



Where Secrets Lie (Deception In The Mountains #1)

Author: *Rebecca Lake*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Some secrets refuse to stay buried

Anna Stanten thought she'd left her past behind when she fled to Texas after her mother's death. But a haunting phone call shatters her new life, luring her back to Idaho with promises of long-buried truths. As she delves into a labyrinth of family secrets, Anna finds herself face-to-face with Wyatt Stone, the first love she'd all but forgotten. Can she trust him with her heart as she unravels the web of lies surrounding her family?

Confronted by the enigmatic figure of her great-uncle Atticus and pursued by an unseen threat, Anna must summon the courage to face the darkness of her family's history. With each revelation, she steps further out of her mother's shadow and into her own strength. But as the secrets pile up and the danger mounts, Anna realizes that uncovering the truth might cost her everything – including her life.

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Summer 2021

Wyatt Stone expected to be kicking back on the plane, relaxing, reflecting on his recent success. Instead, he was headed to Austin, Texas.

An eighteen-wheeler muscled by, pounding a rush of water. Grumbling under his breath, he pushed back against the seat and tightened his grip as the wave receded. The wipers squeaked, slapping at the pelting summer rain. Streaks of light peeked from a break in the clouds, the sky turning bright blue. Each town on this drive looked like the last—white dots blurring into one. He pushed down on the accelerator and welcomed the thrust of power on the dry road.

Unclasping his hand, he pressed stiff fingers against his temple, around and around. It wasn't helping. The contentious meeting in Houston kept replaying in his mind.

A neon sign flashed at a station ahead on the right, the gas gauge and navigation screen calling for a stop. He pulled beside a pump, refueled, and headed inside.

The curly-headed attendant lifted his gaze toward the chime, the glass door slamming closed, a broken metal spring dangling from the hinge.

"I paid for the gas at the pump. Just gum, spearmint." Wyatt grabbed a green pack, the bitter burned-coffee taste lingering. A waft of fumes from his hand tickled his nose. "Hey, got a napkin?"

The attendant nodded at a blue stack on the counter.

“What’s the name of this town?”

“Grandville.”

“Anything good to eat? Not fast food. Maybe something sit-down, not fried.” Wyatt wiped his hands.

“Around the corner is Food to Remember. Lots of locals eat there. It’s not bad. Never heard any complaints.”

“Thanks, man.” He tossed the napkin in the trash can, stepped outside, the door banging shut behind him.

When he drove around the corner, a flash blinded his eyes, sunlight reflecting off the silver metal panels on a white building. He flipped the visor. The words Food to Remember arced over a marquee in black metal letters. His stomach pinched with a rumble. Couldn’t have that during the meeting. The open parking spots suggested a dwindling lunch crowd. He’d make it to Austin in time if he ordered fast.

The pleasant aroma of freshly brewed coffee greeted him at the door. Dazzling lights on an authentic-looking jukebox. Crimson upholstery, contrasted by off-white center inserts, covered the seats. High-backed booths hugged the wall. Stools lined the long counter. The patterned-tile floor followed the same hues. A few customers lingered, finishing their lunch.

“It’s a cliché, but I say tall, dark, and handsome never goes out of style.” The blonde-haired waitress’s voice echoed through the open room. She giggled, speeding past the other waitress. “I’ll take the dreamy guy. You can seat Mr. Meadows. I see him coming through the door. He wore his tennis ball shirt today.” With a flirty toss of her long hair, she wiggled her curves his way.

Wyatt glanced back. A man in his early seventies lined up behind him, presumably Mr. Meadows. He wore a yellow-green knit shirt with fancy stitching. Wyatt held his lips closed tight. The shirt, indeed, resembled a tennis ball.

“Mr. Meadows, Anna is getting your table ready right now.” The server spoke with a sugary voice. She sent Wyatt an engaging smile.

He scratched along his forearm and ignored her flirting. With his next meeting looming ahead, he had no time for any distractions.

“Welcome to Food to Remember. I’m Evie. I have a table for you right over here.” She wiggled along, taking the lead.

His feet followed Evie until the other waitress—Anna—came into view. Something was familiar about her. Did he know her? A tickle started on the back of his neck. Anna Stanten. Was it possible? Could she be here, working in this random place, at a stop on a detour to Austin?

“This is your table.” Evie’s dark eyes followed his gaze.

“I thought I recognized someone,” he explained. “I’ll look over the menu and let you know in a minute. Just water and coffee for now.”

She pocketed her pad with a dramatic huff.

He wanted to ease Anna’s pain as she rubbed her shoulder, his gaze following her’s to the clock on the wall. His heart shivered when she glided across the room toward him, her gentle smile affirming the depth of her beauty. Sun-kissed brown hair pulled back, wisps falling around her delicate cheeks. The uniform hugging her fit frame etched itself into his mind as he longed to wrap her in his arms. He forced down a swallow, holding his breath.

Evie glanced over, smoothing her apron. He waved her off.

His imagination transformed Anna with each step—younger and younger—until she matched his faithful memory. He pictured her reading his childish notes. Two young children struggling to be strong. One note waited for her now in the tree house among the squatty trees. He winced, his knuckle pressing hard against his brow.

She glanced his way and it felt as if time stood still. Her rich-brown eyes fixed on his. His feelings awakened with the sight of her, the memories of her.

He pulled off his jacket, rolled up his pressed sleeves, and dabbed the sweat from his brow with the napkin beside his cup.

“Hi, Mr. Meadows.” She paused before him, her expression kind. “I see you wore the shirt your wife bought you last year. She sure loved tennis. The shirt always reminds me of her.”

The older man’s eyes glistened.

“You havin’ the usual?”

He nodded, wiping a hand across his eye.

Needing a distraction, Wyatt maneuvered around the tables to the jukebox.

Evie’s flirty laugh carried from another table.

When Anna returned from the kitchen, Andy Williams’s version of “Can’t Take My Eyes off You” serenaded her with the words Wyatt yearned to say—hoped to say—when the time was right. Her gaze darted from the vacant jukebox before settling on him. He lifted his coffee cup, holding her gaze.

“Can you top off my coffee? It’s some of the best I’ve had in a while.” He managed to keep his tone smooth and easy when she came his way. “You from around here?”

“I’ll get you some coffee.” She brushed off the personal question, her smile sweet. “Be right back.”

His heart chilled. She didn’t recognize him. Had he changed so much? Or had she never thought of him again?

A full pot of coffee in hand, she headed back toward him. His phone vibrated on the table. He ignored the interruption, his focus on her.

“I’ll take care of my own tables, thank you. I got this one!” Evie snapped over her shoulder.

Anna shrugged.

His heart crashed when she turned away.

“Anna!” a man hollered from behind the counter. “I need you to help out at table five! They’re tired of waiting.”

Wyatt craned his neck. The man was getting under his skin.

“That’s Evie’s table.” Anna replied.

“Did I ask you that?” The man barked.

Her shoulders drooped as she found her pen and scribbled table five’s order, ignoring the lyrics he so yearned for her to hear.

“See you next time.” Mr. Meadows laid his fork on an empty plate. He withdrew a twenty-dollar bill, closing it into her hand with a gentle squeeze.

She smiled, thanked him, and pocketed the cash.

An arrow punctured Wyatt to his core. Was she okay? Did she struggle for money?

A new shift arrived. A friendly waitress with bright-red lipstick and glittered nails worked the room, coffeepot in hand. “Hi. I’m Sandy. Need your coffee warmed?”

“Sure. Great place. I’ve never been here before.”

Her eyes shone. “I work with great people. I guess you’re right. That does make it a great place.”

“I’m just passing through, headed to Austin. I thought I recognized one of the waitresses—Anna. But it couldn’t be her. She doesn’t live here.” He said over Elle James singing “At Last.”

“She’s only been here for about a year. She lived in Houston before that.”

“Well, it’s probably not the girl I knew when I was young. Her given name is Anastasia.”

Sandy let out a gasp, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

She wouldn’t win at poker.

“Where do you know her from?”

“Idaho. We were neighbors when we were kids.”

“You don’t say? I think her mother mentioned that they lived in Idaho before Texas. After Lila’s death, Anna moved here, poor girl.” Her lips pursed. “Her mother’s death hit her pretty hard.”

He twisted to stretch, the seat becoming uncomfortable. “Wow, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Lila had some tough breaks, but she was kind to me when I needed it.”

Evie scampered from the other side of the room, her foot tapping on the floor. “Sandy, this is my table.”

Sandy rolled her eyes and headed to another table to take their order.

“Anything else I can do for you? I get off in a few minutes.” Evie batted her eyes and inched closer to the table—to him.

His phone rang again. “Just the ticket, please.” He held the phone against his chest. “Sorry, I need to take this call. It’s the office.”

Greta Alan. She’d hired him when he was an inexperienced young attorney. After a few years, she’d promoted him to Chief Legal Officer. She was a force in her relentless pursuit of success. She built an empire with Alan Corporation as the cornerstone. She didn’t make excuses or let anything—or anyone—

stand in her path. The woman worked twenty-four seven, expected loyalty, and paid generously. Her son, Devlin, was heir-in-waiting, according to rumors. He must’ve grown up alone, almost forgotten. Wyatt could relate. He pressed his hand hard against the table.

But over the past few months, Greta seemed antsy, unsettled, maybe even paranoid.

The phone’s vibration reminded him of the pending call.

“Wyatt Stone.”

“Sounds like you had success in Houston. Congratulations. I knew you could pull it off.”

“Thanks. But I missed my flight, so I’m keeping the rental and driving to Austin. I’ll drop the car off at the airport and fly out from there.”

Behind the counter, the man’s bark grew louder, grating as it echoed against Wyatt’s ears. He tensed, his grip tightening around the phone.

“Did you hear me?”

“Sorry, Greta. I got distracted. The manager at this diner is a real jerk, screaming at the employees. It would bother me regardless, but I recognize one of the waitresses from Idaho. He keeps yelling at her.” He checked the time on the screen. “Wow, I need to leave if I’m going to make it.” He reached into his pocket and placed enough to cover the bill and a nice tip on the table. His thoughts drifted back to Anna and the tip from Mr. Meadows. Evie probably needed it too. He dropped another ten.

“Did you say Idaho? That is a coincidence.”

“You wouldn’t know her.” He rubbed a hand across the rough stubble on his jaw. “Well, you might. She’s related to Atticus Urbacch—his great-niece, Anastasia, Lila’s daughter. She goes by Anna now.” Atticus—a relationship out of character for Greta. By all accounts, a recluse of his own design, Atticus had few redeeming qualities. But of course, Wyatt didn’t know either of them personally. Maybe neither of them were what they portrayed.

“Anastasia Stanten? She’s there? Someone is yelling at Anastasia? Where are you?”

Whoa. He almost let out a low whistle, caught off guard. Where'd that interest come from? "Grandville, Texas. A little diner called Food to Remember." He glanced at the counter, walking past. "I sure don't like the way that guy is talking to her."

Sunlight struck him as he stepped from the air-conditioned sanctuary and hit the rental's key fob.

"Hmm... We're always looking to diversify the business. It might be interesting to own a diner. Of course, I'd want to know more financial details, and I'd need someone there from Alan Corporation that I could trust to keep an eye on things."

"You're serious?" He started the engine and pulled onto the road.

"I'm always serious about business and things I consider important."

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Spring 2022

The morning sunlight transformed Anna Stanten's glass hummingbird into iridescent glimmers of color twirling like a magical ballet. The cherished hummingbird, a poignant reminder of the mountains... and her mother.

But the light danced alone. She pressed the phone closer. "I don't understand. Who are you?"

"I'll be texting you an address in Idaho." The caller's raspy whispers faded in and out like icy breath on the back of her neck. "Your mother was wronged. If you want things made right, you'll go to this address within the next few days."

Anna's grip tightened around the phone, her knuckles pinching white.

After a brief pause, the unnerving voice became insistent. "Do not delay!"

The phone fell silent.

Her hands tingled as she loosened her grip, staring at the black screen.

Was this call real or something else—a cruel joke? She swiped to see the recent call, but only Unknown Caller and the time displayed. Time! What time was it? Well, the call may not be real, but Mr. Gray, her manager at the diner, was real enough. Slicked-back orange-blond hair, thin mustache, perpetually stunned expression. If she was late—well, she couldn't be late again.

She grabbed her purse, locked up, and hurried her pace to erase the prank caller's cryptic words from her mind.

When the scent of fresh-brewed coffee greeted her at the door, she gasped. How? The last thing she remembered was grabbing her purse, the drive to work a blur.

Evie headed straight for her, long blonde waves swaying in sync with noteworthy curves. In the six months since Evie, in her early twenties and full of life, started at the diner, she had one goal—finding a handsome boyfriend.

“You better hurry,” Evie warned. “Mr. Gray has been asking about you. It's crowded today, and he's in one of his moods.”

Tom Jones's full-throated voice crooned “It's Not Unusual,” setting a nostalgic vibe for Food to Remember Diner. A vintage jukebox skirted one side of the entrance. The antique mirrored podium used to greet customers bordered the other. The midday rush was in full gear, customers sat in high-backed booths lining the wall, on stools at the long bar near the kitchen, and on chairs beside tables spread evenly about.

Anna imagined herself happy, stepped past the mirrored stand, and avoided the truth.

Hours later, she began to sag. “Do you mind watching the front since the rush is over? I need to wash my hands.” Proving her point, she held her sticky hands in the air, white pieces of a napkin stuck to the sides.

“Let me guess.” Evie arched her brow. “Blueberry syrup from booth 2?”

Anna nodded.

After washing her hands, she rubbed the purple splatter on her apron. It wouldn't budge. She returned to the front, shaking her head. How did she end up here,

worrying about a syrup stain on a faded uniform? She had goals, dreams—

“You take the large group.” Evie interrupted. “Bored college students. Too much energy for me at the end of a shift. They’ll probably want the all-day pancakes.”

She flashed a mischievous grin, sped past Anna toward the hostess stand, and wagged a finger toward a large table. “Welcome to Food to Remember Diner. You can sit over there.”

They punched in songs on the jukebox, then clattered into Anna’s section. Their high-pitched voices overplaying The Animals “We Gotta Get out of This Place,” a subtle shot across the bow.

Evie swayed to the music, sending Anna a victorious wave.

Anna bit her lower lip, pulled out her pad, and jotted down their order.

When a muffled ringtone came from her apron pocket, apprehension traveled down her spine. Hitting ignore, she switched the phone to vibrate, then lifted the tray and returned to the table.

The young woman in the group—golden hair, angelic face, devilish eyes—held her phone high, recording every move.

A wannabe actor didn’t wait to take his cue, he smirked behind his plastic white-rimmed glasses, then spilled his drink. Red liquid dribbled on the tile floor. “You gonna clean that up before someone slips, waay –tress?”

Mr. Beall, a regular, stood up and took a step toward the scene, but Mrs. Beall gripped his shoulder and halted the rescue.

