



Her Billionaire's Baby Secret

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Can he keep a secret baby under wraps? Or will the truth ruin his second chance?

Billionaire Kane Leland is relieved to be free of his disastrous marriage. Keeping his corporate image and his vindictive, money-hungry ex-wife in check have become new challenges with her breaking the news that she's expecting his baby. Add to that her threats to expose him as a neglectful deadbeat, and it's a recipe for corporate ruin.

Jewelry shop owner Sariah Tate doesn't like drama. She had enough to last a lifetime with her past relationship. When old high-school flame Kane Leland returns home to Maple Creek, Sariah finds her resolve to resist him and her deep-rooted feelings weakening. She doesn't know his secret. He can't break it to her.

Will they be able to put the past aside and find their second chance?

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Chapter 1

The shock still hadn't worn off. It had been a week since Kane had found out that his ex wife was expecting a baby the following May.

Kane leaned back in the seat of his private jet and drank the last of the bourbon in his glass. He glanced out his window to see the fall colors turning far below on the ground. He'd been out celebrating his new status as a single man with his best friend Benson, the quarterback for the New York Giants, and when he left the restaurant, he bumped into her on the street. That was when she told him she was expecting. The problem was, he didn't know if the baby was his.

Kane had enough on his plate with the unexpected death of his maternal grandfather. He'd gotten the news just that morning, and he made immediate arrangements to fly to his hometown of Maple Creek, Virginia.

Darla, his flight attendant, approached him. "Can I get you something else to drink, Kane?"

"Just some water."

"We should be landing soon." The older woman put a hand on his arm. "I know how hard this must be for you. I'm sorry for your loss." She'd been working for his family for years.

He gave her a thin smile. "Thank you, Darla. That means a lot to me."

“Of course. You don’t have to go through this alone. Don’t forget you have a lot of people who care about you.”

He nodded, his throat growing thick with emotion. His main concern now was the welfare of his grandmother. She’d be hit the hardest by his death. They’d been planning to cruise the Caribbean later that summer. He couldn’t imagine what she must be feeling to have her sweetheart taken from the earth. He knew he needed to do all he could to ensure she had the support she needed.

It had been a week of devastating shocks. Finding out Gramps had suffered a heart attack and died was the worst of it. He’d come back to his hometown often to see his grandparents. They had been a huge part of his life growing up in the small, simple town. They were a typical Maple Creek couple. Sweet, southern, and welcoming to all they met. Both his grandmother and grandfather had grown up in the town and had roots that had been in the town for generations. His grandfather had been the mayor of the town at one time.

He loved coming home to Maple Creek. It was the complete opposite of the busyness of New York City.

The plane descended into Roanoke, the nearest airport to Maple Creek. It was about forty-five minutes from his hometown. He’d called his buddy Chase earlier that morning, and he’d agreed to pick him up.

He got off the plane and got his luggage. Chase was waiting for him, leaning against his black SUV.

“Hey, man,” Chase said when he approached. When he was close enough, Chase reached out to him and gave him a big hug. “I’m sorry about your grandpa.”

Kane wiped away a tear. “Thanks. I miss Gramps already, and I just saw him last

weekend. I can't believe he's gone." How could such a good man be taken from this world? This planet had a shortage of good men. The last thing they needed was another one of the good ones taken. He couldn't make sense of it.

Chase and Kane put the luggage into the back of the SUV, and they both climbed into the front seats.

Chase put the vehicle into drive. "I know your gramps's death was unexpected, but other than that, how have you been doing? I know this divorce has been really hard on you."

Kane wanted to tell Chase about Orchid's pregnancy, but he couldn't speak about it. He'd been forbidden to say a word. He worked with his paternal grandfather in New York City. That was how he'd become a billionaire. As a family member he'd gotten equal shares to the company. He'd moved to Manhattan right after high school to go to college and become groomed to take over the family business. They were currently going through a merger, and until it went through, everything in the office was incredibly tense. They needed that merger badly, and when Orchid showed up at the office demanding money from Kane, his grandfather decided he needed to keep the drama about the baby under wraps.

With this merger the media was scrutinizing them, and he couldn't have it getting out that he had that level of drama going on in his life. That meant he couldn't tell a soul about Orchid's pregnancy, especially when he didn't even know if the baby was his. His grandfather was hoping the baby would end up being some other guy's and the entire thing would blow over. He had to keep it quiet until the merger had gone through and all the paperwork was signed.

It was tough to keep something so huge a secret though. He didn't have anyone he could talk to about how he was feeling about the baby situation. His grandfather wasn't exactly the best option. They didn't talk about much outside of work.

Although he saw his paternal grandfather daily, he'd been much closer to Gramps. He still couldn't believe he was really gone.

"How am I feeling?" Kane repeated. "That's a really great question." He rubbed a hand down his face. "I'm happy to be single."

"I'm surprised your divorce went this fast. I would think it would have dragged out more. It's only been three months."

"It went fast because I gave Orchid what she wanted. I wasn't in the mood to deal with a long, drawn-out divorce." His grandfather had suggested that he do the same thing. Getting a speedy, quiet divorce was exactly what the company needed when they were being so heavily scrutinized.

"You're a better man than me," Chase said. "I wouldn't have given her much of anything. She cheated on you."

"I can't understand how a person could break their marriage vows. I'm not wired that way." When he made a promise, he did everything in his power to stay true to his word. So when Orchid had broken their vows, he'd been devastated. "When we got married, she seemed so amazing, all devoted to me. But eventually her mask fell off, and I saw her true colors. She was only in the relationship for the money. She knew I was going to end up a billionaire, and she wanted in. At first, I didn't care. If she was a gold digger, then fine. I was willing to overlook that. It was the cheating that I couldn't handle. All this wealth doesn't matter that much to me," Kane said. "When you have this much, you stop counting after a while. What do I need all that wealth for anyway? I have everything I need and then some. If Orchid wanted money, then fine. She got it. I just want her out of my life."

"Do you think she's going to stay away?"

“Probably not with how greedy she is. She’s already showed up in my office, demanding more cash. Since I gave her what she wanted in the divorce, it was like she thought it would be easy to get more money from me. I’m worried that I’ve started a new pattern with her where she shows up constantly bugging me for more money. I just want her out of my life.” But he knew that wouldn’t be the case if the baby was his.

“I’m sorry you have to go through all of this. But at least you’re free.”

“I’m glad I’m free too. It’s a great feeling. Our marriage had been dead for a long time, even before I discovered that she’d been cheating on me.” He’d still worked to save his marriage though. That was why they’d had a brief time of reconciliation. That was when she was claiming she’d gotten pregnant. It hadn’t lasted between them though. He’d caught her texting her other guy, Turner, again, and he discovered that she’d been giving him money. It was one of the reasons she kept going to him for money. This other guy was deeply in debt and desperate for the funds.

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“I’d been too cocky to think my wife would ever cheat on me. The scene still replays in my mind, even when I don’t want it to. It was our anniversary, and I came home early from a business trip to surprise her. I had flowers and dinner reservations. That was when I found her with Turner.”

“I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you,” Chase said. It hadn’t taken much digging with his extensive resources to figure out that Orchid had been seeing Turner for quite some time. Eventually, she admitted the truth to him, and his worst fears were confirmed. “Benson told me you two went out to celebrate.” Chase and Benson had gone to high school with Kane, and they’d stayed close over the years.

“Yep.” Thank goodness Benson had already left the restaurant when Orchid had shown up. He didn’t know anything about the baby. He didn’t think his friend would tell anyone, but he couldn’t be too careful. He didn’t want anything getting back to the media. The paparazzi would eat up a story like this. That could be devastating for their company when they needed the merger so badly.

“Do you have your eye on anyone new?” Chase asked.

Kane shook his head. “I haven’t even thought about it.” He hadn’t had the chance with everything going on. Although the circumstances were sad, he was glad to be getting away from the city for a while. He desperately needed a break from all the drama. The simple life of the small town called to him.

“What about Sariah?” Chase asked. “She’s still single.”

“That was a long time ago.” They had dated back in high school. It seemed like

another lifetime.

“It’s too bad you two didn’t work out.”

Kane shrugged. “Our lives went in different directions. I moved to Manhattan to go to school and start working with my grandfather, and she stayed in Maple Creek to work in her grandparents’ jewelry shop.”

“You would have been better off if you’d ended up with Sariah instead of Orchid.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Are you thinking about giving it another shot with Sariah?” Chase asked.

“No. I think I need to take a long break from dating.”

“Why?”

“My trust with women is shattered.”

“I know what Orchid did to you was horrible, but that doesn’t mean all women are like that.”

Kane looked out the window at the rolling green hills. “Try telling that to my heart.”

“That’s rough, man. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I think I need to spend a lot of time on my own without a woman complicating everything.”

“Women can make things better too, though. Think about how happy I am with

Lauren.”

“That’s lucky for you, but I don’t see it ever happening for me that way.”

Chase shook his head. “You never know. I wasn’t expecting to get together with Lauren.”

Kane couldn’t imagine bringing a woman into his messy life. Especially not with the news that he might become a father soon. Chase didn’t have the entire story.

“You should at least be open to giving it a shot with Sariah.”

His heart pounded to think about it. He’d loved her so much in high school. He’d seen her since then, but he’d always been a married man then. It was different now. Would she be open to starting again with him?

She wouldn’t if she knew everything he’d been going through. She would turn and run in the other direction. He’d had women throw themselves at him since he’d announced his divorce, but he knew they were only after his money. Sariah wasn’t like that. They had history. She’d wanted him before the money was a part of his life.

“What do you plan on doing when you get into town?” Chase asked.

“I’d like to go straight to see my grandmother.”

“You got it.”

“You still remember where she lives?” Kane asked.

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“Of course. We were at your grandparents’ house a lot when we were kids. I still remember how much fun we had with that pool table in the basement. Your grandparents were always welcoming to the kids in the neighborhood.”

When Kane was growing up, his parents had had money, but they’d lived conservatively. His parents didn’t want him growing up to live the life of a rich kid. That was why his dad had raised him in Maple Creek. He hadn’t really understood how much money his father had until he’d left the house and moved to Manhattan as an adult.

Chase drove through the tree lined streets of Maple Creek. The trees were just starting to turn, and a few bright orange leaves blew off and flew by as they drove. They passed several grand houses with rocking chairs lining large front porches with potted ferns hanging. He’d traveled the world and hadn’t been to a place more charming than his home.

“I never get tired of this place,” Kane said.

“I love it too.”

Kane looked over at Chase. “I can see why you decided to settle down here.”

“It’s a great place to raise a family.”

Kane’s heart grew heavy hearing Chase’s last words. He’d never be able to give his kid the kind of life Chase and Lauren could provide. Instead, the poor child would have to deal with divorced parents. If the baby was his, of course. He’d waited to

have kids with Orchid because he'd been so focused on building his career. He'd wanted to give his full attention to any child they would end up having. The thought of having to share time with Orchid made him sad. No kid deserved to have parents who weren't together. He was traditional that way. His parents were still happily married, and he'd had a wonderful childhood as a result.

He hated the idea of bringing a child into a broken home. But if this baby was his—and Orchid insisted that it was—then he wouldn't have a choice but to raise his child with parents who weren't together.

Chase must have noticed Kane's shift in mood because he said, "You okay?"

Kane sighed and looked out the window. "I just have a lot going on."

He needed to put the pregnancy stuff from his mind for the next several days. Until the results of the paternity test came in, he wouldn't be able to do anything about the situation. It was vital to know the truth about whether he was the father.

"I can understand that. It must be tough to deal with a divorce and the death of a grandparent all at once."

"It has been hard. I'm glad to be single now, but it's a lot of upheaval."

"I'm here if you ever feel like you need to talk about it," Chase offered.

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"Anytime." Chase pulled up to his grandparents' home. So many memories had been made there. So many good times. It wouldn't be the same without Gramps there, cracking his cheesy jokes. He was having such a hard time with the loss of his grandfather. He couldn't imagine how hard it must be for his grandma. He knew he

had to be there for her as much as possible.

Chase parked the SUV, and Kane stepped down to get his bags from the back. He rolled his luggage to the front porch and rang the doorbell. He could see Chase driving away when he glanced over his shoulder.

He pushed open the front door and stepped inside. A group of women bustled about in the kitchen. His mom was standing with his grandmother's best friend, Mrs. Tate. When he stepped closer, his breath caught. A shapely brunette stood next to Mrs. Tate. When she turned, he saw a glimpse of her profile. It was Sariah. She'd changed her hair. Normally, her hair was a dark blonde, but she looked good with this new color. He hardly recognized her.

It was the first time he'd been around her since he was newly single. Suddenly, his mouth went dry, and all words flew from his mind. She'd had this effect on him frequently throughout the years, but he'd always stayed away out of respect for his marriage. But that no longer existed.

She turned and smiled at him. "Kane."

Chapter 2

Sariah set the casserole down on the table. She'd brought it over with her grandma to cheer up Mrs. Edwards in her time of loss. Grandma was always thoughtful like that, especially when it came to her best friend.

Kane would be showing up eventually, but she wasn't expecting him to walk through the door at that very moment. It was the first time she'd seen him since his divorce. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. If her pounding heart was any indication, she was nervous. It was silly. She shouldn't be affected by his marital status now. They'd been together years ago. So many things had changed since then.

She'd changed. She'd gotten smarter about men, for one thing. She wasn't the silly schoolgirl who'd fallen for the first guy who had paid attention to her. A tiny voice in the back of her head reminded her that Kane had been special. She brushed it off. Every girl romanticized her first love. It was nothing more than that. But she couldn't brush off her pounding heart. Or the butterflies dancing in her belly.

Kane looked good with an expensive haircut and carefully tailored clothes. She'd heard through the Maple Creek gossip mill that he was a billionaire now. She couldn't even fathom what it must be like for him to have that much wealth.

She wasn't hurting for money herself. Tate's Jewelers, the store she'd inherited from her grandparents, was thriving, and she was planning to open another branch in Roanoke. But her level of wealth was nothing compared to what Kane had. She couldn't know how that amount of money had changed him, but she was sure it had. She probably didn't have anything left in common with him now.

“Hi there, Sariah. Your hair is different.” Kane stepped toward her.

“I decided I was ready for a change.” She’d made the impulsive decision to go dark a few weeks ago. She needed a different look, something fresh to represent the new phase in her life of being a strong, single woman. After what she’d been through with Elliot, she was determined to find healing and strength. And that meant men were off limits. She didn’t need any distractions right now, no matter how good Kane looked.

“It looks nice,” Kane said.

“Thanks.” Did he mean that as a friendly compliment, or was he still attracted to her? For that matter, did she want him to be attracted to her? What was the point in even thinking such thoughts? She wasn’t going to pursue anything with Kane. She couldn’t get into another relationship after what happened last time. Anyway, he was here to grieve his grandfather’s death, not to hit on her.

Her grandmother gave her a knowing look. Sariah held back a groan. Her grandmother had been pushing lately for her to try to rekindle her old relationship with Kane now that he was single. There was no way that would happen. They were too different now. Sariah had been through too much.

Elliot had done a number on her. She didn’t know how she could ever trust another man with her heart again, even if Kane had been wonderful when they’d been dating. She’d believed that Elliot had been telling her the truth, but in reality, he’d been keeping a lot of secrets from her. She hadn’t had any idea something was wrong until he got in a car accident, and it had all gone downhill from there.

“How have you been, Kane?” her grandmother asked.

Kane’s eyes grew serious. “It’s been a rough road.”

“You must miss your grandfather terribly.”

“I do.”

His grandmother, Mrs. Edwards, came out from the back of the house. “Kane?” She rushed to greet him. “I thought I’d heard your voice.” She wrapped her arms around him in a warm embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here. I have a room all ready for you.”

“Hi, Grandma.” It looked like she was the one comforting him and not the other way around. That was how Mrs. Edwards was. She was such a kindhearted, selfless person, always looking out for others before herself. “How have you been doing with the divorce?” she asked him, pulling back from their hug. “We’ve all been so worried about you.”

“I’m...” His eyes flicked to Sariah’s.

Why was he looking at her? Did he feel uncomfortable talking about the divorce in front of her? She suddenly wished she could disappear. She didn’t want to make anyone feel awkward. Sariah didn’t know much about Kane’s situation, other than the fact that he was newly divorced.

“I’m fine,” he finally said.

His grandmother patted his arm. “We’re here for you, no matter what.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I’m here for you right now.”

“And we’re glad to see you,” Mrs. Edwards said, turning toward Sariah and her grandmother. “Lois and Sariah were kind enough to bring over a casserole for us. Would you like some?”

“I could never turn down a home cooked meal,” Kane said, pulling out a chair to sit.

Sariah grabbed a plate and a spatula from the kitchen. She’d been there so many times she knew where everything was. She’d even brought Elliot there. She shook off the memories. She’d been focusing way too much on him. She’d been in therapy to help her get over him, but she’d made slow progress. He’d left a huge impact on her psyche.

How could she have been so stupid to fall for a guy like that? She’d fallen for the image that he’d presented to her. She’d thought he was such a great guy. He seemed so well put together on the outside when really, he was falling apart inside. How could she know who to trust anymore? The betrayal had cut deeper than she wanted to admit.

“Are you going to stay and eat?” Mrs. Edwards asked.

Sariah shook her head. “I have plans to meet with Carrington for dinner in fifteen minutes. I really need to get going.” She and Carrington had been friends since high school. They were some of the only ones left from their friends’ group who still hadn’t gotten married. As a result, they’d been spending more time together lately.

“Are you staying here, Kane?” her grandmother asked.

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“Yes, ma’am.”

“What about your parents? Will they be staying here too?” Sariah asked.

“Yes. They should be getting here later on tonight.”

“Gayle, you’ll have a full house,” Lois said, turning to her friend.

A smile stretched across her face. “I’m looking forward to it. This house has felt too empty since David passed.” Tears formed in her eyes as though thinking of the loss of her beloved husband was hard for her. Sariah couldn’t imagine what she must be going through. The closest she’d come to it was when she’d gotten the call that Elliot was in the hospital. She’d been so in love with him. She could hardly breathe when she’d gotten the news and wasn’t sure how badly he’d been injured. But she’d only been with Elliot a year. The Edwards had been together for an entire lifetime.

“I should get going,” Sariah said.

Kane’s eyes met hers. “It was good to see you again.”

“You too. Sorry to hear about your divorce.” She wanted to smack her hand to her face. Why did she bring up such a painful topic?

“Don’t be. It was for the best.”

That piqued her curiosity. What must have happened between them for him to say something like that? But that was none of her business, and she didn’t plan to pry.

She headed out the door, saying her goodbyes, and headed to the Mexican restaurant where she was meeting Carrington. She found a parking spot and realized she'd ended up right next to Carrington's red Chevy Cruze. They opened their car doors at the same time.

"Hey you!" Carrington said, stepping out of her car. "Ready for some spicy food?"

"The spicier, the better," Sariah said. She loved the burn in her mouth from the hot sauces and peppers. She'd always been like that, even as a child. She dumped Tabasco on everything. Other than that, she tended to be a picky eater.

Carrington laughed. She wasn't quite as adventurous with her food, but she didn't mind some mild heat.

The two girls had been good friends for a long time, and they'd gotten even closer lately. They'd loved going to this little Mexican place. It had become one of their favorites, and they liked to meet there often. Sariah ate out a lot since she lived alone, and Carrington was usually more than happy to join her. Neither of them had significant others or anyone they were interested in.

"I heard Kane was coming in town for his grandpa's funeral," Carrington said.

"I actually just saw him."

They headed toward the building. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I was over at his grandma's house, dropping off a casserole when he showed up."

"How did that go? You know, now that he's single?"

“Why does everyone keep assuming that I’m going to get back together with him?” Sariah said.

“Because you were dynamite in high school. You were one of the school’s hottest couples back in the day.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Not that long ago. I’ve always sensed that there was still a little something between you two. Not that either of you would have done anything about it since he was married.”

Sariah pushed open the door to the restaurant. “I’m not looking to get in a relationship. I’ve learned my lesson about trusting men too easily.”

“You had a bad experience with one guy. That doesn’t mean it would be like that with Kane,” Carrington pointed out.

Sariah shook her head as they approached the hostess stand. “I’m just not ready.”

“How many?” the hostess asked.

“Just the two of us,” Carrington said.

The hostess grabbed a couple of menus and led them to a booth next to a window.

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They slid into the booth. “What’s holding you back?” Carrington asked.

“I feel like I need more therapy. I still don’t trust men. Elliot had this secret life I didn’t know anything about. How do I know Kane won’t be the same way?”

“Because you’ve known Kane since high school. We all know him. He’s a great guy.”

“I thought Elliot was a great guy too. On the outside he seemed to have his act together. Boy, was I wrong.”

“That doesn’t mean Kane has a secret life,” Carrington said.

A cute Hispanic girl approached their table and took their drink orders. After she left, Sariah turned back to Carrington. “I can’t stand the thought of someone breaking my trust again. I’m still so shattered from what happened with Elliot.”

“Maybe letting yourself trust again is exactly what you need to get over what happened with Elliot,” Carrington insisted.

“You might be right. But who says Kane is even interested? He just got out of a divorce. He probably needs time to heal as well. There’s not even a point to this conversation. Plus, he’s here to grieve his grandfather’s death, not to pick up a new girlfriend.”

“Fair enough,” Carrington said. “But if an opportunity does present itself with Kane, you should at least give him a chance.”

“I’m not going to make any promises on that front. Kane and I were great together once, but that’s over now. He moved on, and so did I. I have my business to focus on now.”

“How’s that going, by the way?” Carrington asked as the server came back with their drinks.

“It’s going great. I’m shopping around for a new site to open my store in Roanoke.”

“That’s amazing. You’re going to be one busy woman.”

“It feels great to have all this work to do. It’s been keeping my mind off of the stuff that happened with Elliot. I’ve just been burying myself in the extra work.”

“Hey, whatever helps. As long as you aren’t just shoving away your problems without facing them.”

“I still face them in therapy, but it keeps me from dwelling on negativity between sessions.” Sariah took a sip of her margarita. “This is divine. They make the best margaritas in town.”

The server came back and placed chips and salsa on their table. Sariah grabbed a chip and dipped it in the red spicy concoction before shoving it into her mouth.

“I never get tired of this place,” Carrington said, scooping up some salsa with a chip.

“What are you planning to get?” Sariah asked, pouring over the menu. She practically had it memorized.

“Fajitas.”

“You always get those.”

“That’s because they’re the best, and they never get old.”

“I think I’m going to get the beef burrito.” She closed her menu.

Carrington closed hers as well. The server must have been watching them because she approached the table. They gave her their orders, and she headed back into the kitchen.

Sariah leaned back into the seat. She felt safe coming here with Carrington. It was a familiar, comfortable environment for her. Maybe she would live the rest of her life like this. Running her business, hanging out with her bestie, eating good food.

She’d always imagined that one day she would get married and have kids, but now she wondered if that wasn’t to be for her. She was content with the way things were.

“Do you think you’ll ever get married?” she asked Carrington.

“It sure doesn’t look like it. There aren’t exactly a lot of options around.” Carrington dipped another chip in the salsa.

“Does it ever seem weird to you that all our friends married famous people?”

“No, because I knew them before they were famous. They’re still just guys I knew in high school,” Carrington said.

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“I would think it would be hard to be married to someone living in the spotlight.”
Sariah took a sip of her margarita.

“Is that why you aren’t interested in picking up where you left off with Kane?”

“No. I hadn’t even thought about what it would be like to be married to him. It’s never crossed my mind.”

“Think of how rich you would be! That guy is loaded.”

Sariah laughed. “Since when have you been so shallow?”

“I’m not being shallow. I’m being realistic. He’s the richest guy we know, and we’re friends with a lot of wealthy people.”

“So what? I would never marry a guy for money.”

“I’m not saying you would. But the money would be a nice perk.”

