?”

“At this rate, it’ll take me ten years to pay off my loans.”

“That’s about the same for me, plus I took out a loan to buy the practice. But I’m not worried about it. I have enough to live comfortably despite the debts.”

“You’d build, not buy?”

“There’s not a lot of inventory out there unless you want to do extensive remodels. So, we’ll see. The right thing will come along when it’s supposed to.”

We chatted about our dreams for the future a bit more. I confessed to having a dream board with ideas for my cottage I someday hoped to build. Expecting him to tease me, I was pleasantly surprised when he said he said what a good idea it was to envision what you want. “That’s the first step in getting it, right?”

“Who would have thought the two of us would be back here?” Rafferty asked.

“Not me,” I said. “Not in a million years. Time has a way of changing people, I guess. Softens us up.”

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Rafferty nudged my foot with his. “I still remember your valedictorian speech.”

“You do? I thought you were too bitter about coming in second to listen to a word?”

“I was bitter, but I couldn’t help but be impressed.”

“Which part?” I asked, surprised. My recollection of the speech consisted mostly of how nervous I’d been. “I was focusing on not vomiting all over the lectern.”

“You talked about what it’s like to be an outsider and having the courage to be yourself even if it means you don’t fit in. What were your closing words? Be loud. Be bold. Don’t shrink yourself just to fit in.”

“You remember that?”

“It touched me, honestly. Made me mad, too, because your speech was way better than mine.”

I shook my head, smiling. “No, yours was good too.” In fact, I could still see eighteen-year-old Rafferty standing behind the lectern, the spring breeze ruffling his thick brown hair as he spoke into the microphone. “For one thing, you sounded like a professional speaker. You had the class in the palm of your hand.”

“I was on the debate team. That helped.”

I drank a bit more of my wine, reflecting on the message he’d shared that day and how it had nearly driven me insane with envy. His words had been all about his

family and their support, particularly his mother and stepfather. He'd spoken so movingly about the sacrifices of his stepfather, a single man marrying a woman with five young sons, that I'd felt the sting of tears at the backs of my eyes. Not that I would have allowed myself to cry. Not for Rafferty Moon. But now, all these years later, my pettiness embarrassed me. Yes, I'd been young, but I should have been better than that. "I was jealous of your family. All the support they gave you. The story about your stepfather nearly brought me to tears. I can guarantee you that people remembered your speech for a lot longer than they would have mine."

"No way," Rafferty said, completely unconvincingly.

I laughed and poked my foot into his ankle. "Don't look so pleased."

"Sorry. But really, tell me more about my wonderful speech."

We both laughed. I liked this side of Rafferty. Fun-loving and full of self-deprecating humor. Was this the real man? The one he'd kept hidden from the likes of me?

"You told the story about Jasper when he asked your mom to marry him."

"Right. Yeah. Slurfpig."

"That's the most amazing thing I've ever heard a man doing."

"Not to sound totally cheesy, but he's the best man I've ever known. And he doesn't even realize how special he is. He'd just describe himself as a normal guy. A boring banker who likes to remodel houses and make pies. But he's so much more than that. He was a hero to us boys. Still is."

"Did he do all the things he promised?" I asked.

“That and more. To love another person’s children as your own—that’s a hero. It couldn’t have always been easy, but he sure made it look that way.”

“That’s another part I remember from your speech. You said life was certain to throw us curveballs and hardships, and the measure of character was in our reaction to whatever came our way.”

“I still believe that,” Rafferty said. “My mama taught me that by the way she’s lived every day of her life. No self-pity or wallowing. Just put your boots on and get back to it.”

“What other choice do we have, really?”

“Giving up,” Rafferty said.

“Not an option.”

He held out his mason jar to clink with mine. “Amen,” he said. “Like I said earlier, Jasper Moon picked up the broken pieces and put us back together. Without him, we’d still be broken, flailing around, looking for where we belonged.”

“Like me.”

He peered at me, his eyes full of curiosity and sympathy. “Is that how you feel?”

I changed positions, taking my feet off the floor and sitting cross-legged and facing him. “I’m not sure exactly how to describe it. I’ll just say that when a father does nothing but criticize his child, no matter how well they do, it leaves a person feeling like a failure. Insecure. Chip on my shoulder. You know, all of that.”

“It also made you tough and determined to prove him wrong.”

I nodded, smiling. “That too.”

“It’s remarkable, really, what you’ve done with your life.”

“You mean, considering my father?” I asked.

“That and the other difficulties you faced.”

“I suppose you could say that about most people. I’ve been lucky in a lot of ways.”

“Attitude is everything, right?” Rafferty asked. “That’s what my mother always says, anyway. You do the best with what you have.”

He looked handsome in the dim light, with his hair all disheveled and a five-o’clock shadow. Since high school, he seemed to have found the thirty pounds I’d lost in the form of sheer muscle. His shoulders and back were broad, much more so than most men who had a distinctly white-collar job. How did he stay in such good shape now that he no longer did ranch work?

“What are you looking at me like that for?” Rafferty asked. “Do I have something in my teeth?”

“No.” I flushed, mortified that he’d caught me staring. “You look good. That’s all.”

“Wait a minute, are you giving me a compliment?”

“You’re in good shape. Bigger than in high school. That’s all I meant.”

“I have a home gym. And the internet. That’s all I need,” he said. “But it’s nice to know you’ve noticed.”

I’d noticed all right. Alarmingly so.

He yawned, which caused me to yawn.

“Should we get some sleep?” I asked. “Who knows what tomorrow might bring.”

“Good call.”

We put away the wine and rinsed the jars, and then took turns using the bathroom and brushing our teeth. By the time I returned to the main room, Rafferty was lying on his back with his head on his jacket. He looked completely uncomfortable. Not to mention how cold he would get.

“Don’t read too much into this,” I said as I unzipped the sleeping bag. “But I think you should sleep up here with me. We can put the sleeping bag over both of us.”

“That’s a small cot.”

“We can spoon it up. Isn’t that what you said?”

A glint came to his eyes, but he only grinned and shrugged. “If you insist.”

“You lie down first, and I’ll get in next to you.”

He did as I asked, pulling one side of the sleeping bag over him and lifting the other side for me to slide in next to him.

I closed my eyes, comforted by the warmth of his muscular frame. He had one arm

around my shoulder and the other draped around my waist. A girl could get used to this.

“You okay?” Rafferty asked, his breath warm against the back of my neck.

“Yeah, you?”

“I’m afraid my arm may fall asleep. The one under you.”

“What can we do about that?”

“I could roll onto my back, and you could sleep on top of me,” he said. “I think that would be more comfortable for both of us.”

“Yeah, okay.” The idea of sleeping on Rafferty’s chest made my eyes sting with unshed tears. Why? I had no idea.

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He rolled to his back, and I shifted, splaying myself over his large frame. Instinctually, one leg wrapped around his as I nestled into his chest.

“Can you hear my heart beating?” Rafferty asked softly.

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’m afraid it’ll give me away.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m holding a beautiful woman in my arms, and I’m only a human. You feel way too good.”

“You feel pretty good too.”

“All right, then. We have that established. Let’s go to sleep before we get into further trouble.”

Trouble sounded good right then. Very good. But like the good girl I’d always been, I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

I blinked awake slowly, dawn light filtering pale and soft through the frosted cabin window, aware of the warmth of someone’s body next to me. Rafferty. We’d made it through the night. Why had it felt like the best sleep I’d ever had?

Rafferty’s arm rested around my waist, his breathing a gentle rhythm. I shifted just

slightly, careful not to wake him, as I escaped from the cot and strode to the window. The frigid morning air seeped immediately into my bones. I glanced back at him, taking in the sheer beauty of the man. Those thick eyelashes and angular cheekbones. Locks of dark hair mussed.

How had I kept my wits about me last night? I turned back to look out the window.

A layer of snow lay pristine under the gray sky. Two feet at least. The storm had finally passed, leaving a silent stillness behind.

I hugged my arms around myself. Dad, where are you?

I heard Rafferty waking and his feet hitting the floor. “How bad is it?”

“Two feet. At least. But it’s stopped snowing, and I don’t hear any wind.”

He came to stand behind me. “We should eat a little something and head out right away. In case the snow starts up again.”

I nodded in agreement and excused myself to use the bathroom. When I returned, Rafferty handed me a granola bar. “Eat one and put one in your pocket, just in case it takes us a while to get back.”

“Good idea. Everyone’s probably worried about you. They’ll have no idea why they can’t reach you.”

“Yeah. I’m sure Mama’s been calling my phone every five minutes. We’ll get a team together to find your dad the minute we get cell service.”

“Okay, yes.” Even as I said it, I had a crushing dread wrap around me. If he had been out here, he was gone.

We ate breakfast quickly and drank full glasses of water. After Rafferty used the bathroom, we stepped outside. The trail we'd followed to the cabin was completely hidden now, buried beneath the thick snow.

"Do you have any idea where the trail was?" Rafferty asked.

"Yes, between those trees. I'll recognize trees as we go along. And we know to head down, which will take us to the foothills one way or another."

Beside me, Rafferty exhaled, his breath visible in the cold air. "We can do this."

I tugged my hood tighter around my face. "Let's do it."

He gave a single nod, and we took our first steps into the snow. Immediately, my boots sank deep, the cold wetness reaching nearly to my knees. It was slow going; each step meant lifting my leg high enough to pull it free of the drift before plunging it back down. But soon, I fell into a rhythm, the crunch and lift, crunch and lift, with Rafferty's steady presence right next to me.

The silence was absolute. The snow muffled everything, even our footsteps. Only our breaths, rising in puffs of white mist, broke the quiet as we trudged onward. Up ahead, the branches of a tall pine, heavy with snow, arched over the path like a natural gateway, its boughs drooping under the weight. "This is the right way," I said.

Rafferty grunted in agreement. "You okay, or do you need a rest?"

"I'm good for now."

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The exertion kept me warm, other than my exposed face. But if we kept moving, we'd be fine.

My feet sank with each step, sometimes plunging deeper than I'd expected. At one point, I stumbled, nearly tumbling forward. But Rafferty's hand shot out, steadying me, his grip firm.

A few minutes later, I slipped for the third time, nearly disappearing into a hidden snowbank. He came charging toward me, holding out his hand and yanking me to my feet.

"That was scary," I said.

"You're okay," he said. "You're tough." When I looked up, his face was close to mine, his eyes warm and reassuring.

They anchored me. Gave me the courage to keep going. I nodded. "I'm ready."

We continued down the hill, one foot at a time. Finally, as we rounded a bend, I caught sight of my father's ranch down below, the roof and the outline of the barn barely visible beneath thick piles of snow. I stopped and bent over my knees, breathing heavily, frightened of what awaited me.

Rafferty paused beside me, and when I glanced at him, he was looking down at me with tenderness. "We'll find him. One way or another. I'll stay with you every step of the way."

“Thank you.” I felt a sudden, overwhelming wave of gratitude for this man who had been my companion for almost twenty-four hours. He’d never complained or wavered. Steady as they come.

Without thinking, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders in a quick, grateful hug. “I couldn’t have made it without you,” I whispered, near tears.

His arms hesitated, then wrapped around me, our puffy coats a barrier between us. “Whatever you need. Whenever you need, I’ll be here. You won’t be alone.”

“Thank you.”

Together, we turned toward the ranch, each step bringing us closer to home and the truth of what had happened to my father in the worst storm we’d ever witnessed.

As we reached the edge of the property, something caught my eye. Near the barn—something dark and out of place against the blinding white.

A flash of red-and-black flannel.

I stopped, my breath freezing in my throat. Rafferty followed my gaze, and he sighed and cursed under his breath. There was no doubt. It was my father half-buried in snow, his form slumped, still, almost swallowed by the drifts around him.

“No, no, no,” I whispered. Somehow, my legs carried me forward, yet stumbling as I tried to run. I fell, then got back up. One foot in front of the other, I told myself. Stay calm. Rafferty reached him first. He fell to his knees beside my father, feeling for a pulse we both knew would not beat.

I finally got to them, plunging into the snow to kneel by my father’s body. I pressed my hands to his cold, unmoving shoulder. His face was pale, his eyes closed, the

faintest shadow of a peaceful expression frozen there.

“Why was he here?” I asked. “How did we not see him?”

I pressed my hands to his chest and then his grizzled face, unable to tear my gaze away. He was gone. There was no life left to witness in his corpse. How he’d ended up here, so close to the barn and yard we’d combed over, I couldn’t begin to understand. And yet here he was, lying in the snow as if he’d simply sat down and fallen asleep.

Sobs racked my body, tears hot against my frozen cheeks. “Dad, what did you do? What did you do?”

6

RAFFERTY

While we were cocooned away at the cabin, I’d been able to convince myself that Mr. Collins would be fine. I wasn’t sure how, obviously, but I’d had faith that he’d somehow found his way back to the house without getting as terribly disoriented as Arabella, and I feared he had. However, seeing his dead body lying in the snow left little doubt. He’d indeed wandered off somewhere and had not found his way back to safety before the storm. His skin was pale, and his lips tinged with that unmistakable blue that told me he’d been dead for hours. Most likely, the entire night.

Watching Arabella sob over his body brought tears to my own eyes. Regardless of how he’d treated her, he was her father. She’d given up her entire future to come home and take care of him. She’d loved him. I wasn’t sure if he’d been capable of returning it, but that wasn’t the point.

I reached into my pocket to pull out my cell phone to see if we had service. We did.

There were countless calls from my mother, brothers, and my nurse. They'd obviously been worried. I'd call them in a moment, but I had to contact the sheriff first.

I placed my hand on Arabella's back. She flinched but looked up at me. The pain in her eyes made my chest ache. "We need to call the sheriff. Is it all right if I do that now?"

She nodded, her face crumpling as she turned back to her father.

I stepped a few paces away and found Sheriff Winthrop's contact in my phone. Sadly, I had it in my favorites. He was usually the first call I made after the death of one of my patients. He answered right away, sounding raspy and exhausted as if he'd been up all night.

"Rafferty? Are you all right? Your mother's been a wreck."

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“Yes, I’m fine, but I have bad news,” I told him as succinctly as possible what had transpired, including searching for Mr. Collins before becoming disoriented in the storm. “We were headed up the mountain, thinking he might have wandered that direction when the storm strengthened. There’s a log cabin up there, and we thought maybe he’d gone there for shelter. We barely made it. Fortunately, we did and sheltered for the night. But he wasn’t there. We came down the mountain this morning, hoping for the best, but our worst fears were realized. He must have gotten lost and unable to return home before the storm. He’s dead. Fallen near his barn.”

The sheriff cursed softly and then said he’d be out as soon as he could. “They’re plowing the major roads now. I’ll tell him to clear Collins’s driveway as soon as they can so I can get in there. May take over an hour, so hang tight. You know the drill. Leave the body as is.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Call your mother.”

“I’m on it.”

“Once I document everything, we’ll get the funeral director out there. I don’t want Arabella to worry about any of that, okay?”

“I’ll stay with her, don’t worry.”

“I’ll see you soon, son.”

I hung up and returned to Arabella's side. "Sheriff's on his way," I said.

She had remained huddled over his body, shaking from cold and shock. I wanted to take her inside and get her warm, but I knew she'd never leave him. In situations like these, I typically only played the part of a small-town doctor. But in this case, Arabella was my friend. I'd been intimately involved with his care for a year now. Even though she and I hadn't seen eye to eye on his care, at the moment, all that was forgotten. This was a person I'd known all my life—a nemesis, yes, but a classmate just the same. After the last twenty-four hours, our relationship had shifted into a deeper understanding of each other. Spending time together as we had, nearly dying ourselves, had created a bond. Or at least it had for me. Thus, I was unsure what to do next. Did I remain by her side? Give her space?

While I contemplated all of that, I called Mama. She answered on the first ring.

"Rafferty?"

"Hi, Mama. I'm fine. And I'm sorry I worried you." I explained everything, including finding Mr. Collins. "The sheriff's on the way out here now."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry for Arabella. Is she all right? Of course, she's not. Dumb question. What can we do?"

"Maybe come out here once they take him away? I don't want her alone, and I'll have to get into work at some point. I'm calling Ruth next to see what I missed yesterday and if anyone's critical."

After we hung up, I called my nurse. Ruth also expressed relief I was safe. "Thank God. I was worried sick."

Once again, I went over the last twenty-four hours. She went through what I missed

the day before, which were mostly canceled appointments because of the storm, and said that so far, no one had called in with any emergencies. “I called out to the Morris’ yesterday to see if you had arrived. She told me you hadn’t shown and hoped you’d gone home.”