Anna brought out a cloth, and two wide-eyed boys watched from a nearby table, encouraged by their father to hurry their meals. She hummed a childhood song under her breath while wiping the floor. When her thoughts drifted back to a disheartening memory of her mother, her cheeks flash-heated. She was meant to be more than this. Did they think they were original? No, she wouldn't fall prey to a social media challenge or a childish dare.

"Let's bail, guys." The leader hopped to his feet. "This place is dead. Waay-tress, we'll need separate checks."

Ha. Who'd have guessed that? Stifling her smirk, she slid the already prepared checks out of the holder and dealt them faster than a poker dealer in Vegas.

Her phone vibrated. Seriously? To avoid more torment, she slipped into the break room and dug in her apron to silence the call. Fumbling, she answered instead.

An eerie voice screeched through the speaker. She lifted the phone to her ear. The words froze her motion, and everything else faded.

"I'm texting you the address. Don't wait!"

The caller hung up.

Her phone chimed with a text. Her finger swiped away the address on Warm Springs Avenue in Boise, Idaho. An unease tightened her stomach. Cupping a hand against her mouth, she rushed to reach the restroom before the rising tide and locked the door behind her just in time. Once the nausea ceased, she pushed herself up from the cold tile floor.

"Get a grip, Anna," she muttered, her hands trembling. She splashed cool water on her face. A pale reflection with lifeless eyes stared back at her. She lowered her lids

and let the gurgling water splash against the sink, her voice mechanical as she counted to thirty. She kept her eyes closed while tapping her hand along the wall for the paper towels. Then she blotted her face dry in the calm of the darkness. When the count reached thirty, she welcomed the light. Her dark-brown eyes were now alert, and a rosy color brightened her cheeks.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Anna? Are you okay? Can I come in?”

She released the latch. Sandy, her mother’s dear friend, stood outside the door, concern in her eyes.

“What happened? I came into the break room to put my purse away and saw you run into the employee restroom like you saw a ghost. Evie mentioned some trouble in your section. Those jerks couldn’t have gotten you that upset. Did Mr. Gray do something?”

No. Anna shook her head. “A call...”

The caller had exposed her emotional frailty when it came to her mother. Why would this happen now?

“I assumed the first call was a prank, but the text, the address, the words—it all makes it seem real. She, the caller, said something about my mother. Thinking about her, about Idaho, released a flood. You knew Mother and stayed close with her after you moved. She was never someone who opened up about feelings or serious things. She had secrets, either for her protection or for mine. I could only glean pieces, just enough to bewilder me that she never became bitter.” Shaking her head, Anna rubbed at her temples. “I never understood it. Maybe she gained her strength from all the heartache she endured.”

“You’re upset and rattling on.” Sandy tucked an arm around her. “You aren’t making any sense. You’ve had more than one call? Who would call you? How would they even know to call you?”

Someone pounded on the restroom door. “Where is everyone?” Mr. Gray called in. “The shift has started. Customers are waiting. Evie is out there alone, and you know what that means. Things are getting backed up. If you don’t come soon—”

“Calm down. We’re comin’.” Sandy squeezed Anna’s arm and jerked open the door. Before stepping out, she glanced over her shoulder. “We’ll visit about this later and figure out what’s going on. Get through this shift. We’ll talk afterward.”

Anna dug her index fingernail along the cuticle on her thumb.

The caller’s words rang in her ears—“ There is much you do not know or understand. I cannot explain right now, but someone needs to make amends to your mother .”

Make amends. She needed to make amends too. Find forgiveness. Salty liquid seeped down her cheeks faster than she could wipe them.

“ This will be your journey because your mother was wronged and it should be made right. Please, Anastasia, please come .”

“Anna, you coming?” Mr. Gray echoed the voice in her head. He’d cocked a hip against the opened door, wiping his glasses on his shirtsleeve, his naked eyes glaring at her.

“I’m coming.” Head high, she sidestepped him. The Mr. Grays in this world hadn’t gotten her down yet, and she wasn’t going to make it easy for them.

Two hours later, she dropped beside a round chrome table across from Sandy, fingers

curled around an oversized mug of the best coffee in Grandville. The only perk of working here, even if she had to pay for every cup, but man, some days it provided priceless relief, a lifeline.

“You ready to tell me about it?”

With “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” screeching in the background, Anna took a deep breath. “The creepy woman on the phone said something about Mother. Something about her being wronged. It’s got me all jittered.”

“We don’t speak about your mother much anymore. We probably should.” Sandy found a chip on her red nail and picked at the corner. “I knew her and considered her a close friend, but like you said, she didn’t discuss personal things, difficulties. If you wanted to be her friend, you had to know the boundaries. I didn’t know a great deal about her.”

“She had it rough.” Anna twisted the mug in her grip, pressing warm coffee heat into her palms. “Her mother disappeared when she was young—some kind of tragic unsolved mystery—and it drove her father over the brink, I guess. Mother only spoke of it all once.”

Shivering, she could still hear her mother’s soft voice as she told the details, still feel the coat of freezing sorrow wrapping around her from her mother’s loneliness and pain as she spoke. Her hazel eyes distant, her mother came back to the present with one last sentence. “I will never discuss this again, Anna.” She’d closed her eyes then, and that was the end of their discussion. They never had gone there again.

“What did the caller mean my mother had been wronged? Why did she want me to go to Idaho?”

Sandy touched her hand. “ thing I’ve learned over the years, dear. If you don’t take

action, take a risk, you'll always wonder about it."

Anna thought of the red punch, wiping the floor while others watched. What happened to the woman she imagined she would be? More than anything, a part of her still wanted to right things for her mother. Wasn't that why she'd once pursued a career in law? To stand up for people like her mother who wouldn't or couldn't stand up for themselves? To fight back for those wronged? She'd let that dream die with her mother, becoming weak herself. But could this be her opportunity?

A small spark lit inside her. "You think I should go?"

Sandy tapped her nails to the tabletop. "I am not the wisest person, or I wouldn't still be working here—with Mr. Gray—after fifteen years. But life can be filled with regrets. You don't want this decision to be one of them. What does your heart tell you?"

Anna pulled out her phone, then pressed hard against her twitchy left eye as she searched for flights. "Great. The last-minute prices are high enough to charter my own plane." Too much for a journey that stoked both excitement and dread. She dropped her phone on the tabletop, shoved it aside, and buried her chin in her cupped hands. "You know I only returned to Idaho one time."

Why had they gone back?

"Mother's friend let us borrow this old blue sedan—the 'blue beast' mother called it. Keeping it going required applying pressure with one foot on the gas pedal while pressing on the brake at the same time with each stop. If the idle dropped low, the engine sputtered and stalled—the entire trip."

"Whew, she must've welcomed endless stretches of road."

“You got that right. Plus, heavy windblasts seemed to blow the car sideways in Wyoming. Utah brought slow, winding roads up steep mountains with only a sliver of gravel to separate the road from the edge. I remember being afraid to look down when the road was so close to the edge. My imagination would take over.” She’d sat stiff, not wiggling, fearing any movement might hurl the car straight down the mountain to smash against the sharp riverbank.

“ Come to the mountains, Anna ,” the caller’s voice replayed . “The mountains of your youth .”

“The caller seemed to know things about me and Mother, but so long ago, I pushed away memories of Idaho, even the good ones.”

“And now you’re wondering if you’re ready to go back to face them?”

Anna shifted her position on the red-vinyl-topped chrome stool. It moaned in protest at the weight of her small frame. “Doesn’t matter. I can’t afford the trip regardless of the feelings stirred. Besides, what do I even know about this caller? It could be a cruel prank, a modified version of...” She gestured toward the table those jerks sat at earlier. “I may not love this place, but I need this job until I can find a better one. Until I can step out of the shadow of my mother, start over, find my own strength.” She pushed from her seat, tucked the phone back in her apron pocket, and clamped a hand on Sandy’s shoulder. “It’s getting late. I’ll let you head home. Thanks for being there for me.”

“Anytime, dear.” Sandy yawned and followed her toward the parking lot.

There’d be no travel. Anna relaxed.

But the voice wouldn’t stop. Come to the mountains, Anna .

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt Stone leaned against the door to brace himself, his fingers wrapped around the custom gold handle shaped in the letter G, the metal cold under his touch. The door glided open without a whisper. Her faint scent remained, but that wasn't all. His eyes widened. He dug his fingers into his jacket pocket for his phone and checked the date. Four months since the funeral, Greta Alan's black sweater still hung, waiting, on the rack. Her unique green mug with custom gold designs still on the counter. Ghost stories never bothered him as a child, but something about this office—

He inhaled a deep breath, clearing his thoughts. Look for the file. In and out.

But memories triggered by the sweater, the mug, this office replayed. Easing into the familiar leather chair, he imagined Greta Alan, chairman and founder of Alan Corporation, sitting across the mahogany desk during his first and only interview. Her almost perfectly shaped face. Hair blonde from highlights cut into short layers. One layer fell in defiance over her right brow. Tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes—physical evidence of her endurance as she plowed through her life. Large gold hoops swayed from her ears. Gold jacket, custom stitched, intensified by the color of her hair. Sculpted long nose centered between high cheekbones, her eyes—lifeless and cold. Underneath it all, he sensed a hurricane, waiting for an opportunity. Her manner warmed during the interview, but her eyes remained icy and steeled. She hired him on the spot. Legal counsel for Alan Corporation. He reported to work the next day, pinching himself over his good fortune.

Days turned into years, Greta, sitting behind this same desk, wearing a rare smile, sliding a business card his way—Wyatt Stone, Chief Legal Officer. The magnitude of the moment still warmed him.

But the room darkened with his next thoughts, the pivotal day...

He hadn't seen her for weeks. She'd been out for an extended time. Unusual would be an understatement. There were rumors, but he didn't listen to gossip. She would tell him what he needed to know. When his mind entertained doubts, he'd refocused and kept her interests protected. That he could do—that he would do—for her.

She'd summoned him to her office, cryptic and vague. He arrived, coffee mug in hand, and found the desk in front of her office abandoned. Shrugging, he tapped on the closed door.

No answer.

He turned to leave.

"Who is it?" a muffled voice called out.

"It's Wyatt."

"Come in. I've been expecting you."

Biting the inside of his lip while his stomach tumbled, he eased into his familiar seat, the woman in front of him unknown. Pale, thin, frail. He held his mug close and focused on a large swallow.

"I asked you to meet me this morning because we need to go over a few things. My schedule will change without notice. I need confidence that you are clear on my plans and I can trust you will carry them out as I tell you."

"Of course."

“I haven’t gotten where I am today by skirting issues or wallowing like a spoiled child, so I’m not going to soften anything or play a silly guessing game . ”

When he didn’t reply, she approved with a confident nod.

“I’m ill—cancer. I’m dying, but I think they’re trying to speed it up, kill me early with their cure. It’s clouding my mind, making me feel—well, I need to take care of things while I am clearheaded. You understand.”

It wasn’t a question. A nasty taste filled his mouth.

“The diner in Texas. The one between Houston and Austin. I want to buy it, and I want to buy it now. We discussed gathering research and financials. I don’t have time for that. I’m dying, and I can help that girl out—Atticus’s great-niece, Anastasia. Wasn’t that her name?”

He nodded, stunned into silence.

Something didn’t feel right about the suddenness, the randomness out of character. Maybe the cancer treatments had taken a toll ahead of schedule. Did it matter? If this made her happy, she had the funds for it. She couldn’t take it with her, and it might help Anna or create an opportunity for him to reconnect. Wincing at his callous thoughts, he pushed past them to the magnitude of her words.

He met her tired, cold eyes. “What do you want me to do?”

Pressing her shoulders straight, she spoke in a stern tone. “Do what you do. Find the owner. Make an offer. Draw up papers I can sign. We won’t squabble on this one. I’m counting on this moving, on the owner being eager for a chance to cash out with no haggling and a hefty profit.”

His shoulders tensed. “Let me make some calls and gather the information, go over the details, and discuss this further.”

“Discuss? Discuss what? We just discussed it. This isn’t some conglomerate we’re trying to acquire. I expect this to be done. Today. Everything else waits.”

He could almost feel the heat radiating from her—her face turning from white to red. Frail bones covered by corpse-like skin gripped the arm of her chair. She leaned forward, her fierce eyes narrowing, burning through him like fire.

“I can read you, Wyatt. You’re not hearing me. You think I’ve lost it or something. I haven’t. I knew I wanted to do this after your call from Texas. If you’re honest, you want this too. But regardless of what you want, I have the money. I have the power, and what I say goes. Don’t bring me a stack of papers or excuses. Am I clear?”

“Crystal.” His head ached, his conflict between personal and professional emotions thrumming. Resisting the urge to rub it, he twisted his hands on his lap.

She grimaced in pain and forced herself back into the cushion.

He’d better be compassionate. She’d given him his first shot at success. She was ill, dying , and needed his help.

“That’s it. I’ll work on who we will send to monitor and manage the diner once everything is in place. Be prepared for another trip to Texas—soon.”

She held a forest green mug in her hand. The handle, trim, her initials, a mountain all painted in gold. She tilted it up—slurping without apology—eyes steeled, peering at him over the glittering rim....

Tap, tap, tap.

He startled to the present, his focus darting from the green mug to the door.

“Good morning, Mr. Stone. Can I help you find something?”

Nerine, Greta’s assistant of many years, stood back, leaning her tall frame against the open door—half in, half out. Did this office, an unexpected museum, stir her memories as well?

“I’m looking for the file on the Texas acquisition, the diner. Cindy couldn’t locate it. I wondered if it might be here since Greta took such a personal interest in it.” He pressed his palm across his brow. “This office—it’s untouched, like she’ll walk through the door snapping orders after her meetings.”

Nerine scratched her polished nails across her arm, leaving a white streak. She inched inside the room, but not far.

When she started to say something, he stood. “Why are her personal things still here? The black sweater she wore around the building.” He pointed to the coatrack. “Her coffee mug.”

The rosy color faded from her cheeks. She stepped back, standing still, framed by the doorway. “Mr. Alan said he doesn’t want it changed. He allows the cleaning staff to come in, but he gave me strict instructions not to touch anything, move anything out of place, or box anything up.”

“Devlin? Does he use this office?”

“No, his assistant calls, and I report to his office or the conference room when he needs something. She calls. I go. Ever since—” Her gaze swept around the room. “Well, you know.”

Weird. But he didn't have time to think about it now. "Do you know where the file might be? Did she keep any files in her office?"

Nerine hesitated, then made brisk steps to the custom-built shelves close in the corner. She reached inside the frame beside a set of old books and stepped to the side, and the entire wall of shelves swung open. Behind the disguised door appeared a closet larger than his at home. Built-in file cabinets lined the walls around a table.

His head flew back. "Wow. I've been in this office countless times. I had no inkling this was here."

"Few people do. I worked with Greta for over ten years and didn't know about it until a month before she died." Sorrow swept across her face. "In the end, you realize you can't protect your secrets after you're gone. Someone will always know about them, one way or another."

"That's true, I guess." He rubbed his lips together, wetting them with his tongue. "Can you help me find the file?"

Her half-hearted shrug telegraphed her apprehension. He understood. The office gave off an odd undertone before a book of shelves opened like a spy novel. Now it was plain creepy. She opened a couple drawers before stopping and tapping the earpiece in her ear.