“Money is always a nice perk, but you don’t need it to be happy,” Sariah said.

“It sure helps though. Not having to worry about bills would take a huge load off your shoulders,” Carrington said.

“I’m doing just fine financially, thank you very much.”

Carrington’s eyebrow shot up. “Not as well as Kane.” She smiled at Sariah over her

drink before taking a sip.

“You’re terrible.”

“Like I said, I’m being realistic. He’s an excellent catch, and you’re completely available. Plus, there’s history. A sizzling one. I say go for it.”

“I feel like you haven’t been listening to a word I’ve said tonight,” Sariah complained. She didn’t want to face the fact that she could possibly have a happy future with Kane. They’d been blissfully happy together in the past.

“I’ve been listening. I just think you’re not being fair to yourself. It’s like you’re trying to punish yourself for trusting a bad guy in the past. You deserve the best, and it doesn’t get much better than Kane.”

“If you like him so much, why don’t you go for him?”

“Because he has history with you. I would never step between you two. I can still tell there’s something there, just seeing the two of you around each other when he comes into town.”

“We don’t even know if Kane is interested.”

“We can always find out,” Carrington said with a wicked smile.

“No way.”

Carrington pulled her phone out.

“What are you doing?” Panic crept into her voice. “You’d better not be reaching out to him. That would be a violation of my trust.”

“Fine. I won’t reach out to him if you don’t want me to but promise me you won’t shoot him down if he tries to rekindle something.”

“Why do you want me to promise that?” She crossed her arms defensively.

“Because I care about your happiness.”

“So do I. I’m trying to protect my heart.”

“I think you’re trying too hard. Instead, you could be missing out on something amazing.”

“Fine. I’ll give him a shot. But only if he makes the first move. I’m not going after some ultra-rich guy like a desperate gold digger.”

Carrington laughed. “Deal.”

Chapter 3

The next day, Kane walked into Hadley's, and a hostess led him to a table where Chase was waiting for him in the back corner of the restaurant. He'd gone out that morning and rented a car for himself. He didn't want to rely on others to get him around. Chase had offered to give him rides, but Kane knew he was a busy guy with a thriving career as a musician, a wife, and a baby on the way. Anyway, he was a billionaire. Money was no object for him. It was strange to think about. He wasn't raised that way.

Once he came of age and stepped up into his position in the company, he started living more of a well-to-do life. He loved to travel and had stayed at some of the best resorts across the world.

"Hey there, Chase," he said as he took a seat across from him.

Chase looked up from his menu. "Oh, hey."

"Does Owen have anything new on the menu?" He couldn't believe their good friend Owen Hadley was able to balance running the farm fresh restaurant with his demanding film career.

"There's a meatloaf that looks pretty good."

Kane glanced over the selection. "I think I'm just going to stick with the roasted chicken. I had it before, and it was fantastic." He shut the menu and set it next to his plate.

A server showed up and took their orders. Chase decided on the meatloaf. “I’ll let you know how it tastes.” He sipped on the soda the server had brought him while he’d been waiting on Kane.

“Sounds good.”

The waitress took their menus and left.

“Have you heard about the plans to build a shopping mall in Maple Creek?”

“What?” Kane frowned. “Maple Creek is perfect just as it is. Why would anyone want to do anything to change it?”

“If they bring in this mall, it’ll change the entire dynamic of this town.”

“I don’t like it,” Kane said.

“Neither do I. They’re trying to come in and commercialize this place.”

“And the small-town charm will go out the window,” Kane said.

“I know. It makes me sick to my stomach.”

Their server came back with the sweet tea Kane had ordered and a loaf of fresh baked bread.

“This bread is the best,” Chase said, reaching for the knife to cut off a slice. “It’s the real reason I come here.”

“Owen sure does know how to run a successful restaurant.”

“It’s a good thing Alexis decided to marry him when he almost put her bakery out of business.” Chase took a bite of his bread.

“Well, she’s thriving now.” Kane reached for the knife and cut off his own piece.

“It’s always nice to see our friends having a happy ending. I just wish things could have worked out better for you,” Chase said.

Kane shrugged. “It is what it is. I’ll be all right.” He had all the money he could ever want, but it truly hadn’t bought happiness for him. “Sometimes I wonder what’s wrong with me.” He took a bite of his bread. It was still warm and melted in his mouth.

“What do you mean?” Chase asked.

He chewed and swallowed. “I gave Orchid everything. My heart, my wealth, my home. I can’t understand why it wasn’t enough for her.”

“That wasn’t you. She was the one with the issues.”

“Everyone contributes to their marriage failing,” Kane said.

“That doesn’t mean you deserved to be cheated on,” Chase pointed out.

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“I know that. But it still messes with my head.”

“Don’t let it. That kind of worry doesn’t help anything.” Chase took another bite of his bread.

Their server came out with their salads and set the plates down in front of them.

Kane poured the peppercorn ranch dressing over his leafy greens before taking his fork and stabbing the lettuce. “I’m more worried about my grandmother.”

“How’s she doing?” Chase asked.

“Not well. I’m thinking about staying behind after the funeral to give her some additional support. She’s really been struggling with my grandpa’s death.”

“That’s tough. Let me know if I can do anything.”

“I will. Are you planning on going to the funeral?” Kane stabbed at his salad and took a bite.

“Lauren and I will be there.”

“I have a feeling it’s going to be packed,” Kane said.

“I can see that. Your grandfather was a well-loved man in Maple Creek. Wasn’t he the mayor at one time? We were pretty young, but I seem to remember that.”

“He was the mayor. You have a good memory.” Kane wiped his mouth. “How’s Lauren doing?”

“She’s starting to get tired of being pregnant. It’s getting to the point that the fun is wearing off as her back’s been hurting more.”

Kane thought about Orchid’s back hurting. He would have been the most devoted husband, concerned about her every ache and pain. But she’d killed whatever love was left between them when she’d decided to cheat repeatedly. He was done. She’d robbed him of the chance to be excited expectant father. Their marriage had been dead long before he’d even suspected that she’d been cheating. He’d noticed that she’d become distant. He’d been caught up in his work. He knew he’d done his part to contribute to the death of their marriage.

They finished their salads just as their server brought out their main entrees. Kane cut into his roasted chicken and took a bite. It was just as flavorful and moist as he’d remembered it being. “This is fantastic,” he said.

“The meatloaf is really good too. It tastes homemade.”

“My grandma makes a killer meatloaf.” Kane sawed off another bite of chicken and put it in his mouth.

“Hey, what are you two doing here?” a voice to his left asked. Kane looked up to see Carrington standing next to their booth. Sariah stood behind her.

“Just grabbing some food,” Chase said.

The hostess waited with menus for the two girls at the table near them.

“Do you two want to join us?” Kane offered. “We have room here for you.”

“Sure.” Carrington smiled at him. She took the seat next to Chase, and Sariah sat next to Kane. She was close enough that he could smell her perfume, a fresh crisp scent that suited her and brought back memories of kissing her in the backseat of his car in high school. He couldn’t believe she was still wearing the same perfume after all these years.

He didn’t know what he was thinking, inviting them to sit with Chase and him. The words had just slipped out of his mouth. He should have known better than to let Sariah sit so close. She still affected him, even after all these years. It wasn’t something he could control.

“Have you guys heard about the new mall they want to build?” Carrington asked after they’d ordered.

“We were actually just talking about that,” Kane said.

“I can’t believe they want to build a mall here,” Sariah said. “If we want to go shopping, we can drive to Roanoke. There’s perfectly good options there.”

“Think of all the traffic it would bring here,” Carrington said.

“There has to be something we can do to stop them,” Sariah said.

“There’s a city council meeting about it next week,” Chase said.

“I think I’m going to it,” Sariah said.

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“Do you think there’s something you could do to help, Kane?” Carrington asked. “I’d think you’d be able to have some pull with the standing you have in the business community.”

Kane considered her words for a minute. “I’m not sure how I’d be able to help. I’m going to be pretty busy with my grandpa’s funeral.”

“You did just say you wanted to extend your stay to help your grandma out,” Chase said.

“That’s true.” The waitress came back with drinks for the ladies.

“You’re staying longer?” Sariah asked.

“My grandma is struggling. I think it would be best.” He’d already cleared it with his grandfather that morning. He heard something in Sariah’s voice when she’d asked him if he was staying longer. What was it? Did she want him to stay longer? That couldn’t be it. He was imagining things. They were a thing of the past. It was best to keep it that way.

“So if you’re staying longer, then you’ll be able to find time to help us out.” Carrington took a drink of her lemon water.

Chase laughed. “This girl is persistent.”

“I’m not saying take time away from your grandma, but think about the good you could do for Maple Creek,” Carrington said.

“I think she’s right,” Sariah said. “My grandma and I will be around to help support your grandma. When she finds out about the shopping mall, she’ll be the first one to want to fight against it. It could be good for her to find something to get her mind off her sadness.”

Kane hadn’t thought of that. Maybe Sariah was right. It could be this fight would be exactly what his grandma needed. A welcome distraction. They had to get through the funeral first. She deserved to bury her husband before he started distracting her too much.

“I appreciate all you’ve been doing to help support my grandmother,” Kane said to Sariah. “You and your family have really been there for her. She needs that right now.”

“It’s no problem. With her living next door to my grandma for years, she’s helped her with various things for decades. It’s what we do. We’re there for each other.”

Kane’s heart warmed to hear her say that. His grandma meant the world to him. All these years she’d had his grandpa to be there for her, and now that he was gone, he worried she’d have a rough time on her own. “I hate it that I’m so far away most of the time. I have a feeling my grandma’s going to need a lot of extra help now that Gramps is gone.”

“You’re only a plane ride away,” Carrington pointed out.

“Yeah. But it’s not the same. Which is why I’m going to stay at least a week or two after the funeral to help her get situated.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Chase said. “You’re lucky you’re able to get away from work right now.”

“I know. We’re going through a merger right now. It’s a little intense, but I’ll be videoing in with them every day. The company is a family friendly place, and my grandfather was close to my maternal grandparents. He completely gets it.” He didn’t mention that his grandfather also wanted him out of the office since Orchid kept showing up there to stir up drama. With him gone longer, it removed the problem for a longer period of time.

“What do you think you can do to help with the shopping mall?” Sariah turned to Kane.

“At the very least, I can go to the town meeting.”

“Now we’re talking,” Carrington said.

“I’ll go there too. I think the more people we get there, the better our chances will be to get the project shut down,” Chase said.

“It probably won’t be an easy fight,” Carrington said. “I hear these people are determined, and they have big money.”

“Have they already bought the land?” Kane asked.

“I’m not sure,” Sariah said. “Does anyone else know?”

Kane looked around the table, but they all shook their heads. “It shouldn’t be too hard to find out.”

“What does it matter if they did?” Sariah asked.

“They’ll be more likely to build if they already have the land purchased.”

“True, but they’d still have to get the zoning approved,” Chase said.

“Right. That means there’s some time before this thing would go up.”

“It would be so heartbreaking to watch this town change,” Sariah said.

Kane couldn’t stand to see the sadness on her face. It reminded him of the day they said goodbye to each other. It was the summer after high school graduation. He was moving to New York to get settled in for his freshman year of college. It had been so hard to end their relationship, but they’d both agreed that it would be too hard to keep a long-distance relationship. Sometimes he wondered if he’d made a terrible mistake. If he’d stayed with Sariah, would they have gotten married eventually? It would have saved him from the disastrous marriage he’d had with Orchid. Sariah was so sweet compared to Orchid. She was down to earth. Orchid had been pampered even before he’d met her. Her parents had indulged her too much, and he hadn’t done her any favors by giving her everything her heart desired.

She’d taken advantage of him. He saw that now. He didn’t think it would have gone that way if he’d chosen Sariah. He couldn’t stand to see her heart break again. Because that was the look on her face when he’d said goodbye to her that day so many years ago. She’d been heartbroken.

He would do whatever he could to protect her from another heartbreak and Maple Creek from commercialization.

Chapter 4

Sariah turned on her coffee maker as the early morning rays lit up the wood of her living room floor. She loved Sundays. It meant she got to sleep in for once. She turned on some upbeat music and went into the bathroom to blow dry her still wet hair and put her makeup on. Her thoughts wandered to the lunch she'd had with Kane the day before. She'd seen him lots of times since they'd broken up years ago, but it felt different this time. He was single now. Before, he'd always been either dating someone or married. And then she'd ended up sitting next to him at the restaurant. She'd been close enough to smell his cologne, feel his arm brush against her occasionally. A shiver ran down her body just thinking about it.

She finished blow drying her hair and grabbed her coffee, sitting at the kitchen table. She sipped on it, humming along to the music. She wasn't much of a morning person, so her coffee and her music helped her to be in a better mood. When she'd finished drinking it, her doorbell rang.

She padded barefoot across her wood floors to the front door. She found her grandma standing on her front step, holding a plastic food container.

"Hey, Grandma. Come on in." She opened the door wider to allow her to come inside.

"Are you hungry?"

"All I've had is my coffee this morning."

“Good. I made muffins, and I had extra to share.”

“Yum! You know how much I love your muffins.” She took the container and lifted the lid, peering inside. “Ooh! Blueberry is my favorite.” Her grandma used fresh blueberries in her recipe, and it was to die for.

“How are things at the shop?” They migrated to the living room couch and sat down together. Sariah loved spending time with her grandma. She had owned the jewelry shop with her husband before they’d retired. Because of that, Sariah and her grandma usually had a ton to talk about. Her grandpa had passed away two years ago.

“It’s going well. I’ve been working on opening the new store in Roanoke all this week.”

“How’s that been?”

“I’ve had a few hang ups, but that’s to be expected. Nothing too big. So far, we’re right on schedule to open in December.”

“That’s fantastic,” her grandma said. “I’m so proud of the job you’re doing with the business.”

Sariah placed her hand over her grandmother’s. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.” She took a muffin out of the container and bit into it. She could taste the sweetness of the blueberries.

“Was it just my imagination, or did I sense something going on between you and Kane?”

“Grandma, you know that’s in the past. I don’t know what you think you sensed, but nothing’s there now.”

Her grandma gave her a disbelieving look. “You could have fooled me.”

“I’m serious!” Anything between her and Kane was over now. Right?

“Maybe you’re not aware of it then.”

“Aware of what?”

“The way Kane has been looking at you.”

“And what way is that?” Sariah took another bite of her muffin.

“I think he still has feelings for you. He’s crushing.”

Sariah could feel her face turning red. Was that what she wanted? “I don’t think he’s the same guy he was all those years ago.”

“What makes you say that?” her grandma asked.

“Think about it. He’s got all that money now. Having that much wealth would change a person.”

“Not necessarily,” her grandma said. “Kane doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who would let money change him like that.”

That gave Sariah pause. Was her grandma right? “Maybe I need to give Kane the benefit of the doubt.” She wasn’t typically a judgmental kind of person. Kane didn’t deserve the kind of judgment she was placing on him.

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.” Her grandma patted her on the arm.

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“That doesn’t mean I want to get back together with him,” Sariah insisted.

“Would you at least consider being his friend? He’s going through a tough time right now. His grandmother is struggling, and I know he hates to see her in pain.”

“Of course, we already are friends.”

“I think Kane could really benefit from some extra support from you.”

Sariah nodded. “I can see that.”

“He needs you to stick by his side and help him through this trying time.”

“Maybe I’ll give him a call today and see if he wants to do something.”

Her grandma picked up her phone from the side table and handed it to Sariah with a devious smile. “Now’s a great time to do that.”

Sariah laughed. “Okay. If you insist.” She searched the contacts on her phone until she found Kane’s number. She’d gotten it last year when they’d been in a group text for one of the weddings they’d both been in.

She dialed his number, glancing over at her grandma, who had a look of glee on her face. Sariah bit her bottom lip to keep from smiling. Her grandma was a little too excited about this phone call.

“Hey, Kane. It’s Sariah.” Of course he knew that. Her name would have popped up

on his caller ID. If he'd put her in his phone, that is.

"Hey there."

Her grandma was staring intently at her like she was hanging on her every word. "I know you're probably busy, and it's silly that I'm calling, but I thought I'd check in with you and see how you're doing."

"I'm doing all right. How are you?"

Sariah found herself rambling. "My grandma brought over blueberry muffins for me this morning, so I'm in a great mood." Why was she so nervous talking to him? They used to be so close.

Kane chuckled. "Grandma-made blueberry muffins are pretty magical."

And this was coming from a guy who could afford to eat at the most expensive bakeries in New York City. It warmed her heart to hear the love he had in his voice for grandmas everywhere. "Definitely." Her heart pounded, and she couldn't figure out how to slow it down. "I know you've been having a hard time with your grandpa's death. I hope you know I'm here for you."

Kane paused for a moment, and Sariah wondered if she'd caught him off guard. "That's really nice of you, Sariah." His voice was soft and tender, and it did something funny to her insides.

Her grandma mouthed the words "Go on" and waved a hand toward her.

Sariah pressed her lips together to keep from giggling at her grandma's behavior. She reminded her of her friends in middle school when she called her crush for the first time. They'd been up late giggling at a sleepover, and someone had dared her to call

him. She'd ended up waking him up. She'd panicked and hung up on him after she'd gotten out two words. The entire experience had been a disaster. She could hardly face him after that. Until they dared her to call him again at the next slumber party. Her friends were merciless. Her grandma was no better.

She gained her composure. "What do you have going on today?" Why did she feel so nervous all of a sudden? She blamed her grandma for putting too much pressure on her.

"My parents just came in town. We're going through my grandpa's things, trying to divvy up who gets what."

Her grandma got up and headed to the kitchen. "I'm just going to grab a cup of coffee," she whispered to Sariah.

Sariah nodded at her before turning her attention back to her conversation with Kane. "That sounds really hard. Would you like any help?"

"You want to help us?" Kane seemed surprised by her offer.

"Sure. I can roll up my sleeves like the best of them, and it sounds like you have a lot of work to do."

"It's actually more work than you'd think."

"How's that?" Sariah asked.

"My grandma decided yesterday she wants to sell her house and move to one of those senior living communities."

"Really?" Sariah asked, stunned. "I thought she would live in that house until the day

she died. This all feels so sudden. Do you think it's the grief talking?"

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“I don’t know. She told me she can’t stand the thought of living alone in the house. I think that was one of the reasons she wanted me to stay a little longer.”

“What about your parents? Are they going to be able to stay longer too?” Sariah asked.

“My sister is due to have a baby any day, and my mom’s in a hurry to get back to be with her.”

“That’s right,” Sariah said. “I saw on social media that your sister was due soon.”

“She doesn’t even feel safe to travel to her own grandpa’s funeral right now.”

“That’s so hard,” Sariah said. “I bet she really wishes she could be here.”

“She does. It’s just really bad timing.”

Her grandma came back in from the kitchen with her coffee and sat on the couch.

“Tell Kane that I’d like to come help out too.”

“My grandma wants to come help.”

“Is she there with you?” Kane asked.

“Yeah. She’s right next to me.” And she seemed like she was getting antsy.

“You know,” she whispered, “the sooner you get off the phone, the sooner you can

see him in person.”

Sariah held in a laugh.

“We’d love to have her. My grandma will be happy to see her. She’s having a hard time parting with Gramp’s things.”

“If she’s moving to a smaller place, she’s probably going to have to get rid of a lot more than your grandpa’s stuff.”

Her grandma looked shocked at this news, which surprised Sariah. Sariah assumed she had known about the move since she and Mrs. Edwards were best friends.

“Moving where?” Her grandma frantically tapped on her arm. “Get off the phone so we can head over there. I need to talk to her right now.”

“We should head over there soon then. My grandma’s pretty anxious to get there and figure out what’s going on with the move. We’ll bring the muffins too.”

“I won’t complain about you bringing me muffins.” He had warmth in his voice when she ended the call.

She set her phone down and looked over at her grandma.

“I can’t believe Gayle decided to move out of her house,” her grandma said.

“It does seem like a pretty sudden decision.”

“Sometimes grief does that to us,” her grandma said, shaking her head.

“Do you think she’s going to leave Maple Creek?” Sariah asked.

“I seriously doubt it. Gayle grew up here. I couldn’t imagine her ever wanting to live anywhere else.”

“You don’t think she’ll want to move to New York to be near her daughter?”

“Heavens no. Gayle in New York?” Her grandma scoffed. “I couldn’t imagine it.”

“I wouldn’t want to live there either.”

“I’m with you,” her grandma said. “I’m perfectly happy living in Maple Creek.”

“I’ve never told you this, but when Kane and I were seniors in high school, he asked me to move to New York and go to school there instead of here in Virginia.”

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“He did? Why didn’t you say yes?” her grandma probed.

“I’d visited the city with his family the summer before, and I hated it. Too crowded and polluted.”

“I can understand that.”

“Anyway, I wanted to take over your jewelry shop.” She’d already been working there during high school, and she’d fallen in love with the little shop. She hadn’t even graduated when her grandparents started talking about helping her learn the business in case they wanted her to take over one day. She’d then gone to college in nearby Roanoke to get her degree in business.

“Just like Kane ended up taking over his grandfather’s business.”

“Yeah. We did have that in common,” Sariah said.

Her grandmother stood up. “Well, should we head over there and give them a hand?”

Sariah closed the lid on the muffin container. “Yeah. Let me finish getting ready.”

She went into her room and swept her hair up into a ponytail. She’d want to keep her hair out of her face while she worked. She glanced at her reflection. She wasn’t wearing any makeup. She pulled out some foundation and got to work. It wasn’t like she felt like she had to impress Kane, right? It was normal to want to look presentable when going out. That was all.

When she was finished with her makeup, she grabbed her purse from the chair in the corner in her room and headed back out to the living where her grandma was waiting for her.

“Do you want to drive together?” her grandma offered.

“You’ll have to give me a ride home.” Since her grandma lived next door to Mrs. Edwards, she wouldn’t have a reason to come back that way.

“I don’t mind.” Her grandma waggled her eyebrows. “Or better yet. We can ask Kane to give you a ride home.”

“Very funny. He probably doesn’t even have a car here.”

“Actually, he does. I saw a rental car parked in their driveway.”

“Why do you want me to get together with him so badly?”

“Because he’s a great catch.”

“I don’t mind being his friend, but I’m not interested in starting a romance. What would the point be? He lives in New York. I just told you I wouldn’t ever want to live there. Even if I did, I have my business here.”

“You could always open a jewelry shop in New York.”

“No way. There’s no one who could convince me to leave Maple Creek.”

“Not even Kane Leland of Leland Enterprises?”

“He couldn’t convince me to leave then. It wouldn’t be any different now.” Her heart

hurt just talking about it. It had ripped her heart up to say goodbye to him. It had taken her years to get over it. And then he'd jumped right into a relationship with Orchid. She couldn't express how much pain that had caused her. It was like he hadn't really cared about her or what they'd shared together.

Sariah locked up her apartment and followed her grandma to her car.

"You're one stubborn girl," her grandma said as they climbed in.

"I'm not stubborn. I just know I wouldn't be happy there. It's not for me. Besides we don't even know if Kane would ever want to restart a romantic relationship with me. I know you don't think he's changed, but he's been around the world and seen all kind of exotic beautiful women. He can get any woman he wants with the kind of money he has."

"But none of them are as special as you," her grandma said.

"You're only saying that because I'm your granddaughter."

"It doesn't make it any less true." She started the engine and backed out of Sariah's driveway.

Sariah suddenly felt nervous seeing Kane. She wasn't sure if it had to do with the fact that she'd been feeling a growing attraction to him lately or the fact that her grandma had been so enthusiastic about her getting back together with Kane. Sariah didn't want her grandma to discover that she'd been feeling attracted to Kane again. She would be like a kid in a candy shop if she found out. Who knew what she would do or say?

In reality, her attraction to Kane had never gone away. She'd always felt her pulse race around him. She just couldn't do anything about it because she respected the fact

that he was taken. But that wasn't the case anymore.