“How are they?”

“Mother and baby are doing just fine. If you can get out there today, I’m sure they’ll be grateful, but there’s nothing to worry about. The baby’s eating, and Mrs. Morris is recovering nicely under the care of her husband.”

I sighed with relief. I’d not been particularly worried about a perfectly healthy mother and baby, but one never knew when complications might arise. Fortunately, in this case, all was well.

By the time I hung up, the sound of the snowplow headed down the Collinses’ long driveway broke the silence of the morning. I returned to Arabella, who looked up at me as if she hardly recognized me. She was in shock.

“Can I talk you into going inside and getting warm while we wait for the sheriff?”

She stared at me blankly. “What’s that noise?”

“Snowplow. They’ve come out so the sheriff can get down the driveway.”

“Oh, right. Of course.” She remained by her father’s side, though, as if I hadn’t asked the question about returning to the house. I didn’t ask again, simply resigned myself to waiting with her.

About fifteen minutes later, the sheriff’s SUV appeared on the driveway. Soon enough, Winthrop and his deputy had parked and were headed toward us. I helped

Arabella to her feet and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, holding her against my side. She leaned into me, resting her head against the side of my arm.

Sheriff Winthrop and his deputy, McCall, approached quietly. Winthrop nodded to me, giving a brief but respectful look in Arabella's direction. "I'm sorry for your loss, Dr. Collins. Please forgive the formalities, but I'll have to follow protocol."

"I understand," Arabella said.

He began by observing the scene, his gaze lingering on her father's still form half buried in the snow, recording notes in his small notepad. McCall stood by, keeping a respectful distance but making sure no one else would disturb the area.

Winthrop took out his camera and started to document, snapping photographs in quick succession—the body's position, the blanket of snow around him, the heavy drifts that had hidden him from sight until now. He paused to note the snow depth and the clarity of the air after the storm, his jaw tight as he worked.

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Turning to me, he asked in a low voice, “What time did you find him?”

“It was five minutes to eight,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. “It took us about an hour to reach him from the time we left the cabin.”

He nodded, jotting it down, then looked to Arabella. His eyes softened, and he kept his tone gentle. “I know this is difficult, but I need to ask—was there any reason he’d have gone out in the storm?”

Arabella didn’t answer at first, and I was about to tell him it could wait, but she cleared her throat and spoke barely above a whisper. “Not that I know of. He’s suffering from dementia, and his behavior is unpredictable. He’d had a rough morning, including confusing me for my mother.” She paused. Would she tell the sheriff he’d hit her?

“Tell him everything,” I said gently.

Arabella cleared her throat. “Like I said, he was having a hard morning.” She described making his breakfast and how he’d tossed it onto the floor and then hit her.

“Was this a common occurrence?” Winthrop asked.

“Do you really need to know that?” Arabella asked.

“I’m afraid so. It helps us to understand how this happened.”

She nodded. “Dr. Moon can attest to his state of mind the last few months. But yes,

his violent moments were coming more frequently. It was the first time he'd mistaken me for my mother."

"What time did you arrive, Rafferty?"

I explained the reason for my visit and the time I'd shown up. "Just to check on him, but when I got here, Arabella explained that the heater had gone out. I suggested I take a look."

"That's right. Rafferty and I went down to the basement to check on the furnace. The pilot light was out. When we got back to the kitchen, Dad was gone. The door was slightly ajar. I panicked. He'd wandered off before, but I'd always been able to find him. But this time, he was nowhere to be found. We scoured the property, then the barn, and then found footprints that led into the forest... but a little ways up the hill, it was like he simply vanished... I thought maybe he'd decided to go up to the cabin. He didn't usually go up there, but he was acting so strange that it was all I could think of."

"That's when you headed up the mountain and into the woods?" Winthrop asked.

Arabella nodded. "We got all turned around, and we couldn't see anything. By some miracle, I found the cabin. My dad wasn't so lucky."

Winthrop offered her a brief, sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, Dr. Collins. I truly am. Would you like me to call the funeral home? They'll come out and take care of everything."

Arabella started to cry and merely nodded consent.

"May I take you inside now?" I asked her quietly. "You've got to be half frozen by now."

“Not until they take him,” she said.

While we waited, McCall and Winthrop wandered around the property, presumably trying to piece together what had happened. From what I could see, we might never know.

When the funeral director arrived, I stayed by Arabella’s side while they transported Mr. Collins’s body into the hearse. When the back of the hearse closed, she clung to my arm as if her legs might give out. Even through our thick jackets, I could feel her shaking.

“I’m going to leave and give you some peace,” Winthrop said quietly to us once the preparations were complete, his tone kind but formal. “Your father was a hardworking man. Independent old cuss. They don’t make them like that anymore. I’m truly sorry for your loss.”

“Can you think of nothing else to say about him?” Arabella asked softly.

“I didn’t know him well,” Winthrop said, sounding apologetic. “But he raised you, so he must have been a heck of a man.”

“Thank you,” Arabella said. “He was difficult. Hard and often cruel.” She touched her fingers to her cheek where he’d hit her the day before. “Still, he was my father. The only family I had.”

Winthrop placed a hand on her shoulder. “You have a whole town who loves you. And the Moon family, they’ll look after you.”

“I suppose they will,” Arabella murmured.

“You take care of her, Dr. Moon.”

“Will do, sir.”

Winthrop gave a final, respectful nod before signaling to the director, who murmured his gentle condolences.

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When we could no longer see the end of the black car, Arabella agreed to go inside.

I remembered the broken furnace the minute I walked into the frigid house. Arabella seemed to be in some kind of trance, shrugging out of her jacket and putting on a pot of coffee. Without any idea of what to do in a situation like this, I sat at the table feeling helpless. By the time the pot had brewed, Mama and Pop arrived. Thank God. Mama would know what to do.

“That’s my parents,” I said. “They insisted on coming out.”

“It’s nice of them to come.” She spoke woodenly, still seeming as if she were not really connected to her body.

I went out to greet them as they were climbing out of Pop’s truck.

“How is she?” Mama asked.

“Not good. But she’s glad you’re here.” I led them into the kitchen, where Arabella sat at the table with her head bent over a steaming cup of coffee. She looked smaller than she had yesterday.

Mama headed right to her, gently touching Arabella’s shoulder. She looked up, her face pale and eyes rimmed with a tired red.

“How are you holding up?” Mama asked softly, her voice thick with warmth and concern.

Arabella swallowed, managing a thin, shaky smile. “I think I’m still in shock.” She paused, looking down again. “He was out there all alone. I should never have let that happen.”

“We were in the basement,” I said. “The furnace wasn’t working.”

“And when we came up, he was gone,” Arabella said. “He died by himself. Probably scared and feeling betrayed. He always said I was selfish. I guess he died thinking so.”

Mama pulled out the chair beside her and took her hand. “Whatever he said or didn’t say, you must not think that way about yourself. You gave up so much to come home and take care of him.”

Pop moved to the table and took the chair across from Mama. “This isn’t your fault.”

Arabella looked up, her expression a mixture of relief and sorrow. “There were too many times over the last few months that I was so angry and hurt...I thought terrible things. Maybe I made this happen.”

“Nonsense,” Mama said. “Listen to me. I know a little about men who treat the women in their lives like dirt. I was married to one. My first husband was a mean, vindictive man who let his bitterness about his life dictate his every action, and my father wasn’t much better. I know he was your father, but that doesn’t mean you have to love him unconditionally. You love him with what you have and let go of the rest. I can tell you this—I had to work through a lot of feelings I had about my own father after he passed. It’s not easy to admit that the person who raised you hurt you more than loved you. However, the truth is the truth.”

“But it doesn’t mean you don’t wish things had been different,” Pop said.

Arabella's lips pressed into a thin line. "Strangely enough, I kept hoping he'd tell me how proud he was of me. Or something kind. Just one thing. But it never came. I don't have one nice story to share at his funeral. How tragic is that?"

"He was all locked up inside," Mama said. "For whatever reason, he couldn't let himself show emotion or love."

"Some men simply cannot say what they feel," Pop said. "Especially men of his generation."

"Yes, my husband's the exception," Mama said, smiling over at Pop.

"I know it isn't the same, but we're awfully proud of you," Pop said. "Both you and Rafferty. The two of you have given so much to our community already. You hold on to that. To what you know is true. You're an outstanding person who we're proud to know."

Arabella dipped her head. "You're too kind. Thank you."

Mama stroked her hair. "What can we do?"

"I have to get him buried. I've no idea what he wanted other than to be buried in our family plot."

"Something simple, then?" Mama asked. "You don't have to have a traditional funeral. We can do a graveside service with just a few people there. Or no one but you and the preacher, if that's what you want."

"Burials are for the bereaved," Pop said. "Which means you can have whatever you want."

“We’ll help you make all the arrangements,” Mama said. “When my husband died, my friend Iris took care of everything. I was too shattered to do much of anything.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Arabella said. “I can’t stay here. Not tonight.”

“For one thing, the furnace is broken,” I said.

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“You’ll stay with us,” Mama said. “I insist.”

“I don’t want to live here anymore.” Tears traveled down Arabella’s cheeks. “I’m going to sell this house and property come spring. There are no good memories here. I just want to be done with it.”

“Maybe build that cottage you want?” I asked. “Like you said last night?”

She looked over at me, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Mama and Pop exchanged a look but didn’t say anything. If they noticed the new warmth between us, they didn’t acknowledge it.

“I’m free,” Arabella said. “I’m actually free. Is it terrible I feel relieved?”

“Not terrible at all,” Mama said. “You’ll have feelings of grief and relief all rolled together. It’s impossible not to.” Mama stood, brushing the front of her jeans with her hands. “Have either of you eaten?”

We answered at the same time. “Granola bars.”

“All right, let’s get you packed up,” Mama said. “And then we’ll take you both home and give you a good meal.”

Mama held her arms out to me. “My sweet boy. Thank God you’re all right.”

“I’m sorry I worried you,” I said, hugging her tight.

“It’s all right now,” Mama said against the fabric of my shirt. “Everything’s going to be just fine.”

7

ARABELLA

I packed what I thought I would need for a week, figuring I could come back if I needed to. Before I could think too much, I headed back downstairs, where Rafferty waited. His parents had gone on ahead, but he’d offered to stay until I was ready. His presence downstairs while I tossed clothes and toiletries into my suitcase, kept me from completely breaking down.

By noon, I was at Stella and Jasper’s home. Stella showed me into the guest room, with its adjoining bathroom. She’d already put new towels out for me and said she’d put fresh sheets on the bed. After Stella left to give me privacy, I freshened up a little and ran a brush through my hair. When I went downstairs, Rafferty and his mother were in the kitchen. Stella had made sandwiches and fresh lemonade.

“Are you hungry?” Stella asked when I appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Not really, but I should eat something. I have a lot of decisions to make.”

I’d been to Stella and Jasper’s several times over the last few years. They had an elderly and very spoiled cat called Willa, whom they were exceedingly fond of, as well as a newly adopted mutt from a shelter in Bozeman named Humphrey. I’d come out to visit Willa recently as she’d had an abscess on one of her paws. I’d gotten her fixed up in no time, but Jasper in particular, had been nearly frantic. He loved that cat. They’d found her hiding in their shed one winter morning years before and had brought her inside, nursing her back to health.

Humphrey seemed to remember me because he rose from his bed near the breakfast nook to come say hello. Perhaps he sensed my confusion and sadness because he pushed against my knee with his nose.

“Hey, Humphrey,” I said, kneeling beside him. “How you doing, bud?”

He wagged his tail and licked my hand. I wasn’t entirely sure what kind of mix he was, but I suspected some kind of terrier mixed with a lab. Regardless, he was a sweet little boy with fluffy bangs over brown eyes and a sweet smile.

“Come sit,” Stella said. “Is a turkey sandwich all right?”

“That sounds nice.” Stella’s elegant kitchen always smelled of a combination of bacon and cinnamon apples. Jasper had remodeled it for her not long ago, and it was absolute perfection. I loved the soft, muted blue cabinetry, accented with glass-fronted doors and a large and classic farmhouse sink beneath the window. Exposed wooden beams across the ceiling and wide-plank wood floors gave it a bit of a nostalgic feel.

Stella placed a pile of sandwiches on the island. Rafferty retrieved several plates from one of the cabinets and set them side by side next to the pitcher of lemonade.

I joined Rafferty, sitting on one of the industrial-style stools next to him. My mouth was so dry it felt as if my lips were stuck to my teeth. I thirstily drank from the glass of the cold, slightly sour lemonade. It seemed life-giving, that lemonade. Like everything else about Stella. What would my life have been like if she had been my mother? I would never know.

I had a sudden, intense longing for my mother. If only I knew where she was.

“Where’s Jasper?” I asked.

“He ran into town to pick up a few things for dinner,” Stella said. “We weren’t expecting guests.”

“I really don’t want to cause you any extra work,” I said, feeling bad.

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“Nonsense. We’re glad you’re here. I’ve already talked to the funeral director.” Stella remained on the other side of the island. “I told him you weren’t sure what you wanted yet but that we’d get back to him. He said to take your time.”

“This is going to be expensive, isn’t it?” I asked.

“More than it should be,” Rafferty said. “Such a racket.”

Stella shot him an annoyed look. “That’s neither here nor there at this point. It is what it is, and we need to help Arabella figure out what she wants to do, not go into a rant about the funeral business.” She spoke with a humorous lilt in her voice, but Rafferty clearly got her point as he humbly nodded and returned to his sandwich.

I’d been thinking about the funeral on my way over to Stella’s and had decided to do only a graveside service. I said as much to Stella and Rafferty now before taking a bite of the sandwich. Although it tasted like sawdust in my mouth, I knew it was best to eat something. After the harrowing twenty-four hours I’d just experienced, I needed to keep my energy and strength up.

“I’ll call him again after you eat,” Stella said. “But he mentioned the coffin. You’ll have to decide which one you want. Which means we’ll have to go into the funeral home.”

I sighed, feeling tears prick the backs of my eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

“I’ll take you,” Rafferty said. “If you want.”

I glanced sideways at him. His expression was so earnest and sweet it almost set me off crying again, but I held it together. "I'd like that, thanks."

We finished up our sandwiches, and then Stella sent me upstairs to take a shower and change clothes. Rafferty said he'd go home to do the same and come back to get me in an hour. Stella promised to call the funeral home director to let him know we'd be in to choose a casket and make the rest of the arrangements sometime that afternoon.

Fifteen minutes later, I got into the hot shower and scrubbed and washed my hair with more vigor than necessary, as if I wanted to wash death away. When I finished, I turned off the water and donned the fluffy robe Stella had hung in the bathroom. A wave of grief hit me, and I collapsed onto the floor. I wrapped my arms around my knees and wept.

My father was gone. I'd never hear his harsh criticism again. He'd never again call me the nickname I hated. I tried to think of a fond memory of him that didn't include a stinging remark or violent outburst but couldn't muster a single one. How sad was that? A man whom no one would miss, not even his daughter? It was not a legacy anyone would want. Yet it was the truth.

We buried my father on an afternoon so bright and cold I had to wear sunglasses. The irony of such beautiful weather was not lost on me. Not only had he perished in a snowstorm, but he'd been the opposite of light.

As I'd requested, the service was held graveside, with only the Moon family and a few men of my father's generation. The old men stood at the back of the gathering, heads bowed respectfully. I knew at least one of them had had several altercations with my father over the years. Yet he'd come out to pay his respects, which touched me.

Our pastor had asked me if there was anything specific I wanted him to say about the

dearly departed. After some soul-searching, I'd asked him to speak about my father's love of his land that had been in our family for generations.

The cemetery was quiet, save for the faint whistle in the pines and the occasional chirp of a bird braving the cold. Our family plot was set on a small rise overlooking the foothills. Buried here were my grandparents and great-grandparents. A small tombstone marked the burial place of my father's only sibling, who had died during infancy.

A forgotten memory rose to mind as I stood there, looking at the gleaming coffin. He'd brought me out here one Sunday afternoon when I was about thirteen or so. Although he hadn't often attended church, he had that day. After the service, he'd dragged me out to the cemetery to pay his respects to his mother and father.

"This is where you'll lay me to rest someday." He'd knelt to wipe a few leaves and debris from the top of the tombstones of each of his parents. He'd paused at the grave of his little brother. "Samuel was only six months old when he died. My mother went to get him from his cradle, and he wasn't breathing."