"Yes, sir. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Your office or the conference room?" She remained silent, listening. "Should I bring anything in addition to the Daynster Furniture files?"

Her attention returned to Wyatt. "I'm headed out. Mr. Alan's call has me worried. I don't think he wants anyone in here. He said not to move anything. He's very particular about this office." She rolled her shoulders. "So get what you need and get

out. Greta trusted you, and you're the corporate attorney. I should be able to trust you in here."

It sounded more like a question than a statement, but he nodded. It worked either way.

Alone, he imagined Greta in this space, digging for something important, something worth hiding. What file rested in her capable hands last? He sneezed as invisible dust tickled his nose from the folders he flipped through. Each drawer contained a certain transaction or type of transaction. He didn't have time to figure it out. Most documents were from before his time here. Nerine was right. Nothing remained a secret after you're gone. He shuffled through more files and found a group for the diner near the back. After extracting the entire section, he turned off the light and headed to his office.

His assistant, Cindy, glanced over her computer monitor as he passed, her fingers clicking against the keyboard.

"No calls, please, unless they are important. That means Devlin or Rowan."

"Yes, sir."

When he settled behind his desk, the rich smell of fresh coffee matched the taste. He'd have to thank her.

He assessed the stack, ready to start with the oldest and work his way forward. Making the right choice here was important. One day, someone would sit at their desk and thumb through his files. Everything hidden will be laid bare. A shudder went deep into his bones. He wanted to be prepared for that day.

Greta insisted he manage every aspect of their interest in the diner from paperwork to

finances. He dug into the file, persuading himself it was important to be thorough. He needed to do this. He had himself almost convinced. Until the present stepped into the past.

The first document, a deed conveying property in Boise County from First National Bank to Greta Alan, dated before the time his grandparents moved to the area. The legal description of the property indicated the property bordered his grandparents' place. Greta must've purchased the land after foreclosure. He shuffled through the papers. A Warranty Deed, dated after Anna was born, conveyed the property from Greta Alan to Lila Stanten, Anna's mother. Pressing back in the chair, he let the transaction sink in.

His grandparents, not prone to gossip, didn't discuss their neighbor's business. But on one rare occasion after Lila moved away, he heard them talking about the land and Lila. Wyatt had slipped close enough to listen.

"I know, luv," his grandfather had said. "What that family's gone through is pure tragedy. I'm not sure how Lila remained on the property after her father's sudden death. She was so young, under eighteen, and only worked part-time after school at the local grocery store. I guess she could've held back extra money when she worked more hours during the summer."

"We should've tried to help more," Grandmother had broken in. "It's hard to know what's meddling and what's helping sometimes, and we had our struggles."

Wyatt knew the struggles—his mother. But he wanted to remember the discussion about Lila and the property, not dwell on his past although it all intertwined and connected.

"I saw that boy, Nick, over there helping out, bringing things from time to time." Grandfather had tipped his coffee mug with a swallow. "Then Lila hired on full-time

at the store after her graduation. She stayed on the property, in the small house, for a few more years.”

Before taking Anna away.

“She was a strong girl, then a tough woman, to stay there like that. I figured that she’d move after the baby was born. Find somewhere better to live. But she stayed. I’m not sure why. Maybe fear—like the land held her strength, all she’d ever known. Or maybe she waited for that boy to become a man. I guess we’ll never know. I often think of them, the hardships, the little sweet girl, Wyatt’s childhood friend. I hope they found easier times wherever they went.” Grandmother had sighed then. “We should have done more. It haunts me sometimes. Our missed opportunity to help them, to be better neighbors.”

“You helped them, luv. I know what you did. The things you slipped over on that porch. You tried in your sweet way.”

Did the deed explain why Atticus and Greta were so close? Did she protect Lila for Atticus while he maintained appearances, keeping his distance? Greta owned the property now. Somewhere, there was another deed. His imagination sparked. Still, he needed to slow down. Conjectures might drag him over the edge of a rocky cliff. But how did Lila manage to stay on the property, and what held her there while Anna was young?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Anna slapped at the shrieking alarm, then rubbed her eyes, wishing she could drift back to sleep. Shuddering, she placed her stained uniform on the unmade bed, the drab material rasping against her callused hands. She shook her head. She needed something to brighten her mood. Maybe coffee would help.

After she'd set the coffee maker to work and taken a quick shower, the rich aroma drifted through the house to tease her senses. She returned to the kitchen, grabbed a cup, then scurried down the hall, swallowing a gulp along the way.

Behind the plastic organizer, her fingers found the new uniform, a crisp blue button-down and matching blue skirt. In its attempts to replicate a 1960s diner, Food to Remember allowed limited styles. The uniform wasn't worth its price, almost a day's wages.

Pulling back her hair into a ponytail, Anna glanced in the mirror. Flattering brown wisps fell around her face. The new uniform accentuated her fit frame, courtesy of walking laps in a diner every day, and her mood brightened before she hurried out to the car.

As she turned onto the main road, she slowed. Had she locked the back door? She twisted her grip on the steering wheel. Whenever she was anxious, she got this gnawing feeling of something left undone, likely a remnant from her childhood. Mother always headed out early to work, leaving Anna to dress and get on the school bus. She'd often had nightmares about arriving at school without something or with her clothes on backward. "Anna's shoes are on the wrong feet! Anna's shoes are on the wrong feet!" The taunting childlike voices would sing in her discomfiting dreams.

Today, after everything the call dredged up, she was that little girl again. She shook herself. Better to focus on a day full of possibilities, Anna.

She veered past the diner's daily special in black letters on its vintage marquee, driving toward the back. Sunlight bathed the white stucco walls, the morning glow glistening off the silver panels, obscuring peeling paint that betrayed the building's age, and letting its striking architecture shine. The early shift had arrived hours before, and she claimed her usual space beside Sandy's 1970s yellow convertible.

She cringed as the strong scent of fried bacon brought an unpleasant taste to her mouth. She quickened her pace to the break room.

Evie leaned against the wall, blocking Anna's path through the narrow hall.

Chatting with an attractive male customer, Evie spotted Anna and raised her enhanced brows. "Well, don't you look nice today? New uniform?"

Embarrassed by the man's amused grin, Anna managed a nod. The bad taste still lingered. She reached into her bag and swigged a drink of water. "Thank you. Sorry, I can't chat right now. I'm running late."

They didn't move, so she sidestepped them and hustled into the dimly lit room. Great. The early shift had taken all the easy-to-reach shelves. She found a chair and stepped onto the wooden seat. Her toes wobbled as she stretched to stash her purse in an unfilled upper cubby.

At a rustling, followed by a kerplop, she glanced over her shoulder toward the corner. A shadow, a man's form, lurked there, then sped closer and closer, and stomping feet thudded. A force against her back hurled her sideways. The chair crashed, and her feet flew into the air. She braced for impact, closing her eyes.

She was floating, her grandmother's blue bowl beside her. She extended her arms and cupped her hands together as she tried to save the bowl. Her body slammed against the hardwood floor, and reality slammed straight into her senses. The toppled chair's legs pressed against her ribs. She shook her head clear. But pressure crashed against her eyes, and she dropped it back atop the slippery old magazines. She must've hit the table and knocked them across the floor. Deep breaths brought tears to her eyes, so she kept them shallow.

A gentle hand warmed her upper arm. Rowan Landinger, the new bookkeeper, leaned over, patting her arm. Dark-hair, athletic build, the disarming man somehow communicated a strong sense of self-confidence, even though she'd caught him watching her a few times too often. He could turn a girl's head. But something about him bothered her. Something she wasn't sure about. Something she couldn't peg. So she kept her distance. At least until she sorted it out.

"Are you okay?" He frowned. "I don't want to lift you unless I'm sure you're okay."

Lying there awkwardly, she tried to murmur something. He even looked attractive from the floor. She stifled a giggle. His copper-flecked brown eyes were mesmerizing as they spun in circles.

"Anna, Anna, are you okay?" Mr. Gray's no-nonsense voice sounded almost concerned.

Maybe she was hurt more than she knew. But his expression didn't match his words as frustration raised crease lines around his mouth and a vein bulged across his forehead. She definitely preferred looking up at Rowan.

Employees crowded into the doorway. Mr. Gray, squinting his eyes as he adjusted the rolled-up sleeves on his collared uniform, fell back into a more familiar form.

“Get back to work! You all need to go back to your duties. We have customers and a diner to run.” His voice blasted like a loudspeaker. Too loud for Anna’s throbbing head. And there was the ringing.

He peered at her over his glasses, his long sideburns angling toward his mouth. His scowl back, he tapped his foot. “You should have yourself checked at the hospital.”

The pounding of his foot reverberated in her head. Stop tapping!

“Anna, just rest. We are taking you to the hospital.” Sandy stood over her.

Dear Sandy now looked as compassionate as she had after Mother’s sorrowful death. Anna could still hear those welcomed words at the funeral: “Anna, if you ever need me or need anything, you know where I am. I know you have the strength to get through this—your mother’s strength. You’re always welcome to visit me or stay with me in Grandville.”

She didn’t recognize herself after her mother’s death, wallowing in grief. How she’d needed those words from Sandy.

She and her mother had been inseparable that final year. During Anna’s high school years, Mother’s health issues started. Things were manageable in the beginning, and Anna learned how to monitor medical devices, although it petrified her at first.

Over the years, more complications forced her to experience the heartache of unwanted questions. Why did bad things happen to good people?

She should’ve better appreciated her mother’s glass half-full attitude. Why did we appreciate things after it’s too late? Anna drifted, woozy, her mother’s words swirling anew when she urged her to attend college. “You shouldn’t put your life on hold. You have to push through. Make your own path.”

After a couple of years, Anna did enroll. At the beginning of her third year, her mother was no longer able to work and was losing her battle. Anna's grades were suffering, and her mother couldn't stay home alone. Anna dropped her classes, but her mother wouldn't have it. She never understood why Anna wasn't stronger. When Anna would get anxious about the future, her mother would say, "Life is a mystery. Doesn't everyone like a good mystery?"

"I want to be here in case I'm needed," Anna had insisted.

Even now, she could feel the cool touch of her mother's hand on her cheek. "It's up to you to create your own ending, Anna. Don't let someone else write it for you." Her mother looked straight into Anna's eyes with strength Anna hadn't seen for a long time. The next day, Anna returned to the college. Later that week—her heart sank now with the memory—her mother died. After that, Anna didn't recognize herself. She had nothing left to fight for, no will to right the wrongs that had driven her toward a law degree. She couldn't go back to that school, couldn't stay in that house, that town.

"Anna, are you okay?" Sandy shook her. Her watery eyes blinked above puckered bright-red lips. Her face blurred as if part of a kaleidoscope, a spinning kaleidoscope. Why were there so many Sandys?

"I'll just close my eyes and rest a bit. Tomorrow's just around the corner." Anna shut her eyes, searching for peace.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," she said when some type of movement jarred her awake. Was she fine? An unpleasant taste soured her mouth. She felt a little—squishy. She twisted her neck for a better view, then rubbed a hand along her opposite arm to make sure she was still in one piece. Her head throbbed. Blood pooled next to her. It must've happened when her head bounced off the wood floor.

Huh. The floor was moving, taking her entire body with it. She willed herself to move—she couldn't! Something was wrong.

“Just relax. We gave you something to help with the pain. We're moving you out the door and into the ambulance,” a new voice reassured.

“Okay, that's good. I'll just wait here.” She started to drift off again. Her eyes snapped open when she remembered the shadow in the corner—a man's shadow. Her blood ran cold as he rushed toward her, his feet stomping. Had he been lurking in the shadows, waiting for her ?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt finally had everything he wanted, including a high-powered position as an attorney for a top-ranked company, a corner office on the top floor, and a great salary. He glanced at the signed agreement in front of him. It was another successful deal for the Alan Corporation. A big win. Big.

Yes, he had everything he'd strived for—except what mattered the most.

He moved to the window and observed an eagle as it tended its nest. Another eagle perched on a branch nearby. The morning sun streamed through the trees. Soon eaglets would peek up over the edge of the intertwined branches. A family. Pressing down, he slid his fingers across the bone above his brow, closed his eyes, and exhaled.

The soft tone on his office phone refocused his attention.

He slid behind his desk and answered. “Yes, Cindy?”

“Mr. Stone, I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's Mr. Landinger. He said it was important. You specifically told me to interrupt if he ever called.”

“It's fine, thank you. Please put him through.” He leaned back in his leather chair and glanced at his digital calendar. He jarred straight. Rowan's weekly meeting wasn't scheduled for two more days.

“Mr. Stone, this is Rowan Landinger. I—I'm not sure how to start, so I'm just going to tell you the news. It's not good news.”

Wyatt wiped his hand on his slacks. “Rowan, what’s going on? Is something wrong with the diner?” A sick feeling punched him in the gut. “Is something wrong with Anna—Anna Stanten?”

“I’m an accountant, not a security guard. I have an office, and I’m supposed to be watching the books and keeping an eye on Mr. Gray and Anna when I can. But I’m not a professional bodyguard. I’m an accountant.”

Wyatt inhaled, remaining calm while his pulse sprinted to keep up with his pounding heart. “What’s going on? Did something happen to Anna?” With his phone on speaker, he stood and paced.

“Something happened in the break room. We’re not exactly sure what. But we think someone hiding in there knocked her down. She’s okay—a concussion, I heard—but they took her to the hospital.”

Now Wyatt dropped into his chair. “They took her to the hospital?” Pressure pushed against the back of his right eye. He closed it to help.

“Which hospital?” Silence. “Which hospital, Rowan?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure. The ambulance picked her up a couple of hours ago. I can find out, if you like.”

“Yes. I would like that. Call me back when you know something.”

“I’m not a bodyguard, for crying out loud.”

“Careful, Rowan.” He used a professional, even tone. “I don’t expect you to be a bodyguard. I know that’s not your role. However, I do expect you to call me with comprehensive information. That is your role. This sounds serious, and we need to

understand our liability and all the details. How seriously Anna, Ms. Stanten, is injured is something I would expect to know when you call hours after an incident occurs at the diner. That's all. The corporation owns the diner. Someone was injured there." Anna was injured there.

"You're right. It was upsetting to see her on the floor like that. The blood. Everything in turmoil. I'll find out and call back."

Wyatt took a minute to process Rowan's last words. Emotions intruded from an image he pushed away. It felt like a vice tightened around his skull.

"Thank you. Goodbye."

He unclenched his hands, using them to rest his chin.

Option 1: pound his forehead against the desk.

Option 2: still his mind, think clearly.

When Greta Alan suggested—no, demanded—the corporation add the diner to their portfolio, she'd surprised him, and he wasn't easily surprised. The corporation acquired all types of businesses, several of which were in Texas. But large acquisitions like a chain of stores or a line of clothing. Not a diner in an unknown city. Her explanation about Atticus Urbacch and helping his great-niece didn't quite ring true. Greta had cancer. The doctor had a timetable. And Wyatt had a job to do. Her business and her money, right? So he got the deal done.