She couldn't decide which was worse. The possibility that she might be starting to have feelings for Kane again or the chance that her grandma might embarrass her in front of him.

Chapter 5

Kane answered the door and saw Sariah standing with Mrs. Tate on the front porch. Sariah looked beautiful with her hair swept back into a swishy ponytail that he longed to touch. Her hair looked so glossy and soft. He still wasn't used to seeing her as a brunette, but he couldn't deny that he was even more attracted to her that way.

“Hey, you two. Thanks for coming over to help.”

“No problem,” Sariah said. “We're glad to pitch in.”

He'd been shocked when his grandmother had announced that she'd decided to move into a retirement community. Kane worried that she was being too hasty in her decision-making process. Hopefully she wasn't letting the grief talk.

Sariah's call had caught him off guard that morning. He hadn't expected her to offer to help or even to check in with him. It warmed his heart to know that she still cared even after all these years.

Sariah and Mrs. Tate stepped into the living room. They already had piles of photo albums scattered across the sofa. His mom had been going through them, deciding which ones she wanted to take to her house for safekeeping and which ones she wanted to use for the slideshow they were planning at the get together after the funeral.

His parents had arrived the night before. The funeral was in a few days, and they'd decided to come down to help with the preparations. Now they found themselves with

a big project on their hands. His grandma was completely overwhelmed with all the changes happening around her. Kane had tried to convince her that she didn't have to make any hasty decisions, but she seemed determined to start cleaning out her house. She was a force of nature when she put her mind to something, and there was no talking her out of it.

"What should we do?" Sariah asked.

His mother came in from the back of the house with another armful of photo albums. "Sariah?" she looked over the stack in her arms. "I thought I heard your voice."

His mom adored Sariah. She'd never liked Orchid. She'd always thought he should have married Sariah instead. He hoped she didn't say anything to make him feel awkward. He felt like an insecure teen all over again with the two of them standing in the same room again.

"Hi there, Mrs. Leland," Sariah said.

His mother set down her stack of albums on the couch and then pulled Sariah into her arms. "Hi there, honey."

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Sariah said.

His mother squeezed Sariah tighter. "I appreciate that. We miss him so much. It's not the same coming home without him here."

"We came over to offer some helping hands," Sariah's grandmother said.

"Lois, that's so nice of you." His mom let go of Sariah and gave Lois a hug. "It's so good to see you again."

“You, too, dear. We’re both here for you.”

“Where’s Mr. Leland?” Sariah asked.

“He’s out back, sorting through the shed,” his mom told her. “Where would you two like to work?”

“We can go wherever you need us,” Sariah said.

“Kane was just helping his grandmother clean out the kitchen. You can help him in there,” his mom said.

“I can give you a hand with those albums,” Lois said.

Was his mom purposely trying to push him together with Sariah? He wouldn’t put it past her, knowing how much she’s favored Sariah over the years.

He headed toward the kitchen with Sariah on his heels. His grandma was on her tiptoes, trying to pull a tray down from an upper cabinet.

“Let me help you with that.” Kane rushed forward to help her before she dropped the glass tray. He took it from her and set it on the table.

“Hey there, Mrs. Edwards,” Sariah said.

“Hi, Sariah.”

“I’m here to help. What can I do?”

“We’re getting some of my lesser used dishes out to divvy up between family members. I’ll probably donate most of this stuff.”

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“How about I take the dishes from the cabinets, and you sort them into various piles?” Sariah offered. “That’ll keep you from reaching up over and over.”

“I’ll handle the top cabinets,” Kane said since he was the tallest.

“I’m surprised you didn’t just hire a crew of people to do this.” Sariah opened a cabinet and started rummaging through it.

“We don’t need to hire anyone.” Kane reached up and pulled down a stack of silver trays. His grandmother was busy arranging the kitchen items on the table into various piles. He handed the next stack to her. “If we run out of time, we may end up hiring a crew, but for now, I feel like we’re handling it just fine.”

“Well, I certainly don’t mind pitching in.” Sariah pulled out a stack of casserole dishes.

“How did I accumulate so much stuff over the years?” his grandma complained. “It’s not like I can take any of it with me when I die. Feel free to take any of the stuff from this donate pile, Sariah.”

She turned to examine the pile his grandmother indicated. “I could actually use a slow cooker. I don’t have one that works anymore.”

“Well, make your own pile then.” His grandma plucked up the slow cooker and handed it to Sariah. “This one is practically brand new. I just don’t think I’ll ever use it again.”

“Thanks,” Sarah said brightening as she took the slow cooker and made a pile for herself in the corner of the room. “So why have you decided to move out?”

“I can’t keep up with this house and yard. This place needs way too many repairs. It’s too much to keep up with for someone my age.”

“You know, you’ll have my grandparents next door to help you out,” Sariah reminded her.

“I know, and they’ve been wonderful over the years. It’s just time for me to move into another chapter of my life.”

“I can understand that,” Kane said. He was moving into his own new chapter. As much as it hurt to shift, he was eager to start this new section of his life. It was a fresh start, and he was free of his bad marriage.

“Well, now’s the time to go through all this stuff since we have so many family members in town for the funeral,” his grandmother said, bending over her work.

Kane was glad that he’d decided to stay for a while after the funeral. He was especially worried about his grandmother with the hasty decision she’d made about moving out of her house.

“Have you decided on a senior community yet?” Sariah asked.

“There are only a couple to choose from in Maple Creek. I’m leaning toward Pineridge Farms though.”

“So you’re planning to stay in town then?” Sariah pulled out another casserole dish.

“Most definitely.” His grandmother took the dish from Sariah and placed it on the

table.

“How are you able to stay in town longer?” Sariah asked Kane.

“I told him he didn’t need to do that,” his grandma interjected. “But he’s been insisting that he doesn’t want to leave my side. I know he has that big merger at his company.”

“Your company is going through a merger?” Sariah asked, looking curiously at Kane.

“Yes. It’s been pretty intense,” Kane said.

“I’m surprised you were able to get away.” Sariah dug around in the back of the cabinet. Her voice sounded a little muffled as she spoke.

“I’m going to grab a couple of boxes from the garage,” his grandmother said, disappearing through the door that led to the garage.

“My grandfather thought it would be fine. He has everything handled with the merger. Anyway, Orchid has been showing up at the office, causing a scene.”

“Orchid is causing drama?” Sariah sounded surprised.

“You have no idea.” She really didn’t know the half of it.

“I thought she was so put together,” Sariah said.

“Looks can be deceiving from the outside.”

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“I can’t imagine her causing so much trouble. What does she want?”

His grandma came back in from the garage with a couple of boxes. She started arranging the items into them. On one, she wrote donate. On the other, she wrote his mom’s name.

“Orchid keeps coming back for more money,” Kane said.

“Yikes,” Sariah said.

“I wasn’t exactly a cheapskate in the divorce either. I made sure she left with a sizeable sum of money. But apparently, it’s not enough for her.”

“What does she want all the money for?”

“I think her new boyfriend has been pressuring her to get more funds from me. From what I understand, he’s in financial trouble.”

“You don’t owe that guy anything,” Sariah said with a frown and anger dripping from her words.

“No, I don’t,” he agreed.

“The entire thing makes me sick,” his grandmother said. “You don’t owe that gold digger another penny.”

The problem was, he might owe her quite a bit more if she proved this baby was his.

He didn't mind paying his fair share, but he didn't want her to make excuses, saying the baby needed financial support when it was really her boyfriend who wanted it for whatever sketchy business he was involved in.

"You're way too nice to her, if you want my opinion," his grandma said. "That cheating woman still hasn't gotten what she deserved."

"Orchid cheated?" Sariah asked.

"That was why we split up," Kane said.

Her eyes were wide as she looked at him. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

He hadn't talked to Sariah much about his divorce. It was painful to let her know how much he'd been through. He'd been a fool to ever let Sariah go. Kane had begged her to move to New York with him, but she hadn't wanted to leave Maple Creek. Sariah was a small-town girl through and through. There was no way a long-distance relationship would have worked out for them. He didn't want her to put her life on hold for him either. She deserved to live a normal life where she could be free to date around without being tied to a guy who wasn't around much.

"It's in the past now," Kane said. "Sometimes you have to learn lessons the hard way."

"What lesson did you learn?" Sariah's cheeks reddened. "I'm sorry. You probably don't want to tell me all your personal business."

"No. It's fine," he said. "I've learned how to be a better judge of character."

"Because he misjudged Orchid. Big time," his grandmother piped up. "But I knew from the beginning she was no good. She was only after his money."

“She’s not wrong,” Kane said.

“That’s crazy,” Sariah said. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out better for you, Kane.”

“I’m not sorry,” Kane said. “I stopped loving her long ago. Our marriage was dead long before we ever split up. That was probably why she cheated on me.”

“That doesn’t excuse her behavior,” his grandma said.

“No, it doesn’t,” Sariah agreed. “Cheating is never okay. If you want to move on, then break off the relationship first. It’s not rocket science.”

“But Orchid wanted the money, remember,” his grandma said. “If she’d broken it off, she wouldn’t have had access to the same level of wealth.”

“That’s disgusting,” Sariah said. “Sorry, Kane. I know she was your wife.”

“Hey, you’re not saying anything I don’t agree with. I’m past trying to defend or rationalize her bad behavior.” And it was a good thing he’d moved on. He would be in a lot more pain if he were still hung up on Orchid. For a few moments, they worked in silence.

“Have you heard anything about the new mall?” Sariah asked. “That town meeting is tonight coming up this week if you still want to go.”

“Actually, I have been looking into it,” Kane said. “I found out where they want to build it.”

“Where?” Sariah said.

“On the old Hickory Ridge homestead.”

“What? They can’t build a mall there. Talk about wrecking all our childhood memories,” Sariah said.

“It wasn’t just us,” Kane said. The entire community had loved that farm. There was a creek with a rope swing that was a popular swimming spot for kids in the summer. In high school they’d all had bonfires on the property. The owner, Mr. Webber, had always been welcoming the community onto his property. His wife was a retired schoolteacher who had taught at Maple Creek High for forty years. They’d both passed away within the last few years.

“I know,” Sariah said. “It was a well-loved place. Maybe we can use that to our advantage. Get the word out and gather more people to that town meeting.”

“It won’t be easy to fight against the developers. All those people care about is turning a profit,” his grandmother said, shaking her head in disgust.

“Gramps would be so upset if he were alive to hear this news.”

“Why do you say that?” Sariah asked.

“He used to work on that farm when he was a young guy. The property meant a lot to him.”

“It meant a lot to me too. We had a lot of good memories there.”

Kane’s heart warmed to hear her talk about it. They’d had their first kiss on that property. They’d spent the entire day by Maple Creek, swimming and picnicking in the sun. When the sun had set and the place had cleared out, he’d finally been brave enough to make his first move. He’d never forget it. The fireflies had just started to appear, and the crickets were chirping all around them.

But that was a long time ago. He was sure Sariah wasn’t talking about the memories between the two of them. There had been plenty of other happy memories throughout the years. If he were being honest with himself, he would admit that his memories with Sariah were by far the best he’d experienced at Hickory Ridge. But those kinds of thoughts weren’t helpful. Sariah had moved on. What they’d had was ancient history.

“What are you going to do to save the farm, Kane?” his grandmother asked.

“I think the first thing to do is to get the word out to the community that this property is getting turned into a mall.”

“That’s a good direction to head in,” Sariah said. “I can help with getting the word out.”

“We can tell people at the funeral,” his grandma offered.

“No, Grandma, that day is for Gramps.”

“You don’t think that would be one of the best ways you could honor him?” his grandma pointed out. “He wouldn’t want Hickory Ridge to be turned into a shopping center.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Kane agreed. Maybe the funeral would be an ideal gathering for spreading the word about the plans to demolish the farm. Those were historical buildings. The farmhouse dated back to before the Civil War. The barn was over a hundred years old. Mr. and Mrs. Webber had done a great job keeping the buildings in good repair. He wondered what kind of condition they were in now that the couple had passed. “I think we should head over there and check out the property.”

“I’d love to go with you,” Sariah offered. “Maybe we can go after we finish up in here.”

Kane turned around and surveyed the room. “What do we still have left?”

His grandma twisted to look at him. “I have the donate box filled. I think I’m going to go get some more from the garage.”

“I can go with you to give you a hand,” Kane offered.

They left and his grandma led him to a corner of the garage where she had a bunch of empty boxes stacked up. He grabbed a few and handed two of them to his grandma.

“This ought to be enough for now,” she said.

He followed her back into the kitchen with two of his own in his arms. He helped her sort through the piles they’d made on the table. Sariah had her cabinet emptied so she joined them in their sorting effort.

His mom showed up in the doorway. “How’s it going in here?”

“We’re making great progress,” his grandma said. “I think we’re going to end up donating most of this stuff. I don’t plan on cooking as much in my new place.”

“Make sure you keep a few things to keep you afloat until you decide to move out,” his mom said.

“I’ve already thought of that,” his grandma said. “Do you want to go through the donate pile to see if there’s anything you want to keep?”

“Sure.”

“We have this reserved for your stuff.” She pointed to one of the boxes sitting on a kitchen chair.

His mom rummaged through the various donation boxes and pulled a couple of items out.

“You’ll probably find more when we go through the China hutch. Most of the family heirlooms are in there.”

His grandma stood up straight and put her hand on her lower back.

“Are you okay, Grandma?” Kane asked.

“I think my back is about done with all this sorting.”

“Maybe we should be done for the day,” Kane suggested. “We can just move these donation boxes to the garage for people to finish going through.”

“That would be wonderful.”

“Well, I figured you wouldn’t want your table overcrowded with all this stuff. Eventually, you’re going to want a place to eat.” He grabbed a box and hauled it to the garage.

“I’ll help out too.” Sariah another one and followed him out there. They placed them

next to the collection of empty boxes and then headed back into the kitchen to get the rest. It felt good to work beside her. She wasn't afraid to roll up her sleeves and take care of business. She was beautiful to look at and often melted his heart with her sweetness.

She handed him the box in her arms, and their hands brushed. Goosebumps traveled up his arms at her touch. He suddenly had a flash of taking her in his arms and brushing her hair back from her face. The memory only lasted a second, but it had a powerful impact on him and left him breathless.

“Kane? Are you okay?”

He shook off the feeling, coming back to the present. “Yeah. I’m fine. I think that’s about it.”

But he wasn't fine. Why was he thinking of Sariah like that? He was in no position to think about another woman again so soon after his divorce, was he? Surely, he still needed more time to heal.

Chapter 6

They finished up at Mrs. Edward's house, and the two grandmas decided they wanted to go to the farm with Kane and Sariah. Kane's mom stayed behind with his dad to continue working on the house. The four of them piled into Kane's rental car. Sariah offered to let one of the older women sit in the front seat, but they both insisted that she sit up there with him. Sariah felt guilty sitting up front with the extra leg room while the older women sat in the back. She got the impression that both women were trying to push her together with Kane. Why was everyone around her so determined that she get back together with him? Was there something she was missing? She was pretty sure she knew what was best for her life. Right?

Within ten minutes, Kane was pulling into the old gravel driveway of the homestead. They crossed a covered bridge that spanned Maple Creek and headed toward the old farmhouse.

"I haven't been here in years," Mrs. Edwards said.

His grandfather, Mr. Edwards, would have loved to be there with them. Sariah felt a pang of sadness for the loss of the sweet man. He'd always been so supportive of her relationship with Kane back in the day.

"I don't think I've been here since the Webbers put on a fireworks show for fourth of July years ago," her grandmother said.

Sariah had gone with her that year. It had been spectacular. They'd really gone all out with music and a grand finale. "The Webbers did some of the best fireworks in Maple

Creek. It's sad to think they're gone, and their farm is about to be demolished."

"I'll do all I can to keep that from happening," Kane said.

"That's the spirit," Mrs. Edwards said.

Kane pulled up to the farmhouse, and they got out of the car.

Sariah's grandmother looked up at the older home. "Maybe we can get the Maple Creek Historical Society involved in protecting this home."

"It's possible they already know about it," Kane said. "But just to be sure, I'll reach out to them."

"That's a great idea." Sariah's feet crunched over some fallen leaves from the giant maple tree in the front yard. She gazed up at the old white brick home in front of them. It definitely had some character with a large front porch and gabled windows, reminiscent of so many other homes in Maple Creek. It was empty now, but she could remember when rocking chairs lined it and potted plants had hung from the covered porch. Now only dried leaves scattered across the dusty planks.

"Why hasn't this place sold already by now?" Mrs. Edwards asked.

"From what I understand, the Webbers' kids were arguing about what to do with the land. Half wanted to sell, and the other half wanted to keep it in the family. But now that the developer has given them such a generous offer, they've decided to sell the land."

"Maybe the two of you should just get married, buy this place, and move in," Sariah's grandma suggested with a wide smile.

“You have some wild ideas about what should happen.” Sariah could feel her cheeks heating up. This was exactly why she was nervous about her grandma hanging out with her and Kane. Of course, her grandma had insisted on coming along. She wanted every opportunity to drop hints that they should be together. Only it seemed like she was past being subtle at this point. It was like she felt like she didn’t have to bother with a filter now that she’d gotten older.

“You think I should marry Sariah?” Kane asked.

“I sure do,” her grandma said.

He chuckled. “And why do you say that?”

Kane was making it even worse. What was he thinking? Didn’t he know better than to encourage her. She was bad enough on her own.

“Well isn’t it obvious? You two are clearly still in love with each other, even after all these years.”

“Is that so?” Kane glanced over at Sariah with a small smile on his face.

Was he enjoying this? Seeing her squirm? Because she was obviously squirming.

“Of course it is. Anyone with two eyes in their head could see that. Don’t you agree, Gayle?”

“Lois, you leave those two alone. Can’t you see how red Sariah’s face is getting?”

“I don’t think I will. Someone has to speak up. They might be missing out on something wonderful. I’m not going to stand by and let them throw away such a great thing.”

“I’m going to walk down to the creek now,” Sariah said, desperate for escape.

“Ooh! Great idea. We’ll come with you,” her grandma said.

So much for her escape plan. All three of them followed her to the creek. The remnants of the old rope swing still hung from the tree. A couple of boards they’d used for a ladder were still nailed to the trunk. They were close to the spot where she’d had her first kiss with Kane.

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She'd spent too much time blushing today. Sariah refused to let her cheeks heat up again. It felt like everyone was watching her. She couldn't have them catching her acting like an embarrassed high schooler who didn't know how to talk to boys.

Sariah snuck a glance at Kane. Was he thinking about their first kiss too? It had been one of the most magical moments of her life. She'd never been kissed before. Usually, first kisses were known as being awkward or sloppy. But her kiss with Kane hadn't been like that. It had curled her toes and left her longing for more of him. They'd become inseparable after that. It was the summer after freshman year. They'd stayed together until just before graduation. Her heart ached to think of how tough that break up had been.

She didn't want to put her heart on the line for Kane again. There was too much danger of getting hurt. Sariah couldn't handle that kind of pain once more.

She sat down on the bank of the river in a grassy patch. Kane took a seat beside her, brushing against her arm, sending goosebumps chasing down her spine.

"It's beautiful here," he said.

"We can't let anyone turn this place into a mall," Sariah said quietly.

"No. We can't." He put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her toward him. "I won't let that happen."

Butterflies fluttered through her at his warm touch. She could feel the hardness of his muscled body beside her. He was a lot more in shape than he'd been back in high

school. She hadn't been this close to him physically in years, and now that she was experiencing it again, she wasn't sure she wanted him to let go of her.

Sariah pushed open the door to The Icing on Top Bake Shop. She was dying to eat one of Alexis's pink lemonade cupcakes. She'd decided to take a break from the jewelry store. Her Monday afternoon had been slow, and she was sure her employees could keep things running while she stepped out for a quick sugar fix.

Alexis had moved to California with her husband Owen. It had surprised Sariah that Alexis had been willing to do that. But Owen helped her open another bakery in LA. Now both bakeries were thriving. Alexis had gotten her employee Delilah to take over the bake shop, and she'd done a great job running things.

"Hey there, Sariah. What can I get for you?" Delilah greeted her with a smile.

"I'll have a pink lemonade cupcake."

"Sure thing. Anything else?"

"Nope. That's it."

Delilah rang her up and handed her the little box with the pink cupcake inside. Sariah took a seat at one of the little bistro tables to enjoy her treat.

The door to the shop pushed open, and Kane came inside with his mom. His gaze immediately fell on her.

"Fancy meeting you here," Sariah said, grinning at him. "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Leland."

"You too," Mrs. Leland said.

“Hey there, Sariah. That cupcake looks good,” Kane said.

“It’s pink lemonade flavored. What are you up to?”

“We’re here to order some rolls for the funeral.”

“Speaking of,” Mrs. Leland said, “Why don’t you let me go do that? You two catch up.”

“Can you order me one of those pink lemonade cupcakes?” Kane asked.

“Sure.” His mom walked up to the counter, and Delilah pulled out a pad of paper to take down her order. “Before we get started, can I get a pink lemonade cupcake for my son?”

“Absolutely, Mrs. Leland.”

Kane stood up and got the cupcake from Delilah. He walked back over to Sariah. “Mind if I sit down?”

“Sure. Have a seat.” She gestured to the chair across from her.

He took a seat and opened the little box the cupcake had come in. He bit into the dessert. “Oh, wow. This is really good.”

“I know, right?” Sariah grinned at the look at his face. He looked like he was in heaven. “It’s Alexis’s original recipe.”

“She has a lot of unique recipes on her menu,” Kane said, looking over the little menu that sat on the table next to a little vase with a pink rose.

“That’s what makes her so popular.”

He flipped over the menu, scanning the back. “I’m surprised that she’s able to come up with so many recipes that taste so good.”

Sariah shrugged. “She’s good at what she does.”

“It’s sad that she moved away,” Kane said.

“I know. But she still comes back to check on her bakery.”

“No one can stay away from Maple Creek for too long.”

The door opened, and Sariah turned to see Mrs. Wheaton coming into the shop. She took one look at Sariah and Kane sitting together, and her eyes got huge. She rushed right over to them. The town gossip was a larger woman with graying hair and a body that sagged in all the wrong places.

“Well, look at the two of you sitting all cozy! One would almost think something was going on between the two of you again. Please tell me I’m right.”

“We’re just friends, Mrs. Wheaton,” Sariah assured her.

“Well, never say never. The best relationships start out with a strong base of friendship.”

The woman was just as bad as her grandma.

“I’m just glad you seem to be taking my advice,” Mrs. Wheaton said.

“What advice was that?” Kane asked.

“I told her to go after you,” Mrs. Wheaton said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Because I have so much money?” Kane said.

“Well, er, no.” Mrs. Wheaton’s face turned bright red. “Sariah’s not the type of girl to go after a guy for his money.”

But Mrs. Wheaton had made it perfectly clear that she thought Sariah should go after Kane since he was so wealthy. She’d stopped by Sariah’s shop on multiple occasions to give her opinion on the subject.

“Why did you tell her to go after me then?” Kane asked.

Sariah didn’t want him to think she was a gold digger, so she hoped Mrs. Wheaton’s insistence that she wasn’t after his money was believable to him.

“I know the two of you used to date. You’re a great guy, and Sariah deserves happiness. I figured, why not? She doesn’t seem eager to be in a relationship. Sometimes people need a little push, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think Sariah was looking for a push though. Maybe you should let her decide for herself if she wants to date.”

Mrs. Wheaton didn’t seem to enjoy being in the hot seat for once. Normally, she was the one putting everyone else in uncomfortable situations. She fidgeted with the strap of her handbag and shifted her weight like she was looking for an excuse to escape.

Sariah couldn't help the satisfaction that went through her at Mrs. Wheaton's reaction to Kane comment. She wondered if people usually called her out on being so involved in everyone's business.