I'd cried at the thought of the tiny baby and his mother. My father had seen my tears and straightened, a harsh shimmer in his eyes. "My mother never got over it. Stopped living the moment she found out he was dead. She was like a ghost after that, was until the day she died. The old man, well, he just wandered out to the barn and never came back."

"He left?" I asked, thinking of my mother.

"Not physically, but he may as well have—nasty man. Never had much to do with me. Once, he told me I was an albatross around his neck. I was so ignorant I didn't even know what that was. Had to ask my teacher at school what he meant. Once she told me, I knew where I stood."

I thought of that now as the pastor opened his Bible to begin. Dad had grown up without love or affection. He'd passed that legacy right along to me. How could I possibly have a husband and children and not do the same? Was it in my blood? Cruel men who stayed. Weak women who left, one way or the other.

The pastor—a stooped, gray-haired man who'd known my father since they were kids—cleared his throat and looked out at us, his face a blend of compassion and stoicism.

"Harold Collins was a man who loved his land. Land that had been passed down from multiple generations. He was of this place, rugged and rough, strong and resilient. Despite the hard times that came his way, he kept on. He was not a man of many words, but his actions spoke volumes."

Yes, they did, I thought, touching my gloved fingers to my cheek that no longer bore the bruise of his last gift.

A breeze picked up, tossing a lock of my hair across my face and sticking to my lip gloss. I tucked it back behind my ear and kept my gaze on the casket.

The pastor went on, "He understood the beauty and the harshness of this place, and he lived his life with a fierce loyalty to it. In this modern world, where young people change jobs and locations as easily as the wind changes directions, Harold Collins stayed where he'd walked his first steps, devoted to the stewardship of place. Surely, there is beauty and grace in such a thing. I hope it will give his daughter peace in the days to come."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. My father may not have loved me, but he did love the land beneath his feet, with its untamed beauty and brutal winters. Was there peace to be found? I wasn't certain. All I knew was that he was now free of the burdens this life had brought him. And I was free of him.

The pastor paused, drawing in a breath before he quoted from the book of Psalms: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

A weight pressed down on my chest, heavy and bittersweet.

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At last, the pastor nodded and murmured a final blessing, his words soft as he commended my father's spirit to the heavens. I stepped forward, pulling a single red rose from my coat pocket. For a second, I paused, staring down at the casket.

"Goodbye, Dad. May you rest in peace." I laid the rose gently on the polished wood and sobbed. I cried for the way he'd lived and the way he'd gone out, choosing hate over love every time.

I wiped my damp eyes and turned away from the coffin. My gaze found Rafferty's. I fell into those eyes of his, letting his warmth and compassion wrap around me. He reached out to me and I went to him, letting his strong arms engulf me, taking comfort from his support.

He held my hand as we walked across the snowy ground back toward the cars. We'd not bothered with a fancy farewell for my father. No motorcades or fuss for Harold Collins. I suspected he approved.

Rafferty held the door for me, and I got into his truck. He stood for a moment in the space between the door and seat, tugging at the seat belt and reaching across my legs to buckle it around my lap. "You okay?"

I nodded, peering up at him through my damp lashes. "I'm okay."

He brushed a cold thumb over my cheekbone. "It's almost over. And I'm here."

"I know. I know you are."

How was it possible that it was Rafferty Moon I wanted to comfort me?

I paused for a moment, looking up at the brilliant blue sky, and breathed the cold, crisp air into my lungs as if it were life itself. Since I was a small child, my father's presence had been a guiding force in my life. Not for good. Instead, his influence had created self-doubt and worry, qualities as thick as tar. But I was no longer under his dark web. I no longer had to take in his lies and make them true. From now on, I could follow the light. Forge a path in time that brought light to others. And in doing, bring light to my soul.

I would be like Stella Moon. Not Harold Collins.

It was a choice, I realized. We did not have to be sentenced to repeat the sins and mistakes of our ancestors. I'd been given a new way forward. A path that would no doubt be as winding as any other, yet the difference was—I could choose my own way. His mocking, cruel judgments no longer had to live within me, coloring my choices or what I saw in the mirror.

I was Dr. Collins. Not Pudge Collins.

Wisdom teaches us to honor the dead, but not in all cases. In this particular one, I could choose to let him go without sadness. I could choose myself.

Stella and Jasper had graciously offered to host a simple event after the graveside service. At first, I'd declined, thinking I would not be in any shape to receive condolences. In the end, however, I'd agreed. Now, as I sat near the fire in the Stella's living room, with the Moon brothers and their wives mingling, enjoying tea sandwiches and warm beverages, I was glad I had. Regardless of how I felt about my father, this day was for me. I could take in the love and comfort from those who cared about me. There was no reason to be alone. Not anymore.

Jasper had ushered me over to sit on their comfortable sectional arranged around the gas fireplace. Even in my current state, the room soothed my jagged emotions. The high, vaulted ceiling with exposed wooden beams and natural light streaming in through large windows were too pretty for such a sad occasion. This was a room for family celebrations, not a day like today.

Rafferty came by to check on me, refilling my teacup and reminding me to nibble on a sandwich or two before heading over to talk to his father.

Annie and Atticus came by to give their condolences, apologizing that they couldn't stay long, as their baby boy was waiting for them at home with a sitter.

"We're so sorry," Atticus said. "About everything that happened. I hope you know it wasn't your fault."

"I'm starting to," I said. "Your mother's been helpful that way. She's so kind."

"We're lucky," Atticus said. "She's very fond of you. I know it gives her joy to be of service to you."

"Yes, and please let us know if you need anything. Anything at all," Annie said, flashing her movie-star smile.

"I'm okay," I said. "But thank you. Staying with Stella and Jasper has helped tremendously. I couldn't stay out there alone. I'm not sure how I can go back."

"Understandable," Atticus said.

"Get it on the market," Annie said. "If that's what you want. Start fresh in your own home."

“You’re planning on staying?” Atticus asked.

“Bluefern’s my home, even if my father’s falling-down ranch house isn’t. And I have my practice now. I wouldn’t want to leave.”

“Even though you wanted nothing more than to get out of here?” Atticus asked.

“Isn’t it ironic?” I asked. “You, me, and Rafferty, so anxious to get out of here, are now back.”

“For me, I knew I wanted to get back to my family,” Atticus said. “I was away long enough.”

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I'd been brought home by family, too, but for different reasons.

"I hope we can provide comfort in the months to come," Annie said. "You're part of our community, and everyone loves you."

I thanked them, touched by their words. As tragic as it all was, I felt greatly comforted by the Moon family. What would it be like to be a Moon for real?

To be Rafferty's wife?

Whoever it was and wherever she was, I felt jealous. I knew for certain he would never choose me, but I had this strange longing since we shared the cabin. A yearning to be with him. All day. Every day.

What had happened to me up there?

Atticus and Annie excused themselves, and I sat alone for a moment, sipping my tea and wishing I had something stronger. This had been a day. But what could I expect?

Elliot, who was about to give birth at any moment, had managed to make it to the funeral and was now at the gathering. Caspian kept a close watch on her, I'd noticed. Again, a twinge of jealousy poked at me. What would it be like to have a man look at me the way Caspian did his wife? Elliot came to say goodbye, wrapping her arms around me, her round tummy between us. "You hang in there. And let me know if you want to talk."

"Thanks for coming and bringing the cookies."

“It’s all I could think to do,” Elliot said.

Somehow, although greatly pregnant, Elliot had made tiny sugar cookies with raspberry filling. She’d remembered how much I enjoyed them when she served them with a dollop of ice cream at the restaurant last month. As the pastry chef of the Moons’ dude ranch, she never failed to delight her guests with her rotation of delicious concoctions.

Finley came by next, her sweet face crumpling slightly before she embraced me. “I know a little of what you’re feeling, having recently buried my sister. She and your father made it hard to love them, yet we did anyway.”

Finley’s twin sister had struggled with addiction and died in the most traumatic of ways, right in front of her eyes. I’d admired her for how courageously she handled such a blow, especially because her sister had done so many horrific things to Finley over the course of her life.

“That’s right. Still, I feel strangely...untethered,” I said.

“Yes, I know all about that too.” Finley smiled kindly before wrapping me in another hug. “I should go, but call me if you need anything.”

Soren, her husband, lingered behind to give me a hug. He was remarkably less grumpy than he’d been before he fell in love with Finley. “You’re family, you know that, right?” Soren asked. “You reach out if you need me.”

If I hadn’t before the last few days, I certainly did now. “I do, yes.”

Sammie and Thad approached, sitting down together on the couch next to me. “We wanted to say how sorry we are,” Sammie said.

Thad reached over to squeeze my shoulder. “It wasn’t right—what happened. I wish there was something someone could have done.”

“Rafferty and I tried,” I said. “And almost ended up dead in the process.”

“We’re glad you’re both okay. That was a long night waiting to hear,” Sammie said softly.

Sammie’s little girl, Chloe, came running up, throwing her four-year-old arms around my legs and placing her cheek on my knee. Children were like dogs. They always knew just what a person needed.

“How’s your kitten doing?” I asked Chloe.

“She’s good.” Chloe’s mouth curved downward into a frown. “But she’s big now.”

“That’s good. That means she’s growing up just right.”

Thad scooped Chloe onto his lap and kissed the top of her head. “Chloe’s been taking excellent care of our new family member.”

“We should go and leave you in peace,” Sammie said. “Please reach out when you’re ready for a girls’ night out. We can let down our hair, so to speak.”

I promised to do so, then watched as the family of three headed toward the front door.

My father’s old cronies had come by next. They said a few perfunctory things about my father before excusing themselves.

This left just Stella, Jasper, and Rafferty. Stella and Jasper were in the kitchen, presumably cleaning up, but Rafferty came over with a bottle of wine in his hand.

“You ready for something stronger?”

“You read my mind.”

He poured us each a glass and sat on the couch. “Mama and Pop are putting everything away. Are you hungry at all?” He gestured toward the uneaten plate of ham and cheese sandwiches he’d dropped off earlier. “You haven’t eaten anything. You need to keep your strength up.”

I didn’t feel like eating, but to take that anxious expression from his face, I reached for one and took a bite. He did the same, washing it down with a swallow of wine.

“What can I do?” Rafferty asked. “Ask me for anything. Whatever it is you need, I’m here.”

“Kiss me.”

What had I just said?

Rafferty’s eyes widened, and he went slightly pale. “Kiss. You?”

“That’s what I said.”

8

RAFFERTY

If I hadn’t heard it with my ears, I’d have never believed it. Arabella Collins had just asked me to kiss her. I sat stunned for, I don’t know how many seconds, staring at

her, my heart pounding hard in my chest.

“We’ve already spent the night together, so why not?” Arabella asked, clearly trying to make light of her request.

But I didn’t want her to pretend it was nothing. A throwaway. A joke. I wanted to believe it was true. Arabella wanted me to kiss her.

And I wanted to. Desperately. The feel of holding her in my arms during our night in the cabin had worked its way permanently into my nervous system. Or perhaps tattooed into every inch of my skin?

I scooted to the edge of the couch, cupping my hands under my chin, trying to think of what to say. Or do. Arabella snuggled into one corner of my mother’s sectional and gazed down into her lap. She’d discarded the tall black boots she’d worn to the burial and sat with her bare legs folded beneath her. A black knit dress showed off her slender figure. Her hair was down around her shoulders, shining under the soft lights. No one should look that good on the day she buried her father.

In fact, I’d thought earlier how wrong it was for me to notice how pretty she looked on the day of her dad’s funeral. I’d felt like a bad person. I felt even worse right now because my thoughts were not chaste. Or empathetic for her circumstances. I wanted to touch her, kiss her, run my hands through that glorious hair.

“I’m sorry.” Her cheeks flushed the color of a Honeycrisp apple. “I don’t know what I was thinking. It just slipped out.”

“Don’t apologize. I...” What was I exactly? Should I tell her how much I’d like to kiss her? Or how I couldn’t stop thinking about her?

“You’re what?” She shifted just her eyes, keeping her chin dipped close to her neck,

as she looked over at me.

“How honest do you want me to be?”

“Completely. Even if it hurts me.”

“It won’t hurt you. I don’t think so, anyway. The fact is, I’d love to kiss you. I’ve been thinking of nothing else but you and feeling terrible about it since you’ve just laid your father to rest. I’m a bad person.”

“No, I don’t think so. In fact, you’re a really good one. An honorable man. A man who has been a rock for me these last few days. And yes, I want you to kiss me. I didn’t intend to ask you, but I don’t know. I’m not myself today. Obviously.”

“It shouldn’t be today.”

“What shouldn’t?”

“The first time I kiss you shouldn’t be the day you put your father to rest. I don’t want those two things mixed together in your mind.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re too important to me.” I twisted my hands together, trying to find just the right words to tell her the truth. In the last few days, I’d started to imagine a future with her, which was too early for me to say. “Because if we’re to kiss, after all the years of competing with each other and thinking we didn’t like each other, it has to be perfect. It cannot be tainted by the sorrow of this day. Do you understand?”

Tears flooded her eyes. “I do. I do understand.”

“Tomorrow is a new day. A fresh day. Maybe the day that will become the anniversary of our first kiss. The first of many.”

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“Who knew you were such a romantic, Mr. Moon.”

“You bring it out in me.”

She unfolded her legs and scooted closer to me, then cupped my face in her hand, looking into my eyes. “You are and will always be the man who helped me look for my father. That will never change. You will always be tied to these last few days. Your family, too. But that doesn’t mean my feelings for you or any of them will be tainted. It’s the opposite. Seeing how you’ve all surrounded me and supported me has touched me in ways I could never express. I’ve felt like I have a family. I don’t know how you Moons do it—just exuding love. Giving it so freely. Like it isn’t something to hold back like my father did.” Tears ran down the sides of her face, making a trail through her makeup.

“Here. Take this.” I handed her the tissues I’d been carrying around in my jacket pocket all day in case she needed them.

“Thank you.” She dabbed at her cheeks and under her eyes. “I can’t seem to stop crying. Not only from grief but gratitude. For you. And your family. But most of all for you. I don’t think I could have gotten through all of this without you. Truly.”

“My family may not be perfect, but we do know how to love. And I would do anything for you. All you have to do is ask.”

“Kiss me? Now. Today.”

I reached over to run a finger through a tress of her long brown hair. It was as silky as

I remembered from our night together. And the scent. My God, it was enough to make a man swoon. “Are you sure?”

“When we were walking out of the cemetery, I had this strange feeling of being reborn. This was the first day of the rest of my life. I know, it sounds so trite, but it’s true.”

“So, what you’re saying is that our first kiss would be on the first day of the rest of your life.”

She laughed softly, playing with the sleeve of my shirt. “Do you think I’ve lost my marbles?”

“If you have, then so have I.” I played with another lock of her hair. “It’s nice to hear you laugh.”

Today had been filled with enough sorrow to last a lifetime—Arabella standing in black, shoulders squared but clearly carrying the heaviness of grief. And now, here she was beside me, her presence warm and unguarded. She wanted me beside her. How could it be?

I traced my finger along her full bottom lip. “You’re so very beautiful.”

“Do you know what it feels like to hear that from you?” Her voice was no more than a whisper, raw and low. Full of longing.

The same longing I felt.

“It’s true. Everything I’ve said is the truth, even though it makes me feel so vulnerable.”

“We were enemies for a long time. This is scarier because of it. They say trust isn’t built overnight.” She smiled. “But they’re wrong. Whoever they are.”

“They were wrong. I’m sorry the night we spent together was so filled with worry and dread. All tangled up in grief.”

“That sounds like a country song.” She looked at me, an intensity in her gaze that held me captive. “I’ll be the subject of your country song any day of the week.”

“If I had any talent, I would write you a song every day. As cheesy as that sounds.”

Arabella held my gaze, her own eyes steady and unwavering. “If you wait much longer, I’m going to lose my nerve and run away.”

Her words hung between us, softening something in me. I really hoped she was right. We didn’t need to wait for something flawless and unburdened. She said this was a new day beginning for her. It could be the beginning of the best thing that ever happened to me.

Slowly, I reached up, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face. My fingers lingered at her cheek, feeling the warmth of her skin. She closed her eyes, leaning into my hand, a small surrender that pulled me in closer. I watched her, heart pounding as if I were standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting for that final push.

I pressed my lips to hers with a softness I didn’t know I had in me. It was tentative, gentle, and as she responded, I felt everything—her warmth, her grief, the strength she’d carried all day—all of it was there for me to take in, savor, and heal. She pulled me closer, her fingers in my hair, kissing me with what felt like her whole heart. I gave her mine in return.