Then she recommended Rowan for the position in Grandville. That was okay too. Rowan had worked with Greta for over a year. Again, her decision. So Wyatt had Rowan check in weekly. It could've worked.

He needed aspirin. He dialed Cindy.

“Yes, Mr. Stone.”

“Cindy, will you please send me a list of all the hospitals in Grandville, Texas, and the number for the police department?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. Do you have any aspirin?”

“I’ll get you some. And the numbers.”

“Thank you.” He started to hang up. “Cindy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If Rowan Landinger calls back, please interrupt me. Even if I’m in a meeting.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

The blaring monitor and the alarm by the door played in surround sound. The door swung open, and blinding light blasted through Anna's eyelids. Her head throbbed. Her body ached. She placed her hand over her closed lids to ease the pain.

"Anna, are you doing okay?"

The distant voice wobbled into focus. She slid her hand down.

Someone lifted her other arm. "My name is Dr. Clarke. I'm injecting some medication in your IV to lower your blood pressure and help with your pain. You'll feel a warm sensation for a minute, but then you'll rest. Just relax."

The warmth moved through her arm and then throughout her body, a comforting warmth. She relaxed, drifting off to sleep. "I hope this is a dream."

Sometime later, the metal bed rails clanked against the monitor stand as her bed jiggled. Some type of plastic, like a potato chip bag, rustled. She rubbed her eyes, adjusting to the dim room. Did the wall clock say two? As in, two in the morning?

The rustling came again from the nurse between her and the IV stand. With her back toward Anna and her manner restrained, she wasn't the perky young nurse from the earlier shift, but older, slower.

The whiteboard had the name Rita in large print.

The nurse turned, walking toward Anna, her name tag unclear in the darkened room, but it appeared to match the board. The nurse shuffled past and out the door.

Anna drifted back to sleep, then stirred at the sound of someone in the room again. She felt better and more alert. She squinted at the clock. Six a.m.

“Good morning.”

A blond-haired doctor sat in a navy recliner, his feet propped up, his hair tousled, his athletic physique noticeable under the white coat. He dropped the footrest and rubbed the side of his jaw as he stood.

“How are you feeling today?” He moved to read the monitor. The poor guy’s sea-green eyes were almost red.

Anna didn’t appreciate the taste in her mouth right now. She rubbed her tongue across her grimy teeth. A gurgling from her stomach spoke for her. Stop that.

“We’ve ordered food for you. It arrives soon.” He hung her chart back up and stepped to her side. “Do you have any questions before I go?”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

His handsome face gave no hints in its expression. “You had a head injury, which resulted in a severe concussion. You also have bruised ribs. You took a hard fall and got banged up. We’ve had you under observation for two days, but we’ll release you after you’re able to eat and pass a few tests.”

“Two days?” She let out a low whistle, leaned back, and shifted her weight to get more comfortable. The navy reclining chair angled into the corner—Dr. Clarke’s chair. A green curtain hung next to it for no apparent reason since the room didn’t have a window. The colors clashed. She wouldn’t need the cabinet nearby, probably for flowers or personal items. There were no flowers, and there’d be no visitors. She was all alone. She shivered at the familiar feeling.

Dr. Clarke followed her gaze. “I’m sorry. I’m not aware of any visitors, but someone from Food to Remember Diner has called each day to check on you.”

“That’s probably Sandy.” She hesitated before asking. “When can I go home?”

“Your nurses will monitor your progress today and keep me posted. If everything goes well, we’ll discharge you this afternoon or first thing tomorrow morning.”

“It’ll go well.” It had to. She’d had more than enough of hospitals in her life. She suppressed a shudder.

Then the clanking of trays brought the aroma of hot food, which encouraged her stomach to rumble deeper than before. Really? A sweet young girl in a hunter-green uniform carried a tray almost as big as she was. She swayed, wobbling with each step.

As the tray looked ready to tilt, Anna slid over to allow more space, and the eager girl kept it upright and thumped it onto the table, spilling some of the juice. Anna licked her lips like she’d been without real food for weeks on a survival reality show. The aroma made her stomach leap, and she wiggled straighter in the bed, hands in ready position.

“I’ll see you later.” Dr. Clarke chuckled.

Her face overheated. She wiped the dampness from her brow with a subtle swipe of her hand. She discovered her eyes reflected in his before he strode away.

But he remained by the doorway as she took her first bites, watching her. Probably to ensure she didn’t choke as she shoveled the food.

“Thank you,” she whispered as he left. Then the room became empty and drab, and

loneliness reclaimed her as its companion.

Over the next few hours, she completed the steps to ensure she could go home, then waited for Dr. Clarke's evaluation. He stood over her now, chart in hand. At last, he lowered the clipboard and moved to the computer. The clicking on the keyboard lasted for what seemed to be an eternity.

"I can release you if you have a ride home. Do you have someone who can pick you up?"

She raised the back of her bed and repositioned herself, squirming as she delayed. Evie wouldn't offer, and Sandy was at work. She couldn't ask Sandy to lose wages. There was no one else. No one. She shook her head but kept her gaze lowered, interested in her fidgeting hands.

"I can call for a taxi or a ride." Why had she isolated herself and avoided close relationships in Grandville?

He stretched his tight shoulders, and her face warmed as his full gaze probed her. Several years older than she was and professional in a doctor-patient relationship, he was still attentive. Was it too attentive?

"What part of town do you live in? The shifts are about to end. Maybe someone at the hospital lives in your direction."

"I'm not too far. East of Davis Street." She pretended to adjust her sleeve.

He rubbed a hand across his chin. "I'll be back."

She closed her eyes while she waited. She placed a hand on her head and then touched her throbbing ribs.

Dr. Clarke returned with a bounce in his step, then slowed. His gaze drifted to her hand on her rib cage. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She wanted to go home.

“Well then, you have a ride.”

“Whew. Thanks.” After he left, she lowered the bed and shuffled to the restroom. Changing her top would be a challenge.

She checked the room for her things once she was dressed. There wasn’t much. Her purse seemed heavier, though. She must be weaker from the trauma. And lack of food.

“Hi, Anna.” A freckled intern paused at the door, Dr. Clarke coming in again behind her. Her red ponytail bounced over one shoulder as she shuffled from foot to foot with too much enthusiasm. “My name is Misty. I live over by Second Street and East Davis. Are you close to that area?”

“Yes, that’s not far from my place.”

“Great. I’ll get my car and meet you in the loading area. It’s white.” She was out the door.

He shook his head, picked up the phone, and dialed. “This is Dr. Clarke. We need a wheelchair delivered to Room 203. Could you send one up with an orderly?” His forehead tensed. “Okay, can someone at least bring the wheelchair?”

He hung up, then rubbed his hands together. “Do you have all your things? I’m leaving soon. They’ll be bringing the wheelchair here. And, since every orderly is busy, we’ll go down together and meet Misty at the front.”

They waited in awkward silence until rolling wheels clattered down the hallway. The attendant was in and out in a flash.

Dr. Clarke moved behind the chair and pushed it closer. When she gave him a thank-you nod and slid into the seat, he asked, “Got everything?”

“Yep. Thanks.”

He rolled her into an elevator heavy with the scent of stale food. She held her breath long enough for her nose to adjust. They stole bashful glances as they rode to the first floor. Then they continued down the hall toward intense sunshine streaming through the windows above the revolving door. He stopped near the lobby.

“That looks like Misty pulling up now.” He held his hand over his eyes to block the glare from the setting sun as the white four-door sedan parked in the loading area. Misty’s head was bobbing to some type of music.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Take care of yourself.” His hand moved toward her, his expression tender, before he lowered his hand back against his side.

Misty helped Anna into the car. As they sped along, her anxiety increased. How long had Misty been driving? With each turn, Anna squeezed the armrest to keep from sliding across the seat. Misty almost missed the next turn and slammed the brakes. The sudden stop lunged Anna’s body forward, thrusting it against the locked seat belt. She moaned as her hand rushed to protect her ribs.

“Hey, please take it easy. You know I just got out of the hospital, right?”

“Sorry, sometimes I misjudge the turns.”

Anna forced a sympathetic smile, hoping the throbbing would ease.

“Have you been at the hospital long?” she asked, trying to slow Misty’s driving.

“About six months. I love it. I meet interesting people. The cases—” She lifted her hand to her mouth. “Well, I’m not supposed to talk about what I see, but there’s been some interesting things.”

“I’m sure it’s never dull. I appreciate you driving me. I was ready to get back home.”

Misty nodded as if she understood. “It’s hard to rest for sure. We’re coming and going at all hours.”

After a pause, a curious expression crossed Misty’s face. At the stop sign, she slanted a glance Anna’s way, mischief dancing in her eyes. “Do you know Dr. Clarke? I mean—personally.”

The direct question raised Anna’s defenses. “Well, of course. He’s my doctor.”

“It’s just that I hear things. Some of the nurses were talking—nothing mean, you understand. Patients are always attracted to Dr. Clarke. After all, he’s so handsome. Anyway, the nurses—not me—were saying they don’t remember him ever taking such a keen interest in a patient.”

“Dr. Clarke has been very kind. He may have wanted to get rid of me and used you to get me out of the room.”

“I don’t know. He acted differently. Is this your place coming up?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Misty parked in the driveway and turned toward Anna with a casual shrug. “Maybe you remind him of his fiancée who died last year. You kinda look like her.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt relaxed behind his desk, steam rising over his cup.

“Mr. Stone.” Cindy stood at the door. Long legs, pretty smile, easy manner.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Alan’s secretary, Rey, scheduled a meeting with you. She insisted I schedule it and you meet with Mr. Alan at eight thirty.”

“It’s eight twenty now, and I haven’t even finished my morning coffee.”

Her eyes widened.

“Sorry.” He gulped the remainder and pulled his jacket from the rack. Why would Devlin want to see him?

Employees, mugs in hand, shuffled through the hallway. He managed a smile. Devlin had secluded himself over the last few months, barely making a peep. The timing of this meeting after Wyatt’s recent visit to Greta’s office suggested a reason for suspicion.

Rey must be new. He didn’t recognize the blonde with pink highlights behind the desk. Devlin had a reputation for going through assistants, which didn’t fit. He seemed easy enough to get along with and never caused waves in meetings.

“Can I help you?”

“Good morning. I’m Wyatt Stone. Cindy said you scheduled a meeting for this morning.”

She glanced at the time. “Please have a seat. I’ll let Mr. Alan know you’re here.”

He sat in the closest seat and pulled out his phone. The aroma of coffee floated in from down the hall.

“If it’ll be a minute, I might grab a coffee from the break room.” He rubbed his knuckle against his eye. “In case it’s a long meeting.”

She winced. “I should probably go get it for you, but I’m supposed to stay here. If he comes out and I’m not here, I might get in trouble. If you’re not here, I might get in trouble.”

Good grief. “No worries. I’ll wait on the coffee.”

“Thank you.” She let out a sigh. “This is my first week, and I’ve already made a couple of mistakes.”

Devlin had this girl in knots. Maybe he wasn’t as easygoing as he let on.

Her phone rang.

“Hello, Mr. Alan.” Rey’s eyes went wide. “Yes, sir. Cream or sugar?”

Her head and shoulders lowered with the phone.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine.” She glanced around the room.

Looking for a camera?

“I’m getting Mr. Alan some coffee. Would you like some?”

“Nah, I don’t think it would taste good right now. Thanks, though.”

She sent a thankful smile and disappeared.

The custom door clicked open. What was it with these doors?

Devlin stood in its place, the opening overtopping his less-than-average build. Two vertical wrinkles creased from his nose to his forehead. His beady gray eyes were cold like Greta’s. His dull brown hair, turning gray, gelled away from his face, his receding hairline leaving his forehead exposed.

“Wyatt, glad your schedule was open. Come on in.” Devlin moved back to his desk. “Rey bringing you some coffee?”

Maybe he did have a camera out there. Wyatt made a mental note. “No thanks. I told her I didn’t want any.”

Devlin’s brows shot up as his head tilted. Something was off about his eyes—something dark.

“Nerine told me you dropped by Greta’s office looking for a file. Which one?” His eyes sent an accusation across the desk.

He never referred to Greta as mother. Maybe that was a casualty of working together for so long, or maybe it spoke to their relationship.

Wyatt crossed to Devlin’s desk and claimed one of the visitors’ chairs. “Several

times, I suggested we should go digital with the files. Then we wouldn't have to search around when one was missing."

Devlin didn't seem interested either.

"Anyway, I couldn't find the file on the diner purchase. I needed the file to refresh myself on the contract and information."

"I don't want people in her office."

"Nothing has changed."

His eyes flashed. "That's how I want it. I'm not ready for the office to change yet. Is that a problem?"

Wyatt leaned back in his seat, elbows resting on the armrests. "Everyone grieves differently. I wasn't judging. Just taken aback. Did you have a concern about me tracking down the file? It was there, by the way. It included some of the insurance and other information I could have found a different way, but having the file made it easier." He cocked his head. "How are you doing? I haven't seen you around much."

A tap on the door interrupted.

"Yes?"

A spoon clanked against the coffee cup with Rey's steps. She slowed her pace until Devlin waved toward his desk.

The door clicked shut behind her.

There was a dark silence.

Wyatt recoiled, his back against the chair.

“We both know Greta trusted and respected you. But she’s gone now, and I’m in charge. I’m going to let this slide, but I don’t want you in her office again without my permission. You don’t want to cross me. Shut the door after you leave.”

“Sure. You’re in charge.” What’s going on? Did Devlin just challenge him to a duel? Was this grief or something else? Devlin hadn’t shown him this side before. Wyatt didn’t like it.

Rey gave him a fake smile as he left.

“Goodbye.” He managed.

When he returned to his office, a soft tone interrupted his thoughts. “Mr. Stone. Rowan Landinger is calling. Should I put him through?”

“Yes. Thank you, Cindy.”

Silence.

“Mr. Stone, Rowan Landinger.”

“I was just thinking about you. I’ve been expecting your call for a while.”

“I have some news. Ms. Stanten is out of the hospital. But she is going to be out for a few weeks, and Mr. Gray isn’t feeling very generous or flexible.”

“Does he know everything is covered for her? She should receive her full salary, plus tips, while she is out and anything else she needs.”

“He knows.”

“And?”

“And he hasn’t told her or done anything about it.”

Wyatt’s hand fisted at his side. “She was injured at the diner. He, more than anyone, should be concerned. What is he doing?”

“What he does.”

What a jerk. “I’ll call him. I don’t have time for games.”

“I’ll wait to hear from you, sir.”

“Thanks for the heads-up.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll contact you if I have any news.”

He forced his fist to loosen. “I expect you to continue her salary payments and anything else she needs. Don’t stop her checks.”

“Understood.”

He disconnected the phone and pressed the button for Cindy. “Please connect me to Gray at the Food to Remember Diner in Grandville, Texas.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll let you know when he is on the line.”

“Thank you. I’ll stay in my office until I hear back from you.”