"Well, I should get in line. I've got muffins to order." Mrs. Wheaton shuffled away from them.

When she was out of earshot, Kane turned to Sariah. "I hope I'm not coming across as too nosy, but I'm wondering about something."

"What's that?" Sariah asked.

"Mrs. Wheaton mentioned that you didn't seem eager to get into a relationship. Why is that?"

Sariah wadded up her cupcake wrapper as she sifted through her thoughts. "I was in a relationship that didn't go well a few years ago, and I've been pretty guarded about who I let into my life ever since."

"I don't think I realized you were dating someone," Kane said.

"He was keeping a pretty big secret from me. I knew I couldn't trust him anymore, so I ended it."

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Kane's face seemed a bit white for a moment, but Sariah couldn't understand why he might seem upset by what she'd just said.

"You seem like the type that expects a full disclosure in a relationship," Kane said.

"I get it that some people may not feel comfortable sharing everything, but this secret was pretty huge. It was a deal breaker that he didn't tell me."

"What was he hiding from you?"

"He was addicted to painkillers," Sariah said. "I had no idea. I didn't find out until he was in a car accident, and it got worse from there."

"How did it get worse?" Kane asked.

"He'd been high when he got in the accident."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"He ended up killing a man."

"That's horrible," Kane said. "I can't imagine being responsible for a tragedy like that. How did you deal with it?"

"I blamed myself. I should have been more aware of the fact that he was keeping something big from me. If I'd been able to figure out that he'd been using I could have helped him get to rehab. It could have prevented his death."

“You can’t blame yourself for his mistakes. That’s entirely on him,” Kane said.

“You’re not the first person to tell me that,” Sariah said. “I get the idea behind it, but it doesn’t seem like my heart can understand it. When you hear about a tragedy like that, you want to have been able to prevent it somehow. Like if I’d been able to monitor Elliot better, maybe it wouldn’t have happened. I could have stopped him from getting behind the wheel somehow.”

“None of this was your fault,” Kane said.

“Well, now you know why I’m not eager to get into another relationship. I don’t know how to trust a man anymore.”

“Not all guys are like Elliot.”

“I get that, I really do. But I can’t trust my own judgement. I thought he was such a great guy who had his life together. I had no idea how much he was hiding from me.”

“So you broke it off with him when you found out the truth?”

“Not at first. I was too shocked to do anything. And he was hurt. He had a broken collarbone from the accident. I stayed with him and nursed him back to health. It took a couple of weeks for the shock of what he’d been hiding to wear off. By then, I realized there was nothing left of the relationship. If I can’t build a strong foundation of trust with a person, how are we supposed to get through the really hard stuff together?”

“That’s something I completely understand. When I found out Orchid was cheating on me, I realized she was keeping secrets from me too. It’s hard to trust again after something like that hits you so hard.”

“It feels impossible. My therapist says I have PTSD, and I think everyone’s a liar with big scary secrets. I’ve been struggling ever since I broke things off with Elliot. A few months ago my grandma suggested I start therapy. It’s been helping, but I’m not entirely healed. Obviously. So now you know why I’m alone. I’m broken, Kane. I don’t know if I’ll ever be fixed.”

“We’re all broken in some way. And that’s okay. We just have to make it to the next day. That’s all we can worry about right now.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Kane reached across the table and took her hand. “You’re an incredible woman, Sariah. You’ll figure this all out.”

She warmed at his words, and her pulse picked up at his touch. “Thanks, Kane. It’s nice to talk to you about this stuff. We haven’t had a serious conversation, something on this level, in a long time.”

“I hope you know I’m still here for you. You can come to me with your problems anytime.”

She squeezed his outstretched hand. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Sariah hadn’t expected this kindness from Kane. He’d been a huge support to her in high school, but that had been a long time ago. It was like she had her old friendship back with him. She was okay with that. But what if he decided he wanted to fully return to what they’d had? She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. But the idea wasn’t completely horrible to her either. Maybe it was possible.

Chapter 7

The morning of the funeral was clear and unexpectedly warm for mid October. Kane's heart was heavy as he dressed in an Armani suit and styled his hair. The expensive suit would stand out here, but he wanted to look his best. He owed that to his grandpa's memory.

His mom was in the kitchen with his grandma, making pancakes and eggs together.

"Need any help?" he offered as he stepped into the room.

"No, we have it handled," his mom said. "We're just about done."

His dad came into the room, freshly showered and in a suit. "Good morning, son."

"Morning, Dad." Kane grabbed a mug from the now-sparse cabinets and filled it with coffee. They'd made good progress with his grandma's house purge project. There was a sizeable pile in the garage of items to donate. Kane made a mental note to load it all up and take it to a donation center the following day. Today it would have to wait. They needed to focus on Gramps today.

His talk with Sariah at the bakery had gone better than expected. He'd felt a strong connection to her. She'd been surprisingly supportive since he'd come back in town for Gramps' death. It felt nice to get closer to her again after all these years. He still wasn't sure he wanted it to turn into anything romantic. He had too much on his plate to welcome a woman into his life in that way. But with the way he'd been hurting over Gramps' death, the extra comfort and kindness was appreciated.

He sat at the table, and his mom handed him a plate with a stack of pancakes and a side of scrambled eggs. It was strange to have his mom waiting on him again like he was a kid. Although he had a personal chef, he often liked to cook for himself. He had Alfredo teach him how to improve his recipes. It was nothing new to have someone waiting on him, but that person wasn't usually his mom. Not anymore. It was kind of nice to let her take care of him. There was something comforting about eating his mom's cooking. It was familiar and brought him back to the happy years of his childhood.

"How's the search for a new place to live going, Grandma?"

"We looked at some of the websites last night," his mom said. "We'll probably go visit Pineridge Farms tomorrow to see how she likes it."

"How's the progress on the shed coming, Dad?"

"I got it all cleaned out last night," his dad said.

"Thank you so much for all your help," his grandma said. "All of you have worked so hard, helping an old woman chase a silly dream."

"It's not silly," his mom said. "I can understand wanting to move. This place needs a lot of work."

Kane finished his breakfast and checked the time. "We should probably get going."

He had his grandma drive with him, and his parents drove to Maple Creek Baptist Church together. On the way over, his grandma opened her purse and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. He pulled up to a stoplight and looked over at her. She had tears running down her cheeks.

He reached over and patted her arm. “You’re a strong woman. You’ll get through this day.”

“It just doesn’t seem real that he’s gone.”

“I know. I miss him too.” It was the first time he’d seen his grandma crying over his grandfather’s death. She’d been holding everything inside, putting on a brave face. It seemed like she’d hit her limit. There was something about driving to the funeral that seemed so final. His grandpa was never coming back.

The light changed, and he focused on the road. A few minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot next to the church. “Are you ready to do this?” He reached over and squeezed her hand.

She didn’t say a word. She just let go of his hand, pushed open her car door, and stepped outside. When they got inside the building, Kane spotted Sariah standing with her grandmother. She had on a black dress, and her hair was partially pulled back with curls tumbling loose around her shoulders.

“How are you doing?” She stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around him. “I know how it felt when my grandpa died two years ago. You hang in there. You’ll get through this.”

“Thanks, Sariah.” His heart warmed at her words.

She released her hug and stepped back. “Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

Her grandma hugged him next. “Please don’t hesitate to reach out to us if you need anything. I’m just next door. I’ll be over there right after the cemetery with a casserole.” They were having close family and friends over to the house for food after the services.

The funeral was beautiful. He had a chance to get up and say a few words. He spoke of summers when his grandpa took him fishing and evenings learning to build things and fix sinks. His grandpa had been a down-to-earth man who wasn't afraid to use his hands to get a job done. He'd passed that legacy down to Kane. It kept him humble.

It was too easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of wealth and fame that his position at Leland Enterprises brought. He often went to charity galas and brushed shoulders with New York's elite. It was part of the job. It would have been easy for him to be swept away with the headiness of it all. But his childhood, with his grandpa so heavily involved in his life in Maple Creek, had kept him grounded. It had made him the man he'd turned out to be.

At the end of the service, Kane's grandmother got up and spoke about the Hickory Ridge homestead and how developers were planning to turn it into a shopping mall. She invited all present to come to the town hall meeting about it the following Wednesday night.

As one of the pallbearers, he helped carry his grandpa's casket from the sanctuary. His heart was heavy as he walked from the building with the burden on his shoulder. He felt tears running down his cheeks as he helped load the casket into the waiting vehicle.

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He drove his grandma over to the cemetery. She kept dabbing her eyes on the way over. “Thank you for the kind words you said about Gramps.”

“It was an honor,” Kane said. “He really was an amazing man who helped make me who I am today.”

“It would have meant a lot to him to hear you say that.”

They parked when he arrived at the cemetery, and dread filled his belly. He wasn’t sure he was ready to say goodbye. He couldn’t imagine what his grandma must have been feeling. He knew the pain of divorce, but the death of a spouse wasn’t something he could fathom. He wasn’t sure which would be worse.

At least he wasn’t still pining for Orchid. That had died out a long time ago. He knew his grandmother longed to hug her husband one last time. She wouldn’t ever get the chance.

Sariah crossed the grass with Mrs. Tate. Kane looked over at her and met her gaze. She gave him an encouraging smile, and he felt a bit of strength he hadn’t had before. There was a tent set up next to the graveside with chairs set up in rows inside. His mom sat next to his grandma, and he sat on the second row.

“Mind if we sit with you?” Sariah offered.

“Sure. Have a seat.” Her presence was comforting.

She scooted into the chair next to him, and Mrs. Tate followed, taking the next

available seat. He could smell her perfume, that familiar scent that took him to simpler days when he'd been happy and carefree.

He wanted to find those days again. His life was full of too much darkness lately. Sariah had brought him so much joy. Would he ever be that happy again? He couldn't remember a time when he'd been so happy. It was before all the money and fame had come. He was the first to say that money didn't bring happiness. Sariah brought happiness. And so did Maple Creek. He felt drawn to her in that moment. It had been happening more and more lately. It terrified him because he wasn't sure where these feelings for her would lead. He wasn't ready for anything serious.

But the more he spent time with Sariah, the closer he felt to her. And he wasn't willing to give up her friendship. Not again. He'd lost her once, and now he was starting to find her again. He may never have her fully restored to his life like she'd once been, but he was going to hold onto what he now had with her. It comforted him when life was so dark. He was starting to realize how much he needed that.

His grandfather's casket was lowered into the ground, and Sariah took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. He knew she didn't mean anything romantic by it, but he couldn't help the feeling of warmth that was growing in his chest.

After the services, he took his grandmother's arm and led her back to his car. "I'm so sorry, Grandma. I can't imagine how you must be feeling right now."

She didn't say anything, but she wiped away tears. He opened her door and helped her inside the rental car. He heard her sniffle before he shut the door and rounded the vehicle to the driver's side.

He drove back to his grandmother's house. His parents were already there and had opened the house for the guests who were beginning to pour through the doors. Sariah pulled up in her grandmother's driveway, and he saw them go into her

grandma's house, probably to get the casserole she'd promised at the funeral.

"I can't believe how many people showed up," his grandma said as she got out of the car.

"Gramps was a well-loved man in Maple Creek." Maple Creek Baptist Church had a huge sanctuary, and it had been packed.

"It was a lovely service," she said as they walked into the house.

The inside of the home was packed with loved ones. His mom was bustling about, getting food set out on the table. She'd worked hard the day before to get everything cleaned up after their organizing session.

Sariah and her grandma came into the house with the casserole. Sariah set it on the table next to the rolls they'd ordered from Alexis's bakery. His mom set up the slideshow on the tv in the living room. Several people crowded around to watch the memories of Gramps' life.

The front door opened, and Chase stepped inside with his wife, Lauren, and her daughter, Penny. Kane went to greet them, and Chase gave him a big hug. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Kane pulled back. "Thanks, man. It was really great of you to come."

"We wouldn't miss it," Lauren said. "You mean a lot to us." He'd been a groomsman in their wedding and had gone to high school with both of them.

Kane grabbed a plate of food and ate, letting the comfort of the food wash over him. He now understood why people always brought food over when someone died. It felt better to eat. He was just finishing up his food and greeting a few guests when his

phone rang. He checked the screen.

It was Orchid. He debated silencing his phone, but decided he'd better see what she needed. "I'm so sorry. I need to take this call." He stepped outside to the front porch and sat in one of the rocking chairs.

"Hey, Kane."

"What's going on, Orchid? You do know it's my grandpa's funeral today, right?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you today, but I thought you'd want to know."

"Know what?" he asked.

"I got the results from the paternity test back this morning. They told me the gender too."

"Okay." His heart began to pound, and he gripped the arm of the chair. "So what were the results?"

"It's a girl. And you're the father."

Chapter 8

Sariah talked with several guests about the plight of Hickory Ridge. Several of them wanted to go to the town meeting to show their support.

“We’re running out of paper plates,” her grandma said. “Can you run next door and grab some? I have them in the cabinet over the fridge.”

“Sure.” Sariah pushed open the side door and stepped outside. She could hear a man’s voice from around the corner.

“Orchid, you’re kidding right?”

It was Kane, and clearly, he was talking to his ex on the phone. She didn’t want to intrude, so she kept walking. She figured he’d want some privacy.

“Ok... Yes... I understand. No. I’m not upset. I guess I’m just a little in shock. I didn’t know what to expect.”

Sariah kept walking. She didn’t need to know Kane’s business, but he didn’t sound very happy about whatever news he’d just gotten.

She went into the house and located the paper plates. They were right where her grandmother had said they’d be. She brought the entire stack and returned to Mrs. Edwards home. She considered going through the side door again, but she didn’t hear Kane on the phone anymore so she decided to see if he was still on the porch. He hadn’t sounded very happy. He’d had enough on his plate with the funeral. He didn’t

need extra drama from Orchid too.

She rounded the corner and saw Kane sitting in a rocking chair, gazing out into the distance, like he was somewhere far away instead of on his grandma's porch.

"Are you okay, Kane?"

He started at her voice. "Oh, hi, Sariah." He rubbed a hand over his jaw.

She stared at him, waiting for him to answer her question, and he cleared his throat like he'd just realized he still hadn't answered her.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" She didn't want to tell him she'd overheard his conversation with Orchid because she didn't want him to think she'd been eavesdropping. Sariah couldn't push the issue too hard if he wasn't willing to share with her.

He stood up. "Yeah. It's just been a hard day."

"You know, if you ever feel like you need to talk, I'm here."

"Thanks. I appreciate that," Kane said.

She walked up the porch steps, and he opened the front door for her. "We ran out of plates, and I went next door to get more," she explained.

He grunted a response. He was definitely still in another universe.

She went into the kitchen and set the plates out on the table. She turned to look for Kane. He was sitting in an armchair in the living room, staring out into space.

Something was definitely wrong with him, and she had a feeling it had to do with whatever Orchid had just told him.

It was his right to keep his business private, but she couldn't shake off the feeling of sadness that was hitting her. He hadn't wanted to confide in her. That meant he didn't trust her. She'd thought that they'd gotten closer. They'd had a few good conversations, and she felt like she was the kind of person others tended to confide in.

She grabbed a plate and filled it with stuffed jalapeños. She hoped the fried food would help her get her mind off of whatever Kane was going through. She hated seeing him like this, especially on the day of the funeral. She spent the rest of the gathering making small talk, but she couldn't get her mind off of Kane and whatever he was going through.

"Is everything okay?" her grandma asked her.

"I'm worried about Kane." Her gaze flicked to the living room where he sat.

Her grandma followed her gaze. "He was close to his grandfather."

"There's something else going on though," Sariah said.

Her grandma frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"I overheard him on the phone with his ex. He sounded upset."

"Did you talk to him about it?" her grandma asked.

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“Yeah. He just brushed me off and wouldn’t tell me what was wrong.” Sariah shoved another stuffed pepper into her mouth.

“Then he must have his reasons for keeping it to himself.”

She chewed and swallowed before speaking again. “I know it’s none of my business, but I can’t stop worrying about him. He just looks so upset.”

Her grandma leaned against the kitchen wall. “You need to be patient with him. Try building trust with him, and he’ll be a lot more likely to open up to you.”

“How do I do that?”

“Spend time with him. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“I just want to be able to help him, and I can’t do that if he won’t tell me what’s wrong.”

“I get it. And he may never tell you what’s wrong. That’s his right.”

“I know. I don’t know why I’m so nosy,” Sariah said.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be involved in his life. It just means you care about him.”

“Of course I care about him. He’s my friend. We’ve known each other for a long time.”

Her grandma grinned. “And there’s some pretty juicy history there, too.”

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?” Sariah made a face at her grandmother.

“Nope. I wasn’t planning on it.”

“You’re impossible sometimes.”

“I just want to see you happy. Kane has the ability to give you a great life on so many levels.”

“It’s not about the money for me.”

“I know, but money still matters. You wouldn’t have to work another day in your life if you married him.”

“I don’t want to stop working. I love what I do.”

“Don’t forget that Kane is a great guy who would treat you like gold. Look what he’s been doing to help his grandmother. He could be heading right back to New York after the funeral, but he’s offered to stick around and help her. Only a great guy would care that much about his grandmother.”

She did have a good point. Kane was sweet to be such a big support to his grandma. She didn’t think Elliot would have done something like that. He was usually too focused on his own problems to worry about someone else. And Kane had a lot on his plate too. His company was going through a merger, and he had plenty of drama with his ex. But he’d put all that to the side to make sure his grandma was okay. Only the best of men would do something like that.

Maybe her grandma was right. The answer was to build trust with Kane. It really bothered her that he hadn't opened up to her. Maybe it was because Elliot hadn't opened up to her either. Not that she thought Kane was hiding something big from her, but the idea that another guy wouldn't confide in her really hurt.

Was there something wrong with her? Did she have a sign on her forehead that said, don't tell this girl your secrets, she's not trustworthy?

If Elliot had told her about his addiction, she could have done something to help him. That was how she felt about Kane. She couldn't help him if she didn't know what was wrong.

She wasn't sure why she wanted to help Kane so badly. Maybe it was because she was starting to feel something for him again. She was a naturally nurturing person. She wanted to care for those she loved. It was a deep need within her. If she couldn't be there for someone, it hurt inside her.

"I have an idea," her grandma said, jolting Sariah from her thoughts.

Sariah wasn't sure how she felt about the gleam in her grandmother's eyes. That usually wasn't a good sign. It meant she was up to something.

Her grandma crossed the room to Kane and engaged in a conversation with him. Whatever she was saying to him was snapping him out of his zoned-out state. He sat up straighter and even smiled a little bit. With the noise level of people around her talking, she couldn't understand what her grandma was saying to Kane.

Kane stood up and crossed the room toward Sariah. She just hoped she wouldn't regret whatever her grandmother had just done. She turned back to the refreshment table to refill her plate.

“Sariah.”

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She turned around to see him standing next to her. “Hi, Kane.” Sariah gripped the sides of her half-filled plate. She suddenly felt nervous. Kane had a serious look on his face. It was almost like he was nervous too.

“Would you like to go dinner with me tomorrow night?”

“Did my grandma put you up to this? Because you don’t have to ask me out if you don’t want to. She can be a little pushy sometimes.”

“She didn’t put me up to it.”

“Then what was she saying to you over there just now?”

“She told me you wanted to get to know me better,” Kane said.

“I do want to get to know you better.”

“I feel the same way about you.”

Her heart flipped over in her chest when he said that.

“So would this be like a date?” Sariah fiddled with her hands.

“Yes, it would be exactly like a date.”

She considered the offer for a moment. She hadn’t wanted to date again until she’d gone through more therapy, but Kane wasn’t asking for a relationship. He was asking

for one evening of dinner. He didn't even live in Maple Creek, so it wasn't like he was looking for something serious. When it came down to the bare truth, Sariah wanted to go on a date with Kane. She missed him. And it was a good chance to get to know him better. Maybe she could build trust with him like her grandma had mentioned earlier. Was that why she'd convinced Kane to ask her out?

"I'd love to go out with you tomorrow night."

"I'll pick you up at six."

Kane picked her up right on time. Sariah lived in an older house near Main Street where her shop was located. She'd bought it a few years after she'd taken over the store. It had been a bit of a fixer upper, but she'd put a lot of work into it over the years. Her favorite part about the house was the huge wrap-around porch that seemed to be so popular on the older homes in Maple Creek. When her house had been built, it hadn't had air conditioning, so the original owners had escaped to the porch in the summer evenings when the house was too hot to stand. Now it had central heat and air and a modern kitchen and bathrooms. Sariah still loved to sit on her porch after dinner when the weather was nice. Tonight, she was sitting out there waiting for Kane to pull up, enjoying the crisp autumn air.

She'd changed her outfit three times before she'd finally settled on a blue blouse and black pants. She had on a long gold necklace and matching gold hoop earrings. She brought a black sweater in case it got chilly. She still felt underdressed. What was a girl supposed to wear on a date with a billionaire? She certainly couldn't afford the designer clothes he was probably used to seeing on the women who swarmed him in New York.

Kane stepped out of his rental car and walked toward her. He took in her appearance and smiled. "You look nice."

She'd spent extra time on her hair and makeup. She'd dyed her hair darker after a particularly empowering therapy session to help her through the trauma surrounding Elliot, and it had been a good change for her. She felt more accomplished and serious as a brunette. Tonight, she'd curled it away from her face in soft waves. She'd gone a bit darker on her makeup with a smoky eye and dark red lipstick.

"Thank you. You look nice too." Kane had on a light blue dress shirt and slacks. He filled out the shirt well. He clearly spent a decent amount of time at the gym, something Sariah could appreciate. She was sitting on the porch, appreciating it right now.

She stood up and met him on the top step. "Where are we going tonight?"

"How does Hadley's sound?"

"Perfect." It was one of her favorite places to eat.

He opened her car door, and she climbed inside. He circled around to the driver's side and got in before cranking the engine.

"Thanks for asking me to dinner."

"It's not weird, is it?"

Sariah twisted the black leather strap of the purse in her lap. "What do you mean?"

Kane backed out of the driveway. "Asking you out again after all these years."

She shook her head. "No. I'm glad you did."

"I'm really nervous," he said.

“You’re nervous? You can get whatever girl you want.”

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“I don’t want just any girl. And until recently, I didn’t think I wanted anyone for a while.”

“Are you saying you want me?” Why did she have to say that? She was pushing things too far too fast.

He cleared his throat. “I’m saying I want to see how it goes.”

She relaxed into her seat. “I’m okay with that.”

“Good.”

She looked over at him, her cheeks heating. She hoped he didn’t think she was prying. “What do you mean when you say you didn’t think you wanted anyone until recently?”

“My divorce has been hard on me. I didn’t think I’d want to date for a long time, even though a lot of people have been pushing me to go out there and date again.”

She swallowed and wiped her palms on her pants. “Then what made you decide you wanted to ask me out?”

“That’s a fair question. You’ve been there for me a lot lately. It’s meant the world to me.”

She grinned. “You could say the same thing to my grandma, but I don’t see you asking her out.”

Kane laughed. "Okay. Fair enough. I find you rather...attractive."

Her heart fluttered. "You do?"

He pulled up to a stop sign and looked over at her with tenderness in his eyes. "Of course. You're gorgeous. But it's more than that. We have history, Sariah. I can't forget how good things were between us all those years ago."

"They were good," she said softly. "We were good together. But I'm not looking to get into something too serious." She didn't want him getting the wrong idea.

"Neither am I. But if I were to ever get into something serious, I'd consider you before anyone else because I know what I'm getting with you."

"But it wouldn't work out between us. We live too far apart," Sariah pointed out. "We said before we didn't want anything long distance. I can't see that it would be different now."

"Then it's a good thing this is just dinner," Kane said. He pulled into the Hadley's parking lot.