When we finally broke apart, I rested my forehead against hers, breathing in the quiet

of the moment. The fire crackled, the warmth of it blending with the warmth between us.

“Were you right?” I murmured, the words barely escaping my lips. “Will the memory of today be something else too?”

“The day the man of my dreams kissed me for the first time?” She closed her eyes, her hand resting on my chest. “The first day of the rest of my life? I would have to say so.”

9

ARABELLA

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

The day after the funeral, thankfully, was a Saturday, so I was only on call, as opposed to seeing patients. That morning, Rafferty had encouraged me to go out to my father's house and begin the process of preparing the house for sale. Stella had called a Realtor friend of hers who had promised to come out on Sunday afternoon to take a look. Before I gave the whole process over to a Realtor, I wanted a chance to look through some things in the attic. My father had never allowed me up there. He said it was because of safety reasons, but I always had the feeling there was more to it. If I were to sell the house and get rid of most of the contents, I wanted to make sure I knew what was up there.

I shivered as I stepped into the dusty attic, the chill slipping in from the tiny window on the far wall. The air was thick with the smell of mothballs and old wood. Boxes upon boxes were stacked neatly, like some archive of a life I barely understood. I took a steadying breath, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear, readying myself for the task of sorting through my father's things.

I didn't know why I felt so nervous, but as I looked around, the shadows stretching across the dusty floor, a strange prickling feeling crept up my spine. I was about to find something important.

After a few minutes of moving boxes, my eye caught a small wooden chest wedged between an old suitcase and a broken lamp. It was unremarkable in every way—just an old, plain box with metal latches that had begun to rust. My heart started to beat a little faster as I pulled it out.

It's something in here.

I set the chest on the floor and knelt before it, brushing off the dust. The latches squeaked as I pried it open, lifting the lid to peer inside. It appeared to be a keepsake box—there were newspaper clippings, several notebooks, yearbooks, and a few photographs. At the bottom of all that, a stack of envelopes in varying sizes were bound together with a blue ribbon. I forgot everything else when I saw how the envelope was addressed. To me. And the return address? My mother.

Sally Collins

254 Oak Lane

Missoula, Montana

I flipped through the envelopes with postage dates that spanned over years but were always mailed on the same day, exactly seven days before my birthday. There were fourteen in all. All sealed, untouched. Unread.

“What is this?” I whispered, barely able to breathe. I ran my fingers over the envelopes; their edges softened over time.

I sat back, feeling a strange mix of anticipation and disbelief as I held the bundle of letters in my lap. Each one marked a year, a birthday I’d spent here, under my father’s roof, completely unaware that somewhere out there, my mother had thought of me, remembered me, and written to me. And he’d hidden them. He’d hidden all of them.

My throat tightened, and I felt the sting of tears as I held the cards, my fingers tracing over her neat, precise handwriting. How could he have kept these from me? The very thought seemed unthinkable, a cruelty I couldn’t comprehend. Taking a shaky breath, I untied the ribbon, letting it fall loose around my hands.

A ribbon. He'd bothered to tie them all together but not give them to me?

What have you done?

With trembling fingers, I carefully opened the first envelope, dated for my fifth birthday. Inside was a card, bright and cheerful, with a cartoon puppy wearing a party hat and holding a cupcake in its mouth. The text on the front read, "Happy Birthday to You!" in playful letters.

My Sweet Arabella,

Happy fifth birthday. I hope you're smiling and laughing today and that you have a cake with sprinkles and candles to blow out. If I could be there, I'd hold you tight and never let go. Every day, I miss you with all my heart, and I dream of the day when I might see you again.

Please know that I love you, always and forever. Keep that close, my brave girl.

With all my love,

Mom

The words blurred as tears stung my eyes. I had no memory of my fifth birthday, no recollection of cake or candles. In all likelihood, my father wouldn't have allowed me to have a party. Maybe a cake? But when I searched my memory, it was nothing but blank space.

There were similar cards and messages for my sixth, seventh, and eighth birthdays.

The one she'd sent on my ninth birthday featured a beautiful illustration of a forest and a cozy cabin in the background. A few deer and birds added a whimsical touch,

and the text on the front read, "For My Beautiful Girl on Her Special Day." Inside, she'd written:

Happy ninth birthday. It's hard to believe you're growing up so fast! I think about you every day, wondering how you're doing and what you're interested in and wishing I could see it for myself. Until we meet again, I have only my imagination, thinking of you growing up good and strong. I'm proud of you, Arabella, wherever you are and whatever you're doing. I carry you with me always.

Be happy, beautiful girl.

With all my heart,

Mom

I closed my eyes, feeling the weight of her words. She'd wanted to see me, to know me. She'd been holding me in her heart even though I'd thought she'd forgotten me.

The letter for my tenth birthday came with a lighthearted card featuring a cartoon owl wearing glasses and perched on a branch. The words read, "Look Whoooo's Turning 10!" I smiled through my tears.

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Dear Arabella,

Double digits! You're growing so fast. I hope this year is full of adventure and happiness for you. I wish I knew all the details.

I've no idea if your father lets you open these, but I feel compelled to share with you a little about my life now that you're old enough to understand. I've started volunteering helping recovering addicts. Aiding others struggling with addiction has filled my heart in a lot of the empty spaces. Not all of them, of course. The empty place in my heart is for you and you only.

I've met a wonderful man named Jacob and we're getting married in a few weeks. I wish you could be there.

I imagine you're having a big-girl party this year. Maybe skating or a movie with your girlfriends? I hope they're nice and not mean girls. I knew a few of those back in my day. Whatever you're doing, I hope you're showered with love.

With endless love,

Mom

I could imagine her picking out the card, smiling at the idea of me reaching this "big" milestone. It was a small connection, but one I clung to.

The next letter, for my eleventh birthday, came with a sweet card featuring a mother and baby fox cuddled together, surrounded by tiny flowers. The words on the front

said, “For a Wonderful Daughter.” I traced the edges of the illustration before reading her message inside.

Happy Birthday, Arabella! Wishing you a great year. You’re always in my thoughts and my heart on this day and every day.

I have some very big news to share, something that feels almost like a miracle. This year, I had a baby boy. His name is Daniel. He’s sweet and quiet, kind of like you were as a baby. When he’s old enough, I’ll tell him all about you. He will always know he has an incredible big sister and that someday, God willing, he will meet you. I wish with all my heart that you could be here with us, that we could be a family together.

Daniel’s birth has reminded me that there is always hope, always a chance to rebuild. I know it’s been a long time since I left, and I regret every day that I had to make that choice. But please know, Arabella, that you will always be my first baby—my bright and beloved girl. I think of you every day and hope that someday you’ll find your way back to me.

With all my love,

Mom

A younger brother. I had a brother. Have a brother. I felt a strange ache in my chest, a longing mixed with sadness. She had a new family, yet she’d wanted me to be part of it, too. Even from far away, she’d kept me close.

For my thirteenth birthday, she’d sent an elegant card with a watercolor illustration of wildflowers and butterflies, a touch more mature. The front read, “Celebrating You.”

Happy Birthday to my amazing daughter! I am so proud of the young woman you’re

becoming. I'm always cheering you on from afar. I long to see you, to know you. I have no doubt the reality would be even better than my imagination.

Daniel is talking now, running around on chubby legs and getting into everything. I thank God every day for my sobriety so that I can be the mother for him I never had the chance to be for you.

I hope your thirteenth year is full of laughter and fun. Having known you for your first three years, I have no doubt you do very well in school. I could tell how smart you were from the moment I looked into your eyes.

I'm not sure you get these cards. If you do and if you ever want to write back, please know that I welcome any word from you with a grateful and open heart.

With endless love,

Mom

The words felt different now, more reflective, almost as if she were starting to see me not as a little girl but as a young woman. A new ache formed, thinking of all she'd missed and all I'd never known.

The card for my fourteenth birthday was simple but sweet, with a watercolor image of two birds perched together on a branch, surrounded by delicate blossoms. The words on the front read, "Happy Birthday to Someone Very Special."

Dearest Arabella, happy birthday! I imagine you're growing more wonderful and wise each year. I think of you every day, wishing I could know the young woman you're becoming.

Life here is good, steady, and filled with hope. I've had another child. A boy named

Michael. He's feisty and mischievous. I'm in trouble with this one! I've continued to volunteer and also have started a new career that I'm very excited about. I wish I could tell you all about it.

Know that you're loved deeply and truly, forever and always.

With all my love,

Mom

The card's gentle tone and words filled me with a strange mix of comfort and sadness. Each year, her words seemed to reach out, trying to make up for the distance, to offer the love she couldn't give in person.

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For my fifteenth birthday, the card showed a misty forest path leading to a warm glow in the distance, like a sunrise or the end of a journey. The front read simply, “Thinking of You on Your Special Day.”

Inside, her handwriting was as neat and careful as ever.

My dearest Arabella, happy birthday. I’m writing this on a quiet morning, watching the sunrise, thinking of all the moments I wish we could share. I hope this year is full of joy and that you’re surrounded by people who love you.

So much time has passed. So many years that we’ve had to live apart, and yet I carry hope with me every day. Hope that one day we’ll have the chance to know each other again, to make up for all the lost moments. I’ll always be here, waiting, whenever that day comes.

You are and always will be my heart. I love you.

Mom

For my sixteenth birthday, the card was simple, with a soft image of clouds parting to reveal a glowing sunrise. The words on the front read, “For a Beautiful Young Woman on Her Special Day.”

My Dearest Arabella,

Happy sixteenth birthday! Today, I want to share the story of the night you were born, a memory I’ve held close to my heart ever since.

It was a stormy, wild night—the kind where the wind howls and the rain feels like it's battering down from every side. I remember holding on to the armrest as we drove through that storm, watching the lightning flash across the sky and feeling both terrified and excited, knowing I would meet you soon.

We barely made it to the hospital. Your father cursed the entire ride into town, and I remember thinking—I hope the baby can't hear his harsh tone. The roads were nearly flooded, and for a while, I worried the doctor wouldn't make it in time. Your father left me there to drink at the bar, but I had a wonderful nurse who stayed with me. Most fathers during that time were with their wives, but your father was not that kind. But you, my beautiful baby girl, arrived with a strength and certainty all your own that night at 9:17. At 8 pounds, 3 ounces, and 21 inches long, you seemed like a miracle in my arms. You had long, thick lashes and a shock of dark hair, the softest I'd ever felt, framing a face so peaceful and sweet it took my breath away. I'd heard before that the moment you look into your baby's eyes, you fall madly in love. That was certainly true for me. From that day on, you were my whole heart.

The storm raged on outside, but in that room, holding you, I understood my purpose for the first time. To be your mother. I promised I would always love you fiercely, no matter what came our way. But I let you down. I let a drug become my life when it should have been you.

I'll never forgive myself for losing you. I'll never stop hoping that someday I'll see you again.

I hope this story brings you a little closer to me, wherever you are, and that you know how deeply I cherish the memory of that night.

Each year on your birthday, I buy myself a chocolate cupcake and light a candle, saying a prayer for my baby girl. Wherever you are or whatever you're doing, I ask God to watch over you.

With all my love, now and forever,

Mom

The card for my seventeenth birthday was understated, with an illustration of a single blooming flower against a soft blue background. The text on the front read, “Happy Birthday to My Daughter.”

Inside, my mother’s handwriting was carefully composed, as if she’d thought over each word before setting it to paper.

Dearest Arabella,

Happy, happy birthday! Seventeen—another year closer to adulthood. I think about you every day, wondering who you’ve become, hoping you’re safe and happy.

This year, I want to tell you the story of how I met your father and what happened between us. I have a feeling he won’t have shared it with you, so here goes.

We met when I was still in high school. I was sixteen, a shy girl from a strict, religious family. I loved school. I’d been chosen for the lead in our high school play, and it was as if I’d found my calling. Your father saw me in that play and pursued me, even though he was ten years older than me. As you’re aware, he was the son of a local ranch family that went back generations. He was handsome and brooding, and I remember thinking he was the most intriguing person I’d ever met. Looking back, he had no business courting a teenage girl, but that’s the sordid truth. No one in my life protected me from him. I thought I was madly in love with him, but I know now it was only infatuation and my need for love. My family was steady but cold, and I yearned for love. When he paid attention to me, it felt like being seen for the first time. After a lot of therapy, I realize that he was basically a predator, and despite my parents’ so-called Christian beliefs, no one bothered to help me.

I had a scholarship to college and wanted to study acting, hoping someday to move to New York City and try to have a career in the theater. But when I found out I was pregnant with you, my life changed overnight. When I told your father, he insisted we get married right away. I'd just turned eighteen, so it was legal. We went to the courthouse, and it was done.

As you might imagine, my family did not take the news well. They were strict and had high expectations. When I told them I was married and pregnant, they were enraged and beyond disappointed. They told me they never wanted to see me again. My mother was the hardest to lose. She never spoke to me again, despite my attempts to reconcile.

To make matters worse, she passed away when you were only a year old. It's one of the deepest sorrows of my life that she never got to meet you. I wish she could have seen how precious you were, how much light you brought into the world.

In those early years, I realized that your father didn't want me to have anyone else in my life. He liked me isolated, dependent only on him. It was easier that way, easier to keep me close, easier to keep control. And slowly, over time, I lost my voice, my freedom, until I felt like I didn't know myself anymore. He used more than just his fists to keep me under. His words wounded me in ways that never healed.

I tell you this not to hurt you or to speak ill of him but because I want you to know where you come from. I want you to understand that you have a strength in you that is all your own. I hope you can use that strength to live freely, make your own choices, and follow the dreams that are yours alone.

I hope you're surrounded by love on your birthday, doing something you enjoy.

With all my love, now and always,

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Mom

Finally, I reached the envelope marked for my eighteenth birthday. The card was more sophisticated, with an elegant tree on the front and the words Happy Birthday.

Inside, she had written the longest message of all, one that held truths I hadn't known I'd been searching for.

Dear Arabella, today you turn eighteen. It's a special birthday, one where you're growing into yourself and seeing the world through new eyes. And because of that, I feel it's time to tell you the truth.

As I'm sure you know, I left when you were three. I know that must be hard to read, but I want you to understand why. Back then, I was struggling. It started when I broke my leg in three places after your father pushed me down the stairs. What was supposed to be a temporary painkiller became a killer in a whole different way. Soon, I found myself in a dark place, a place I didn't want to be in but couldn't escape from. I was addicted and not strong enough to ask for help.

One night, your father found the pills I'd bought illegally. I confessed that I'd become reliant upon them and didn't know how to stop. I told him I'd been getting the pills from some shady people. Your father was not forgiving. He gave me a choice—leave town and never come back, or he'd turn me into the police. He wanted to protect you, he said, from a drug-crazed lunatic. It crushed me to leave, but I was in the throes of addiction and not thinking right. So, I agreed. I left.

Leaving was the hardest choice I ever made. At the time, I was so strung out and

afraid I wasn't capable of making a rational decision. It is no excuse, but your father's threats frightened me. I thought you would be better off without me. It took me another two years after I left to finally get help and get sober. When I finally woke up from my drug-induced oblivion, I realized it was too late to try to get you back. I hoped and believed you were better off without me. But I never stopped loving you. I'm here now, waiting and hoping that one day you'll find me. My porch light is always on.

Since I got help, I'm proud to say I have never once relapsed. I recently earned my fifteen-year chip. I've spent every day of my sobriety helping other addicts in one way or another. I wish I could tell you it feels like the good guys are winning, but every day I wake to another person who's lost their life due to opioids. Still, I keep on fighting. Despite everything, I've never lost my will to try to make the world better and to give back.

I have a life that's meaningful and filled with love. But nothing—no place or purpose—has ever filled the part of my heart that belongs to you.

Now that you're old enough to decide on your own whether I'm worthy to be in your life, I wanted to reach out one last time to tell you I'm here if you ever want to reach out. That said, I won't blame you if you want nothing to do with me. I hated myself for what I did to you. I still do. Forgiveness of others seems easier than it is for myself. But if you can forgive me, now that you're an adult, you can reach me at this number. 423-555-1785.

With all my love forever,

Mom

As I read, tears streamed down my face. I'd spent so many years thinking she had chosen to leave me. That she'd disappeared, not wanting to be found. But I'd had it

all wrong. He'd abused her and then sent her away. How had I not suspected this of my father? He'd proven himself cruel my entire life. Why wouldn't I have at least asked questions?

And why had my father left these in a box instead of just tossing them out when they arrived?