While waiting, he searched the database of public land records for the deed from Lila to Greta. It had been recorded shortly around the time they would've moved. Not surprisingly, he didn't find it in the stack of files for the diner. Why did Greta want that property?

Cindy's name flashed on his phone, and soon, she'd put Gray through.

"Mr. Stone. This is Fendle Gray from the Food to Remember Diner."

"Gray, did we discuss the incident at the diner and the compensation for the injured party?"

"Well, yes, but she hasn't been working."

"And did we agree her salary would continue, with tips, during the time she is unable to work due to her physical and emotional injuries?"

"I remember that discussion, but we only allow someone one or two days of paid leave for an accident."

"Let's start over. Are you listening?"

"I am."

"Anna Stanten is to be paid her full salary, with estimated tips, plus any other necessary expenses, until she returns. Currently, there is no maximum on her leave. She was injured at the diner due to a lack of security. You understand? It is our responsibility to keep employees safe."

"I understand, but I'm shorthanded. If she stays out for a long period of time—"

“This isn’t a discussion. I’m reminding you she is to be paid while she is out. And give her some free food or something. Have you no heart, man?”

“I’m supposed to keep the diner profitable.”

“For Alan Corporation? Right now, I’m representing said corporation. Take care of this. If I have to get on a plane and come there myself—” He evened his tone. “Look, you’re not on the hook for the shortfall on this. We don’t want to be sued. Plus, there’s the part where it’s the right thing to do. I appreciate that you are worried about the bottom line, and I’m giving you permission to hire someone to help out and keep the salary flowing. Relax about this and do your job. And give everyone a free meal on me today, maybe even allow them a cup of coffee once in a while.”

“Yes, sir.”

He wouldn’t have this conversation again. The next time Gray didn’t keep his word, Wyatt would make a call to Ken, the flight manager at the corporate hangar. Greta kept the jet reserved on standby. Devlin didn’t fly, so it remained parked in the hangar. Yes, if Gray didn’t get it together, Wyatt would call Ken, wheels in the air, headed to Texas.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Unnerved by the deafening silence, Anna could no longer sit still. I am so lonely.

Where did loneliness start, and when did it stop?

She'd forgotten to ask Dr. Clarke about returning to work. Mr. Gray wouldn't give her an exception. He'd require her to carry her food trays at the diner. She stood up, went to the kitchen table, and picked up the stack of unpaid bills. Then she dropped into her burgundy armchair and reached for her overstuffed bag on the side table. The contents started falling out as she searched for the elusive phone. Her heart raced. Where was her phone? Calm down, girl .

What was wrong with her today?

Her fingertips touched her phone on the bottom. Something large and heavy blocked it. She pursed her lips, pulled out the thick item, then unearthed her phone. She placed it on the table, frowning at the manila envelope on her lap. She turned it over and over. Only her name handwritten on it.

Well, kinda her name. No one who knew her called her Anastasia. How creepy was that? And put right in her purse?

Around a year ago, she came to Grandville for a break, a quiet life with little drama. After Anna's mother died, Sandy mentioned that Anna could call her if she ever needed anything. A couple of weeks later, when Anna still couldn't focus, she called Sandy to take her up on her offer, well aware that sometimes people said things in a difficult situation, an offer they hoped the other person wouldn't accept.

Sandy's counsel still rang in her ears: "Of course, I'll help you any way I can, but working at the diner won't be a step up. I wish I could've gone to college. I imagined it full of adventure and excitement. This won't be that. Please be sure it's the fresh start you want."

Anna had promised she'd be strong—move on. But she'd needed time to pull herself together. Just a little time, a friendly face, a break. She'd then go back and finish strong.

She thought moving here was an escape.

Now, the call, the attack, and the package...

Her life was going in the wrong direction. She'd been hurt. She shoved the envelope across the side table. No need to open it or decide what to do with it tonight.

But her phone battery was low. She headed to the kitchen for a drink and plugged the phone in.

Then she returned to the chair and stared at the package. Isolating the envelope didn't free her. It left her frozen and unable to move.

What was in it?

She'd toss and turn all night thinking about it.

Why was it so heavy?

Unable to will herself to move or ignore the bewitching package, she counted to thirty. Then she stretched to grab it, catching only the corner.

It slammed on the floor and skidded almost under the couch.

Really? Her ribs complained about the stretch. Yet, she crawled and grabbed for it. She almost had it when a firm knock on the door startled her.

“Anna, honey?”

She turned toward the door and Sandy’s voice, then down at her opponent, taunting her now.

The knock was louder, more insistent. Was it really Sandy?

Anna charted a strategic path that wasn’t visible through the window and angled to view the front step. Whew. She let out her breath.

Sandy pressed her face flush against the narrow side window, peering in. In her late fifties, with big-rimmed glasses and gray hair pulled up in a bun, she always managed a casual, laid-back style, contrasted by her red lipstick and red glitter nails. As she often said, “Why not shine?”

Right now, she looked frantic.

Anna jerked open the door. “I was trying to make sure it was you before I opened the door.”

Sandy burst in, almost hysterical. “Where were you? I’ve been trying to call. They said you left the hospital, but you didn’t answer your phone.”

“I’m sorry.” Anna stepped aside, letting her friend in. “I got a ride home. I was exhausted and ready to leave. I saw some missed calls, but I’m just... tired. It’s been kinda lonely, though.”

“I’m glad I was worried for nothing.” Sandy flopped into the tan chair by the door. “I hurried in such a rush. Let me sit and, well, allow myself to calm down. I don’t know why I was so worried. Maybe it was because of the calls you received. I’ve been—you know—more aware.”

She kicked off her sandals and focused on Anna. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your rest.”

“Thanks. Sorry I worried you. It’s been a lot all at once.”

Sandy wiggled her feet back into her sandals and stood. “I’ll head out now unless you need something tonight or want me to stay. I can bring some food tomorrow from the diner, so you can take things slow. Mr. Gray suggested it. He also said not to worry about your days off right now. He has you covered.”

Whoa. Anna raised her eyebrows. Nothing made sense right now. “Our Mr. Gray? The guy who won’t allow the staff a free soda?”

“Yep. That guy. The incident must’ve scared him. Someone getting into the building and harming an employee. He probably thinks you’ll sue.”

Anna had to take her own food and water to the diner if she didn’t want to pay for it. Her mouth tightened, and her face flushed.

She forced a deep breath. “Thank you again. I appreciate it and all you’ve done. I probably don’t say it enough. You’ve been such a good friend to me.” She rubbed her hands down her thighs. “Let’s discuss the food thing tomorrow. I’ve got a few things to take care of, and I want to make sure I’m here if you come.”

“Yes, yes, just rest. Sounds good.” Sandy was already halfway through the door. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Anna shut and locked the door. Her gaze shifted to the brown wrapper mocking her from under the couch. The envelope that had magically appeared in her purse.

She reached to grab its corner, then jolted, her arm slamming against the couch when glass shattered like a high-pitched cymbal in her room. A thump from a piece of furniture followed. An intruder was in her house!

A creak came from the hall floorboards, bringing the intruder closer.

She moved toward the umbrella by the door. It wasn't sturdy enough, but she'd fight this time.

She grasped the umbrella, her hand twitching. Everything in her was twitching.

Her phone was on the kitchen counter, steps away. But she'd have to go toward the intruder to retrieve it.

The creaks edged closer and closer.

She eyed the phone, the distance to the front door.

Then bright headlights flooded the living room window. A horn blared.

The creaking stopped. Then the moan of the floorboards started again, closer together and faster, but moving away, getting softer.

The headlights still streamed into the living room window, but the horn fell silent.

"Hey, stop! What are you doing?" a man yelled. Then it was quiet.

Race to the phone! She made a mad dash, her legs pumping, her head and ribs

screaming.

“Anna?” The voice was now at the door. “Anna, are you okay?”

Her pulse thudded in her head, and her grip tightened on her phone. Things were blurry again. Should she dial 911 or see who was at the door? Definitely 911. Things are getting beyond weird.

“Anna. Anna!” There was more banging. “Anna, it’s Garrett Clarke. Dr. Clarke.”

Using the same trail she used with Sandy’s visit, she stayed out of view and crept toward the door. Moving slower and feeling weaker, she advanced farther toward the narrow side with the glass pane for a better view.

It was Dr. Clarke. His face wasn’t against the glass like Sandy’s. But why was he here? Anna waited to catch her breath and pull herself together before she opened the door.

“Anna, are you okay?” He reached out and touched her shoulder.

“I–I don’t know.” Her knees failed her.

Dr. Clarke steadied her and allowed her to regain her composure, his arm strong and reassuring around her.

She closed her eyes, breathing in his unique scent. She forced open her eyes and tried to clear her head as she lumbered toward the sofa.

Great. She was hanging onto him. She shifted her weight and stood up straighter.

“Are you okay?”

With the way he looked so deep into her eyes, he could probably see clear into her soul, his gaze exposing her raw emotions.

“You’re shivering. Sit down,” he ordered in doctor mode. “You might be in shock.”

“Yes. I—I just need to sit for a minute. There was someone. Someone was here. In my bedroom. When you drove up before you knocked on the door. Your car. The horn. You frightened them away.”

“I’m concerned about you right now. After you have a minute to calm down, I’m going to check your vitals.”

“I’m okay, really. It was just such a shock on top of the other events that have happened. You understand, right?”

“I understand, but I also want to make sure it’s not more than that.” He checked her pulse and flashed his penlight into her eyes. He seemed satisfied.

“How did you know to come here?”

“I was still worried about you. As I came down the road, I noticed something wasn’t right. I started honking when I saw the broken glass. Then he—or, well, someone—ran through the yard.” Dr. Clarke knelt in front of her, taking one hand and rubbing warmth into it, then working the other as he spoke. “I didn’t see much, though, other than dark clothing and a hooded jacket. He ran away from my car. He was stocky, didn’t move fast, and didn’t seem athletic. I had a choice—follow him or check on you. Check on you won.”

“I didn’t call the police. My phone was in the kitchen. I have it now. I should call.”

“Let’s give it a minute. You’ve been under a lot of stress. He’s long gone now

anyway. Maybe you should call the police in the morning.”

Anna scooted back onto the couch, and he sat next to her. His shoulder brushed hers, and a sense of excitement tingled through her, even as she calmed. They sat without speaking. It was quiet, but it wasn't lonely. Dr. Clarke scanned the room, maybe wondering why she didn't have more personal things.

“Let me get you something to drink.” He pushed to his feet and strode toward the kitchen, then rummaged in her cabinets and ran the water.

She glanced at the intriguing envelope and moved her foot enough to tap it farther out of sight. Then she relaxed to the sound of Dr. Clarke puttering in her kitchen. How warm and comforting. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

He returned before she dozed off. After placing a water glass on the nearby table, he settled beside her. Very close.

“Thank you.” Exhaustion threatened to win. But she was safe. He was a doctor. She drifted off.

When she woke, her ribs ached, and her neck was stiff and tight. Her shoes were nested beside the couch and a pillow under her head. Her throw blanket covered her. No one moved about, so she expanded two blinds and looked out the window. No car.

Something was written on the back of an envelope on the table.

Please don't let it be an envelope with overdue stamped on it.

She walked over to examine the note.

Anna, I stayed here last night to ensure you got some rest. Sorry I couldn't make

breakfast, but I did start coffee. I have early rounds. My phone number is on the card on the table. Call me once you're up and around—leave a message if I don't answer. You should also report the break-in. That's two separate incidents now. Take care.

Garrett Clarke

She scooped up his card and dropped it into a pocket in her purse. Then, coffee in one hand, phone in the other, she braved the bedroom and held her breath as she opened the door. Broken glass covered the floor, and the dresser lay on its side. She swerved around the glass and stepped inside. The plastic bag from the hospital had been ripped open by the wall—her uniform, torn and bloodied, spilled out over the floor. A full day of wages—gone. She straightened her shoulders and gritted her teeth. Enough of this! Without further delay, she dialed the police.

Just what was coming next?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt settled into his chair to rehash the last minutes of his recent meeting. Training a new attorney presented a welcome challenge. He'd made a note to review the paragraph on page two that caused a delay in the agreement. Maybe he could share his insight with her, the new attorney. This agreement would need a compromise—an off-putting concession. Reading through the document, folder open, he reached for his pen and tapped his fingers across his desk. No pen. He scanned the room. Things were out of place. Little things—but enough if one looked. He dialed Cindy.

“Did you notice anyone in my office while I was out for the meeting?”

“Mr. Alan came by earlier. He said he'd wait in your office. I meant to tell you the minute you returned, but I got started on the documents you asked me to rush. I hope that wasn't a problem.”

“No, you were right. They're waiting on the documents.” He paused. “How long?”

“Sir?”

“How long was Devlin in my office?”

“Oh. Not long. I made it a point to come check on him regularly.”

“Remind me about this event during your evaluation. This is one of many things that makes you excellent at your job, Cindy.”

“Why, thank you, sir.”

Had Devlin ever before dropped by his office unannounced—or waited while he was in a meeting? Wyatt scratched his chin, then pulled the key from his pocket. One click, the drawer opened. Did he miss something important in the files or was it a test to double-check his skills? He could handle Devlin if he enjoyed playing games, but still, Wyatt pulled out the files once more. Maybe the answers were right in these.

He'd go slow, take his time. Reviewing each document, page by page, he shook his head. There was nothing here, nothing new. The connection between Anna's family and Greta, no surprise, was well known from her relationship with Atticus. The same folders, same documents. Nothing to drive Devlin to act erratic. Wyatt's grandparents knew—or suspected—Lila owned the property when she moved to Texas. Greta owned the property at the time of her death, although no deed returning the property found its way into these files. He pressed a palm on his brow and tried to understand the circle. As he slid the legal-size papers back into the folder, he paused at one he'd overlooked. A letter-size document from an attorney regarding parental-child obligations in Idaho—dated after Lila's father's death, but before Anna's birth.

Dear Mrs. Alan,

In response to your query, in Idaho, the law allows a child to be “emancipated by marriage,” allowing the child to be considered a legal adult. Therefore, the marriage between Niklaus Knerr and Lila Stanten dissolves the parental-child obligation. Lila Stanten, now an adult according to the law, is eligible to live independently.

I have enclosed my invoice for this service. Please contact me if there is any additional information or services required.

Yours truly,

Tim Johnson

Wyatt tapped his fingers together. He'd read an article a year ago on the subject. That, combined with a short mention in law school, confirmed his knowledge regarding the law. According to the article, the controversy entered with "sham" marriages intended to skirt the rules and allow a child to sever the parent-child obligation and relationship. Misuse of the law involved child custody battles, nullifying child custody agreements when the child was considered an adult due to marriage. Did Lila figure out she could remain in that old house on the property by marrying Niklaus, Anna's father? Then the relationship grew into love, or did the love blossom first? How and why did Greta know about the marriage to the point of seeking an opinion from legal counsel? Another example of her relationship with Atticus—protecting and watching his family from a distance?

He slapped his hand against his head. Two steps forward, one back.

His phone in one hand, scrolling a computer screen with the other, he sensed someone. His gaze swept to the doorway. Devlin stood silent, focused on Wyatt without as much as a knock.