Sariah let out a pent-up breath. He was right. She was getting ahead of herself, letting her mind jump to all kinds of crazy conclusions. They were just going to grab some really yummy food. That was all. It wasn't like he'd meant anything too serious when he said she was gorgeous. He probably said that to lots of women.

The only reason he'd even bothered to ask her out was because they'd dated in high school. Still, it was flattering.

They walked into the restaurant together. It was hard to believe she was on a date with Kane again after all these years. Even if it wasn't anything serious. She'd given

up hope that they'd ever work something out after he'd married Orchid. But now there was a small possibility that something might be sparking between them again.

Chapter 9

Kane settled into the booth beside Sariah. They opened their menus and glanced over their options. The chicken and dumplings looked really good tonight.

But even better was Sariah. He couldn't stop looking at her.

All his high school memories were rushing back at him at once. She was the best part of his teen years. He'd forgotten how much he'd missed her until he'd started spending more time with her lately.

He'd been reeling from the news from Orchid. When her grandmother approached him, he decided he needed a change of pace to get his mind off Orchid and the baby. He could tell her grandmother was hinting that he ask Sariah out. He didn't care. It was a good idea. He had to have something to look forward to or he would lose his mind. So he'd gone with it.

The test results had really hit him hard that night when he was getting ready for bed. He was going to have a daughter. He'd called his grandfather before going to bed and had told him the news that the paternity test had shown the baby was his. His grandfather had wanted him to continue to keep it quiet until the merger had gone through. They were still negotiating the terms of the contract. It would probably take at least another month until everything would be finalized.

His parents had headed back to New York to be with his sister who was supposed to have her baby any day now. It was strange to think that Orchid would be having his daughter next May. He wasn't sure he knew how to be a dad. The entire idea of it was

blowing his mind.

“I know I’ve been asking you this a lot, but are you sure you’re okay?”

Sariah’s words snapped him back to reality. He couldn’t reveal what was on his mind, but it was clear she wanted to know. “There’s a lot going on right now. My company is in the middle of a merger, my ex is still causing drama, and I’m worried about my grandma.”

“What’s going on with your ex?”

“She’s trying to get more money out of me.” It wasn’t a lie. Now that the baby was confirmed to be his, he’d owe her a lot more money.

“Did you two sign a prenup?” Sariah asked.

“My grandfather insisted that I get her to sign one, but I wouldn’t do it. I didn’t think Orchid would ever betray me like she’s done.” He shrugged. “What can I say? I was young and dumb.”

“We were all like that once. It’s okay to mess up. It’s part of being human.”

“I get that, but it’s not fun when you have to live with the consequences.”

“No, it’s not.” Sariah looked up as the server came over, a young guy with short cropped brown hair.

“What can I get you two to drink?”

They gave the server their drink order, and he left.

Kane glanced over his menu. “What are you thinking about ordering?”

“The chicken fettuccine.”

“I haven’t had that yet. I want the chicken and dumplings.”

“That’s a great choice. I’ve had it before. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Do you cook much?” Kane asked.

“Sometimes. I eat out a lot. It’s not like I have a lot of people to cook for.”

“I’ve had my chef give me some lessons. I really enjoy it.”

“You have a chef?” Sariah shook her head. “It’s hard to identify with the life you’ve been leading for the past decade,” Sariah said.

“I’m still the same guy.”

“How do you keep it from going to your head?” Sariah asked. “I’d probably be vain if I had that kind of money.”

“I don’t let it. But I’ll admit, it would be easy to let that kind of money change me.”

“It hasn’t changed you?”

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“I’m sure it’s changed me some, but that would be hard to avoid. My life is vastly different now.”

“I can’t even imagine what it must be like.”

“Why don’t you let me show you?” Kane offered.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You can come visit me in New York, and I can give you a taste of what it’s like to live my life.”

“You’d do that?”

“Sure. I think it would be fun.”

Sariah looked away. “I don’t really like the city.”

“That’s because you haven’t been shown around properly,” Kane said.

“I guess you have a point.”

“Would you be interested in something like that?”

“Maybe.”

Their server brought their drinks and took the order for their dinner before returning

to the kitchen. Sariah sipped her fresh squeezed lemonade, and Kane opened his bottle of artesian water and poured it into his glass of ice.

“How does Hadley’s compare with some of the restaurants in New York City?” Sariah asked.

“I guess that depends on where you go. I like eating at all sorts of places. Sometimes I want to grab a fast-food burger. Other times I’m eating at one of the priciest restaurants in the city. Hadley’s is great, but it falls somewhere in between.”

“You eat fast food?” Sariah teased.

“I told you, I’m still me. Just because I have money doesn’t mean I don’t like eating at the cheapest burger joint in town.”

“I would have thought you’d always be eating gourmet food.”

“I do eat that way a lot when my chef cooks for me. I like to stay fit, and that requires a healthy menu. He prepares food very specifically for me according to my diet. I have a personal trainer who works closely with my chef to come up with the right meals for me.”

“I remember you being concerned with what you were eating even back in high school. Most guys were eating everything in sight, and you were trying to pack in protein and veggies.”

“I was just figuring out my diet back then.”

“We were figuring out a lot of things back then,” Sariah said, her voice quiet.

“Do you think it was a mistake for us to break up?” Kane asked. Why was he asking

this? Was he looking for ways to get rejected?

“No. You were moving away. I had a life in Maple Creek. And now you have a life in New York.”

Kane’s heart hurt at her words. She was right. They still had the same issue they had when they broke up last time. But being here with her made him wish they could find a way to overcome the problem. It was easy to talk to her.

“I’m having a good time,” Kane said. “I meet a lot of people in New York, but most of them don’t really get the real me. You knew me well before I came into money. You know the real Kane.”

“Do I still?”

“Yes. And if there are parts of me that are different, then I want you to get to know those parts.”

Sariah gazed at him, a small smile on her lips. “I want that too. I’m sure we’ve both changed over the years.”

“We’ve had life experience we didn’t have when we were kids,” Kane said.

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Sariah tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture that mesmerized Kane. She was so beautiful. “True. I’m a business owner now, and I’ve been through a bad relationship.”

“The guy who kept secrets from you?” Kane asked.

“Yeah. Elliot. He was addicted to painkillers, and I had no idea.”

“Yeah. You told me about him.”

“It was hard to take because of the way my dad betrayed my mom by cheating on her when I was twelve.”

This was news to him. “I knew your parents were divorced, but I didn’t know it was because your dad cheated.”

“I only found out a few years ago when my mom felt like I was old enough to know.”

“Your dad had secrets too.” Kane was starting to piece this together. How would she feel when she found out he was about to be a dad? Would she be mad at him for keeping secrets?

“Exactly. And I fell for it just like my mom did.”

“Where’s your mom living now?” Kane asked. “I never see her around anymore.”

“She moved to Boston with a new husband not long after I graduated from high

school.”

“Good for her.”

“I miss her a lot. I’ve gotten closer to my grandma since my mom isn’t around as much. My dad lives in California now. I barely see him. He doesn’t even come back to visit his mom much. I’m closer to her than he is. A lot of that is because I took over the jewelry business. He wasn’t ever interested in taking over.” Kane knew that part. Her dad had gone on to be a paramedic instead.

Their server came back with their food and placed their plates in front of them. Kane dug into his steaming chicken and dumplings. “This is perfect.”

“My pasta is good too.”

“I’m glad you agreed to go out with me tonight. I wasn’t sure you’d say yes,” Kane admitted.

“I wasn’t sure I’d say yes either. I don’t want to mess up our friendship by taking it to a place we can’t come back from.”

He frowned. “Is that what you think might happen between us?”

“It’s possible. I don’t want to lose you as a friend, but I’m not going to lie. I’m still into you. You can’t date someone for all those years and just lose all the feelings you had for that person.”

“Well, actually you can. I don’t have feelings for Orchid anymore,” Kane pointed out.

“I guess you’re right. I don’t feel anything for Elliot either. But I still feel something

for you. You're special."

"I feel that way about you too," Kane said. He reached across the table and took her hand. It was small and smooth in his. He longed to take her in his arms and kiss her once again. It had been way too long since his lips had met hers. He knew he was putting his heart on the line, but he was starting to care less and less.

They finished their food, and Kane paid the bill. He couldn't stop thinking about how much he wanted to kiss her. He'd hardly been able to focus on eating his dinner. He ached for Sariah.

They stepped out of the restaurant, and Kane looked up at the clear night sky, marveling at how many stars dotted the expanse above them. He walked her to the passenger side of the car.

"Thank you for dinner," Sariah said as he opened her door.

"You can thank your grandma too. I might not have asked you out if it wasn't for her."

She grinned at him. "I knew she was up to something."

"She is a conniving one," Kane said.

Sariah climbed into the car. "You know she's been pushing me to date you again, right?"

Kane smiled. "She was pretty obvious."

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Sariah laughed. “She’s like a twelve-year-old girl, giggling over boys.”

He shut her door and then walked around the vehicle and climbed into the driver’s seat. “I think she’s adorable. She doesn’t bother me a bit. In fact, I think she’s entertaining.”

“Entertaining,” Sariah repeated. “That’s a good word for it.”

“I hope my grandma doesn’t miss her too much when she moves,” Kane said.

“Are you kidding? She won’t be able to keep my grandma away. She’ll still be driving over to her house all the time.”

He started the engine. “I think you’re probably right.”

“Have you heard any more about the Hickory Ridge homestead?” Sariah asked as he backed the car out.

“The town meeting is tomorrow. I’m planning on going.”

“Me too,” Sariah said.

“I spent the day today talking with people around town, gathering support. The historical society is on board, just like we’d hoped.”

“That’s great. I spoke with several people after the funeral when we were eating. I haven’t run into a single person who wants that mall there.”

“I’ve had a similar experience. Unfortunately, the developers don’t care what the people want. They’re just looking to make money.”

“That’s so frustrating. There has to be something we can do if we all stand together.”

“I agree. We’ll see how the town meeting goes.” Surely there was something he could do with all the corporate experience he had.

They pulled up to Sariah’s house. “Do you want to sit on the porch for a few minutes? It’s still not too cold out.” It was unseasonably warm that night. Perfect porch sitting weather.

“I’d love to.” He sat in the rocking chair next to her.

“How much longer do you think you’ll stay before you go back to New York?” Sariah asked.

“I’m not sure. I can’t be in town too much longer because I need to get back to help with the merger, but I want to help my grandma get settled into her new home. Or at least help her pick a place out. It just feels too soon to leave her alone just yet.”

“I’m glad you’re staying longer. This is the most I’ve spent time with you for years. Part of that is because I stayed away intentionally. I didn’t want to get too close to you because you were married.”

“And now I’m not.”

“Yeah. It’s different now. I’m allowed to feel something for you now.”

“And what are you feeling?”

Sariah turned toward him and looked him in the eye. “My old feelings are returning. I’d pushed them down for so long, but they’re still there after all this time.”

He reached out and brushed some of her hair back from her face. He was close enough that he could detect her familiar perfume. “You smell nice. It’s the same scent you had all those years ago.”

Sariah kept her gaze on him. “You still remember what I smelled like?”

“How could I forget? You were my first love. I remember everything.”

Sariah’s eyes softened. “I remember too.”

This girl was melting his heart. He couldn’t bear to stay away from her a moment longer.

He leaned forward and brushed his nose against hers. He heard her sharp intake of breath. He stayed like that for a moment, just reveling in the feeling of their time together. It was something he hadn’t allowed in many years, and all the memories came back fresh and new like they’d just happened. Kissing her in the moonlight next to the creek, sneaking out with her after midnight to kiss in the back of his car. Kissing by their lockers at school and getting in trouble for it.

She leaned closer to him, and then her lips were on his. She was just as sweet and innocent as he’d remembered. But she was older now, more experienced, and that was evident as her lips moved over his. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to her as she kissed him. He buried his hands in her hair, feeling the silky waves beneath his touch.

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This moment was just as perfect as all the others had been, but it wasn't a memory. It was reality. The thought spurred him on, and he deepened the kiss. She responded by pulling him in closer.

He felt his heart exploding in his chest. How could he have gone so many years without this amazing woman? He craved more of her.

But he knew he couldn't have her. Not really. He lived in New York, and she hated it there. There didn't seem to be a future for them. The thought raced through him and rocked him to the core. What was he doing, kissing her like this? He was playing with fire, and they'd both end up hurt.

He pulled away from her. "I should probably go."

She looked up at him with stars in her eyes. His heart broke, knowing he was about to shatter the expression on her face.

"I'm sorry. We shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?" She frowned.

"Because we both know this can't last."

A light dawned in her eyes. "You're right. We should probably stick to being just friends." She sighed. "But that kiss sure was nice."

"It was. But it can't happen again. I don't want to destroy our friendship."

Her face hardened into a mask of indifference, and her spine went stiff. “I agree.”

“Good. So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Also, there’s a bluegrass festival this week. Do you want to go Thursday night? I know both our grandmas were planning on going together.”

“That sounds fun. Let’s plan on it.”

“Okay,” Sariah said. Her eyes met his, and he had a sudden longing to reach out for her to kiss her again.

“I really do need to go before I do something we’ll both regret later.”

Her cheeks flushed. “See you later.”

He walked back to his car with a heavy heart. He wasn’t sure how he was going to make it through the next few days without kissing her again, but he knew he needed to stay strong.

Or it would end up in heartbreak for them both.

Chapter 10

Sariah stepped out of her car, and her grandma climbed from the passenger side. They walked toward the city building and saw Kane walking with his grandma from the other side of the parking lot. The two older women waved at each other. Her grandma took her arm and led her toward Kane and Mrs. Edwards.

“Hello, Gayle!” her grandma called out. “Let’s all get seats together.”

Sariah wasn’t sure how she felt about seeing Kane again. She had mixed feelings on the subject. Part of her wanted to stay away from him, but another part wanted to pull him into her arms for another kiss. She hadn’t told anyone about their impromptu kissing session, but her grandma knew she’d gone on a date with him. She’d called Sariah that night after the date and tried to pump her for information, but Sariah wouldn’t tell her much of anything. She didn’t want her grandmother to get her hopes up about her and Kane having a real relationship. It was never going to happen, and Sariah wasn’t up for a fling with Kane. He meant too much to her for that to go well.

“I heard you two went on a date last night,” Mrs. Edwards said, taking Sariah’s other arm. She was surrounded by nosy grandmas. She wasn’t going to give a report on her date with Kane standing right there. She looked over at him, desperate for escape.

“Grandma, she doesn’t have to tell you about our date.”

“I don’t need to know every detail, but a basic rundown of what happened. It’s not too much to ask.”

“Good luck with that, Gayle. I tried to get Sariah to tell me what happened on their date, and I couldn’t get a word out of her.”

“That’s not true,” Sariah protested. “I told you we had a nice time.”

“But did you give me any of the juicy details? I think not.”

Mrs. Edwards shook her head. “Don’t feel bad. Kane wouldn’t tell me anything either.”

Sariah looked over at Kane, and his mouth twitched like he was holding back a laugh.

“I thought Sariah would at least tell us something worth hearing. You’ll oblige a new widow, won’t you?”

“Grandma, I can’t believe you’re using Gramp’s death to guilt Sariah into telling you her private business. That’s a new low for you.”

“I’m a desperate woman. No one is giving me details. I can’t even find out anything from Lois because no one told her either.”

“No one would tell her what?” Sariah turned to see Mrs. Wheaton waddling up to them.

Great. Just what she needed. Mrs. Wheaton was even more nosy than both grandmas combined.

“Oh, Mrs. Wheaton. Maybe you can get Sariah to tell us how her date went with Kane,” her grandma said.

Mrs. Wheaton widened her eyes. “Sariah and Kane went on a date? I knew they were

right for each other. Next thing you know, we'll be hearing about their upcoming wedding."

Sariah groaned. "Why do you all care so much?"

"We're old ladies. We have to live vicariously through the younger people," her grandma said.

"Maybe you need a boyfriend to keep you busy, Grandma. Then maybe you'll leave me in peace."

"I don't plan on ever getting remarried. I'm happy the way I am," her grandma said.

"I didn't say anything about getting remarried. You can get a boyfriend and keep it casual." They walked into the doors of the building.

"If you ever decide you do want a man, I know some great choices at the assisted living community where I volunteer," Mrs. Wheaton said.

Sariah laughed at the stricken expression on her grandmother's face. She was finally getting a taste of her own medicine.

Mrs. Edwards joined in on her laughter. "That's a wonderful idea. Let's find Lois a boyfriend."

They walked into the room where the crowd was assembling for the meeting. It was already packed, and the only open seats were near the back. They were even a few minutes early. It looked like they'd done a good job putting the word out. Sariah filed into the empty row. Her grandma filed in next to her.

"Wait, Lois. Shouldn't we let the lovebirds sit next to each other?"

“Oh! Great thinking.”

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Sariah rolled her eyes. They had to be kidding, right?

Kane chuckled and took the seat next to Sariah. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, “It’s not like I’m going to complain if they want me to sit next to someone so beautiful.”

Sariah’s heart pounded at both his words and his nearness, and her cheeks heated up.

“What did he just say to her?” Sariah’s grandma said. “Did you hear him, Gayle?”

“No, he was being too quiet. I couldn’t hear a thing. It’s too loud in here.”

“She’s blushing, so it must have been something good.”

That only made Sariah’s cheeks grow even hotter. How was she supposed to get through this meeting with these grandmas teasing her relentlessly? Imagine if she actually got together with Kane.

Mrs. Wheaton took a seat in the row behind them and leaned forward. “So I never heard. How did that date go, Sariah? Will there be a second one?”

Sariah blew out an exasperated breath. She thought she’d heard the last from Mrs. Wheaton today. How was she supposed to know if Kane would ask her out again? “I...uh.” She glanced nervously up at Kane.

He turned and addressed Mrs. Wheaton. “That remains to be seen.”

It did? Sariah had no idea what he meant by that. Did he actually want to go out with her again? It was a bad idea, but she could hardly stop thinking about him since they'd kissed. She desperately wanted him to do it again.

“Well, make your mind up. A girl like Sariah won't be available for long. If you dawdle too long, some other man will come along and snatch her right up.” Mrs. Wheaton's daughter, Aubrey, who ran the Whitmore House, a popular venue for weddings, scooted into the chair beside her mom. Sariah wondered how Aubrey fared with a meddling mom like Mrs. Wheaton. The bubbly redhead was still single as far as Sariah knew.

Mrs. Wheaton was wrong about Sariah being a hot commodity. Sariah didn't see any other guys lining up to date her. Before her date with Kane, she hadn't been asked out in months.

“Well, we can't have Sariah getting snatched up by someone else, can we?” Kane said with a wide smile.

How humiliating! Sariah turned around and faced the front. Maybe Mrs. Wheaton would get the message and stop interrogating them.

Across the room, Carrington shuffled into a row with her dad beside her. Chase and Lauren sat a few rows ahead of them. They must have found a babysitter for Penny because she wasn't with them.

“Come on, Mom. Leave them alone. Why do you always have to stick your nose in other people's business,” Aubrey scolded.

Sariah turned around to look at her and mouthed a thank you in her direction.

Aubrey smiled back.

“I just want to help them find some happiness. Is that so wrong?”

“I think you need to learn some better boundaries,” Aubrey said. “It’s bad enough that you do it to me. Do you have to try to marry off the entire town too?”

“I can’t help it. I’m a hopeless romantic.”

The meeting got started, and a hush fell over the room. Michael Ross, a balding guy with glasses and a large belly, got up first and started defending his company’s right to build the mall. He insisted that it would bring in positive change for the town. Sariah thought it was a bunch of nonsense. All they cared about was making a load of cash.

Chase got up next and argued against the mall being built. Then Kane’s grandma got up and walked to the front of the room. As the wife of the former mayor, she had a lot of pull in the community still.

“Maple Creek is a magical place. Its roads are safe for kids to walk to school. The traffic is light. It has that classic small-town feel. Everyone knows each other here. We live here because we love that dynamic. If a mall goes in, the next thing we’ll know, the traffic will get heavier, and then a bunch of new neighborhoods will start popping up everywhere. Not to mention the stores that will start flooding into town. This isn’t the kind of change we want for our town. A mall will bring in more crime too. Is that what you want for our future generations?”

She went on for a few minutes. Overall, it was a powerful, moving speech. But Sariah wasn’t sure if it was enough to convince the masses to vote against it.

When she finished, Mrs. Stayton, the president of the Maple Creek Historical Society got up to speak. She was a short, plump woman in her mid-forties with bright red hair. She spoke about preserving the history on that land, and what a shame it would

be to bulldoze a home dating back to before the Civil War.

After all the speakers had a chance to defend their stances, they took a vote. After the vote had been counted, Mayor Gibbins, a woman in her sixties with smoothly styled chin-length bleached hair, stood up to the podium to read the results.

Kane squeezed Sariah's hand. "All we can do now is hope for the best."

Mayor Gibbins put on a pair of reading glasses and peered at the sheet before her. "We have fifty-three votes in favor of the mall being built and forty-nine against."

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The room burst into conversation, with everyone talking at once.

Sariah left the building with a heavy heart. Was this mall really going to be built? They'd worked so hard to gather enough people to stand with them. But apparently it wasn't enough.

"I can't believe there weren't more people on our side," Sariah said to Kane as they walked out into the parking lot.

"We even announced it at the funeral," Mrs. Edwards said. "I thought for sure that would have been enough to get us to win."

"I guess we just need to get used to Maple Creek losing that small town feel," Sariah said, shaking her head.

"There might still be something we can do to put a stop to it," Kane said.

"What do you mean?" Sariah asked, stopping to look at him.

"Leave it to me. I'm going to make some phone calls. I can't make any promises, but I'll do what I can."

That brought a little more hope, but she didn't know what Kane was planning, so who knew how well his idea might work?

She felt a pang of sadness, knowing that he was going to say goodbye for the night and she would have to wait another day to see him. What was wrong with her? He

was about to go back to New York, and then she wouldn't see him again until who knows when. She had to start controlling her thoughts and get it out of her head that she wanted to be with Kane. Even if that was all she could think about lately.

Sariah didn't see Kane again until after work on Thursday. They met up at his grandma's house to go to the bluegrass festival. It was being held in the park just off Main Street. She'd been seeing people setting up for it from her shop windows all day. Thursday was the first night of the festival, and it was running through the weekend. Their area was known for its rich history of bluegrass music.

She pulled into her grandmother's driveway. She figured she would leave her car there and then walk next door to Mrs. Edward's house. Kane came out of the front door as she walked across the strip of lawn between the two houses.

She waved to him, and the front door opened again as his grandma came outside. She had on a burnt orange shirt and a black sweater. Her own grandma's garage door opened, and Lois stepped outside.

"You look nice, Sariah." Sariah looked down at her pink and burgundy floral blouse and skinny jeans.

"Thanks. I just bought this shirt, and I haven't had a chance to wear it yet." Sariah liked the way it clung to her curves in a flattering way. She'd purchased it online, and it was always a gamble when she wasn't able to try on the shirt first.

Kane walked up to her, and she looked up at him. "You do look nice," he said in a low voice. He looked nice in a casual black t-shirt that hugged his muscular body and jeans. If Sariah didn't know better, she'd think he was just a regular guy.

"Thank you."

“Sariah, you need to go shopping more often.” Her grandma laughed. “You certainly have Kane’s approval.”

Sariah refrained from rolling her eyes. “I’m glad we can keep you entertained, Grandma.”

“Are we ready to go?” Mrs. Edwards asked.

“Yep,” Sariah said. “Who’s driving?”

“I can drive the minivan,” her grandma offered.

“Uh, Lois, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Mrs. Edwards said. “She’s not exactly the safest driver.” She whispered it but wasn’t quiet enough to keep her friend from hearing her.

“I’m a perfectly safe driver!” her grandmother insisted.

“What about the time you hit my mailbox?”

“That was ten years ago,” she protested. “I haven’t hit anything in years.”