These were questions I would most likely not get answers to.

I hugged the letter to my chest, feeling the ache of both what I'd lost and what I'd found. Somewhere, she had been waiting for me, hoping I would understand. And now I had to try.

I closed my eyes, pressing my lips together as it all sank in. This woman, who had disappeared from my life without explanation, who I'd been told wanted nothing to do with me, had remembered me every single year. Every single birthday. She had cared. More than cared. She'd loved me desperately.

I ran my fingers over the words, wondering what her hand looked like as she wrote. Did she have painted nails? A favorite hand lotion?

The truth was clear to me now. My mother had been forced to leave. Her addiction, the threats, my father's ultimatum—all of it unfolded in painful detail on the page.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I whispered. "I'm sorry he stole you from me."

As if she could hear me.

I hugged the last card to my chest, pressing it against my heart, reeling, scrambling to make sense of what I'd just read. The sadness and desperation in the words on those pages crippled me. How hard it must have been for her, knowing I was only hours

away but not able to see me. She must have been terrified of my father to have stayed away after she got sober. She'd stopped writing after I turned eighteen—given up, thinking I didn't want to hear from her. Or perhaps she'd predicted my father would never have shown them to me, accepting that it was a fight she could not win.

The tragedy of that rendered me inconsolable. I rocked, still holding the card, and let the tears come. In my state of shock and grief, I tried to conjure an image of her before she'd been taken from me, but nothing came.

It was Rafferty's voice that pulled me back to reality.

"Arabella?"

"I'm in the attic," I yelled down to him.

I heard his footsteps on the stairs as he came up to the attic. He stopped in the entryway when he saw me sitting there, probably tear-streaked and definitely still clutching the card to my chest.

"Arabella? What is it?"

"My mother."

Rafferty crossed the room, crouching beside me and picking up one of the envelopes and looking at the name and address. "Sally Collins. These were from your mom?"

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“Birthday cards,” I managed, my voice breaking. “They came every year, but he kept them from me. They were all unopened.”

“Why would he keep them?” Rafferty muttered under his breath.

“He tied them up with that ribbon and put them in this box. I can’t understand it.”

I handed him the card in my hand. “This is the last one. It explains why she left.” I found the one she’d sent on my seventeenth birthday and handed it to him. “But read this one first. It explains why she married the bastard in the first place. He’s a predator. She was only sixteen.”

He sat beside me and opened the card she’d sent on my seventeenth birthday, then read the last one. His expression changed from sadness to anger, his neck flushing red. Then he raised his gaze to mine. “No one looked after her. They should have protected her from him. She was sixteen. My God.” He rubbed his cheeks as if he wanted to wake a muscle. “And then he pushed her down the stairs. Her addiction was because of him.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I know.” I started to cry again.

Rafferty pulled me onto his lap and held me, his chin placed atop my head. Despite my grief, I could practically hear his mind sorting over what he’d just learned. “Do you want to try to reach her? We can try calling the number she wrote down. Just to see if anyone answers?”

“I don’t know if I’m ready.” I needed time to process everything and to come to

terms with the facts. In addition, I needed to prepare myself. She might not still be alive. “If she’s moved or changed her number or...whatever...I don’t know if I can face the disappointment.”

He stroked my hair. “Whatever you want, baby. Whenever you want, this is nearly impossible to take in.”

“There’s more stuff in there,” I said. “In the box. Will you help me look?”

“Yes, let’s do it together.”

Together. Rafferty was here for me. No matter what I found inside.

10

RAFFERTY

Arabella crawled out of my lap and knelt near the box. First, we found several articles from the now-defunct local paper. The Bluefern Star had closed about ten years previous, unable to compete with the digital world. But before that, the paper had covered all local events.

Arabella held one of the articles aloft. “This is about a production of Our Town at the high school. My mother’s in it. She played Emily.” She thrust it toward me. “Sally Nixon. That’s her on stage.”

I looked down at the article. Indeed, the photograph was of a young woman with dark hair and big eyes wearing a costume reflecting the early 20th century—a woman who looked remarkably like Arabella. The writer of the article was complimentary of the cast but especially of Sally Nixon, who played Emily Webb.

I read it out loud. “Miss Sally Nixon, who played Emily Webb, was remarkably good, bringing this crusty old writer to tears several times during the play. We have a little star right here in Bluefern. I’m sure I’m not alone in wishing this young woman good luck when she graduates in the spring and goes to the University of Montana to study theater.”

“I had no idea she wanted to be an actress or that she was the star of high school plays.” Arabella took the article from my hand, clearly reading it again.

We dug through the rest of the box. There were report cards and several essays written by a young Sally, with A-plus marks on the top of the page. Journals from various ages with the same neat handwriting dated back to the mid-80s. I scanned the first page of one but quickly discarded it, feeling as though I was spying on a teenage girl. Of what I read, it was a typical diary of a teenager, talking about friends and a boy she liked but was too shy to even say hello to.

Next, Arabella pulled out a yearbook. “Look at this.”

My mother had yearbooks from high school as well, but she was older than Arabella’s mother by four years, so they were not the same ones I was looking at now. How strange, though, that Mama and Sally Nixon had endured the same fate—getting pregnant and marrying right out of school, giving up their college dreams in exchange for living with a monster.

“Have you ever asked my mother about Sally? She might have known her.”

“No. I did what my father wanted me to—act as if Sally Nixon never existed.”

My chest tightened, thinking about Sally and the abuse she must have endured while married to Collins. Robbing a woman of her child was perhaps the greatest cruelty one human could do to another.

“What a horrible man he was,” Arabella said simply.

We opened one of the yearbooks and quickly found Sally’s senior year photograph, as well as photos of her from several more school plays.

“She’s only fifty,” Arabella said. “Unless she went back to drugs, it’s very likely she’s still alive.”

“Agreed.” I wanted to pick up the phone and call immediately, but knew it was not my choice to make.

“Why did my father keep all this stuff? Was he going to share it with me at some point and then changed his mind?”

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“I can’t understand it,” I said. “I’d have thought he’d have tossed them in the fire.”

Arabella picked up one of the journals and opened it to the first page but closed it just as quickly. “She was fourteen when she wrote in this one. I can’t look. Not until I know if she’s alive or not.”

“It does seem invasive. Like a voyeur.”

“Exactly.” She touched my face with the tips of her cold fingers. “Thank you for being here. You’re so wonderful. Do you know that?”

I smiled and covered her hand with mine before bringing it to my mouth for a soft kiss. “You’re pretty wonderful yourself. Let’s take a break from this and have a sandwich.”

“Your mother’s coming by soon to help me figure out what to do to get this place on the market. Maybe she’ll remember something about Sally.”

I helped Arabella gather the cards and put them in the right envelopes. She then tucked everything back into her mother’s keepsake box, carrying it down to the kitchen.

While I made her lunch, she sat hunched over the small table, reading the cards again. They made her smile, then tear up, then smile again.

My mother arrived a few minutes later. She walked into the kitchen, unraveling her thick scarf, her sweeping gaze taking us in, as well as the box on the table next to

Arabella. “You found something of interest in the attic?” Mama asked in a tone that made me marvel at her intuition.

“You won’t believe it,” Arabella said.

“She found a box with some of her mother’s things.” I described the newspaper articles and yearbooks. “And there are birthday cards to Arabella every year since she turned five.”

“You should read the last two,” Arabella said, pulling them from the bottom of the stack and handing them to her.

Mama read for a second before she gasped and put her hand over her mouth. When she was finished with both cards, she handed them back to Arabella and took a seat at the rickety old table. “What do you want to do?”

“I guess I’d like to call the number and see if anyone answers. But it’s been fourteen years since she sent this.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“Later today,” Arabella said, sounding resolute. “After we meet with the Realtor.”

“She’ll be here any minute,” Mama said.

No sooner had she said that than the Realtor’s car pulled in front of the house. “You two stay inside where it’s warm,” I said. “I’ll go out to greet her.”

Maisie Templeton was around my mother’s age and had been in business for as long as I could remember. She knew the territory better than most. I felt hopeful she could advise Arabella about the market and what we needed to do to get the house ready.

I hustled over to open her car door, offering my hand as she plunged boot-clad feet into the snow.

“Hello there, Dr. Moon.” Maisie smiled warmly and gave me a hug.

“You’ve known me my whole life. I think Rafferty is just fine.”

Maisie’s hazel eyes sparkled behind attractive, thick-framed glasses. She wore her silvery hair in a spiky, short style that suited her. As long as I’d known her, she’d always dressed impeccably. I could remember noticing her panache when I was in high school and vowed to be that way someday myself.

“Tell me before we go in—how’s Dr. Collins holding up?”

I offered her my arm as the walkway was slick. “She’s all right. But motivated to sell, that’s for certain. There are a lot of bad memories for her here.”

“I’m assuming the house needs some work?”

“Yeah. Honestly, it needs a full gut job. Which we understand will affect the selling price. Regardless, Arabella doesn’t want to spend the time or money fixing it up before selling. She wants this done as soon as possible.”

“That’s fair.”

We were on the porch by this time. I opened the door and waited for her to pass through before following.

After we had Maisie and Arabella settled at the table with sandwiches and mugs of hot tea, Mama and I excused ourselves to give them a little privacy. I needed to get to work, and Mama had errands to do.

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We walked out to her car, and I reached down to open her door, but she put her hand on my arm to stop me. “What’s going on with you and Arabella? I thought you two were enemies?” She raised one saucy eyebrow.

“Well, spending a night snowed in changed things a little.”

“So, it seems.”

“Truth is—I’ve got all kinds of feelings for her. It’s weird, Mama. But maybe I’ve always had strong reactions to her because she evokes so much passion in me.”

“Interesting.”

Typical Mama, waiting for me to tell her everything, which she knew I would. She’d done this when we were young, waiting us out until we confessed to whatever it was we had done or not done.

“We’ve shared a few intimate moments,” I said.

“How intimate?” Again, with a raised eyebrow.

“A few kisses. But this morning, when I found her like that, surrounded by all those birthday cards, a part of my heart broke for her. I wish I could do something to help.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea that she reach out to her mother?”

“I don’t think she’ll be able to keep herself from doing so. Do you remember her at

all?”

“Sally? Sure. But she was about four or five years younger than me, so I didn’t know her well. If I recall correctly, her mother was deeply involved in the church. I always got the feeling they were very strict with Sally. She had that look about her.”

“What look is that?”

“Kind of beaten down. Careful. Skittish. One time, I saw her in a play at the high school, and she really blossomed under the lights. It’s such a shame what happened to her. I had no idea what Collins did to her.” She shook her head sadly. “I know what it’s like to be kept down, treated as if you don’t matter. They all let her down, maybe most especially her mother. She should have been paying attention. Forbidden her to see a man ten years older.”

“She might not have known.”

“It’s possible. Teenagers can be sneaky. Regardless, what happened to her in this town where we’re supposed to look after one another is unforgivable. And pushing her downstairs and breaking her leg like that? He’s the one who should have been in jail.”

My cell phone went off, startling both of us.

“It’s Caspian,” I said. “I bet it’s baby time.”

I answered and didn’t even have time to say hello.

“Raff, the baby’s coming. We’ve been timing contractions, and they’re one minute apart. Can you come?” His voice was shaking, and he sounded as if he’d just run up the side of a mountain.

“Mama’s with me. Should I bring her too?” Caspian and Elliot had asked for a home birth, which I’d reluctantly agreed to. I didn’t love the idea, but it was their choice.

“Yes, that would be great. I’m a wreck. Please hurry.”

“We’re on our way.”

When Mama and I arrived at Caspian and Elliot’s house, we let ourselves in through the back door. We found Caspian and Elliot in the guest bedroom, where they’d planned to have the birth. I’d expected to see the doula they’d hired, but it was only the two of them. Elliot was sitting on an exercise ball, clearly between contractions. Caspian was pacing around the room muttering to himself.

Mama rushed over to Elliot. “What can I do to help?”

“Keep him calm?” Elliot gestured toward her husband.

“What happened to the doula?” I asked. They’d convinced me they’d rather have her than my nurse, which I hadn’t been thrilled about either, but again, I wanted to honor their wishes.

“She’s sick.” Caspian ran a hand through his hair. By the way, it stuck up on both sides of his head. I guessed this wasn’t the first time. “So, it’s just me, and apparently, I’m falling apart. No one told me she was going to be in this much pain.”

As if prompted, Elliot groaned and started panting. She fell to her knees, draping her arms around the ball. Mama dropped down beside her, rubbing her lower back. “You’re doing good,” Mama said. “Just keep breathing.”

Caspian gestured helplessly toward his wife, clearly at a loss. “Can you do something? This isn’t normal, is it? I mean, look at her.”

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“It’s totally normal for a birth without an epidural. The pain means everything’s moving along. You need to breathe, too.” I gripped his shoulder. “Think of this as another night in your kitchen. You and Elliot baked up something wonderful, and it’s about to come out of the oven. Haven’t you always told me that staying calm is your secret to success?”

“My beautiful wife did all the cooking in this case,” Caspian said. “But I get your point.”

“I’ll see how far along she is once she’s through this contraction. Can you get some ice chips for her?”

Caspian smacked his forehead. “Right. I forgot about those. God, I’m a mess.”

“It’s all right, Dad,” I said. “This is all new and scary, but you’re all going to be fine.”

“I’ll get the ice.” Caspian ran from the room.

After the contraction had subsided, I guided Elliot to lie back on the bed so I could check her progress. Mama sat on the edge of the bed, dabbing Elliot’s sweaty face with a damp cloth.

“All right, Elliot,” I said gently, positioning myself to examine her as I pulled on a pair of gloves. “Let’s see how close we are.” After a quick check, I glanced up and gave her a reassuring smile. “You’re almost fully dilated—just a little bit more to go. You’re doing amazing. I can’t believe you got this far along before calling me.”

“The birthing class went over all of it. Once they were one minute apart, we knew to call. I can do this, right?” Elliot let out a shaky breath, relief and determination mingling in her eyes.

“You’re doing it right now,” Mama said, stroking her hair. “It will all be worth it, I promise.”

Caspian burst into the room, carrying a glass of ice. “What did I miss?”

“I’m almost fully dilated,” Elliot said, giving him a tired smile. “Which means we get to meet our baby really soon.”

“Soon. Okay. Yeah. Totally ready.” Caspian shook the glass of ice. “And I’ve got these.”

Another contraction made the mother-to-be cry out in pain.

Caspian looked as though he might burst into tears. “I can’t take it.”

“Suck on one of those ice chips,” I said to my brother. “When she’s through this contraction, give her one. She’ll need a little hydration. We’re close.”

“Yeah, okay.” Caspian went to sit on the other side of his wife. When the pain had subsided, he gave her a small piece of ice and then stroked her hair. “You’re amazing, baby. So strong.”

“I’ll be glad when this part is over,” Elliot said.

The next fifteen minutes were a blur of contractions and breathing, with Caspian obsessed with serving her ice. At least it kept him busy. I’d never seen him so unsteady. I was only a little ashamed by how entertaining I found him.

I examined her again and was delighted to see she was fully dilated. “You’re at ten, Elliot. You ready?”

“I think so,” Elliot said, sounding weak.

“Let’s do this,” I said, grinning as I pulled on gloves. “Caspian, I want you to get behind her and wrap your legs on either side of her. And hold her while she pushes.”

“What? Really? Yeah, okay.”

Caspian climbed onto the bed behind her, wrapping his arms around her sides. He pressed his cheek against hers, whispering words of encouragement.

“I see the baby’s head,” I said from my quarterback position. I instructed her to push as soon as the next contraction came. Seconds later, she cried out but braced herself against Caspian and bore down as instructed.

“You’ve got this, baby,” Caspian murmured.

Elliot’s face glistened from the effort. Caspian’s arms remained around her as he murmured soft words of encouragement into her ear.

“All right, Elliot,” I said, keeping my voice calm and steady. “A few more should do it.”

Elliot nodded, determination flashing in her eyes as another contraction came. She took a deep breath and bore down, her grip tightening around Caspian’s wrists. The baby’s head emerged, and this time came all the way out. “We’ve got a head, people.”

Another contraction caused Elliot’s face to contort with the effort. Caspian was right

there with her.

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The baby's shoulders emerged, and I carefully guided and supported the tiny body out and into the world.

"One more, Elliot," I said, my own voice filled with excitement now. "Nice and easy. Half the effort as before."

She drew in a final, powerful breath, and with one last push, the baby slipped free. A tiny cry filled the room. I held up the little bundle, grinning. "It's a girl. You have a girl." Gently, I placed her on Elliot's chest, her small body wriggling as she took in the world for the first time.