Wyatt slid the meeting folder over the deed and hung up the phone, his full attention now on the man in front of him.

"Did we have an appointment?" Wyatt asked, pulling up his calendar.

"I don't need an appointment."

Holding his frustration in check, he flattened his hands calmly on the desk. Had he ever even known this man with the soulless eyes?

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Do you have any updates on the diner incident?" Devlin slithered into the chair

across from Wyatt.

Why the sudden interest? Hands now in his lap, Wyatt eased back in his chair. “Only that the injured party isn’t suing yet and is out of the hospital.”

“By injured party you mean Anastasia Stanten?”

Something about this conversation made Wyatt’s skin crawl. Devlin didn’t care about details. “Yes, Anna Stanten.”

“Did the files have what you needed?”

“Time will tell, but without any litigation, we have fewer concerns regarding the incident. Of course, the investigation may turn up something, but that would be more in the area of a crime, not company liability.”

“I’m considering selling that diner. I have no idea why Greta bought it in the first place. Do you?”

Wyatt shook his head. “It took me by surprise.”

Devlin’s eyes narrowed as he stood. Then he tilted his head with a shrug. “Well, no matter. Be prepared to wrap things up. We’re paying our accountant to live in another state for a tiny diner. Makes no sense.” He started for the door. “Yes, I’ve decided. Once the investigation is over, we’re selling.”

As Devlin called over his shoulder, as if trying to provoke a reaction, Wyatt clenched his teeth and held back the words he wanted to speak—for now.

Around the time he finished the deal on the diner, Greta astonished him with a large bonus—his entire annual salary. Speechless when he opened the envelope, he later

surmised she felt her end near and chose to shower her final gifts as she desired. He interacted with her professionally, not personally, but for some reason, she took him under her wing and treated him well. He hadn't spent a penny of the bonus, saving it for a rainy day.

Why was Devlin asking about Anna, and how did he know so much already? Clouds were forming, a storm brewing.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

After an invigorating shower, a cup of hot coffee, and fresh clothes, Anna retrieved the elusive envelope. Now, with it in her control, pulse racing, she pulled on the tab. Out spilled a gold locket. She peered inside a letter envelope and—

She let out a whistle.

Talk about a lot of cash.

She counted out thirty-five hundred-dollar bills, a fortune right now. She set it aside, fingered the bulky locket, then tipped the back to the light to view the unusual script. A flick of a finger opened it to an attractive woman's portrait. Something about her looked familiar. Her fist closed over the locket, and she picked up the typed paper with her other hand.

How odd. Some of the words faded into yellowed paper. Was it old?

She scanned it before reading, and a chill slid up her spine. The cold engulfed her entire body with the first words:

Please forgive me. There is much you do not know. I cannot fully explain or make amends, but I can say I was blinded by greed and then by an unexpected love. Yet, neither has true value without honesty and purpose. Oh what an unfortunate chain of poor choices!

I am now old and leave nothing but ruin. I am lonely, regretful, and all I have loved has been destroyed. Some, I fear, by my actions. Wealth is of no comfort, for I have caused enormous sorrow. Now I think of what could have been—of what should have

been. What is even possible at this point? How do we start? I couldn't bring myself to face the unforgivable until I became consumed with the enormity of my actions. I am facing my mortality.

When I became aware of Lila's passing and your circumstances, I began searching for you. By grace, I have found you. In my last hour now and heartbroken by my actions, I attempt to right some wrongs.

Dear Anastasia, please come to Idaho. Come to the mountains of your mother's youth where everything changed course and I lost my way. Please don't wait. You owe me nothing even as I seek everything. This will be your journey because your mother was wronged and it should be made right. Please, Anastasia, please come.

The mascara, combined with the salty tears, made her eyes burn. She rubbed them, making it worse, and flipped the page over for a signature.

Nothing.

"Who wrote this?"

This person had no power over her or her emotions, but the words moved her at the mention of her mother. Lila, mother, forgiver, grace.

She wiped her tears away, exhausted, then read it again.

"Anna, we only have each other," her mother repeated over the years. "There is no one else we can trust. They're all gone."

Mother only spoke in detail about her past that one time during her final days. She never mentioned any other family. Who would think that they owed her anything?

Anna swallowed hard. She'd never known her grandparents or father. The topic of her father wasn't discussed. Yes, there was a name on her birth certificate. He was gone. Did it matter why? He'd never made an effort—not one—to know her. She'd borne the loneliness of being the only child of a quiet, private mother who struggled to keep things afloat with few kindnesses from life and died too soon.

If there was someone else, anyone else, wouldn't they have tried to help when they struggled, especially when her mother was ill and no longer strong enough to work?

She clenched her teeth and fisted her hands. The locket cut into her fingers. She'd never forget her mother's difficult experiences and how people treated her when she deserved much better. She watched it all her life. The image of her mother the day she returned to work after being out ill for an extended time still haunted Anna.

"Don't worry. It's okay. Someone else is using my office now," her mother had said. Her eyes focused on the plant in her hand as she picked the dried leaves off and laid them on the dirt. "They needed the office, and I still have a job. That's all that matters. You can take this plant back home for me. I won't have room for it now."

Anna sought a law degree so she could help other people fight the same injustices. That memory refreshed her mind. If she now had the opportunity to right some wrongs done to her mother, shouldn't she?

What was the connection between Anna, her mother, Idaho, and the envelope? She tapped the table, only now realizing her phone was ringing. The screen displayed five missed calls, three from Sandy and two from an unknown caller. And a missed text. The phone rang again. Unknown displayed on the screen. She swiped it up and demanded, "What do you want?"

"Did you get the package?" the woman asked.

Anna's heart started beating faster. The phone slipped in her clammy hands as she hesitated. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't know who you are."

"Anastasia, did you receive the package? The travel money, the locket, and the letter?"

Anna was silent.

"Anastasia, are you there?"

Her finger hovered over the end-call button, then eased away. She brought the phone closer, tired of games. "Who are you? Why are you calling me? How did you get my number and access to my purse?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. It matters what you do with the information and travel money. You're needed immediately. Further details can be provided at that time."

Seriously? Was the woman nuts? "I don't know you. I was injured, and you expect me to respond to some cryptic telephone call after you've harmed me? Why would I trust you?"

Answers. She needed answers.

Still, something inside her was stirring. If for nothing else, because of the mention of her mother. If something could've made her mother's life more comfortable or righted any wrongs for her, how could Anna not pursue this? Even after having been physically harmed. Even unsure who to believe. "Anna, we only have each other. There is no one else we can trust. They're all gone."

"Anastasia, I'm sorry you were harmed. I'd never want to harm you. You should come soon. Come to that address I texted to you. Do not delay."

If only her mother were here. Would Anna ever stop wishing her mother were here?

“I don’t have anything else to say,” she responded. “I don’t know you. I’m tired. Don’t call me again.”

She hit the disconnect button. She should call Dr. Clarke, thank him, and let him know she reported the break-in to the police.

She headed to bed and snuggled down, exhausted. The phone was ringing somewhere in the distance as she drifted off to sleep.

Hours later, she unlocked her phone. Four missed calls. One from Sandy, one from Dr. Clarke—Garrett—and two unknowns during her nap.

She scanned her texts and paused at the address on Warm Springs Avenue in Boise.

“Anna, look at that house.” Her mother had pointed toward a magnificent home one sunny day. The pale-yellow house rose from a slight hill, and wide, inviting steps led up to the double doors. The three-story Victorian with its bay windows and turret looked like a castle to Anna as a child, and white flowers floating on the surrounding trees lent a magical fairy-dust feel. She’d imagined they were popcorn balls and the roses lining the front in every color were gumdrops. Each detail of the house created a sense of wonder as, with their car windows down, the dreamy smell of roses wafted in.

“Why would I be going to a home on Warm Springs Avenue?”

She frowned at the missed calls again. The first returned call would be to Dr. Clarke.

“Hello?” That strong, smooth voice!

“Dr. Clarke, this is Anna. Anna Stanten.”

“Anna.” She could almost hear his grin through the phone. “Please, call me Garrett.”

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier. I saw your missed call, and I wanted to make sure you knew everything was okay. You may have saved my life. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.” Great, she gushed like a schoolgirl.

She seemed to be repeating herself. Her face heated. “And for staying with me during the night to make sure I was safe.” Yes, that especially.

“You’re okay, really? Did you call the police?”

“Yes, I called the police and reported everything. They said that since no one was harmed, nothing was stolen, and we really didn’t see the intruder, there wasn’t much they could do. Of course, they’ll investigate. But they didn’t sound optimistic. They took my statement over the phone and had me complete some things online. They’ll call me with any questions.”

“Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, but I still seem to lose my focus and ramble. I also seem to be dragging—tire easily.”

“It takes a while to get over a concussion in usual circumstances. With all that you’ve been through, you might have to allow yourself longer. Do you want me to come over? Do you need anything?”

Yes, yes, yes! Biting down those words, she took a deep breath. “I’m okay today, but I appreciate the offer.”

“Okay. You continue to take it easy. You have my number. Please use it any time.”

“Thank you... Garrett.” She smiled, hoping he could feel her happiness. After ending the call, she glanced at the other missed call, Sandy. Anna stared at the screen, then set the phone back down.

She walked over to the tall, broken dresser, opened the drawer, and removed the red and blue scarves on top. She pulled out the envelope, reread the letter, studied the locket, and recounted the money. She then snapped a picture of each item before placing it back inside. With the package next to her and her phone in hand, she once again searched for flights to Boise.

The earliest reasonable flight with only one stop would leave from Houston, adding a hundred and fifty miles of driving but saving her over five hundred dollars—more than she’d earn in three shifts at the diner.

Speaking of which... She dialed. When she didn’t recognize the man’s voice that answered, she asked for Mr. Gray.

“He’s busy in the kitchen and can’t take a call right now. Can I help you?”

“Who am I speaking to?” No way would she give much information to anyone unfamiliar.

“This is Rowan Landinger. Who is this?”

Great. She’d never trusted him anyway. “Rowan, this is Anna. Could you ask Mr. Gray to call me when he has time?”

“Anna, how are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Thank you for checking on me that day.” Maybe she should give him some grace. He seemed genuinely concerned. “Please be sure to tell Mr. Gray I called.” Now why’d she add the reminder? Rowan was a professional.

“You’re okay?”

“Yes, I have a few—”

“Mr. Gray called the police. We don’t have cameras, and no one saw anything. But you should know he reported the incident.”

Suddenly weak, she braced her free hand on the rattling dresser. She had nothing to provide to the police about the incident. She saw a shadowed figure before she saw nothing.

“Okay, thank you. Goodbye.” She pushed the red button. She couldn’t muster more.

She frowned at the remaining missed calls. Not wanting to concern Sandy again, Anna sent a text, something she rarely did since Sandy avoided texting.

Anna: Sandy, while I’m recovering I’ve decided to take the trip, go to Idaho. It probably is a dead end, but you’re right. I won’t know unless I go and find out. I’ll stay in touch and reach out when I return.

Anna rubbed her eyebrows and placed the phone back down. Then it flashed the diner’s caller ID.

Here goes nothing . She swiped to accept. Mr. Gray had been unpredictable lately. “Hello.”

“Anna, this is Mr. Gray. Rowan said you called. Are you okay?”

How long until that wasn't the first question in every conversation?

"I'm improving. Thank you. I wanted to let you know it's still going to be a while before the doctor will release me to lift trays and work." A white lie because she'd forgotten to ask Garrett. "While I'm unable to work, I'd like to wrap up things in Houston."

In his silence, she could almost hear him grimace.

"We'll get someone to cover for you. Since you were injured on the property, the diner owner insists you continue to receive your pay based on your typical daily average, including tips."

Taken back, she dropped onto the edge of her bed.

"Um, wow. Mr. Gray, thank you. Please pass my thanks along. I can't tell you how much this means to me. I never expected such generosity."

"We contacted the police. They couldn't determine anything about the culprit. Rowan mentioned he told you in case the police follow up with you. Just give me an idea of your plans once you know them. I need to go, Anna." He was back true to form. This was more familiar.

She said a mumbled version of thank you about five more times, then disconnected. Whoa. What had just happened?

A text buzzed her phone.

Sandy: Proud of you. Stay strong. Be safe. Let me know if you need anything.

Poor Sandy, it may have taken her these last fifteen minutes to put that together.

Technology wasn't her strength, but she had others. Anna wanted to feel pride in her decisions, make the right choice. Playing it safe didn't help. Maybe being bold would start a new chapter.

She finished packing, placed her knee on her bag, adding her weight to apply enough force to close it, then made her last call. As the phone rang, she almost hoped it would go to Garrett's voicemail. She had practiced what to say and played the call over and over in her mind several times. Still, she'd end up winging it.

"Hello, Anna," he drawled, his accent low and thick. Well, his voice sure hadn't lost its appeal.

"Hey there." She still couldn't smoothly use his first name. "I was calling to let you know I'm doing fine, but I'm going out of town for a few days."

Hmm, could she say "awkward silence"?

"Thank you for calling. I'm no longer officially your doctor, but you can call me anytime. You're really doing okay? Say 'rib' as your emergency word if you need me to come or to call 911."

Although touched, she giggled at the word choice.

"That is thoughtful. I'll remember the word, although I might need to use that word for real. We might need to come up with a different one." They were hurting earlier. She pressed a hand to them now. "I'm okay. I'm flying out of Houston tomorrow for something family related." That sentence almost made her sick. It felt like one of those what's-wrong-with-this-picture games.

"We haven't known each other that long, so I hope it's not odd if I tell you that I'll miss you while you're gone. You remind me of someone I cared a great deal

about—someone special.” He hesitated. “I’m here for you—as your friend. All you need to do is say the word, and I’ll help however I can.”

“Thank you. I promise I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

When they said their goodbyes, she hung up, feeling blue. He was a wonderful person who lit up when he saw her and gave her respect. Yes, she had to admit it. She would miss him too. What did he mean when he said that she reminded him of someone special? Misty mentioned her resemblance to his fiancée who died—if you believe secondhand information. Is that who he meant—his dead fiancée?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt flicked the light, standing inside the doorway of his office. He'd worked hard to achieve his success. Yet, he felt his career at Alan Corp slipping through his fingers. Devlin had grown listless, lost in a sea of uselessness without Greta, his anchor. Wyatt's mind twisted in circles. His constant concern for Anna's safety, Devlin's interference, and Greta's long interest in Anna's family, according to the file. His next move—Should he call it quits? Move on? Start over? Refocus? Or should he roll up his sleeves, dig in, do what he knew best, and stop this—whatever it was—before things got out of hand?

His phone intruded. "Mr. Stone, Mr. Landinger is calling you."

"Okay, put him through."

"Hi, Mr. Stone." Rowan's voice came on. "Anna's gone."

"Gone?" What did that mean? Where would she go?

"Sorry. I meant to say she's in Idaho. Sandy, her friend, told me. She came to work today all teary-eyed, saying she received some kind of call or text that Anna was going out of town. She didn't say why. But Anna's gone. Now that I think of it, Sandy said some type of family issue came up. So she's not here anymore. Does that wrap up my job here?"