“Just because you’ve gotten lucky doesn’t mean you don’t drive recklessly,” Mrs. Edwards insisted.

“She almost got into a wreck the last time she drove me somewhere,” Sariah said. There was definitely some truth to what Mrs. Edwards was saying.

“But we didn’t. And that wasn’t my fault. That guy slammed on his breaks out of nowhere.”

“You were driving way too close to him,” Sariah pointed out.

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“How about I drive?” Kane offered, putting a stop to the commotion.

“Yes. I’d feel much better about that,” Mrs. Edwards said.

Her grandma scowled. “You’re all being ridiculous.”

They all piled into Kane’s rental car, and he headed toward the festival.

The smell of fried food permeated the air when they’d arrived and were stepping from the vehicle. Bluegrass music buzzed around them, and the park milled with happy festival goers.

“I need a corn dog,” her grandma said, leading the way to the nearest food stand.

“Well, she doesn’t waste any time, does she?” Kane joked.

“Straight to the food,” Mrs. Edwards said with a grin.

Sariah didn’t mind. Her stomach was growling the minute she’d smelled the food. “I could go for a funnel cake.” It made her happy to see Mrs. Edwards so happy. Going to this bluegrass festival was just what she needed to cheer up.

“Before dinner?” Mrs. Edwards said it like Sariah was five again and was going to spoil her appetite.

Sariah laughed. “I’ll eat a corn dog first.”

“You can’t come to a festival like this without trying the funnel cakes,” Kane said.

“See? Kane gets it.” She looked over at his broad shoulders and had the sudden urge to wrap her arms around his waist and snuggle up to him.

He must have felt her eyes on him because he turned to her and met her eye. A soft smile hit his lips, and a shiver ran down her spine. She didn’t know what he was thinking, but the tenderness she saw on his face made her wonder if he was thinking about their kiss.

Did he plan to kiss her again? She hoped so. But it was dangerous to want something like that. He was going to leave, and she had plans to expand her business. Their lives didn’t mesh. Plus, she’d promised herself she wasn’t going to get involved with another guy anytime soon. How could she let herself trust again after what Elliot had done to her?

Chapter 11

Once the two grandmothers had bought their dinner, Kane stepped up to the food stand and ordered two corn dogs. He handed one to Sariah and kept the other for himself.

“Are you sure?” Sariah took it from him. “I can pay for my own.”

“Let the man buy you dinner,” her grandmother chided. “He wants to do it.”

“Thank you, Kane.” She took a bite into the fried cornbread outer layer. “Mm. This is good.”

“Do you want any mustard?” He squirted some from the plastic bottle onto his corn dog.

“No thanks. I think it tastes great just as it is. I’m not much of a mustard person anyway.”

“How can you not be a mustard person?” Kane teased. “Especially spicy mustard. That’s my favorite.” It didn’t surprise him though. She’d turned down all kinds of foods while they’d dated in high school.

“The spicy kind is the worst!” Sariah said.

“I thought you liked spicy foods,” Kane said.

“I like spicy peppers. Not spicy mustard. There’s a big difference,” Sariah insisted.

Kane laughed. Her reaction was just exactly what he’d hoped for. “What about horseradish?”

“Are you kidding me? That stuff is disgusting. Some of the stuff people put on their foods shouldn’t be considered edible.”

“I never realized you were such a picky eater,” his grandmother said.

“I knew she was,” Kane said. “But she’s so fun to tease.”

“Hey! I’m not that picky. I enjoy plenty of foods.”

Compared to his varied diet, she didn’t. He liked to eat all kinds of strange foods. He’d eaten dishes from all over the world. But he didn’t fault her for her simple diet. She could eat whatever she wanted.

They walked around with their food and shopped at some of the booths of handmade pottery and jewelry. The two grandmas stopped at a stand that sold hand-beaded necklaces, and Kane kept walking with Sariah.

At the section for the local bookstore, he picked up a cookbook that featured recipes from around the world. “Maybe we should get this for you to help you expand your horizons.”

“Very funny. I think my horizons are just fine.” She swiped the cookbook from him and put it back.

He picked the cookbook up again and flipped through it. “Look, they have a recipe for chicken’s feet in here. I hear it’s all the rage in South America.”

“Eww! Chicken’s feet? Why would anyone eat that?”

“Plenty of people eat it. They would think you’re weird for not eating it.”

“Have you tried it?” she asked.

“Once. It wasn’t very good.”

“You actually ate chicken’s feet? Now I’m not sure I can ever kiss you again.”

He raised his brow. “Were you thinking about it?” His heart raced thinking about her mind being on kissing him.

She made a grossed-out face. “Eating chicken’s feet?”

“No. Kissing me.” He looked up from the book to her flushed cheeks.

“I’m not telling you.” She took the book from his hands and shut it, placing it back on the wire rack.

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He reached out for the book, but she slapped his hand away. “Hey, I wasn’t done with that. I was going to suggest you try haggis next.”

“No, thank you. I don’t know what haggis is, and I’m not sure I want to find out.”

“It’s a bunch of sheep organs minced up.”

Sariah’s face looked a little green. “Let me guess. You’ve eaten that too.”

“It’s not my favorite.”

“Was it better than the chicken’s feet?”

“Not really.”

She crossed her arms. “Why do you eat so much weird stuff?”

He shrugged. “Mostly so I can say I’ve tried it.”

“So, for bragging rights.”

“Pretty much.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re such a weirdo.”

“You’re the one who wanted to kiss me the other night,” he pointed out.

She raised her eyebrows. “What makes you think it was my idea?”

“You kissed me first,” he insisted.

“But you were already leaning in. It was clear that you wanted the kiss.” She looked around like she was checking to see if their grandmothers were around to hear their conversation.

He licked his lips. He wanted another kiss right now. Seeing her all sassy only made him crave her more. “You’re right. I did want that kiss.”

She caught his gaze, and her lips parted.

He fought the urge to take her in his arms and kiss her passionately right there in the middle of the crowd. Knowing the Maple Creek rumor mill, word would spread like wildfire that he was dating Sariah. At least the paparazzi hadn’t discovered where he was. If they caught wind that he was kissing another woman, they’d have a heyday with the information.

His phone rang in his back pocket. He pulled it out and checked the screen. It was Orchid. He tucked the phone back in his pocket and let it go to voicemail. She was the last person he wanted to talk to right now. Especially not in front of Sariah.

Was he a total jerk for not telling her he was about to become a dad? He knew she had issues with Elliot keeping secrets from her. Hopefully, she wouldn’t get mad at him when she found out he had a kid on the way. Eventually, it would get out. He couldn’t hide it forever.

He was a much more complicated guy than he seemed on the surface. When she learned the truth, she might pull away from him. He wasn’t sure he wanted that anymore. The longer he spent time with her, the more he wanted to see more of her.

Kane and Sariah browsed the book stand for a bit more and then headed to the stage where some chairs were set up. A bluegrass band was playing on the stage, and there were people scattered throughout the audience seating. “Want to sit down and listen for a while?”

“Sure.”

His phone buzzed again. He checked it to see another missed call from Orchid. She’d called while he was at the town meeting too, and he still hadn’t gotten back to her. Hopefully the baby was okay. He wasn’t going to call her back now though. Not in front of Sariah.

A text message came through.

Orchid: I need you to call me back as soon as you see this.

He hated texting in front of Sariah, but he needed to make sure the baby was okay.

Kane: I’m unavailable to talk on the phone right now. What’s going on?

She didn’t respond.

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“Is everything okay?” Sariah asked.

“It’s just my ex. She’s been harassing me lately.”

“What does she want?”

“Probably what she always wants. More money.” He hoped that was all it was this time. He wanted the baby to be okay.

Sariah frowned. “As long as you’re paying her what was court ordered, you don’t owe her a dime.”

“I’m not a stingy guy. I pay my fair share, but it’s never enough for her. She has a guy behind her, pushing her to get more money from me.” He took her hand. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you don’t want to hear about this stuff.”

“I don’t mind. I get it that you have a lot you’re dealing with. I don’t mind being let in on what you’re struggling with.”

They sat together for about thirty minutes until their grandmas joined them. “We’re going to go get funnel cakes, do you want to come with us?” his grandma asked.

Kane stood up and stretched. “Sure. You okay with that, Sariah?”

“Are you kidding? I know this is a music festival, but I came here for the funnel cakes.”

Kane laughed. “So those are good enough for you?”

“Fried batter with powdered sugar? Um yeah. I think it’s good enough. I don’t even know how that’s a question.”

“They are pretty irresistible.” He loved seeing the light in her eyes when she talked about the funnel cakes. She was more irresistible than the funnel cakes though. He wasn’t even sure how he was able to keep his hands off her.

They left with their grandmothers and got in line to buy funnel cakes.

“I hope you know I’m planning to eat an entire funnel cake by myself,” Sariah announced to Kane.

“You’re going to make yourself sick.”

“Nope. I can put down fried foods like nobody’s business. It’s a gift.”

Kane laughed. “I didn’t realize you were so talented.” And yet she was still tiny. Women everywhere would hate her for it.

They made it to the front of the line, and Kane’s phone went off again. Sariah stepped up to the window and talked to the teen girl running the stand. Kane checked his phone.

Orchid: Just call me back whenever you can.

He frowned. That didn’t tell him anything about if the baby was okay.

Kane placed a few twenties on the counter in front of Sariah. “Order for our grandmas too.”

“You don’t have to keep paying for stuff, you know,” Sariah said.

“I don’t mind. Consider this a date of sorts.”

“A date?” his grandma piped up. “Then you shouldn’t have invited two old ladies along.”

“We’re happy to have you here,” Sariah said.

“All we’re doing is getting in the way of your budding romance,” Mrs. Tate said.

“What makes you say we have a budding romance?” Kane said with a smile.

“I have eyes in my head, don’t I?” Mrs. Tate said. “I can see what’s right in front of me.”

Kane smiled. He couldn’t deny that his feelings for Sariah were growing by the day. She was an amazing woman. He was getting to the point that he wasn’t sure he could go back to New York without her. It looked like his grandma was spot on with her assessment.

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Part of him dreaded going back to New York. It was happier in Maple Creek. And to think, he'd come into town for a funeral. He hadn't expected to have such a nice time that he wouldn't want to leave. But New York held the stressful part of his life. The merger and his pregnant ex-wife. He really did want to know if something was wrong with the baby. Sariah was busy getting the food. Maybe now was a good time to send a quick text.

Kane checked to make sure no one was reading over his shoulder. He knew he was taking a risk, typing this out, because Sariah might see his texts with Orchid at some point, but he didn't want to wait until he had time to call her to find out if the baby was okay.

Kane: Just tell me if there's anything wrong with the baby.

Her response came right away.Orchid: The baby is fine.

In that case, she probably just wanted money. It was incredibly frustrating that she'd interrupted his evening so many times that night. At least his baby was okay. He realized how much he wanted that kid to be a part of his life when he'd worried that something might happen to the little one. Babies died in vitro all the time, especially the tiny ones.

They got their funnel cakes and headed to a pavilion full of picnic tables. It was starting to get dark, and lights were turning on everywhere. It was nice that the pavilion was well lit.

"This is worth every calorie," Sariah said as she sunk her teeth into her funnel cake.

Kane laughed and bit into his own. It was still warm and had the right amount of crisp and sweetness.

Aside from Orchid's phone calls and texts, it had been a perfect evening. He couldn't have imagined having a better time with anyone else. This woman truly made his heart happy. He hadn't been looking for it and hadn't expected it. He wasn't sure that the best idea was to push her away either. Not when she brought him so much happiness. Maybe there was a way they could work things out between them.

Orchid had repeatedly called him over the next few days. He'd hardly responded to her, and he hadn't called her back. If she couldn't text him that she wanted money, he wasn't going to take the time to talk to her on the phone. He was sick of her using him like a piggy bank. It was like she thought he was only good for his money. But that was nothing new. She'd treated him that way their entire marriage. He was through with that nonsense now. He didn't have to answer her calls now.

He spent the next few days driving his grandmother around to view various apartments in addition to Pineridge Farms, the senior community she was most interested in. She filled out some applications, and they only needed to wait to hear back before she could make any major decisions.

When he wasn't shopping for a new home for her, he was busy helping her to pack up her house and sort through what she didn't want anymore.

Sariah came over on Saturday to help clean out the garage. She had her hair pulled back into a ponytail with a few tendrils of hair framing her face. She kept pushing them out of her face. He could tell it was annoying her, but he thought it was adorable.

Sariah was a hard worker, and they were making great progress. By three that afternoon, they had the garage divided in two halves. The "keep" side and the "get rid

of” side. There was no way his grandmother would be able to keep most of what was left on the “keep” side of the garage. But he’d address that with her on another day. She most likely wouldn’t have a garage at her new place, and the storage would be limited. He wasn’t sure she was taking the move seriously enough.

He thought maybe she’d end up backing out of the move, but so far, she was still insisting she wanted to go through with it.

“Let’s take a break,” Kane suggested.

“Sounds good.” Sariah pushed her hair from her face. Her cheeks glowed from the active day they’d had.

“Want to see what we can scrounge up in the kitchen?”

“Sure.”

They went into the house, and he found a container of cookies his grandmother had made the day before. His grandma was at the grocery store with Mrs. Tate, so they had the house to themselves.

“Snickerdoodles are my favorite.” Sariah took a cookie from the plastic bin.

“My grandma makes the best cookies.” He took a bite, savoring the cinnamon flavor. They were best straight out of the oven, but these were still delicious.

The doorbell rang, and Kane got up to see who was there. They weren’t expecting anyone, and as far as he knew, his grandma hadn’t ordered anything that was supposed to be delivered.

He opened the door, and his mouth fell open. “What are you doing here?” Orchid

stood before him in a low-cut dress that clung to her curves. He still couldn't see any evidence of a growing belly, but he knew it could take a while before she started showing. He hadn't seen her in weeks. Not since she'd cornered him outside the restaurant when he'd been eating with Benson, and she'd told him she was pregnant.

Sariah came up behind him, and panic flew through Kane. He had to keep Orchid quiet about the baby in front of Sariah.

"Can I come in?" Orchid asked.

Chapter 12

“Why did you come all this way?” Kane asked.

Sariah couldn't believe his ex would show up unannounced on his grandmother's doorstep like this. The woman was a nut job. Unless she was trying to get back together with him. She wasn't doing that, was she?

“Are you going to let me in, or not? I've traveled a long way, and I'm exhausted.”

“Can we talk on the porch for a minute?” he said through a clenched jaw.

It was almost like he didn't want Sariah to overhear whatever Orchid had to say.

Orchid pushed the door open wider. “Is that your old high school girlfriend behind you?”

Sariah tensed. Orchid was drop dead gorgeous. How could she ever compete with a woman who looked like that? And now she was coming off like she was jealous of Sariah.

“Are you dating her?” Orchid spat.

“That's none of your business. Can we take this to the porch?”

Orchid gave him a challenging look. “Why? Because you don't want her to find out about the baby?”

Sariah felt the color draining from her face. Suddenly, she felt sick to her stomach. “What’s she talking about, Kane?”

“I asked you nicely to take this to the porch. Are you going to respect me enough to listen, or are you going to keep broadcasting my personal life?”

Broadcasting? Kane had known about the baby all along, and he’d kept it a secret from her. She’d allowed herself to start to trust again, but this proved how stupid she’d been. Why would he hide something so huge from her?

“You didn’t tell me Orchid was pregnant,” Sariah said.

Kane turned to look at her with a stricken face. “I’ll explain it to you later.”

“I came all this way for a reason,” Orchid said. “Babies are expensive, Kane. I’m going to need more money.”

“And you’ll get it.”

“Are you sure about that?” Orchid put her hands on her hips. “You haven’t even bothered to call me back.”

Kane looked tired. “Because I know you. All you care about is getting more from me. But I want to make sure you get the money according to the legal system. Not according to whatever your boyfriend is desperate for.”

“He’s my fiancé,” Orchid corrected. “I care about taking care of our baby. I need money to buy a crib and diapers.”

Kane leaned against the door frame with a stiff annoyance. “The baby isn’t due for a while still. You’re not even showing yet. I’ll make sure you get everything you need

before it's time. But give me a chance to finish grieving for my grandfather. I'm here to focus on my grandma's needs right now. Your desperate plea for more cash isn't exactly my top priority right now."

"You don't look like you're very focused on your grandma. Are you sure you don't have another agenda?" Orchid looked pointedly at Sariah. "What's she doing over here anyway?"

"She's helping me clean out my grandma's garage."

"Oh, how sweet of her." Orchid's mouth turned downward, and her voice dripped with venom.

"I don't know why it matters to you. You have Turner. Who I choose to spend time with shouldn't bother you anymore."

"You and I are having a baby together. It matters who you choose to spend your time with. I don't want you bringing just anyone around our baby."

What kind of person did Orchid think Sariah was? A druggie or something?

Kane's face turned a dark shade of red. "Sariah is perfectly worthy of being around our kid. Anyway, you lost your right to decide who I spend time with when you cheated on me."

"Turner and I fell in love. You can't help who you fall for."

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“You’re not convincing me to help you out financially. Why do you want it right now anyway?”

Orchid looked off to the side for a moment. “I have rights as the mother of your child.”

“Does this have something to do with the fancy honeymoon you want to book for your upcoming wedding? Or maybe it’s the designer dress you plan to wear? I know weddings can be pretty expensive.”

Orchid didn’t say anything for a moment.

“That’s what I thought. I’ve known you for a long time, Orchid. You wouldn’t have come all this way if you hadn’t been desperate for the money.”

Sariah stepped forward. “Why did you come all this way?”

Orchid looked at her with disdain. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“Then you’ve wasted your time,” Kane said. “Did you really think I was going to just hand you over money?”

“If you don’t, I’ll take you back to court.”

“And if the court decides I need to pay you during your pregnancy, then I’ll happily pay money.”

“Kane, babies are expensive. I have medical bills. That paternity test wasn’t cheap either.” Orchid had a point. But wasn’t Kane giving her enough to afford medical care just fine? She’d been married to a billionaire.

“You’re already getting the max amount in spousal support. I’m sure you can afford that paternity test just fine. That’s a drop in the bucket compared to what you’re getting from me. It’s not like you’re impoverished. You live in a brand new multi-million-dollar condo.”

“I’m talking about what’s fair and legal,” Orchid said.

“I’ll have to talk to my lawyer about what’s fair and legal. I don’t know New York family law well enough to give you an answer right on the spot.”

“Kane isn’t being unreasonable,” Sariah said. “You can’t manipulate him into paying for your wedding. That’s not his responsibility.”

Orchid crossed her arms defensively. “I never said I wanted him to pay for my wedding.”

“But we both know you’re planning one, and you have expensive taste,” Kane pointed out.

The entire conversation was making the sick feeling in Sariah’s stomach worse. She still couldn’t get over the fact that Kane was having a kid and had kept it from her. How long had he known? Was that what he’d been talking to Orchid about at the funeral?

She didn’t understand the need for secrecy. It made her feel like he was trying to keep her out of his inner life, and that hurt her heart. He was okay with kissing her and taking her on dates, but he couldn’t share something huge like this with her?

She was fed up with guys being secretive with her. She should have known better than to trust him.

“I should go. I’ve intruded on this conversation long enough,” Sariah said.

Kane turned to look at her with sadness in his eyes. “We’ll talk later?”

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll just go out the side door. I’m sure the two of you have plenty to discuss.”

She turned without looking back and headed to the side door. She could hear Kane speaking to Orchid in a low voice. She couldn’t make out what he was saying anymore. She didn’t care. Her heart was breaking. She had to get away before her tears began to fall. She made it out to her car and backed out before the first sob broke from her throat.

She drove home with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Sariah had to work the next day. It was a Saturday, and Tate’s Jewelers was busy. She had a few couples come in looking for engagement rings. How were so many people in their small town getting married? It hurt her to see them happy and together. Would she ever find that? She’d thought for a moment that maybe Kane was considering something more serious with her, but now she wasn’t so sure she wanted that.

He’d lied to her. She wasn’t sure that was something she could get over.

She took inventory and put out some new rings she’d just gotten in. She helped a few more customers, and then checked the clock. It was almost lunch time. She had plans to meet up with Carrington to grab lunch at the sandwich shop a few streets over.

She'd called her the night before after she'd had a good cry. She told Carrington all about how Kane had been keeping such a huge secret from her. Kane had tried to call her, but she hadn't wanted to talk to him. The last thing she wanted to hear was a bunch of excuses from a man she'd thought she could trust. She'd thought he was different, but she realized now how wrong she was about that.

How was he that different from Elliot? He'd kept his drug usage a secret, and Kane had kept his ex-wife's pregnancy a secret. Both were huge pieces of information she felt like she needed to know. Kane had acted like he wanted to pursue something with her. He couldn't have been that serious if he'd been hiding something this big from her.

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Sariah looked up to see Carrington walk into the store. She finished up with the customer she was helping and then went into the office to grab her purse.

“Ready to go?” Carrington asked when she came back out.

“Yep.”

“I can drive if you want,” Carrington offered.

“Sounds good to me.” Sariah followed her friend out of the store and out to the parking lot.

Carrington unlocked the car with her key fob, and Sariah climbed inside.

“How are you holding up?” Carrington asked when they’d gotten inside.

“I’m having a hard day.”

Carrington started the engine. “I can’t believe he has a kid on the way. Talk about bad timing.”

“I hope he’s not mad that I told you. He seemed to want it kept secret,” Sariah said. She hadn’t thought about that until after she’d already told Carrington.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything to anyone.”

“I know you’re not really the gossiping type, which is rare in this town.”

Carrington laughed. “That’s true. Most people in Maple Creek are eager to spread secrets around.”

“That’s just part of living in a small town where everyone knows each other.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. I love it here,” Carrington said.

“Yeah, as long as they aren’t talking about you,” Sariah said.

Carrington laughed and pulled into the parking lot of the sandwich shop. “So far, I’ve been too boring to talk about. All I do is work at the art museum and hang out with my dad.”

“That could change overnight. I used to be considered boring in this town,” Sariah said. “Now everyone’s talking about me dating Kane.”

“Well, that is pretty juicy gossip.”

“I don’t think I’m going to give them much to talk about anymore.”

“You don’t think you can work things out with him?”

“I don’t know if he wants to, first of all. We were pretty close to rekindling our old relationship, although I don’t know how it would have worked out unless we decided we wanted to do the long-distance thing.”

“And then the pregnancy secret came out.”

“Well, it was bound to eventually.”

“That’s a good point. It’s not like he can hide the fact that he has a kid,” Carrington

said.

“I guess technically he could. Lots of guys have secret families.” Sariah climbed out of the car.

“Yeah, but I don’t think Kane is one of those guys.” Carrington stepped out of the driver’s side.

“I don’t get why he was keeping the baby thing from me.” Sariah closed her door.

They walked toward the restaurant. “Have you talked to him about it?” Carrington asked.

“Not yet. He tried to call me last night, but I wasn’t in the mood to talk to him.”

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“I think once you’ve calmed down, you should give him a chance to explain why he didn’t tell you about the baby.” Carrington stepped up to the counter.

A younger girl smiled up at them. She looked to be about twenty and had her hair pulled back into a brown ponytail. “What can I get you today?”

“I’ll have the ham and cheddar with a bottle of water.” Carrington paid for her food and moved to the side.

“I’ll have a turkey Swiss melt with a root beer.”

“Do you want chips with that?”

“Sure. Just regular potato chips.”

The younger girl rang her up, and Sariah paid her. She got her food and then joined Carrington at the table she’d reserved for the two of them.

She bit into the warm gooey cheesy sandwich. It was just what she needed.

“Do you hate it that all our friends have gotten married off, and we’re left single?” Carrington twisted off the top of her water bottle.

“To some degree. I’m happy that they’ve all found someone, but I was happy to be single. I felt like guys couldn’t be trusted.”