"Oh my God, she's perfect," Caspian said, tears running down his face as he stared at their daughter with an expression of pure awe. He climbed out from behind Elliot, adjusting the pillows behind her.

Elliot only had eyes for her baby girl. She smiled and cooed. "Hello, little one. It's so good to meet you."

Mama leaned in, smiling down at the baby and then squeezing Elliot's shoulder. "A baby girl. I thought for sure it would be a boy. You did good, Mama."

"How does it feel to be a grandmother for the second time?" I asked.

"Third. Chloe's ours, too," Mama said.

"Right. Third then?"

“It feels like winning the lottery,” Mama said. “The most perfect gift.”

“Time to cut the cord,” I said. “You up for it, Dad?”

“I...I guess so. It won’t hurt either of them, will it?”

“I thought you said they went over everything in the birthing class,” I said, teasing.

“Caspian wasn’t the best listener if we’re telling the truth,” Elliot said, with a loving look in her husband’s direction.

Caspian shrugged. “I get distracted easily. And I’ve never been good at school. I’ll know how to do everything next time,” Caspian said.

“I don’t know if there’s going to be a next time,” Elliot said. “That was hard.”

“But you were a rock star,” Caspian said.

I offered him the sterile scissors used to cut the cord. His hands trembled slightly as he took the scissors from me, shifting so he could get a clear view of the cord connecting his wife to their child. With a deep breath, Caspian positioned the scissors carefully, jaw clenched as he brought them to the small, pulsing cord. With a gentle snip, the cord was severed, officially bringing their daughter fully into the world. He set the scissors aside, his eyes never leaving his little girl.

“Okay, time to deliver the placenta,” I said. “Caspian, take the baby.”

Caspian nodded, his eyelids reddening. Elliot placed her in his strong arms, and I watched a grown man melt into nothing but a heart. “Hey, sweetheart. This is your dad.” He kissed his daughter’s damp head. “Welcome home, baby girl.”

In no time at all, Elliot had pushed out the placenta. I almost laughed when I saw Caspian's look of horror at the sight. "People eat that stuff?"

"Not this person," Elliot said, closing her eyes.

"You're going to have to give the baby over to me for a few minutes," I said to my brother. "I'll get her cleaned up and weighed and make sure all is well."

"I'll help to get you all cleaned up and change the bedding, all that," Mama said to the new mother. "I'm not a nurse, but I had five boys."

"What do I do?" Caspian asked, his gaze following me as I gathered the infant against my chest. "I should do something."

Mama chuckled and handed him a damp cloth. "Here, honey. Wipe that sweat off your face. Then call your dad. He's also a nervous wreck, probably wearing a path through my new carpet, pacing back and forth. After that, get your wife a sandwich and some water. She needs to rebuild her strength."

"Make a sandwich. Now that's something I can do." Caspian leaned over to give his wife a kiss. "I thought I loved you as much as humanly possible yesterday. But I was wrong. You were spectacular. I've never seen anything like it. Thank you for giving me the greatest gift imaginable."

"You had a little something to do with it." Elliot laughed softly, barely audible over the sounds of the baby's cry. "And I love you too."

Caspian left, and I bathed the baby with a warm cloth while Mama worked on Elliot. Soon, both baby and mother were ready for the next steps: bonding and nursing.

"Eight pounds, three ounces," I said, looking at the scale the doula had dropped off

last week in preparation. “And twenty-one inches. She’s perfectly healthy.” I chuckled as I put a tiny diaper on my niece, then swaddled her in a soft cotton blanket and brought her back to Elliot. “You ready to try nursing?”

“I’m nervous,” Elliot said.

“Don’t be,” Mama said. “You’ll both know what to do.”

“Do you have a name?” Mama asked, gazing lovingly at the baby as Elliot positioned the baby on her chest. The baby immediately latched on, thank goodness. I was not about to handle my sister-in-law’s breasts not even in the name of medicine.

“Yes, we’re naming her Madeleine—after my favorite pastry.” Elliot stroked Madeleine’s tiny head as the baby suckled. “Not even a pastry can compare to this.”

“And just like that, you’re a mama bear,” Mama said, brushing stray hair from Elliot’s forehead. “Not much better in this life, I can tell you that.”

I thought about Arabella’s mother, how she’d had to leave her baby behind, and how it must have broken her heart.

Would there finally be a reconciliation? Justice and peace and last?

11

ARABELLA

Rafferty had texted me not long after he and his mother left the house that the baby was coming. As I waited to hear that all had gone as planned, I busied myself back in the attic, sorting through boxes and deciding most of the contents had been stored away for a reason. Nothing but junk.

I'd gotten through most of it when Rafferty texted again.

We have a baby Moon. Madeleine Moon has arrived healthy. Elliot's doing great, too. Caspian's a little shaky but really happy.

A slight wistfulness came over me. I wanted a baby. A family. Would I ever get one?

I drove back to Jasper and Stella's after I'd taken a load of trash out to the dump and then another to the donation drop-off. Maisie and I had come up with a plan and price that she felt would help move the ranch fast. She also gave me the name of a lawyer to hire to sort out any legal issues. I'd decided I wanted to keep five acres of my father's hundred-acre plot. If all went well, I'd have enough to pay off my student debt and take out a loan to have a house built.

Jasper was not there when I let myself in through the back door, having left me a note that he went to meet his new granddaughter but would be back before dinner. A minute or so later, Rafferty texted that he was on his way.

I sat at the kitchen island, staring at my phone. Should I call the number Sally had sent me? Should I wait? If it was bad news and she was deceased, I wasn't sure I could take it.

Courage. I had to at least try to reach her. If it was bad news, I'd just have to deal with it.

I paced back and forth, the phone clutched tightly in my hand. My heart raced, and I had to take a few steadying breaths before punching in the number I'd already memorized. The room was so quiet I could hear the hum of the refrigerator and the faint ticking of the wall clock, but all my focus was on each ring.

Finally, a voice picked up on the other end, soft and warm, though cautious. "Hello?"

I gripped the counter to steady myself. “Is this Sally Nixon?” My throat was so tight I could barely get the words out.

There was a pause, and I could feel her hesitation—a stranger’s voice calling her something that had long since been stripped from her life. “That’s my maiden name.” Her tone held a faint tremor of hope. “Who is this?”

I cleared my throat, forcing the words past the knot that had tightened there. “It’s...it’s Arabella.”

A soft gasp and then silence. I imagined her standing there, phone to her ear, perhaps a hand clutched to her mouth as she tried to process what I’d just said. What did she look like now? Was she well? Had her marriage to Jacob lasted? And what about my brothers?

“Arabella?” Her voice trembled, full of disbelief. “I’d given up. All these years...”

“I didn’t know where you were. Or that you’d written to me.” A mix of remorse and relief and nerves bubbled into a complicated concoction inside me. “My father died recently, and I’ve been cleaning out the house to put it on the market. This morning, I was up in the attic, and I found a box with some of your things—keepsakes from what I could tell. And there was this stack of cards. All unopened. The birthday cards. From you. He never told me you’d sent them. He never told me what happened.”

“I figured he wouldn’t.” The warmth in her tone gave way to bitterness. “But I had to hope that he might give you the birthday cards, even if he wouldn’t let me see you.” Her voice broke, and I could hear how she fought to keep from crying. “It was a silly hope, I suppose, knowing who he is. Or was. What happened to him?”

“He had dementia,” I said softly, my own throat tight with emotion. “And wandered away from home. He died in a snowstorm.”

“Oh, that’s awful. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He was...a terrible man.”

“Was he abusive to you? That was my biggest fear.”

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I wanted to lie to spare her feelings, but I didn't want to start our relationship with mistruths. "He was cruel to me when I was younger. Mostly verbal. An occasional smack across the face when I made him angry, but nothing serious. He never pushed me down the stairs, for example."

I heard her breath catch. "Thank God."

"He was the reason you got addicted."

"I've been sober a long time now," she said softly. "I'm proud to say so and proud of the work I did on myself. But I wish to God I'd never been prescribed those pills in the first place. Then I wouldn't have lost you. Maybe I could have taken you away from him. We could have moved away." The longing in her voice was palpable, a wound that had never fully healed.

"I have so many questions," I said. "About Jacob and my brothers. Michael and Daniel." Saying their names out loud felt a little like a prayer.

"Oh, they're great. All grown now. Twenty-one and eighteen. They're both at the university and live on campus, not far from here. Michael's more like Jacob, quiet and cerebral. Daniel's all me. Arty and sensitive."

"And Jacob? Is he well?"

"Oh, yes. We're very happy together. He's my best friend. Always supportive, even during hard times. Jacob healed a lot of the wounds your father gave me. I hope that gives you comfort."

“It does. The way he told the story—he told me you left because you didn’t want me. All these years, I’ve hated you. To know that you’ve had a good life makes... I feel a little better about believing his lies. I’m sorry I didn’t do more digging. Ask more questions.”

I heard sobs coming from the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” I said.

“No, it’s not your fault. The truth is the truth. Your father robbed me of my child. I’ll never forgive him, even though I’ve tried. As low as I got, God never gave up on me. Somehow, he reached me in my lowest moment. I was near death when I felt his presence so strongly. He wanted me to get better. He still believed in me. A few days later, I went to rehab, and I’ve stayed sober all this time.”

“I’m proud of you. It must have been hard.”

“Facing a sober life without you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. What about you, though? I want to know everything.”

“I want to tell you everything, but not over the phone. Would you want to meet in person?” I managed to ask, feeling that surge of courage I’d built up to make this call begin to waver.

“Oh my gosh, yes,” she said, her voice now bright with a new energy. “Would you like to come here? Meet your brothers and Jacob?”

I swallowed hard, a lump in my throat that hurt. “I can’t think of anything I’ve ever wanted more. I can be there tomorrow. Missoula’s about three hours away, according to my phone.”

“Tomorrow,” she repeated, sounding almost breathless. “I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“Is your address the same as the one on the cards?”

“No, we moved a few years after that to a house in the suburbs more suited to raising a family.”

A pang of jealousy struck me, but I set it aside. None of this was her choice.

She gave me the address, which I scribbled on a notepad left on the counter.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then. I can be there around two if that’s okay?”

“That’s perfect.”

“Is it all right if I bring someone with me? I have a special man in my life, and it would mean a lot if I could bring him with me.”

“You could bring a herd of elk and still be welcome in my home.”

I smiled at the thought of a herd of elk in the suburbs. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” Sally said.

After I hung up, I stood staring out into the dimming light of day, amazed at the turn of events.

I couldn’t wait to tell Rafferty.

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The next morning, we set out right at ten. Rafferty had been ecstatic when I told him the news, as had Jasper and Stella. I'd felt shy to ask Rafferty if he would go with me, but he seemed eager to join me.

It was close to two by the time we turned into the gated community in a wealthy area of Missoula. As we pulled up to the sprawling, tree-lined street, my stomach twisted into a painful knot. I felt breathless. My fingers tingled. "I think I may pass out."

"You'll be fine. Just breathe."

"Easy for you to say."

"True enough. This is it," Rafferty said, pulling into a circular driveway in front of a spectacular brick house with a wide porch and ivy that climbed up the front. "Nice place," he said.

"Yeah. Really nice." It was the kind of house I might have imagined for a happy family—if I'd ever dared to imagine one for myself. I took a deep breath, steadying my hands as I climbed out of the car. Rafferty came to stand beside me and took my hand as we walked up to the front entrance.

The double doors opened before we reached them, and there she was. My mother. I froze, taking in her appearance: slim, youthful, with a grace and beauty that felt achingly familiar. She looked like me, only older. Same sleek brown hair and a heart-shaped face. The same soulful eyes. Seeing her felt surreal, like glimpsing an image of myself through some warped lens of time. She wore a warm, hopeful smile, though I could see her fighting back tears.

“Arabella,” she whispered, stepping forward, eyes wide, as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“Hello.” My vision blurred with tears. I pressed my hand to my mouth, willing myself to keep it together.

“Your eyes are the same as the last time I saw you,” she said. “I would have known you had I seen you somewhere.”

“I look just like you.”

“Much prettier. May I hug you?”

“Yes, I’d like that,” I said.

Her arms wrapped around me, trembling. “I can’t believe it’s you. I’ve dreamed of this day for so long.”

I hugged her back, a strange sensation washing over me. Déjà vu? Memory? I don’t know. But she was someone I knew, one way or the other. She was my mother. “We’ve lost so much time,” I said.

“I know.” She pulled away, cupping my face. “My goodness, you’re so lovely. I’ve so many things to ask you.”

“I do too,” I said, my voice catching.

I suddenly remembered poor Rafferty standing a few feet away, giving us space. “This is my friend Rafferty. He’s from Bluefern.”

Sally reached out her hand, and Rafferty took it. “Would I recognize the name of

your family? I grew up in Bluefern. You know that, of course. I'm sorry. I'm so nervous."

Rafferty smiled one of his best bedside manner smiles. "It's understandable. My mother's name is Stella Moon, but before she married my stepdad, she was Stella Sharp."

"Oh yes, of course. I remember her. She had three little boys. You must be one of them?"

"I'm the third. There are two more after me," Rafferty said. "Five altogether. Our biological father was killed, and my mother remarried when I was nine. Jasper Moon adopted us, so we took his name. Arabella and I are the same age. We went to high school together."

"Mortal enemies," I said.

"We competed for top rank in our class." Rafferty flushed as he shot a glance my way. "We're no longer enemies. And all that hard work paid off for both of us. Your daughter is Bluefern's veterinarian."

Sally's face lit up with obvious delight. "I knew you were smart. And you were crazy for animals from the time you could walk."

"Rafferty's Bluefern's doctor," I said, a surge of pride warming my chest. "He came back to town to run a family practice about the same time I moved home."

Sally's eyes dimmed momentarily, but she quickly hid whatever it was that hurt her. "How wonderful. I want to hear every detail. Please, come in out of the cold. The boys are all dying to meet you."

Inside, the rooms were as beautiful as the exterior suggested—decorated in warm, earthy tones, with large windows that let in streams of natural light. Family photos lined the walls. I hesitated for a moment, taking in the progression of my brothers' ages through the years. Several were of my mother holding them as infants. A pang of envy made my chest ache, almost like the feeling of being homesick. They had been loved and cherished. That much was obvious.

What would I have been like had I grown up here with my mother?

She guided us into a formal living room. A nice-looking man with streaks of silver in his dark hair stood to greet us.

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“This is Jacob. My husband.” The pride and love in her tone were obvious, as was the shine that came to her eyes.

“Arabella, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Jacob stepped closer, holding out his hand and enveloping mine in a firm but gentle shake. “We’ve prayed for this day.” His eyes were a muted shade of blue, and his smile was warm and inviting. I felt instantly at ease.

“It’s nice to meet you too. Thank you for having us.”

“You’re always welcome here,” Jacob said.

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I turned to see two young men. Tall and athletic, they looked a lot like younger versions of their father.

“These are your brothers,” Sally said. “Daniel and Michael.”

The taller of the two, Daniel, stepped forward first, giving me a shy smile. “Hi, Arabella. I’m glad to meet you.”

“I’m glad to meet you, too. It’s hard to believe I have a little brother.”

“We’re psyched to finally meet you.” The younger of the two bounded forward, pumping my hand. “I’m Michael.” He had the energy of a black Lab puppy. “You look just like Mom.”

“I thought so too,” I said.

“Did you remember her?” Michael asked.

“I have memories, yes. Not a lot. Almost like little snippets of videos, if that makes sense.”

“Totally. I’m sorry about everything that happened.” Michael’s tremulous smile became a grin. “But you’ve made Mom really happy by calling. It’s a miracle. One we’ve been praying for.”

“You have no idea how much it means to hear that coming from you.” I smiled back at him, mesmerized by the charming warmth that exuded from his every pore.

Rafferty’s hand gently pressed against the small of my back, reminding me to introduce him to my brothers and stepfather. What a concept. I had brothers. And a stepfather. It was hard to stay grounded in the moment, as my thoughts jumped from thing to thing, like a bee in a meadow of flowers.

“This is Rafferty,” I said.

Rafferty stepped forward, shaking both boys’ hands before turning to Jacob to do the same. “Thanks for welcoming us into your home.”

Jacob spoke, his voice calm and genuine. “We hope you’ll make a habit of it.”

“Are you hungry? I made lunch,” Sally said. “And I have sodas or coffee if you’re thirsty.”