"I'm not sure." How could Wyatt be? He'd never fully understood what Rowan was doing there. Sent by Greta to watch over Anna. Why? It still creeped him out a bit. Something about her being Atticus's sole heir probably—maybe. Who knows? Lately, though, Anna had needed someone looking out for her. Again, why? Too bad

he couldn't ask Greta. Find out what was going on or how long it was supposed to keep going on.

Okay, focus.

Rubbing his palm against his slacks, Wyatt calmed. "I hadn't heard anything about her coming here. Hang there for a while longer and let me see if I can sort through things from this angle."

"Okay, but I'm ready to head back if this is over. Summer is almost here, and it's about to sizzle. I'd rather be in Idaho when the mercury rises, if you know what I mean."

"I'll let you know. Thanks for being there."

Wyatt rolled up his sleeves.

"Mr. Stone?"

"Uh, just hang tight. I'll be in touch. Thanks for the update."

Phone still in his hand, he crossed to the window, focusing on the eagle nest. Anna was in Idaho. To visit whom? The only family she had was Atticus.

Adrenaline pulsed through him like caffeine dripping from an IV into his veins. Anastasia Stanten was back in Idaho, but where?

Anna turned into the First Bank & Trust parking lot. The horn honked as she pressed the remote and made her way inside. With her heart beating so hard, she should be able to look down and see it thumping in the air.

“May I help you?” asked a petite woman behind the massive marble counter.

“I’d like to rent a safety deposit box.”

“Certainly. Can I see some identification? I’ll also need you to fill out a signature card and a few forms.”

The paperwork completed, the teller looked over the documents, slid her chair back, and motioned for Anna to follow her through the glass doors. The teller slung the vault door open, gears turning like an expensive clock. Anna cringed at the screeching sound as she pulled the metal box out of its resting place.

“Please follow me.” The teller crossed the hall to a private room. “Just press the button on the wall when you’re done, and I’ll be back to help you lock up.” She shut the door and left Anna in the windowless cubicle.

Anna placed the envelope inside the metal container and lifted her mother’s dark walnut box out of her purse. She rubbed her finger across the word Lila carved beside a butterfly and heart, replicating the tender movement of her mother’s fingers each time she held it in her hands. Anna closed her eyes, straining to hear her mother’s voice, feel her presence one more time. No magic, no special moment as she held the cherished box and the items it protected. The smell of cedar escaped when she opened the box, revealing old photographs and trinkets—the sum of one’s life. She placed the mini time capsule inside, closed the container, and slid it back into its original resting place.

Treasures secured, she grabbed her sunglasses from the car console and sped off closer to answers in Boise.

Car after car joined her at each ramp.

Anna twisted her grip on the steering wheel, seeing her mother sitting there in her mind's eye, telling tall tales to fascinate the bored young Anna beside her during their long trip back to Idaho—the snow-covered mountains and their many secrets, hidden train tracks, mysterious caves, forest fires, and buried gold. Villains with odd names like the Great Bisaan and the Magnificent Magsman.

Anna smiled now in reminiscence. Those cunning manipulative villains grew more aggressive as her mother's creativity began to flow. When the story became too intense and Anna seemed anxious, her mother would lighten it with nonsensical humor.

“A teensy wonder hiding behind a rock on the north side of the tallest mountain frightened them all away. Anyone entering the magical place must use a secret iron gateway,” her mother would tease as they rode along.

“Oh, Mother, I miss you,” Anna whispered. “I wish you were taking this trip with me.”

What did the woman mean about Mother being wronged? Could Anna somehow make it right for her?

More than anything, she wanted to believe she could.

The early shuttle was almost full when Anna moved up the steps. Her close neighbor smelled of coffee and sugar, making her stomach gurgle.

In the busy terminal, an old detour sign demarked an airport under perpetual construction. Her luggage got heavier and heavier with each step. By the time she reached the counter, every muscle ached, protesting her packing skills. A cramp clenched her back as she heaved the bag onto the scale and twisted the tight muscle.

The agent raised her eyebrows and slapped an orange “heavy” sticker on Anna’s bag.

With just her carry-on, Anna hustled toward Gate 15. The coffee scent swirled, teasing her as she breezed through security. Ah, there was the familiar symbol ahead on the right.

Moments later, she beamed at the steam rising off her extra-large coffee, trundled her carry-on toward her gate, and claimed a vacant seat facing the windows. Beyond, the ground crew, wearing yellow fluorescent vests, moved around like ants as they carted luggage or waved orange wands in the air.

Coffee finished, mouth warmed, she shut her eyes. When someone bumped her right arm, she placed her left hand on her upper right arm. The man now sitting next to her didn’t apologize. She snuggled her arm against her chair and pulled her bag closer. Still agitated, she glanced his way once more. Now, why did he look familiar?

“We invite all ticketed and confirmed passengers going to Boise to begin boarding through gate fifteen,” the agent announced.

As a fast-moving crowd formed a pop-up line, she fidgeted in her uncomfortable chair. The man sitting next to her was waiting too. A whiff of stale coffee found her. She picked up the empty coffee cup that fell under her seat. Oh. That’s right. He’d been in the corner of the coffee shop. The stain on his tan shirt must be coffee.

“This is the second call for passengers to Boise boarding through gate fifteen.” The agent used a stronger tone. The crowd had thinned.

Anna gathered her things and headed toward the gate. Movement flashed near her chair, but she continued.

Then a woman’s scream shrilled.

“Help!” A new cry came from the other side of the room. The woman pointed toward something.

Anna pivoted to the man from the coffee shop, now slumped over her vacant chair, his entire shirt brown-red. The seat she left was wet, and dark red dripped onto the carpet. “Blood?”

Something rose in her throat, and her skin turned cold and clammy as she inspected her clothes. Good, nothing resembled blood. The thought chilled her further. Had he been shot? What was going on—incident after incident. Who was the target?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

A nna's heart thudded as a curious crowd formed. Three men in gray security uniforms pushed through. She started toward the commotion, then paused, and made her way back along the Jetway. She gave a final glance over her shoulder. Her hands trembled in their clutch on her carry-on, and she fought the urge to swallow.

Surely, her suspicions were unfounded, paranoid even. Besides, no way could someone have shot that guy. How could they have gotten a weapon past security?

The stench of oil, gas, and hot asphalt sneaked through the open panel along the jet bridge, grounding her. Deep breaths further anchored her in reality.

She found her seat, 22B. She glanced at the window-seat occupant, scooted to the middle seat, lifting the armrest in haste, and ogled the unoccupied aisle seat as the final passengers boarded. She dug out a piece of gum and chewed it long enough to relieve the fume taste in her mouth.

Inching her seat back, she closed her eyes and drifted to sleep. Her mind wandered back to a time and place long forgotten. She was a child, lying on the green grass with colorful flowers in her hand, staring at the big sky as billowy clouds floated. She imagined the sweet scent of the flowers and the crisp clean mountain air. She was happy.

Once the plane landed, the lucky man by the window was allowed to move forward for a connecting flight. The man on the aisle stood and yanked his luggage wedged inside the overhead bin. The bag barely missed her head during its descent, then scattered its contents. When she picked up a pair of binoculars, a camera, a binder, and a key chain, he jerked the key chain out of her hand before stomping off. A

woman's eyes fixated on the floor in front of Anna's seat. She followed the woman's gaze. A small bag had also fallen out of the man's damaged bag and rolled deep under the seat.

After the nosy blonde passed, Anna pulled out the man's small bag, then made her way through the jet bridge. Her head lowered toward her shoulder with a sense someone was watching.

A woman was staring. The nosy one from the plane.

Uneasy, Anna moved to the walkway's other side and picked up her pace. With passengers crowding the luggage carousel, she approached the car rental counter and timed it perfectly. In under ten minutes, she'd claimed the fob and, luggage in tow, crossed the road to the car rental parking lot.

As she drove, a sign guided her toward the hotel entrance, and she soon entered a lobby replete with dark wood, wrought-iron decor, a stone fireplace, and marble floors. After completing the seamless check-in process, she returned to the car for her heavy luggage. The sun was disappearing behind the mountains, cooling the air.

A green sedan with tinted windows idled a few yards away. The lights were off, but someone was inside.

She glanced back at the empty lobby. Get a grip, girl.

Since when was she jittery? Hands shaking, she pushed the remote and entered her rental. The rearview mirror reflected movement in the mystery car. More alarmed, she adjusted the mirror in time to see a young woman wearing the hotel uniform slide into its passenger seat.

Anna's shoulders sloped, and she rolled her neck side to side. "That's it. No more

overreacting.”

She grabbed her purse, popped the trunk open, and hauled her bag out.

Inside, gold signs directed her toward the elevator. The doors swished closed, and the elevator lifted her to the fourth floor.

The hotel bed bounced as she plunked her luggage down in a typical hotel room. Nothing fancy. Just bed, desk, and chair. One painting of a white flower. Opening the sliding door, she sneezed. The hall led to a closet, in-room safe, and bathroom.

She ran a hand down her clothes, and a shiver went through her. That man with the once-tan shirt had nothing to do with her, right? She slipped on a fresh pink shirt and jeans, then headed back downstairs.

Another gold sign directed hungry travelers toward The Grill where an enthusiastic hostess bounced ahead of Anna toward a fashionable red-upholstered corner booth, then disappeared. Anna scooted to the middle of the seat for a better view and gave the waiter her order.

One woman in a black dress and heels relaxed by herself with a glass of white wine. A couple in another corner wore matching shirts. The red words the mountains are calling; I must go arched over a mountain backdrop on their shirts. The guy stood and urged his companion to follow as he laid down a tip.

Good. Most of the tables were empty.

The waiter returned with Anna’s coffee.

As she took a sip and twisted her lips at the bitter, burnt taste, the nosy blonde from the plane sauntered toward Anna’s table. Unnerved, Anna shifted.

“May I sit with you?” The woman slid down on the booth’s other side.

“I’m sorry, but I’m tired. I’d prefer to eat alone.” Anna scooted to the edge of the seat.

The enthusiastic hostess trailed the woman to make sure everything was okay. “Ma’am? I have a table over there for you.” The hostess nodded across the room. “We try to split tables when it’s late, allowing all the servers to have a table.”

“I prefer to sit here.”

With her food order coming, Anna grabbed her purse. “I’ll take my order with me to my room if that is okay.”

The woman’s face flushed. She glared at the hostess as if Anna were leaving her with the tab.

“Yes, of course,” the hostess replied and waved for the waiter to stop.

Anna slid out of her seat and moved toward the exit, the waiter following her step-by-step.

“Ms. Stanten!” the relentless woman called out.

Anna’s head jerked toward the woman, confusing the waiter, who didn’t know whether to go to the room or to follow Anna. “How do you know my name?”

“Ms. Stanten, I have many things to discuss with you. I couldn’t discuss them over the telephone and have been eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

“I don’t understand. You were on the plane with me from Houston.” Anna closed one

eye as she rubbed her temple.

“I called you from Houston after I found you, but I wanted to wait until you arrived in Boise before I revealed the entire story.”

“Story, what story?” How awkward discussing this in the middle of the restaurant.

The waiter was fidgeting, unsure what to do.

Then the woman paled, focusing on an older, short man entering the restaurant. “I must go now. I’ll be in touch soon.”

The man spoke with the hostess.

Since the waiter partially blocked Anna’s view, she returned her focus to the woman. The seat was now vacant. Anna frowned and shrugged.

The waiter was moving back toward her again. “Would you like me to take this to your room?”

“Definitely.” Anna headed toward the door, casually eyeing the older man as she passed. His head down, he read the menu. She couldn’t make out his features in the shadows.

Once off the elevator, she stopped the waiter. “I can take the tray the rest of the way.” She signed the bill, tipped him, and headed down the hallway.

Inside her room, she double-locked her door and placed the duplicate copies from the bank in the safe, her appetite gone. She nibbled at her sandwich and fruit while she used her laptop to search for news sources about the Houston airport. She was scrolling through articles when footsteps scuffled in the outer hallway. Then

something rustled, and a folded piece of paper slipped under the door. When no further sound came, she tiptoed over and picked up the handwritten note— The Grill. Tomorrow 8 a.m. See you there.

Did the woman follow Anna to the restaurant?

She crumpled the note in her fist. “See you there?”

Maybe. But the woman better come with answers.

She glanced back at the laptop screen, the words airport incident still in the search line.

Just what were those answers going to cost? Was she ready for them?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt heard the rumors. He'd seen the behavior himself. Devlin acting strange, moods dark, unpredictable, searching for—purpose maybe. He swiped to answer his phone. "Wyatt Stone."

"This is Vicky, Mr. Alan's assistant. Mr. Alan requests your attendance at a meeting in his office."

"What time is the meeting?"

"Right now. Mr. Alan wants to see you right now."

She had to be kidding. "Right now?"

"Yes, sir. That's what he said."

He inhaled a slow breath. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, sir."

"And, Vicky—"

"Sir?"

"Please call Cindy to arrange a meeting next time."

Why had he mentioned scheduling a meeting? She likely wouldn't be there long enough to schedule the next one.

Cindy glanced up in surprise.

“Received a call from Vicky. Headed to Devlin’s office.”

“Vicky?”

“His new assistant. Not sure what happened to Rey.”

“Rey is in another department, or maybe she left. I’m not certain. It’s hard to keep up. I didn’t know the name of her replacement.”

“I asked her to call you next time.”

She raised her brows.

“That’s what I thought too. I’ll look at the lease renewal documents when I get back.”

Stretching his legs would do him some good. Might as well make the most of it.

“Can I help you?” A redheaded woman grinned from behind her desk.

So happy. Must be her first day. Her red shirt matched the color of her hair. He felt a smile creeping onto his lips, welcoming anything to brighten the next minutes.

“Wyatt Stone. You spoke to me a few minutes ago.”

She perked up, smiling as she punched her phone. “Mr. Alan, Mr. Stone is here for his appointment.” She clattered the phone back onto her desk. “He said to go on in. Would you like me to get the door?”

“No need.” He took a step into reality.

Devlin redecorated. Ghastly. He didn't want to look. Two guest chairs in the ugliest shade of green—yellow or yellow-green. A leather chair that swallowed Devlin as he perched behind a massive dark-walnut desk like a defiant king. The top of the desk bare. Just monitor, phone, wood.

“Any updates for me?”

“Could you be more specific? Updates on what?” Wyatt rolled his neck to the side. He wanted to get along with Devlin, but it might no longer be an option. “Should we schedule weekly meetings? I could have Cindy put together a list of the pending negotiations so we could work around what's already scheduled.”

Devlin leaned forward, his eyes lifeless like dark shadows. “You know what I'm asking about. Any updates on the diner, on Anastasia Stanten?”

“Nothing. No lawsuit yet. We may be in the clear.”

“Where is she? Home? Working? Rowan still keeping an eye on her?”

Wyatt fisted his hands on the enormous desk. “What are you worried about? I'm not sure where she is. Rowan said she might be headed here, to Idaho. But your asking leads me to surmise you already know that. Are you also receiving updates from Rowan? Or is this about selling the diner?”