“You’re speaking in past tense. Does that mean you don’t feel that way anymore?”

Carrington drank from her water bottle.

“Spending so much time with Kane has changed my perspective on dating. At least, I was headed in that direction. I’m not sure how I feel now.” Sariah ripped open her bag of chips and popped one in her mouth.

“Do you think you would have allowed yourself to grow close to him again if you’d known about the baby?” Carrington twisted the top back on her bottle.

She chewed and swallowed the chip. “The baby doesn’t bother me. I wouldn’t have a problem dating a guy with a kid. It’s the sneakiness that bugs me.”

“Maybe he just wasn’t ready to talk about it. You did say that Orchid didn’t even look pregnant yet. Lots of people aren’t ready to tell people right away.”

“I get not telling your parents or extended family, but don’t you think it’s important information to share with someone you’re kissing?”

“That depends on if you want to be committed to the person you’re kissing, or if it’s just a casual thing,” Carrington pointed out.

That didn’t help Sariah feel any better though. “We weren’t officially together, so I can see how he might not think it’s something he’d need to share with me. But for some reason, it doesn’t make me feel better. I don’t know if that’s because of my past with Elliot and all his secrets, or if it’s because I want him to be more serious with me.”

“It sounds like it’s both.” Carrington took a bite of her sandwich.

Sariah looked up to see Kane and Chase walking into the shop. “Look who’s here.”

Carrington twisted to see the two guys. “You should talk to him.”

Kane turned his head and caught her eye. He lifted a hand and waved at her.

Sariah turned back to Carrington, ignoring Kane’s wave. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can totally do this,” Carrington whispered.

“I’m not sure I have a choice because he’s coming this direction.”

Chapter 13

Kane desperately needed to talk to Sariah. He'd tried calling her last night, and she hadn't returned his call. He had a feeling she might be avoiding him. His mind was full of questions about how she was feeling. He'd called his grandfather after waiting for Sariah to call him back and not having any luck. His grandfather wanted him to make sure Sariah kept the knowledge of his new baby coming under wraps.

His biggest worry was that she was pulling away because she felt like him having a kid would be too much baggage. There was no way Orchid would have wanted to be with him back in the day if she'd found out he'd had a kid.

He wasn't expecting to run into Sariah at the sandwich shop. Kane had gone there with Chase to talk over his options. He'd told Chase about the baby coming on their way to the restaurant and had sworn him to secrecy. His grandpa had loosened up about who he could tell. He'd explained how hard it was for him to keep something like that such a big secret. Chase was trustworthy anyway. As a well-known musician, he understood the need for privacy. The guy knew more about dodging the paparazzi than Kane did.

Chase had been surprised about the baby but was happy for him too. He didn't seem to mind that Kane had been keeping it a secret from him, but he understood how Sariah might be upset. Kane had sensed that Sariah was a little freaked out with the whole baby thing. He hoped that she would come around.

His heart ached for Sariah. He'd been falling for her again since he'd come back in town, and he was at the point that he couldn't ignore how strong it had gotten. It

didn't matter anymore that he was fresh out of a divorce or that he had a baby coming. He had to figure out a way to be with her.

The problem was, he didn't know if she felt the same way about him. And what if she did? It wasn't like they could do anything about it. Unless they were willing to do the long-distance thing. It was a possibility, but she hadn't wanted to do it back in high school. Who was to say she'd be okay with it now?

He approached her table. "Sariah, can we talk privately?"

Sariah and Carrington exchanged a glance, and Carrington nodded to her.

Sariah turned to him. "Sure." She grabbed what was left of her sandwich and bunched the wrapper around it. She grabbed it along with her chips and drink and stood to follow him.

"Do you want me to order some food for you?" Chase asked.

"Sure. Just get me the ham and Swiss on wheat with a Coke."

"You got it." Chase got in line.

"Want to go sit in my car for a minute?" Kane asked.

"That's fine." She didn't sound very excited to talk to him.

His stomach sunk. He wasn't so sure about how this conversation was going to go down.

They settled in his car, and he blew out a pent-up breath. "I'm sorry you had to find out I'm going to be a dad that way. I feel really bad about the way it went down"

“Why? Because your secret was spilled when you wanted it quiet?” Sariah bit out the words.

“No.” He dragged the word out. This wasn’t off to a very good start.

“I trusted you, Kane. I thought you were being open and honest with me. I told you I had issues with guys keeping secrets from me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I thought you might be upset when you found out.”

“Mostly, I felt betrayed. I just can’t understand why you didn’t tell me. Why keep something that big a secret?”

“I get how you might feel that way. My grandfather wants me to keep it quiet. Right now, our company is going through a merger, and we need to keep the drama to a minimum.”

“Why would going through a merger make you have to keep something like that a secret?”

“The company we’re merging with is run by a pro family group. They were attracted to working with us because we were such a family-oriented company. My grandfather thinks the drama with Orchid should be kept to a minimum. It’s bad enough that she’s been showing up at the office, causing all kinds of trouble, demanding money from me.”

“So you couldn’t tell me because of your job?”

“That’s right.”

Sariah sat quietly for a moment with her gaze turned away from him. Her expression

was unreadable. “The secrecy is a hard one for me. I get why it was important, but I still feel upset.”

“My ex kept big secrets from me too, so I understand some of what you must feel.”

“At least you aren’t addicted to painkillers. I don’t think I could handle something like that again.”

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He took her chin and turned her toward him. Her gaze met his. She was such a beautiful woman. “I really like you, Sariah. I’ve been feeling myself falling for you again since I’ve been here visiting.” He stroked his thumb across her cheek.

She put her hand over his. “I’ve been falling for you too.”

“I’m dreading going back to New York without you,” he confessed.

“Then stay longer.” She pulled him toward her and pressed her lips to his. She was soft and sweet and smelled amazing. He brought a hand to the back of her neck and pulled her closer to him. He needed her near him always. The thought of spending even one day away from her created an ache in his chest that he could hardly bear.

But how could he leave New York? He had a career there and now a baby on the way. He had important ties to the city, and he didn’t see how he could ignore those responsibilities. He couldn’t expect Sariah to leave Maple Creek either. It was her home, and she had a thriving business there.

When she kissed him like this, he wanted to do anything she asked. The truth was, he wasn’t free to make choices to abandon two huge parts of his life.

She must have seen some of the sorrow on his face because her features clouded with worry. “What is it?”

“I don’t know how this is going to work out between us.”

“We’ll make it work. People do it all the time,” Sariah insisted, kissing him again.

He broke off the kiss. “I want to be honest with you. The reality is, I’m not going to be able to stay here for much longer. I can come back and visit you, but ultimately, either you’re going to have to move to New York or we’re going to need to have a long-distance relationship.”

“Can’t you work long distance?”

“That’s a possibility, but it won’t work for me to abandon my kid.”

“Right. The baby.” He could see the gears turning in her mind. “You can’t live so far away from your kid, can you?”

He shook his head. “I’m going to want to be in my baby’s life. I want to be there for all the major milestones.”

“I can’t blame you for that. I’d want the same thing. And the fact that you’re standing by your child only makes me love you so much more.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “This really isn’t going to work, is it?”

“We can give the long-distance thing a try.”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for that. I wasn’t back when we were in high school, and I’m still not.”

“I have a private jet. I can come back to visit you all the time. It won’t be like I’m in college.”

“You’ll forget about me pretty quickly. I know you must have gorgeous women swarming you all the time at those fancy New York parties you’re always going to.”

It was true, he did have a lot of women trying to get their claws into him.

Sariah wiped at the wetness on her cheek. "I won't be around to stake my claim. How could I compete with that?"

"It wouldn't be a competition. They aren't you. When I commit to someone, I don't see the other women."

It was like the word commit had triggered something in her. A light went off in her eyes. "I'm just not ready to commit myself. I still have a lot of trust issues. I'm working through that in therapy, but as much as I care about you, I don't think it's the right time for us," Sariah said. "I'm sorry, Kane." She looked up at him with the saddest blue eyes.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. She wasn't willing to fight for what they'd found together? Just because some jerk did a number on her?

"I should probably go." She pushed open her car door.

"Wait." He took her by the hand and pulled her closer to him. He pressed his lips to hers, and she curled toward him. For that one moment, everything was perfect. He didn't want to think about what was about to happen next.

She pulled away from him and looked into his eyes.

"Just consider what I'm proposing."

"I'm sorry. I can't," she whispered. "I'm not ready. I thought I might be, but I was wrong." She stepped out of the car, leaving him sitting by himself.

He sat and stared out his windshield for a few minutes, strangely numb. How could this be over? Just like that?

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Chase walked out of the restaurant, carrying a bag of food and a couple of drinks. He knocked on the car window, and Kane opened the door. Chase handed him his Coke. “You okay? You don’t look so good.”

“Sariah and I just broke up.”

Chase leaned against his car. “Were you ever really together?”

“Get in. I’ll tell you what happened.”

Chase got in the passenger side, and Kane filled him in on his conversation with Sariah. When he’d gotten him up to date, he pulled out his sandwich. He unwrapped his straw and jabbed it into his cup. He took a long drink from his Coke.

“That’s awful. I’m so sorry,” Chase said. “So in the end, she just wasn’t ready to commit?”

“I think that was the problem from the start. She was just using the long-distance issue as an excuse.”

“I don’t know what to say to fix this for you,” Chase said.

Kane took a bite of his sandwich. The food helped him feel better. “I’m hoping this is just a momentary freak out, and that she’ll eventually come around.”

“That might be the case. Or it might not. You should prepare yourself for the fact that it might really be over between you two.”

“I think it hurts worse since we were high school sweethearts. We have all that history. It’s like I’m breaking up with her for the first time all over again.”

“And you just had to deal with your breakup with Orchid.”

“You would think that would hurt more than this, but it doesn’t. I guess it’s because I’m okay with losing Orchid. I’ve made peace with it. But I can’t make peace with this. It feels wrong.”

“But if she doesn’t want the relationship, there’s nothing you can do to change her mind.”

Kane took another bite of his sandwich. There had to be something he could do. He shook his head. No. He couldn’t force her to be with him. He had to respect her decision to break things off. Maybe he just needed to let Sariah go.

He could focus on spending his remaining days in town helping his grandma to get packed up. Maybe they could finalize her apartment search. That was why he’d decided to stay longer anyway. This trip was about being there for his grandma. The other stuff with Sariah had just caught him unaware.

“I think you’re right,” Kane said. “I think I need to respect her wishes.” He sipped his Coke, thankful for the caffeine.

“You may give her some space and later discover that she may change her mind. Girls don’t like to be smothered if they’re feeling flighty.”

“I can’t keep my hopes up, though. I have to move on with my life. I can’t sit around a pine for a girl who doesn’t want to be with me.”

Chase laughed. “Good luck with that. I have a feeling you won’t be able to escape the

ping. Especially, if you feel as strongly about her as you say you do.”

“I know you’re right, but I don’t want to think about that right now.” If he did, the pain might be too much to bear. He’d have to immerse himself in his work to keep himself from falling apart. First with his grandma, and then he needed to get back to New York so he could help with the merger. Then he’d figure out what he was obligated to pay Orchid. He’d pay her what he owed, and then he’d be free from her harassment.

Over the next few days, he focused on his grandma. He kept himself from thinking too much about Sariah, and he didn’t see her once during that time.

He was packing a box in the spare bedroom one day when his grandmother came into the room. “Guess what? I just got a call from Pineridge Farms. They’ve accepted my application and have something available for me to move into this week.”

“That’s great news!” He opened the closet and scooted his box closer to his new workspace.

His sister had given birth to her baby the day before, so his parents would be available within the next week to come to Maple Creek to help his grandma move into her new place.

His grandma sat on the edge of the bed. “Why haven’t I seen Sariah around here lately?”

He sighed. He’d been avoiding this conversation with his grandma. He didn’t want her to be disappointed that things hadn’t worked out with Sariah.

“We decided to stop seeing each other.”

She scowled at him. “Why would you decide something ridiculous like that?”

“It was mostly her decision. I tried to fight for her, but she said she wasn’t ready to commit. We both knew eventually I’d have to go back to New York.” The sadness welled up in his chest again just talking about it.

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“I bet this has to do with that loser she used to date.”

“She mentioned him. She said she can’t trust men anymore because of her relationship with him.” Kane felt the frustration build inside him. “How am I supposed to prove myself to her if she doesn’t give me a chance?”

His grandma crossed her arms and gave him a stern look. “I don’t think you’re trying hard enough. How many times have you tried calling her since she shot you down?”

“Well... none.”

“That’s exactly my point. You can either stay miserable, or you could try harder. Chances are she just needs a little coaxing. She’s just scared. And stupid, if you ask me. She’s letting her past keep her from her future.”

“I just feel so helpless. I feel like I need to respect her wishes.”

“She doesn’t know her own wishes. I don’t think that deserves respect.”

Kane laughed. His grandma sure was saucy when she wanted to be.

“I’m going to talk to Lois. Maybe she can talk some sense into her granddaughter.”

For the first time all week, hope blossomed in Kane’s chest again.

Chapter 14

Sariah walked into Two Scoops, her friend Sully's ice cream shop, with her grandma beside her. She'd taken a break from work to meet up with her grandma. She hadn't talked to her grandma much about what had happened with Kane. When her grandma asked her the night before why she wasn't spending time with Kane, she'd brushed her off, saying she was busy with her store and he was busy helping his grandma pack up. She had a feeling that wasn't a good enough excuse for her grandma. It was only a matter of time before she started questioning her all over again. Sariah suspected that her grandma had invited her to eat ice cream so she could grill her about Kane some more.

Sully greeted them at the counter with a big smile. "Hey there, Sariah. What can I get for you?"

"I'll have a couple scoops of the pumpkin ice cream in a bowl."

"Pumpkin ice cream?" her grandmother said. "That sounds delicious. Can I try a sample of that?"

"Sure thing!" Sully reached into the glass case with a little spoon, dipped it in a tub of ice cream, and brought out a little scoop for her grandma. "Here you go."

Her grandmother tasted the sample and looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'll take two scoops of that in a cone."

"You got it." She dished out their orders, and they moved down to the register. She

handed them their ice cream, and Sariah's grandmother paid for them both.

"You don't have to pay for my ice cream," Sariah said.

"I told you I was treating you today. I'm happy to do it."

She really was up to something. Sariah could sense it.

They found a table in the corner and settled down to enjoy their sugary snacks.

"What's going on with Kane?" her grandmother looked at her pointedly.

Sariah shrugged. "He's going back to New York."

"And you're okay with that?"

She dipped her spoon into her pumpkin ice cream. "It's where he lives. We all know that."

"I thought you two were becoming a couple."

Sariah swallowed her ice cream. "We never decided that."

"What happened?"

"What makes you think something happened?" Sariah was starting to feel defensive. She didn't like her grandma grilling her like this.

"It was obvious. You two were in love. We could all tell. Now you're avoiding each other."

“It is because we can’t be together,” Sariah tried to explain.

Her grandmother gave her an exasperated look. “Whyever not?”

“Because we live in different cities.”

“Then one of you can move,” her grandma pointed out.

“We talked about that. It won’t work. He has a kid coming in New York, and I have my business here in Maple Creek.”

“He has a kid coming? What are you talking about?”

Oops. She slapped her hand over her mouth. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you. Kane could get in big trouble if that secret gets out.”

Her grandma leaned forward and whispered. “Did he get Orchid pregnant?”

Sariah nodded. “And now he’s tied to New York if he wants to be in the baby’s life.”

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“And you hate New York.” Her grandma sounded defeated.

“I hate New York.”

“Couldn’t you live there for him?”

“And give up Tate’s Jewelers? You know I can’t do that.”

“Not even for love?” Her grandma got all doe eyed.

Sariah squirmed. If it wasn’t for her fear of getting hurt, she would have figured out some way to run her business from New York. She would be willing to live there with him in a heartbeat, even though she hated it there. How bad could New York be when you were with a billionaire? Sure, there were still the crowds, but they’d be eating the best food in town and living it up. It didn’t sound that bad after all. But she didn’t want to give everything up and end up hurt and alone again. She wasn’t willing to take that risk.

When Sariah didn’t answer, her grandma said, “I feel like there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

“What do you mean?”

“There has to be another reason you aren’t willing to be with Kane.”

“There is,” Sariah admitted. How was her grandmother so good at weaseling information out of her? “I’m not ready for another relationship.”

Her grandma looked highly annoyed. “I thought you were going to therapy to get yourself healed.”

“I am. But there’s some sort of block there. It’s like I can’t overcome it.”

“You’re going to let that stupid block keep you from a lifetime of happiness with one of the best guys you’ve ever met?”

Sariah sighed. “When you put it that way, I feel pretty useless.”

“Don’t feel useless. Do something about your block.”

“What am I supposed to do? I’ve tried everything.”

“Journal it out. Talk to your therapist some more. Try a new therapist. Don’t just pretend it’s not there.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“You’re letting that man slip through your fingers, and I’m not going to sit by and let you give up such a wonderful opportunity for happiness.”

Sariah felt like she’d failed her grandma somehow. But the truth was, she’d failed herself. She’d let her fear control her. She was a coward. There was no other way to look at it. Was it worth it to take a risk and give Kane another chance? Give love another chance? Or would she spend the rest of her life alone and afraid to open her heart?

Sariah returned to work but felt distracted for the rest of the day. She kept going back and forth on whether she should give Kane another shot. The shop stayed busy with customers and phone calls, but her heart wasn’t in any of it. She kept seeing images

of her in Kane's arms flashing through her mind. What if he never held her like that again? She wasn't sure she could bear it. She should have known better than to get involved with him. But the pull to be with him was undeniable and strong.

Finally, at the end of the day she decided to text him. She wasn't deciding she wanted to be with him, but she could at least reach out and see how he felt about things, right?

Sariah: Are you available to come over to my place tonight? I feel like we should talk.

Ten minutes later, a response came through.

Kane: I can do that. What time?

Sariah: Six. Does that work?

Kane: I'll be there.

Sariah left the shop with one of her evening shift employees and grabbed some tacos for dinner. She brought her food home and ate so she wouldn't be hungry when Kane came over. Once she'd finished her Mexican food, she threw the trash away. That was when she heard a knock on the door of her older home. She got up from the kitchen table and swung open the front door.

Kane stood on the front porch, and he looked heartbreakingly good. He wore a plain white t-shirt and jeans, but his clothes still probably cost a fortune.

"Come on in." She opened the door wider for him. "Thanks for coming over. I wasn't sure you'd still want to talk to me."

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Kane looked at her with sadness in his eyes. "I always want to talk to you."

"Do you want to sit down?"

"Sure." He followed her into the living room and settled on the couch. "How have you been?"

She'd been awful and confused and heartbroken. But she wasn't sure she wanted to admit that to Kane. "I've been okay. Busy with work."

"I've been busy too."

"How are things with your grandma?"

"Her application got accepted at the place she most wanted to move to, so she should be moving in pretty soon. Within the next week."

"That's great news. I bet she's excited."

"I still worry about her."

"You shouldn't. She won't have to worry about keeping up that yard or repairing things in that house. She's going to love her new place. You'll see," Sariah encouraged him.

"I'm sure you're right. It's just hard to watch my grandma try to go out on her own. For so many years her life has been focused on my grandpa."

“You’re really sweet to care about her so much. She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m doing what I can. I won’t be able to be there for her as much once I go back to New York.”

Hearing him talk about going back to New York brought a fresh wave of sorrow to her heart. How was she going to be okay without him? Somehow, she would get through it. She didn’t have a choice. He had to be there for his kid. “I can understand that.”

“My parents are coming down to help her move next week.”

“That’s good.”

“I might come back to help her get settled in, but I have to get back to New York to check in on how the merger’s doing.”

Thinking about him coming back so soon brought hope back to Sariah’s heart. But could she spend time with him if she couldn’t have him all to herself? She wasn’t sure she could do it. Just standing here with him was painful.

Kane met her eye. “I have another reason for coming back.”

It was hard to look at him without feeling her face heat up. She longed for him, but she had to keep reminding herself that they weren’t going to work out. “What reason is that?”

“I figured out a way to save Hickory Ridge.”

That was the last thing she thought he was going to say. “What? I thought that was a done deal.”

Kane gave her a wide smile. “I bought the land out from under them yesterday.”

She scrunched her brow in confusion. “How did you do that?”

His smile got bigger. “I gave the seller an offer they couldn’t refuse.”

She couldn’t believe it. “What are you planning to do with the land?”

“I’m still deciding, but I was thinking about doing something with charity. It’s going to take a lot of research to figure out how to get it to work.”

“What kind of charity?”

“A drug rehab place.”

Sariah’s heart swelled. He was doing that for her. He knew how upset she was about Elliot’s drug usage. “I don’t know what to say.”

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“I’ve thought a lot about it. I want to keep it as a farm with horses there as part of the recovery process. Since it would be a charity, it would be low cost for the participants. I still have a lot of questions about how to set everything up legally, but I think it’s going to happen.”

“That’s amazing.”

“If Elliot had gotten better help, he wouldn’t have hurt that other family. Clearly, the community needs more help in that area. It’s a better usage of the land than a shopping center.”

“I think it’s wonderful, Kane. That means so much to me. My life was turned upside down when I found out Elliot was using. He would have benefited from the kind of place you’re thinking of starting.”

“Have you thought about what to call it?”

“I want to name it after my grandfather.”

Tears welled up in Sariah’s eyes. “I love it. Your grandpa would be so proud of you. Have you told your grandma about this yet?”

“I told her this morning.”

Sariah looked up into Kane’s dark eyes. “I love you, Kane. You’re an amazing guy.”

He bent down to kiss her, pressing his lips to hers tentatively. She kissed him back

eagerly, savoring each moment like it was her last. Because it probably was. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to be around him again. Her insides were being torn in two. She warred with herself. Couldn't she just get over her fear and allow this man into her life?

She didn't know how to do it. The fear was too overwhelming. But that fear would be the end of her. She was going to lose this man. She could feel it. But she was powerless to stop the train wreck from happening. She pulled away. "I'm sorry, Kane. I can't do this. I wish I could, but I can't."

He put his forehead to hers and sighed. "This is so hard. I don't know if I can keep putting myself out there, Sariah. I feel like you're pulling me in two different directions."

"That's because I feel that way myself."

"I'm trying so hard to be patient and understanding, but you're killing me here."

"I wouldn't blame you if you decided to move on."

"I wish you would fight harder for us," Kane said.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm trying, I really am."

Kane sighed. "Don't cry, Sariah. I'm just frustrated. I don't mean to take it out on you. That's the last thing I want."

She wiped away the tears brimming her eyes.

"I'm not giving up completely on us, but sometimes I wonder if I'm an idiot to keep pursuing something you don't seem to be fully invested in."

“I’m sorry I’m making this so hard on you. It’s hard on me too. Maybe I just need to sort this all out in therapy.”

“I’m not going anywhere if you’re telling me there’s hope for us,” Kane promised, stroking her arm.

It felt amazing to savor his touch. “We don’t have to make a decision today, do we?” Sariah asked.

“No, I guess we don’t.”

But eventually, he would give up on her, and thinking about it shattered her heart.

Chapter 15

Kane went back to New York a few days later. His parents had arrived in Maple Creek to help his grandma move. His sister was recovering well and had her husband around to help her with the baby. A day after he arrived in New York, he went to visit his sister and held her new baby. A wave of emotions washed over him. Before long he would have his own baby to hold. He just hoped Orchid didn't make the custody situation miserable.

The merger was right on track to go through successfully. He'd been able to keep the news of the baby away from the media, and as far as he knew, the other company hadn't heard any word of his baby coming. If they had, they hadn't seemed to have a problem with it.

He came home from work on a Tuesday evening. His chef had prepared chicken with quinoa and vegetables for him. He ate dinner and then settled on the couch to catch up on his favorite tv show. It had been a while since he'd just sat and vegged out. He'd been so busy with the negotiating of the merger. When he wasn't doing that, he was researching what it would take to open his rehab center.