“Maybe in a bit,” I said. At the moment, I was way too nervous to eat or drink anything.

“Mom cooks when she’s nervous,” Michael said. “So, there are cookies too.”

“She makes really good cookies,” Daniel said.

Sally flushed with obvious pleasure at their compliments, which told me how loyal they were to her. Protective even. Yet they were welcoming me into their lives without hesitation. They had been loved unconditionally. I was not a threat to them because they felt secure.

“It must be weird to be here,” Daniel said. He was the quieter of the two but one who noticed what was happening around him. A quiet observer. Like me.

“Shall we leave the ladies to get better acquainted?” Jacob asked. “Rafferty, would you care to join us downstairs? We have a man cave down there with a television.”

“We can watch football,” Daniel said. “Or whatever.”

“Last we looked, the Steelers were up by seven,” Jacob said.

I couldn’t care less about football, but I welcomed the chance to speak to my mother alone. There would be time to get to know Jacob and my brothers later after I got used to the idea that I had a family.

“You good?” Rafferty asked quietly, near my ear.

“Yes, I’m fine.” I smiled back at him, resisting the urge to throw myself into his arms.

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“Great. Lead the way,” Rafferty said. “But fair warning, I am not a Steelers fan.”

As the men exited the room, I heard Rafferty say something about a quarterback injury and Michael answering back about a rookie substitution.

“Do you want to sit?” Sally asked me, gesturing toward the couch.

“Yes, thanks. Your home’s lovely.” This room was feminine and pretty, with a sage-green couch and white chairs set around a gas fireplace. Every vase and piece of artwork on the walls seemed specifically picked. Did Sally have a gift for decorating, or did she hire someone? So many questions.

“Did you decorate yourself?” I asked.

“Sort of. I have a good friend who’s a set designer. She helped me.”

Set designer? Did that mean she was still involved in the theater?

We settled in the matching chairs, divided by a sleek black coffee table. I crossed my legs and hooked one ankle behind my opposite calf at the exact time my mother did the same. She must have noticed, too, because we shared a chuckle.

“In your box—there were clippings from the newspaper about the school plays,” I said.

“Oh, yes. I kept everything from those days.”

“Did you ever pursue acting?” I asked. Wait until I told her Annie Armstrong was married to Atticus.

“Yes. In fact, I founded a small theater here in Missoula. We started small, but now we’re quite well-known. I’m the artistic director. We have two stages, so we have multiple productions going at once. You’d be surprised at the talent here.”

“I thought you worked with addicts?” I asked.

“That’s my other passion, but I only volunteer. When I married Jacob, he encouraged me to pursue my dreams and actually funded the theater the first few years.”

“What does he do?” I asked, curious.

“He’s a doctor. Oncologist here at one of our big hospitals.”

Doctor. Like Rafferty. Interesting coincidence.

Sally seemed to be thinking along the same lines. “I know, it’s weird, isn’t it? Are you together or just friends?”

I launched into the whole story, starting with our rivalry and ending with the snowstorm and finding my father dead. “It’s hard to explain, but something shifted that night we were alone. I was frightened and worried and guilty, you know. He was so strong and thoughtful. Brave, too. I saw him in a whole new way. So, we’re new. But not new at the same time.”

“I can see how you feel about him by the sparkle in your eyes.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m in love with him,” I whispered conspiratorially.

“He seems like a catch to me despite your former rivalry.”

Prickles went down my arms. The way she looked at me as if I were the most special person in the world made me feel like a cherished daughter. A daughter who could tell her mother anything and know she would listen without judgment, delighted by my every word. Like Stella with her sons. I’d never experienced that kind of parental love. Not that I could remember, anyway.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” I said.

“I can’t either,” Sally said, laughing through tears. “You’ve no idea how many times I wished for this. Thank you for reaching out. For being willing to give me a chance.”

“After I learned the truth, I would have fought hard to find you. I was worried you wouldn’t be at the same number. Or that I’d find out you were no longer with us. It took me a whole day to convince myself to try the number, but finally decided it was better to know what happened. Either way.”

“I kept that number all these years. Just in case.”

“I’m glad you did,” I said.

“All right, tell me everything. I want to know as much as you’re willing to share.”

“Where do we start?” I asked. “There’s a lot to cover.”

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“Twenty-nine years,” Sally said. “But maybe we start in the present. Tell me more about your life in Bluefern. Oh, and I want to know about your college experience and medical school and why you decided to be a vet. Who your best friend is. What do you like for dessert? Everything.”

So, I did as requested. I told her all of the details of my life. My time at medical school. My best friends Breck and Abby. “Both veterinarians but far away from me, sadly.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” Sally leaned forward, seemingly hanging on my every word. It felt so good to be listened to and to be gazed at with such love. “But they sound lovely.”

I told her about the slow realization my father was showing signs of dementia until finally I made the nearly impossible decision to come home and take care of him. “Even though he was terrible, he was my father. Knowing what I know now, though, I don’t think I would have come. I’d have let him rot there alone.”

“You say that, but my guess is you’re too softhearted to have done so.”

Buoyed by her attention, I told her more about my childhood. “My grandmother came to live with us after you...were sent away. She took care of my physical needs but wasn’t really available emotionally if you know what I mean.”

“I remember her.” Sally shuddered. “She hated me.”

“She hated everyone. She was almost as mean as him.”

Sally's eyes filled again, and she dabbed at them with a tissue. "My poor baby. Stuck with them."

"She died when I was eleven, and then it was just the two of us. I took care of cooking and cleaning, but I never let it get in the way of studying. I'm not sure how I knew school was the only way I was going to get away from him, but I did."

"And yet you came back."

"He's gone now, so I'm free. And now I know the truth."

"It's strange that he kept the cards I sent." Sally glanced toward the fire. "It makes no sense."

"I know. We'll never know, I don't think."

I asked her questions then, wanting to know more about how she'd been groomed by my father.

"He saw me in a play, and he started just showing up in places. I worked in the diner after school, and he'd show up there, always at the end of my shift, and offer to walk me to my car. My home life wasn't the greatest. I didn't get a lot of love or affection, and he showered me with it. I read something recently about this concept of 'love bombing.' Have you heard of that?"

"Sure."

"He charmed me—pursued me relentlessly until I slept with him. I got pregnant, obviously, and when I told him, he acted like he was happy. Maybe he was. He wanted to keep me there. Keep me small. He knew a baby was the way to do it. And it wasn't until I'd given up everything—my plans for college and getting out of

Bluefern—and married him that he showed me who he truly was. I was eight months pregnant the first time he hit me. Before that, it was only verbal brutality. I tried to protect you from him after you were born, and it wasn't hard. He never showed much interest in you, which I couldn't understand. I was obsessed with you. Maybe that's what caused his violence to become worse. He was jealous. The time he pushed me down the stairs and I broke my leg, he left me in the house alone. I had to crawl to the phone to call someone to come get me and take me to the doctor. And you know what happened after that. The painkillers softened everything. Took the edge off. Made me less afraid of my husband. It all spiraled out of control, though, when the doctor cut me off. Arabella, the lengths I went to get those happy pills—it's disgusting to think of now."

"I'm so proud of you for your recovery."

She smiled. "Thank you. I promised myself if I kicked it, I would spend the rest of my life trying to make something of myself. I got involved in the local theater scene here. I even went back to school and got a degree in drama. I was teaching school when I met Jacob. He changed my life."

"Funny how the right person can do that," I said.

"I'm all for women empowering themselves, but at the end of the day, having someone who supports you in all things is a true blessing. I've been lucky that way. And the boys have been the biggest joy. But there was always something missing." She pressed her hand into her chest. "This part of me that had been cut out. You."

Overcome with emotion, I teared up. "I'm here now."

"I can't fix the ways you suffered because of him. God knows I would if I could, but I'd consider it a privilege to be your mom now. We'll never get back those years, but we could share a lot more. If you want."

“I’ve always wanted a mother to share everything with—to tell all my secrets and dreams and experience unconditional love. I don’t think I really realized how much I needed you until I found the stack of cards.”

“We have a lot to look forward to now,” Sally said. “Holidays. Maybe wedding dress shopping?”

I laughed, glancing toward the door that led down to the basement. “I didn’t think it would be Rafferty Moon, that’s for sure. Hopefully, he’s feeling what I’m feeling.”

“I can assure you that he does.” She patted my knee, staring into my eyes. “What man wouldn’t want you?”

“My father made sure I thought the opposite. He called me Pudge.”

“Pudge? Why?”

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“I was a chubby kid. Food was a source of comfort.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I left you there with him.”

“He told me I was too fat for any man to love,” I said. “And I believed him.”

“You know how wrong he was, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I do. The way Rafferty looks at me helps.”

“That’s a fine man. A smart one too.”

“I thought you didn’t want me,” I said quietly. “Which made me feel like he was right. Even my own mother couldn’t love me. But when I found those cards, everything I thought I knew lifted, and I could finally see the full truth. You loved me. You wanted me. All this time.”

“Desperately.”

“A fresh start. We have a chance now,” I said.

She held out her arms and I went to her, letting her hold me as the healing process began.

By the time Sally and Arabella were done talking, it was already dark outside. Jacob suggested we stay overnight and drive home in the morning. The night before, after Arabella had asked me to join her, I'd called my nurse and instructed her to handle what she could without me and to reschedule the rest. Arabella had done the same. Thus, we happily agreed. It was only afterward that I wondered if they had more than one guest room.

When Sally mentioned there was only one available, but the couch was comfortable, Arabella quickly answered. "We'll share a room."

All right then.

If she didn't have any worries about sharing a bed, I sure didn't either. Pop and Mama had taught me never to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I was merely thankful for my good fortune. The thought of being near her throughout the night, this time in a warm, cozy bed, made my head swim. I really needed to keep myself in check, but it might be an impossible task.

Before we'd arrived, Sally had cooked up a pan of lasagna. The scent of tomatoes, herbs, and garlic as it warmed in their cozy kitchen made my stomach growl.

Sally carried the dish of lasagna to the table while Arabella brought in a Caesar salad and chunks of warm, crusty bread. The women looked so much alike. It was almost startling. One would never guess that Sally had struggled with drug addiction. Her face was virtually unlined, and her hair was thick and shiny. If she dyed it, I sure couldn't tell—a classic beauty, just like her daughter.

Jacob said a prayer before we ate, thanking the Lord for this miraculous turn of events and for bringing us all safely back together.

"All right," Sally announced when we'd all said our amens. "Dig in before it gets

cold!”

We passed the dish of lasagna around the table, each of us helping ourselves to a generous portion.

“Tell me about school,” Arabella said to her brothers. “Daniel, you’re premed, right? Rafferty and I were the same.” She explained that she’d gone to veterinarian school while I’d studied people medicine.

“Yes, I’m graduating this spring,” Daniel said. “And hoping to get into med school for next fall.”

“His MCAT scores were very good,” Sally said, sounding proud.

“Do you have your eye on where you want to go?” I asked.

“Anywhere that will take me,” Daniel said.

“Wherever it is, I hope it won’t be too far away,” Sally said.

“I’m in film and drama, myself,” Michael said. “Not quite the noble cause of saving lives, but it has its moments.”

“Hey, someone’s got to make those medical dramas look realistic,” I said.

“Right?” Michael asked, grinning. “How ironic would it be if I made a show about doctors when I’m the only man in this family who didn’t study medicine?”

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“Michael takes after our mother,” Daniel said graciously. “They’re artists and storytellers. Which the world will always need.”

“If only to help us make sense of the chaos,” Sally said softly.

Arabella asked Sally to tell her more about her theater. Sally lit up, describing how she’d built it from nothing, starting out in a run-down building in downtown Missoula with only forty-nine seats. “Now we have two stages with several hundred seats. We’re a nonprofit, of course, but we’re doing well because of several wealthy donors.”

“And sold-out shows,” Jacob said.

“Mom’s kind of famous in the theater community,” Michael said. “All my friends at school worship her.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Sally said. “But thank you.”

“I’d love to see a show sometime,” Arabella said. “Do you act or direct or both?”

“Both. Depending on the project. I enjoy all of it equally, so it’s a joy no matter what I’m doing. The Missoula Playhouse has been my passion for twenty years. Other than this lot, obviously.” She gestured around the table.

Jacob gave his wife a fond smile before glancing over at me. “So, Rafferty, tell me about your practice. I’m sure it’s different than my experience in a big hospital.”

I nodded while swallowing a piece of the crusty bread. “Yeah, it’s a bit of everything, and it keeps me on my toes. A lot less...specialized than what you’re doing, obviously.”

Jacob took a moment to answer, slicing into his lasagna thoughtfully. “In a way, yes. Oncology is very focused, with a lot of protocol and endless testing. A lot of heartbreak and a lot of triumphs. I can’t imagine doing anything else, but it can wear on me sometimes. Still, the advances I’ve seen in my career are optimistic.”

We fell into an easy conversation about the challenges of medicine, the differences between big hospital work and the day-to-day of a small practice. Jacob’s dedication to his patients was clear, the same kind I felt for the people of Bluefern. Sally and the boys chimed in occasionally, sharing stories of Jacob’s late nights and the ways he tried to balance it all with family life.

The dialogue turned to Arabella’s veterinarian practice. She had us all howling over a recent story that involved her and an ornery cow.

The dynamic between the brothers and their parents reminded me very much of my own family. Not quite as loud, of course, but with the same good-natured ribbing I enjoyed with my brothers. And the same unconditional love that flowed among them all.

Toward the end of the meal, Arabella’s hand found mine under the table. I glanced over at her, thrilled to feel her soft hand in mine. Better than that, though, was the look of peace and contentment on her face. This was the family she’d wanted.

I hoped she’d still find mine appealing. Because I’d decided over the last few days, I was going to do whatever I could to get Arabella Collins to fall in love with me and meet me at the church to exchange wedding vows. One way or another.

The next morning, after a breakfast of eggs and pancakes, the entire family walked us out to my vehicle. Arabella's brothers were leaving to return to school soon after we left, but they'd wanted to say goodbye to their sister first.

After hugs and promises of more visits, Arabella and I headed for home. As we pulled onto the highway, the Montana landscape stretched out in front of us, endless and breathtaking. Snow-dusted peaks framed the horizon, and pine forests sprawled under the open sky, vast and deep green against the winter sunlight. Arabella remained quiet, just staring out the window, her fingers absentmindedly moving to the beat of the music on the radio. I glanced over at her, noticing again that a soft peace seemed to have settled over her, as though she'd shed an old weight she'd been carrying for years.

We'd shared a bed last night, talking a little while holding hands under the covers before falling asleep. I didn't dare get too close to her for fear of my base instincts overriding my dedication to being a perfect gentleman. Fortunately, I'd been tired from the day's activities and had soon fallen into a dreamless sleep.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Blessed. Regretful. Happy. Sad. Mostly, grateful. I have a second chance with my mother, and now I have two brothers. Jacob's special, don't you think?"

I nodded, keeping my gaze on the road. "Very much so. He's taken good care of his family. Gave your mother her dream job."

"And that beautiful home."

"Is that something you want?" I asked, almost afraid to hear her answer.

"What? A family and a home?"

“Yeah.”

“I do,” she whispered, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “And now I know it’s possible, even for me.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“My dad made sure to tell me more often than not how no one wanted a fat girl.”

I gripped the steering wheel, filling with rage at how I would have loved to get my hands around that guy’s neck before he died. However, I kept myself together, not wanting to drive off the side of the road. “Have you stopped believing him? Because let me tell you—this man here—although I’m not perfect—he sees you as you are, and that is beautiful, smart, and fun. You have everything a man could want.”

“Including you?”

“Especially me,” I said, my voice a little rough.

She smiled, and we fell into a comfortable silence, watching the Montana landscape roll by as we passed rivers frozen over and ranch lands lying dormant under patches of melting snow. The light was shifting, growing warmer as we drove on, casting a golden glow across the foothills and valleys. I’d driven this route a hundred times, but somehow, this time, it felt different.

As we drew closer to Bluefern, a few stray snowflakes began to drift down, soft and quiet, against the windshield.

“Looks like we might be in for some more snow,” I said, glancing over at her.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she pulled up the weather forecast on her phone. “Yep, they’re predicting at least another six inches in the next few hours.”

We were quiet again, both of us watching the world around us change as the light dimmed and the snow began to fall heavier, blanketing the road in a thin layer of white. By the time we reached Bluefern, the snow was coming down hard enough that the idea of pushing through to Stella and Jasper’s didn’t sit well with me.

“How would you feel about hunkering down at my place tonight? We can cook something warm. Cozy up by the fire. I think we’ve had enough of snowstorms for a while, don’t you?”

A slight smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I can't think of anything I'd like more," she said softly, glancing at me from under her lashes.

"I'm a terrible cook, so I hope you don't mind something from a can."

"A meal from a can is how this whole thing started, so I say, bring it on."

"I can't believe I've never been here." Arabella sat at the counter in my kitchen, sipping a glass of wine while I put some premade meatballs into the oven.

The house I'd rented when I moved back was nothing special, but it did the job. Kept me warm in the winter and cool in the summer. I'd not really bothered to decorate, so I had little furniture. Regardless, it suited me for the time being. Most of the social and family time were at my family members' homes, so it wasn't as if I needed a place to entertain. Someday, I wanted to find a house of my own or have one built, but I hadn't come upon the right opportunity. "Hopefully, the right house or property will fall into my lap at some point."

"I happen to know of one," she said, clearly referring to her house. "But I hear the furnace doesn't work."

"And you're sure you want to sell?"

She nodded. "I don't have any good memories there. And I have no interest in running a small ranch. It's better to start fresh. But I'll take my five acres and have the perfect house built. Anyway, people like us should always have a new dream or project to work on."

"I suppose that's true." I had a new dream, and she was sitting right in front of me.

The water in the pot on the cooktop boiled, ready for the spaghetti noodles we were

having with our meatballs. I stuck them into the water and stirred, a memory creeping up the back stairs of my mind. I smiled as an image of Pop and Mama dancing in the kitchen played before my eyes. “My parents used to dance in the kitchen. We always groaned and rolled our eyes, but I secretly loved it.”

“I would have loved that too.” She gestured toward the Bluetooth speaker on the counter. “Put on some music. I think we should dance right now.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes, something slow, so you have to hold me extra tight.”

I couldn’t punch a playlist into my phone fast enough. Seconds later, the music connected to the speaker, filling the room. The first song was too fast, but I quickly found a country ballad.

With a shy grin on her face, she stood and extended a hand toward me. “Dance with me, Dr. Rafferty.”

I took her hand and pulled her to me. She wrapped her arms around my neck, swaying slightly to the music. “I always wished you’d have asked me to dance. When we were in high school.”

I placed my hands at her waist, feeling the warmth of her body against mine, her cheek pressed to my chest. “You’re kidding? I thought you hated me.”

“I’ve been thinking about that over the last few days. You hated me, so I had to pretend I hated you. Inside, though, I thought you were the best thing that had ever happened to the world. I’d have given anything to know that someday I’d be in your kitchen, dancing with the handsome, smart Rafferty Moon. I’d have told shy, chubby Arabella to hold on. Her life would someday be better than she could ever imagine.”

“I’m glad it’s me you want to dance with.”

“You’re not going to break my heart, are you?” Arabella asked against my chest.

“Not if I can help it.”

“If I give you my heart, you’ll keep it safe?”

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“I’d hold it close to my own and love you like Pop loves Mama. Above all else. To distraction. Forgetting any other woman exists. Will you keep my heart safe?”

“It will be the greatest honor of my life to have your heart in my hands.” She looked up into my eyes. “This is real, right? Not a dream? A fantasy? A psychotic delusion?”

I chuckled, leaning down to kiss her, making sure she knew this was very real.

13

RAFFERTY

A week before Christmas, we woke to a layer of soft, dry snow that blanketed the landscape. That afternoon, I stood at the bedroom window as Arabella came out of the bathroom dressed in a sleeveless cranberry-red dress that showed off her shapely shoulders and toned arms. The color suited her complexion, not to mention the cut of the dress that accentuated every curve.

“You look stunning,” I said. “Are you sure you want to be with this clown?”

She laughed, joining me by the window and running a hand down the front of my shirt. “You’re not a clown, Rafferty Moon. You’re my hero.”

“And you’re mine.” I kissed her gently. Then we parted ways to go downstairs before we got carried away. I had a mission—a sparkling mission waiting in the inner pocket of my suit jacket. I’d had it planned for weeks—a proposal in front of both our families in the living room of our new home.

Arabella and I had fallen even deeper in love by the time we chose an architect to build our dream home. Our marriage was a bygone conclusion by then, although I'd promised her and myself that she would have a proposal moment. Tonight was that night. My palms dampened at the thought.

It took eight months to build, but our house was complete by Thanksgiving. We'd talked about getting married many times but had agreed to wait until the house was completed so that we could start our life together in a place new to both of us. Miraculously, Arabella's land and house, minus the five acres she'd kept for us, had sold relatively quickly. A young man looking to run a small ranch had been waiting for the right piece of land to come on the market. He and his young family were now settled into the old farmhouse and had been welcomed into the community in Bluefern fashion. Just the other day, I spotted cattle peppering the field that had been empty for far too long.

I'd had a good year financially and was able to match her contribution, making the house truly ours and not just hers. We'd also saved a lot of money because of one man—Jasper Moon. As he had since I was nine years old, he'd enriched my life with his simple acts of love. When we thanked him for all he did to help get our house ready, he just brushed it aside. "It's what I was born to do. Be your pop."

In my opinion, we'd chosen the perfect spot for the house, tucked near the creek that wound its way through the property. Any time I stepped out to the back patio, I could hear water bubbling over stones. We'd picked a modern farmhouse aesthetic, with white board-and-batten siding made to last, black-framed windows that reflected the endless sky, and a charcoal-gray metal roof ready to take on whatever Montana's winters could throw at us.

The front porch stretched along the entire front of the house, complete with a swing that creaked softly in the breeze. My brothers, Pop, and I had spent a month of weekends on the front landscape. We'd put in a paver walkway made of light gray

stones that led from the driveway to the porch steps. Low-growing shrubs lined the path, their evergreen foliage dotted with clusters of red berries. A few larger bushes framed the porch, softening the edges of the house.

Around back, the patio opened up to sweeping views of the mountain range, the peaks dusted with fresh snow. We'd even added a firepit similar to the one Atticus and Annie had at their house, surrounded by Adirondack chairs.

Pop had built a small bridge that arched over the creek, leading to a meadow that would be spotted with wildflowers in the spring and summer, but today, it was dusted with freshly fallen snow. As a surprise for us, Pop had also put together raised beds to the left of the patio for a vegetable garden.

The doorbell rang as we were headed downstairs. I rushed to the door, welcoming Pop and Mama. They were looking particularly well, their active lifestyle keeping them young and the cold air flushing their cheeks. Mama handed Arabella a gift wrapped in gold paper. "This is for your housewarming, not Christmas, so you must open it after the party."

"If you insist," Arabella said, hugging my mother.

Casper and Elliot, with baby Madeleine in a red dress, as smiley and happy as she usually was, arrived next. Soon, she would be a year old, which none of us could believe. She'd brought so much joy to my brother and Elliot that I suspected another one would be along soon.

Soon, Thad and Sammie, with an excited Chloe bouncing on her toes and twirling about to show everyone her tulle skirt, appeared. Sammie was pregnant and due in February, and her baby bump was more than evident on her small frame. Atticus and Annie were also expecting another baby, which was due in the early spring. Their little guy was an active toddler, running this way and that, compelling Atticus to keep

a close watch on him for fear he would knock over the Christmas tree. Apparently, he'd already done so at home.

Soren and Finley were the last of my family to show. They had a newborn, only two weeks old, a little girl they'd named Ellie. The new parents looked tired but happy as they joined everyone in the living.

"It looks absolutely brilliant in here," Finley exclaimed in her British accent. "Next year, I'm going to do more decorating."

"You've had your hands full," Mama said kindly as she held out her arms for Ellie.

Arabella and my mother had spent an entire day decorating our house for Christmas. They'd giggled with glee as they'd envisioned creating a winter wonderland in the living room. Not that I was an expert or anything, but they seemed to have accomplished their goal. A tall, snowy white Christmas tree stood by the window, adorned with shimmering silver and gold ornaments. Tiny white lights twinkled among the branches, and a delicate star crowned the top.

We'd decided on a plush cream sofa, now layered with soft, oversized holiday pillows and a faux fur throw. The rustic wooden coffee table was topped with a few glowing candles, adding warmth and a hint of holiday spice to the air. Gift boxes, wrapped in simple brown paper and tied with twine and sprigs of evergreen, were tucked beneath the tree. For whatever reason, Arabella had insisted the wrapping all match. She didn't say, but I knew that the Christmases with her father had been stark and cold. Thus, she wanted us to do the opposite. As baffling as it was to me, she couldn't rest until every detail was exactly as she'd envisioned. If it made her happy, it made me happy.

Arabella's family entered all together. Her brothers were on holiday break from school, bringing their youthful energy to the party. Sally, looking lovely in a blue

dress, hugged me tightly. “You all set?” Sally asked.

“More than ready,” I said. “The ring’s in my pocket. I’m nervous, though.”

“Don’t be.” Jacob pumped my hand. “She’s going to love that ring.”

I’d splurged and gotten her a solitaire the size of a small country. Not really. But it was big and sparkly, and I knew Arabella would love it. She’d hinted at the type of ring she wanted, making it easy for me.

I’d called Sally and Jacob last week to ask for their blessing. They’d given it without hesitation. Sally had called me an “answer to prayer,” which thrilled me.

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An hour into the party, I decided it was time. Everyone had nibbled on appetizers and imbibed in various ways, depending on if they were pregnant or not. I turned down the Christmas music piped through the overhead speakers. I took a deep breath, feeling the small velvet box in my pocket, steadying myself. Being Arabella's husband was why I'd been born. I'd realized that over the last few months. It wasn't my work, which I loved and had spent so many years honing, or any of my other accomplishments that mattered the most. It was the woman standing across the room laughing at something Annie had said.

I caught Arabella's eye and motioned for her to join me in front of the fireplace. The chatter quieted as everyone seemed to realize the time was now. As was typical in my family, there were no surprises. Everyone knew I was about to propose except Arabella. I hoped, anyway.

For a second, I took in the scene before me, hoping to sear it to my memory. Caspian grinned like a fool, and Thad's eyes softened as he snuggled Chloe on his lap. Their wives, Elliot and Sammie, together by the Christmas tree, had wrapped their arms around each other and prepared for the show. Soren stood in the corner with his arm around his pregnant wife, his eyes glassy with tears. My grumpy brother had turned into a sentimental fool right before our eyes. That's what the love of a good woman did to a man. I knew all about it.

Annie and Atticus shared the oversize chair with their son on his father's lap. He'd fallen asleep on Atticus's chest, having worn himself out by running from one beloved aunt or uncle to another for the first hour of the party.

Sally and Jacob sat together on one end of the couch, holding hands. The love on

Sally's face as she watched her daughter was enough to bring me to tears, but I had to focus. Daniel and Michael were draped over the leather chair in the corner, smiling encouragingly at me.

I looked over at Mama and Pop, who sat side by side in the loveseat. Mama had already started crying. Pop nodded at me as if to say, "You got this."

"What's happening?" Arabella whispered, glancing around the room, her cheeks flushing the color of a pink rose.

Her eyes widened as I dropped to one knee. I took her hand, marveling at the softness of her skin. She'd had her nails done yesterday, which I'd worried meant she knew this was coming. However, given the shocked expression on her face, I could see that she had not.

I took a deep breath and began. "If you'd told me a year ago at this time that we would be standing in our new home with our family all around us, I would not have believed it. But that fateful day—the day that brought us together—changed everything. I think I knew that morning, when I woke to see you standing by the window in the cabin, that you were my destiny. My forever love. All the years of fighting my true feelings suddenly vanished, and I saw you for what you truly are, my soulmate."

Arabella nodded, tears spilling over her cheeks. "Yes. For me too."

I took the box out of my pocket and opened it, holding up the ring to show her. The firelight caught the diamond, sparkling but nowhere near the same beauty as Arabella's shining eyes. "Arabella Collins, will you be my wife? My best friend? Partner in all things?"

She covered her mouth, clearly trying to compose herself before speaking. "There's nothing I've ever wanted more than to be your wife. To be part of your family. And

you be part of mine.” She glanced over at her mother, who blew her a kiss. “I will be your wife, your best friend, and partner in all things.”

I slipped the ring onto her finger as the room burst into applause and cheers. She stared at the diamond on her hand as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing. “It’s perfect. I love it.” She held her hand aloft to show everyone.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pop get up to open the bottles of champagne and apple cider I’d put on ice earlier. But my gaze quickly returned to Arabella. I leaned down to brush my lips against hers. She wrapped her arms around my neck. “You’ve made me happier than I ever thought possible,” she said. “Thank you for making all my dreams come true.”

“You’re the dream-maker.”

We kissed one more time as well wishes cascaded around us like a soft snowfall. A storm so severe that it took her father’s life had also brought us together in the most profound of ways, and now here we were, surrounded by everyone who loved us. From that dark day, this one had been born.

Pop and Soren were pouring glasses of bubbly for everyone while Elliot and Finley passed them around the room. Once everyone had a glass, Pop cleared his throat.

“I’d like to make a toast, if I may?” Pop asked.

Everyone nodded in agreement and took their places around the room. I held Arabella’s hand in my free one as Pop began to speak.

He gestured toward Mama before turning to Sally and Jacob. “I’d like to welcome you to our family and thank you for embracing us with open arms. It means a lot to Stella and me to see Arabella’s family rallying behind her, loving her as she deserves to be loved.”

“Thank you, Jasper,” Sally said, wiping tears from her cheeks. “It’s an honor to be part of this family and to have such a special young man join ours.”

Beside me, Arabella sniffed. I squeezed her hand a little harder, fighting tears of my own.

Pop continued, addressing Sally and Jacob. “Many years ago, I stood before this woman—my Stella—and asked if she would be my wife. She came as a package deal, of course. Five little boys who desperately needed a father—one who would remain steadfast and loyal—one who would love them unconditionally. I knew the moment I met them that this was the reason God had put me on this earth.” He teared up, hesitating for a moment before gaining control. “And that I was the man God chose for Stella and her boys? Well, it was hard to believe, and yet here I was, an ordinary guy chosen for an angel and her precious boys. I couldn’t believe my luck then or now.”

Mama was crying and shaking her head, dabbing at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Jasper, we’re the lucky ones.”

My brothers were all nodding and muttering the same sentiments under their breath.

Pop went on, undeterred. “Being a husband and father to you, particularly humans has been the greatest joy and blessing of my life. Through the years, we’ve endured hardships, but mostly, we’ve been blessed with the love of family and friends, of memory upon happy memory. Watching you boys grow into the stellar young men you are today—there’s nothing quite like it. Absolutely nothing makes me prouder than knowing what good people you are—how you make the world better every single day with your big hearts, work ethics, and commitment to family. Over the last few years, watching as you have found your soulmates and made them your wives and watching how you treat them as if they are your everything has filled my heart with gratitude. Stella and I may not have been perfect, but we taught you that love is the most precious of all God’s gifts. That is the singular best thing I’ve ever done.

“On a night similar to this, I stood before you all and promised to live by Slurfpig.”

“Long live Slurfpig,” shouted my brothers in unison.

“I commissioned a painting for each of you by a local artist with the promises I made that day. It would make me happy to see Slurfpigs hung somewhere in your homes. And I hope in the years to come, those promises will be a reminder to you too. Especially on days that are particularly trying. There will be some, hopefully very few, but with a foundation of love and sacrifice, choices are clearer, paths more obvious.”

He turned toward Arabella and me. “So, on this auspicious day, I would like to congratulate Rafferty and Arabella and wish for you the kind of marriage Stella and I have enjoyed.”

“Thanks, Pop,” I whispered despite the lump in my throat.

“It is what I’ve wanted for all our boys, and today, with the final proposal in our family until this new generation comes of age, I wanted to tell you once again how much I love each of you and what a blessing it has been to be your father.” His gaze swept the room. “Whether you came to me by Stella or the rascals you fell in love with, I cherish you with all my heart.” He wiped the corners of his eyes before he raised his glass. “To our family.”

Everyone raised their glasses, calling out words of congratulations. But it was Thad’s voice that rang out the loudest, an echo of that day so long ago when five little boys had listened to the promises from the man they would call Pop. “I love you, Mr. Moon.”

“And I love all of you Moons.” Pop held up his glass. “To the Slurfpig in all of us. Long may he live.”

All the Moons and our special guests raised their glasses, some of us laughing, others crying, a few of the youngest among us babbling and gurgling from their baby seats, and toasting to our family. I held my soon-to-be Mrs. Moon close, grateful to have found my purpose at long last.