He hadn't heard from Sariah in a few days. He grabbed his phone while his show loaded on his tv and sent her a quick text.

Kane: Hey just checking in with you. I haven't heard from you in a couple of days.

She responded, and they texted back and forth for a few minutes. They'd been staying in touch, but the relationship was still strained.

He heard his doorbell, and he got up from the couch. He answered the door and saw Orchid standing there.

“Gary let me up,” she said, referring to the doorman.

“Come on in.”

“I need to talk to you about something.” Orchid didn’t look happy.

“What’s going on?”

Orchid sat on his couch, and he sat across from her in an armchair. “Turner wants me to get an abortion.”

“What?” He wanted to punch the loser for suggesting that someone kill his daughter. “He doesn’t get to choose that.”

“He doesn’t want to raise someone else’s kid.”

“He should have thought about that before he decided to hook up with you.”

“How could he have known you were going to get me pregnant?”

Kane had to change the subject before he flew into a rage. But he couldn’t. This needed to be talked about.

A sob broke from deep within Orchid. “I don’t want my baby to die.”

That was good at least. “Then don’t. You don’t have to kill her. Turner is out of his mind to ask you to do this.”

“I begged him to change his mind, but he won’t listen to anything I say. It’s like his heart is made of stone.”

“Have you considered leaving him?” That would solve a lot of issues. Kane didn’t want to deal with the loser anymore. The guy was always trying to leech money off of him. Not that he wanted Orchid back. Even if she were free, he would never consider rekindling anything with her. That ship had sailed. And now he was in love with Sariah again.

“What if you took custody of her?” It was like she hadn’t even heard his suggestion that she leave Turner.

“You would give up custody of your daughter to make some jerk happy?”

“He’s my everything. I can’t imagine life without him.”

Kane was ready to gag. The guy was just using her to funnel money from Kane. How could she not see that? Turner didn’t care about her. But Orchid wasn’t his problem anymore. She was an adult woman and could learn from her own mistakes. There was nothing he could do to save her. And he wasn’t willing to try if he could. She’d given up the right to his emotional support when she’d chosen Turner.

“I’m happy to take custody of the baby. I’d do anything for her. But are you sure this is what you want?” he asked in a soft voice. He didn’t know why he was trying to talk her out of it. Either way, he didn’t want her changing her mind and fighting to get custody back from him. His daughter deserved a safe, stable home. He was starting to think that Orchid’s home wasn’t the right place for her anymore. She’d told him she was just diagnosed with bipolar disorder a week ago. It explained a lot about her behavior and all the trouble she’d put Kane through over the years.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot over the past few weeks. I don’t think I’m cut out

to be a mom. Turner and I are planning our wedding, and a baby would be a big responsibility when I'm starting a new life."

"That's fair. If you don't feel like you can do it, I'll be there for her."

"Maybe, I can get him to change his mind. Turner's just going to have to put up with me being pregnant for the next several months. I can't bring myself to have an abortion."

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“I’m glad to hear you say that.” He wouldn’t have been able to do anything to stop her if she’d wanted to abort the baby.

Orchid was an emotional wreck. He didn’t know if she would change her mind about staying with Turner and decide last minute that she wanted to keep custody of the baby. “Would you be willing to sign some documents, saying I’d have custody of the baby after she’s born?”

“I’d have to think about it, but I don’t see why I couldn’t,” Orchid said.

He had to hurry if he wanted to keep the baby safe. Orchid had attempted suicide once before years ago, and he didn’t know she would deal with all the pregnancy hormones after she delivered the baby. His sister had postpartum depression. How much worse could it be for a bipolar woman? That wasn’t a healthy environment for his child. He wasn’t the type to take a child from her mother, but now that there was talk of abortion and handing over custody, he was ready to take action to protect his daughter.

“I’ll see if my lawyer can meet with us tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

He stood up. “Good.” He hoped she got the message and realized he was ready for her to leave.

She stood up too. Thankfully, she seemed to understand.

The sooner he got his lawyer on the phone, the better.

Kane was able to get Orchid to sign paperwork the next day, saying she was willing to give custody to him. His mind was racing with the new information that he was going to be a full-time dad. It also meant that Orchid couldn't go after him for more money. She would get her huge alimony check and nothing more.

He was disappointed that she wasn't willing to leave Turner. He didn't understand how she could give up custody of her daughter so easily, but then again, she'd made a lot of decisions he didn't agree with.

He still hadn't told Sariah that he was going to have custody of his daughter. He wasn't sure how she'd take the news.

A week passed, and the merger went through, leaving Kane with a little time on his hands. He decided to take some time off to see how his grandma was settling into her new place. Chase offered to let him stay in his spare bedroom since his grandma only had one bedroom now.

He took his private jet back to Maple Creek and arrived on a Saturday afternoon. He got a rental car and drove over to visit his grandma. He punched her new address into his phone and followed the directions.

He knew where Pineridge Farms was, but he wasn't exactly sure which unit was hers. He pulled up to her house, leaving his suitcase from the back of his car for when he got to Chase's house later that night.

The last time he'd come to her house from his private jet, Sariah had been in there. He'd come so far since that day. He'd learned to open his heart and trust again.

He didn't know how Sariah would react to his news that he was going to be a full-

time dad, but he hoped she still wanted to be with him. So much had changed now. It had been awful being away from her. He'd thought about her constantly while he'd been in New York. He wanted her more now than ever before.

Now that he was going to have custody of his daughter, he would be free to move back to Maple Creek. With video technology and cell phones, he was able to run the company from a distance. Chase was able to record his music long distance. Why couldn't he move to Maple Creek and run his business from afar?

He still didn't know if Sariah would have him, but he was willing to find out.

He knocked on the door, and his grandma opened it. "Kane! You're here." She hugged him.

He took in the smell of fresh baked cookies that seemed to linger around her. He'd missed her terribly while he'd been gone. He released the hug. "Show me around your new place."

She gave him a grand tour of her tiny one-bedroom place. She'd gotten settled in nicely. His parents had done a great job helping her get moved in.

"Everything is landscaped for me. No more bending over to pull weeds. My back has been thanking me."

"And you don't have to worry if the roof is going to leak," Kane said.

"Exactly."

"Does Mrs. Tate still come to visit you often?"

"Just about every day. I can't keep the woman away." Not that she would want to.

The two women were inseparable.

“Have you put your old place up on the market yet?” he asked.

“We’re planning on listing it first thing next week. I have a realtor all set up.”

“It’ll be sad to say goodbye to that house. We have a lot of memories there.”

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“Yes, we do. I’m okay with it though. Let some younger family enjoy that home. I don’t need all that space for just me.”

That was a good attitude to have about it. At least she wasn’t regretting her decision to move. “Have you seen Sariah lately?”

“All the time. That girl still loves you, you know. When are you going to ask her to marry you?”

“Oh, we’re talking about marriage, are we?” Kane chuckled. “It’s still a little soon for that. Sariah and I have a lot to discuss before we can start making huge commitments.”

“What is there to discuss? You love her, and she loves you. It sounds like a done deal to me.”

His grandma was making an assumption that Sariah loved him. But she was right about him being in love with Sariah. Not that he’d told anyone that. He’d only just realized it himself the other day. There was something about being away from Sariah that helped him see the truth of how he felt.

“Well, for one thing I’m going to be a dad.”

His grandmother didn’t look surprised even though he hadn’t told her about the baby yet. “I was wondering when you were going to spill the beans on that.”

“How did you know about it?”

“Oh, come on. I live in Maple Creek. You know secrets don’t last here.”

Kane had to laugh. It was all he could do at this point. All that mattered was that the merger had gone through, and somehow, miraculously, no one from the other company had gotten upset about his drama.

“When are you going to see Sariah?”

“I was planning to go over there when she gets off work.”

“Well, that’s in the next thirty minutes. I say you go over to her shop and surprise her before she leaves for the day.”

“I like the way you think.” He didn’t think he could wait much longer to see her.

“You won’t miss me too much?”

“You’ll come back and see me tomorrow, won’t you?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

He said his goodbyes and then headed across town toward Sariah’s jewelry shop. He passed Fresh Cut Flowers, the shop his friend Layla owned. He stopped by and bought a bouquet of flowers for Sariah. She’d loved irises in high school. He hoped that was still the case. He hadn’t seen her in weeks, and he wanted to make an entrance.

He arrived at Sariah’s shop and pushed open the door with the flowers in his hand.

She looked up and saw him, her face brightening. “Kane. You’re back.”

She looked even more beautiful than he’d remembered. There was something about being away from the one you loved that made them more appealing. She was with a

customer, but she asked one of her employees to take over and she approached Kane.

He reached out to hand her the floral arrangement. "These are for you."

She didn't take the flowers and didn't say a word, she just grabbed his face and kissed him. He relaxed into her, still holding the bouquet. "Nice to see you, too."

"Thank you for the flowers," she whispered against his mouth. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"Do you want to get out of here?" She smiled up at him.

"I never thought you'd ask."

She took the bundle of irises from him. "I just need to get my things. I'll meet you out front, okay?"

When she came outside with her purse and the bouquet, she looked up at him. "You remembered after all these years that irises are my favorite."

"I told you, I remember everything."

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That brightened her smile even more.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I thought we could grab some food and eat a picnic on my new land.”

“Your new land?”

“Hickory Ridge. I own it now.”

“Oh, right. It’s strange to think it’s yours now.”

And he could take Sariah back to the spot where they’d had their first kiss whenever he wanted.

“We’re going to start construction on the land soon. I’d like to completely renovate the main house and build another structure on the land for lodging for the rehab participants.”

They got some dinner, and he drove out to the farm. They got out of the car, and he pulled a blanket from the trunk that he’d borrowed from his grandmother’s house.

“Look at you, being all prepared,” Sariah said.

He spread the blanket out on the grass, and they settled on it together. They pulled out their burgers and fries and started eating.

“Sariah.” He met her eyes. “I have something to tell you that changes things a lot. Well, two things.”

She swallowed her food. She looked nervous. “What is it?”

“I’m in love with you.”

Tenderness filled her eyes. “I’m in love with you too.”

He reached out and kissed her. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Their kiss lingered for a moment before she sweetly pulled away. “I think I’ve been in love with you for a long time, but I’ve been denying it because of what happened with Elliot. And I wasn’t sure how you felt.”

“I’m glad you finally saw the truth.”

“Me too.” She cocked her head. “You said you had two things to tell me. What’s the other thing.”

“I’m thinking about moving back to Maple Creek.”

She gaped at him. “What about your baby?”

“That’s the part that’s new.” He told her about how Orchid had approached him, and how he was going to have custody of the baby as soon as she was born. “I know this changes things, but I want you to know, I’m going to be around a lot more. I have my grandmother here and the rehab center. Maple Creek seems like a better place to raise a kid than New York.”

“That’s amazing news, Kane.”

“So, what do you say? Are you up for being in a committed relationship with me?”

Chapter 16

Sariah didn't answer Kane at first. Everything was happening so fast. But she'd missed him so much while he was gone. She'd thought he'd get distracted with other women in New York, but clearly, that hadn't been the case.

When she'd seen him come into her shop with those irises, her heart had almost burst with happiness. And now he was going to have custody of his daughter and was planning to move to Maple Creek. All the obstacles she'd been protesting about had been cleared away.

Except for the fact that she'd been too scared to let herself have a serious relationship with Kane. She'd gone to her therapist and had discussed her feelings at length. She finally came to the conclusion that she needed to leap blindly and trust that Kane would catch her.

Sometimes love was scary and dangerous, but if she didn't take that chance, she wouldn't get to experience the amazing side that it had to offer.

Sariah leaned into Kane, and he wrapped an arm around her. "Thank you so much for being such a great guy." Guilt sunk in her stomach. "I feel like I owe you an apology."

He pulled back to look at her. He brushed her hair from her forehead. "For what?"

"I've misjudged you. Compared you to Elliot, and that wasn't fair. You clearly aren't the same guy. Not even close." She waved a hand across the land in front of her.

“Look at this place. Think about all the people you’re going to help here. Elliot couldn’t even help himself. And now you’re willing to raise your daughter on your own. That takes a lot of courage.”

“I know I’m asking a lot of you. I’m coming with another person in this deal.”

“The baby being in the picture doesn’t bother me. I love kids. I think it’s great that you’re getting custody. But won’t she be away from her mom too much?”

“I have a private jet. I can take her back all the time to see her mom. I want Orchid to be in her life.”

That made Sariah feel better. She hated the idea of a baby girl being without her mother, even if that mom had chosen a guy over her own baby.

“What do you say?” Kane asked. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

Sariah nodded. “Yes. Definitely.”

Relief and joy washed over Kane’s face. He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, stroking down her arms before reaching up to thread his fingers through her hair. He was an amazing kisser, and she didn’t want him to stop. Her heart beat wildly in her chest.

She couldn’t believe this man was finally hers. After all these years, they’d finally made it back together. Kissing him felt like coming home to a place you’d missed for years. Someplace that had lived only in her dreams for years. But now it was her reality.

She pulled back from him. “I can’t believe you’re really moving back here.”

“I’ve missed Maple Creek for a long time. It’s the right time.”

“Won’t your grandfather get upset?”

“I’ll still be working for him long distance. Times have changed. We’re past the day and age when people have to be in person. Granted, I’ll still have to go back to New York often. The mother of my baby lives there, and I’ll want to go back to build rapport with the other people in the company. But Maple Creek is my home.”

“I wouldn’t mind visiting New York once in a while with you.”

“I thought you hated it there.”

“I wouldn’t want to live there full time, but I’m willing to give it a shot if it means I get to spend more time with you. I’ve been away from you these past few weeks, and I have to say, I’m not a fan of it. I missed you so much.”

He pulled her back toward him. “I missed you too. I hate being away from you.”

“We wouldn’t be very good at the long-distance thing, would we?”

Kane laughed against her mouth before kissing her. “No. We’d be terrible at it. But I would have made it work for you. It would have been worth it.”

Sariah’s heart soared at his words. How had she gotten such an amazing man? She’d put her trust in him, and it was already paying off in a huge way. Her heart was so full.

“Kane.”

“Yes?” He kissed her again and again.

“You’re going to have a newborn.”

“I know. It’s crazy.”

“You’re going to need to get a nursery set up.”

“I’m going to need a house.”

“You’d better start shopping. Babies need stable homes.”

He kissed her again. “They do.”

“I want to help you pick something out. What’s your budget like?”

He laughed. “My budget doesn’t matter. I just want something safe and happy for my daughter.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard to find in Maple Creek.”

“Want to go house shopping with me tomorrow?” he asked.

She pulled away and looked up at him. “I’d love that.” Her heart could just burst with happiness. She would get to see Kane all the time now.

“How’s your second store coming?” Kane asked.

“We’re planning to open it next month,” Sariah said. It was another reason she was glad Kane was moving to Maple Creek.

“How would you feel about expanding some more?” he asked, grabbing a handful of fries and eating them.

“What do you mean?”

He grinned at her. “I happen to know of a really good investor, who knows when he sees a successful business deal.”

“You want to help me open more stores?”

“If that’s something you want.”

“Are you kidding? I never thought I’d be able to get more than one store off the ground, and now my dream of a second store is finally becoming a reality. Having more stores is beyond my wildest dreams.”

“It might be a lot for you to juggle.”

“I’m okay with that. I just need a great guy by my side who understands how to run a company extremely well. You wouldn’t happen to know anyone like that, would you?”

“I think I know a guy. He’s pretty decent.”

“Pretty decent? He’s not a billionaire, is he?”

“I couldn’t say. He doesn’t like to flash his money around.”

Sariah laughed. “I like that about him.”

And she kissed him again.

Kane and Sariah went shopping for a home for him and his new daughter the next day. They found a beautiful four-bedroom home on twenty acres of woods that wasn't too far from Hickory Ridge homestead. A week later, Kane put an offer on the property, and it was accepted.

He could have bought something much grander, and maybe one day he would, but for now, he insisted that it was plenty of house for what he needed. He planned to keep his condo in New York too.

The next time Kane went to New York, Sariah went with him. He showed her around the city, fed her one of the gourmet meals from his chef, and he took her to a gala. He'd made sure she was decked out in a formal from one of the most expensive shops in town. Kane insisted on giving Sariah the best.

When she returned from New York, it was on Kane's private jet with him by her side. They worked hard together to get her second store up and running. With Kane's business advice, her store was much more successful than it would have been had she opened it on her own.

She realized now that she could have been amazing on her own, but with Kane she was even better. He helped her become the best version of herself. They balanced each other out.

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The baby was born, and Sariah was right by his side when he held his daughter for the first time.

“Meet Eloise.”

Sariah took the tiny pink bundle from him and stared into her little face. Her eyes opened, and she focused on Sariah’s face.

“She’s beautiful, Kane. A perfect little girl.”

He looked at her with love in his eyes, for both her and for his daughter. A few days later, he loaded his jet with his tiny daughter and Sariah. She was there for him a lot during those first few weeks, often sleeping in his spare room to help him get up in the night for feedings. It would have been overwhelming for him to care for the baby on his own.

Sariah didn’t know what she was doing with such a helpless little human being, but she did her best. The more she took care of little Eloise, the closer she felt to the sweet girl. She loved being there for all her first milestones. She got to the point that she couldn’t imagine her life without the darling girl.

They went back to New York with Eloise often. When she was six months old, Orchid announced that she and her new husband didn’t want to continue with visitation. Sariah’s heart broke for Eloise, and she felt even more determined to be in the sweet girl’s life.

One year after Kane had moved back to Maple Creek, he took her to the spot next to

the creek where they'd had their first kiss. The newly constructed David Edwards Rehabilitation Center stood in the distance next to the beautifully renovated farmhouse and barn full of horses.

He got down on one knee and pulled out a little black box. He opened it and a huge diamond sat inside. Sariah covered a gasp with both hands.

"Sariah Tate, you're the most amazing woman to ever come into my life. You're my first love and my last. I couldn't imagine my life without you. You've been there for my daughter and have raised her like your own. I want you by my side for the rest of my life. Will you become my Mrs. Leland?"

She leaped into his arms. "Yes! Are you kidding me?" How could one woman hold so much happiness in her body? To think she'd hesitated to be with him at first. All because she'd let fear rule her life. She was finished with letting fear take over.

It had been scary to help with Eloise at first. She didn't know anything about babies. But she'd overcome that fear too. And now she was going to be the sweet child's stepmom.

She was overcome with joy. Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought about her beautiful new family.

She took the ring from him and slipped it on her finger. "Where did you find this diamond? It's beautiful."

"I'm in the jewelry business now, remember? I have connections."

Sariah giggled. Since the opening of her second store had been such a success in Roanoke, they were planning to open two more stores in the surrounding area.

“We need to tell our grandmas our news.”

They got back into his car and drove over to his grandma’s house to show off her new ring. They called her grandma on the way and told her to meet them there.

When they got there, Kane opened the door for Sariah. “Can you believe you’re going to be my wife?”

“Shush. You don’t want to spill the news too soon. They might hear you.”

They walked into the house together. Before Sariah could say anything, Mrs. Edwards grabbed her hand.

“Sariah Tate, are you engaged to my grandson?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Well, it’s about time.”

There was a knock on the door, and Sariah glanced out the window. She could see her grandma’s car parked in the driveway. “Guess who’s here.”

Mrs. Edwards opened the front door. “Lois, get in here and look at the size of this diamond on Sariah’s finger.”

“What?” She rushed toward them. “Let me see.” She grabbed Sariah’s hand and inspected it. “He finally got the guts to pop the question?”

Sariah and Kane laughed.

“He sure took his sweet time. Gayle and I have been waiting forever for this day.”

“Where’s the wedding going to be?” Mrs. Edwards asked.

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“We haven’t even thought about that yet,” Sariah said.

“Have you picked a date?”

“Not yet,” Kane said.

“How about next summer?” Sariah suggested.

“June weddings are to die for!” her grandma said.

“I bet Aubrey could fit you in at the Whitmore House,” Mrs. Edwards said.

“I’ve always wanted to get married at the gardens outside the art museum.”

“You’d better call Carrington right away. That place books up fast,” her grandma said. “Gayle, can you believe we get to help them plan a wedding? We have so much to do.”

“Including getting dates for the wedding,” Mrs. Edwards said. “Have you noticed any eligible bachelors around Pineridge farms?”

“Gayle!” She swatted her best friend. “I thought I told you I wasn’t interested in getting remarried!”

“I didn’t say anything about getting remarried. I only said we needed dates to the wedding.”

Sariah and Kane laughed, and their two grandmas went on and on about wedding decorations and honeymoon destinations. Sariah looked over at Kane, and her heart sped up. She couldn't believe she was going to be his wife. There was nothing she wanted more.

She'd been blessed beyond her wildest imaginings. Her business was booming, the man of her dreams was by her side, and now she would be a mom to the sweetest little girl she'd ever met.

Most people never got this lucky. Sariah wouldn't trade her happiness for all the money in the world. Not that she would need to now. Kane had more than she knew what to do with.

He was so worth all the fear, the risk she'd taken when she'd decided to step out of her comfort zone and try another new relationship.

Kane was nothing like Elliot. He was honest and open with her about everything. They communicated well and made an excellent team when it came to the business. With Leland Enterprises, Tate's Jewelers, time with his daughter, and the rehab center, Kane was a busy guy. But he always made time for her. They preferred to work side by side. Sariah had decided to step back and let her managers run the business mostly while she made more of the corporate decisions. She planned to run the business from the home office Kane had set up for her at his place so she could be around for Eloise more.

She had a wonderful life ahead of her and an amazing family to spend it with.

The End

Epilogue

Carrington straightened the basket of flowers on the side table. The food should be coming out any minute. She'd just watched Sariah and Kane get married in the gardens behind the Art Museum. The reception was about to start in the grand ballroom of the old mansion. The room was lined with paintings and pottery.

It was dicey for her to run this wedding, because she was doubling as the maid of honor. Kane and Sariah wanted their wedding to be a small, intimate affair close to home with their friends and family all around them.

The caterers brought the food out, and Carrington made sure they were arranging it correctly. The reception was due to start in fifteen minutes. The guests were still outside, socializing while the bride and groom took photos. They'd gotten photos with Carrington and the rest of the wedding party a few minutes earlier. That left her free to make sure the food made it out okay.

When she was satisfied that the food was in place, she headed back outside. She spotted Sully and Aubrey Wheaton in their bridesmaids' dresses talking to Bryant Hodges. She'd had secret feelings for him for years. He'd always kept her in the friend zone and openly told her that he'd wanted Sully. Carrington knew Sully wasn't interested in him though. It was a big mess.

Carrington had put off dating for years for stupid Bryant. Seeing Sariah finally settling down and being happy with Kane was a moment of awakening for Carrington. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life pining after a guy who didn't want her back. It was humiliating. That was why she never told anyone about her

feelings for him. She acted like there was no one in town for her.

She'd wanted Bryant for five years. Now, looking back, she realized what a waste that had been. He'd been friends with her all that time, and he still saw her as a sister.

Carrington was sick of being single. She was ready to find something real. But she didn't see anyone available she was interested in, other than Bryant. But she wasn't going to pursue him anymore. She deserved someone who saw her for what she was worth. She was sick of hearing him talk about how amazing Sully was. She loved Sully, but it had gotten old fast when it was coming from the guy she'd wanted for herself.

She needed to pull her head out of the clouds and focus on the pressing situation around her. The museum wasn't doing well. They were heavily in debt, and the building needed some major repairs. She was struggling to pay back the loan she'd taken out, and the bank wasn't willing to give her another chance or to extend her more credit.

She had to come up with a solution, and fast. But she'd been wasting too much time hanging out with a guy who didn't actually want her. She deserved better. She just wasn't sure she would find her Prince Charming.