Devlin pushed back with a snarky smirk. “Greta took an interest in Atticus's great-niece, so I'm curious. But you'd do well to realize I'm the one asking questions. What I know and don't know is not your concern. You work here—for me. Can I trust you? That's part of what I need to know.”

“Trust me for what? I've proven myself time and again, but this transition isn't going well for me right now. If you want to schedule regular meetings, let me—rather, let

Cindy—know. If you want me to resign, let me know that too.” He stopped before he could add anything else.

“You be careful where you tread. I’ve given you latitude out of respect for Greta. But I’m considering all options right now. I need someone I can rely on. That has my best interests at heart. Your loyalty is to me. Not some pet project. Greta respected you, held you on some pedestal.” His voice quieted. “Above me.” Chin notching higher, he regained his stern tone. “I’m not Greta. Remember that, and we might get along just fine.”

Wyatt held his words inside and allowed his blood to cool as he headed out of that peculiar office and back into the light. Devlin had developed jealousy issues. But why the diner? And why did he have Anna in his sights?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

As soon as she left her hotel room the next morning, Anna headed toward The Grill.

A curly-brown-headed hostess greeted her. “Just one?”

“It may be two. I’m expecting someone to join me. Is there a corner table in the back available?”

“If you can wait a minute, Mike is clearing one over there.”

“That would be perfect. Thank you.”

Business travelers, dressed in suits, sat alone. A talkative family chattered over a morning meal on the room’s far side. A man read a newspaper, wedged in the corner by a window, the sun bright behind him, leaving only his shadowed profile in view.

“Your table is ready. Please follow me.” The hostess led Anna to a table away from the booths.

Anna settled on a wooden chair facing the entrance. Then she pinched her nostrils together with her thumb and forefinger as the scent of disinfectant mixed with a musty odor escaped from the opened menu.

She tipped her watch into view. Already ten after eight. Whoever sent the note was late.

“Would you like something to drink while you decide on your order?” The youth concentrated on the pad in his hand. His blond hair just touched his shoulders when

he looked down.

“Coffee and ice water, please.”

Anna skimmed her musty-smelling menu as the young man carried her drink order to the kitchen. She’d just slid out her phone to check for a missed call when the table jolted.

The persistent woman dropped into the chair across from her and plopped an oversized purse onto the table. She closed a clenched fist around a knot of pearls that dangled low over the crisp white blouse offset by her teal pantsuit.

The young man returned with Anna’s coffee and water. He glanced at Anna’s companion, who waved him away before she could speak. The waiter returned to the kitchen.

“Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to meet this soon and in the open.” The erratic woman turned her wooden chair at an angle, providing her with a full view of the room. She eyed the man wedged in the corner and clutched her pearls again.

“ You asked for this meeting. I presume you’re who’s been calling me.” Tired of these evasive games, Anna sipped her much-needed coffee.

“My name is Martha Jones. I’ve known your great-uncle for years.”

“Who?” Anna shook her head. “I don’t have a great-uncle. Are you sure you don’t have me mixed up with someone?”

“I know exactly who you are, Anastasia. Soon, you will too. There are many things to discuss.”

Emotions seemed to hit all at once. As Anna sat speechless, Martha pulled her pearls back and forth, seeming eager to continue. Anna was about to speak when the waiter dropped by. “Are you ready to order now?”

The woman drummed her fingers on the wooden tabletop and didn’t respond.

“Um, I don’t think I’ll be ordering anything right now.” The words squeaked past Anna’s clogged throat. She eyed her companion—Martha. “How about you?”

“Nothing for me.”

“Then just the check, please,” Anna added. The waiter shook his head, reached into his pouch, handed Anna the bill, then strode away.

“I have many things to tell you. I understand why you’re skeptical and questioning.” A slight twitch jerked Martha’s left eyelid. In her midsixties and sporting a stylish short bob, she obviously dyed her hair a light blonde. The color further washed out her drawn face and pale skin, but she must’ve been pretty in her younger years. Even with the obvious stress, she was quite attractive now.

“I don’t understand any of this.” Anna tapped her index finger against her lips. “What could you have to do with me?” The chair scraped, moving closer to the table with forward bursts. “Did you know my mother?”

Martha’s eye kept twitching, even as she surveyed the room as though she expected a monster lurking in the shadows. “This must come as a great surprise. Nevertheless, I’m not certain this is the right place.”

“Is something wrong?” A chill tripped down Anna’s spine. That man in the airport... Martha had been there too.

“Why don’t you get a jacket and anything else you’d like, and I’ll take you for a drive?” Martha released her pearls and reached for her purse. “That way, we can discuss everything in private.”

A drive? Did she trust this woman enough to get in a car with her?

“This is all too strange.” Anna swallowed hard. “I came all this way. I want answers. I’ve never heard of a great-uncle. I’m not going to wait long, but I’ll go with you. If you wanted to harm me, I guess you could have already.”

“Good.” Martha stood, dug out her keys, and tucked her purse under her arm. “I’ll bring my car to the covered area at the front entrance. Join me after you get anything you need from your hotel room. It’s a black sedan.”

Anna nodded, wrote the room number to be charged on the bill, and slid out of her seat. By the time she reached her floor, she’d convinced herself this was the way to resolve her questions. She didn’t come this far to turn back. She hurried toward her room, opened the door, grabbed the necessary items, checked the safe, and returned to the elevator, avoiding her reflection in the mirror.

She strode toward the main entrance and the black car. When she slid into the passenger seat, Martha looked even more nervous.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Anna reached to let herself out, but Martha put the car in drive and hit the accelerator, lunging forward. Her muscles tense, Anna pulled her bag closer and waited.

“Do you remember this area? I know it’s been many years.”

“Not much. We only lived here when I was a child.”

“Things have changed since then.” With that tone, Martha must be thinking of other times. “I just wondered how much you remembered.”

“I remember enough to know all my memories aren’t pleasant, I must say.” Anna shifted, her legs antsy and her heartbeat ratcheting up. “I didn’t come to discuss my memories or my past. Why did you contact me? And why did you make it sound mysterious and urgent?”

“Since the news of an unknown living relative is a surprise to you, you’ll have many more revelations. I don’t mind answering your questions. I’m eager to get everything out in the open. However, let’s get somewhere and stop. We can have our discussion all at once, without the distraction of maneuvering through traffic.”

Seriously? Anna glared at the woman. “How long is this going to drag on?”

Tight-lipped, Martha kept her focus straight ahead.

Anna laid her head back and found herself relaxing. Now, why couldn’t she keep her eyes open? What a funny time to become sleepy.

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Anna gasped when she opened her eyes no longer in a vehicle but in a room. She rubbed her eyes and gave them time to adjust. Dark mahogany enhanced the intended grandeur, and the angled corner fireplace with structured, precise carvings drew immediate attention.

The light tried to find its way in, but the frosted window perfectly aligned with the fireplace, blocked it, and created an eerie shadow. The shadow obscured a life-sized painting of a girl picking spring flowers in a garden. Although bright and cheery, the painting somehow surrendered to the shadows, allowing them to conquer it.

With nothing out of place, the impeccable appointments made her skin crawl.

She reached for the lamp. But the dull bulb caused the shadow to grow.

Dizzy, she slid her feet toward the bedside rug. She stopped to get her balance in a deafening silence that revealed the smallest sound. The wooden floor squeaked, announcing her departure. She winced, rolling her shoulders forward as she reached for the doorknob. She turned it while sliding the door open, then jolted. Martha stood outside.

“I have been waiting for you to wake up.” Martha spoke as if it were typical to get into a car and wake up in a house.

“Where am I?” Anna stomped toward her. “What is going on?”

“Come downstairs with me.” Softening her tone, Martha hooked a finger around the knot of pearls. “I have much to explain.”

That line again? No longer trusting her, Anna glared. “You’ve been pulling my strings long enough.” Wasn’t she smarter than this? If so, it was time she started proving it. And yet, when Martha turned, Anna followed her down the hallway toward the stairs overlooking the grand entrance, a gold-toned chandelier dangling above.

As they continued toward the railing, the stairway curved, leading the way down. Pictures hung along the walls, and one caught her eye. It had to be her grandmother. She’d first seen Sabina’s picture when she’d gone through her mother’s wooden box after her death. Her grandmother, an attractive young woman, had been on her horse, Ruby, with her hair flowing in the wind on a sunny day. Several other pictures and interesting trinkets had remained in the wooden box now in the metal cave at the bank.

“Who is this?” Anna tried to ask without showing any emotion.

“Don’t pretend you don’t recognize your grandmother.”

Anna stopped and made no effort to hide studying it. Her arms crept around her middle, hugging herself as if she could hold in the unsettling feelings. How strange to see this likeness hanging here, in a house she’d never visited or heard of until now. Her grandmother was much younger in the painting than in her mother’s photo of her, and the artist captured the same carefree glimmer at a younger age.

Inching closer, she put her hand over her mouth and held back a slight gasp. The object around her grandmother’s neck—surely, it was the locket from the envelope.

Did this younger version of her grandmother have any similarities to the woman in the locket? Obviously, that couldn’t be her grandmother because of her age, but perhaps there was some family resemblance. Anna wasn’t sure. All she could see was the strong resemblance between this painting and her mother. Both women had high

arched foreheads and strong cheekbones. Even a little of herself, like the dimple in her left cheek and the long line of her nose, teased her from this portrait. Her eyes burning, she blinked faster and faster.

The next portrait was of an older man. Anna saw a dark cloud and felt an icy breeze swirling around it.

Tugging the pearls back and forth, Martha followed her glance. “That is your great-uncle Atticus.”

Anna didn’t comment. Her mind was starting to clear, and her questions were not being answered.

“How did I get here? To this house?”

“You must have been exhausted. You fell asleep in the car. I decided the best place for you to rest would be here.”

“I don’t remember anything after the first few minutes of the drive. No way—I mean, absolutely no possible way—did I sleep that soundly.”

“I’m telling you the facts, dear.” The endearment grated as Martha played up that sweet, concerned voice again. “You must have been exhausted, and you still haven’t eaten. Why don’t we get you something to eat?”

Dare she eat a meal Martha prepared? Anna eyed her companion, tapping her forefinger on her lips. What was she worried about? She’d been out cold. Martha could have harmed her already. She was famished, uncertain where she was right now, and needed time to figure things out. She’d play along.

“Yes, I’m hungry.”

“Come along, then.” Martha reached the final step. Her heels clicked and clacked like a horse on the road as she clogged across the marble floor toward one of the many corridors, leading Anna along.

An aromatic smell of rich French coffee and sweet fresh pastry drifted along the hall. When Anna’s stomach rumbled, Martha chuckled. “You are hungry.”

The tantalizing smells increased as they approached their destination. Cheery voices chattered, and pots and pans clattered before they entered a pristine kitchen where a sturdy woman directed the others. Her apron displayed signs of today’s menu, yet she remained tidy and gave the intended impression of cleanliness and order while the young woman at her right responded to her commands.

Something rattled and clunked in the corner. As Anna turned, a stocky man hurried out the side door. The others had also turned toward the noise and then toward Anna and Martha.

“Can we help you?” the woman in charge asked.

“Bessie, this is Anastasia, our guest. She’s hungry, and we’re looking for something for her to eat.”

Bessie didn’t reply to Martha. Was there some animosity between them?

Then Bessie smiled at Anna. “I’ll put something together, and we’ll serve it in the Ruby Dining Room.”

Martha let out a slight gasp, the pearls bouncing as she jerked back a step before she collected herself. “We’ll wait in the study.”

Bessie kept staring at her. Uncomfortable, Anna ducked her head.

“This way.” Martha beckoned, and Anna once again followed.

But docile or not, she’d record every detail about the house in her memory. She may need to leave on her own soon, and she’d best know all her options. The sounds and smells faded, and they entered a room with dark wood. Bookshelves barricaded the walls, and firm brown leather chairs held positions an exact distance apart as if preparing to attack. No pictures or personal items softened the precision, unless that lone brown pillow on the wooden window seat counted. Anna shivered. Even with its expensive furnishings, it felt empty and lifeless.

When Martha eased into the chair closest to the door and smoothed down her teal slacks, Anna whirled toward her, hands on her hips. She wanted answers, but not from books. “I’d like to know why you contacted me.”

“I realize you’re frustrated. I’ll tell you everything soon. It might be better if we wait until after our meal.”

Another stall! Anna almost stamped her foot. “I’ve waited long enough. It’s time for some answers.”

Martha opened her mouth as though about to make another excuse. Then she closed it and let out a sigh. “What do you know about your mother’s family?”

“I don’t want to discuss what I know. I want to discuss what you know.”

“Understandable, but I need a place to start.”

“Start at the beginning as you know it. I’m ready to hear what you have to say.”

Martha rubbed her eyebrow. Her left eye was twitching again. “Your great-grandfather Peter was a hardworking man. The oldest of six children, he carried much

responsibility growing up. While this affected him throughout his life, he was an honest man, dedicated to his family, though rigid. He expected much—maybe too much, not only from himself. His hard work turned into success. He felt his children should follow in his footsteps of independence and somehow have the same strengths he possessed. As I said, his expectations were unrealistic and demanding.”

Anna tried to remember any stories about her great-grandfather. “Mother never spoke of him. She never spoke of any relatives.”

“Humph. Well, he had two sons and one daughter—Alexander, Atticus, and Sabina.” Martha straightened her blazer sleeve as if waiting for a response. When none came, she continued.

“Alexander died when he was only four. Your great-uncle Atticus and your grandmother grew up together. Though several years apart, they were close until your grandmother met your grandfather. Their disagreement on the relationship caused a rift. Atticus always believed the relationship was her way of rebelling against their father. They didn’t speak again, and I heard Atticus changed after their conflict. I didn’t know him at the time. I began working for him after Sabina disappeared.”

Disappeared. Anna shivered. The one time Mother spoke of her mother, Sabina, what had she said? “Mother loved her horse, Ruby, and often went on long morning rides. One morning, she didn’t come home. Later that evening, the horse limped back with her saddle covered in blood and dangling. My mother wasn’t with Ruby. Her body was never found.”

But Martha was speaking. “I did hear, though not directly from him, that sometime after their fight, Atticus grew a beard and pulled back from society. He became reclusive for years, even though he was still young. When something happened to your grandmother, when she disappeared, Atticus was the first to blame your grandfather.”

Anna didn't respond. She was here for answers, not to provide them. But her mother had said much the same thing, hadn't she? "The primary suspect is always the husband, and so it was for my father. Heartbroken, he had to deal with pointing fingers and wagging tongues, along with raising a child alone. It broke him. He became angry. Unkind. Began to drink. Never really recovered."

Anna pivoted toward the door as she smelled something wonderful coming her way.

A young woman carried in a tray. "I hope you're hungry, miss. Cook loaded this up with a variety of sliced moist meats, au gratin potatoes, cut fruit, salad, and an abundance of yum." Chirping away, she bent to slide it onto the table beside Anna, the tray larger than the pedestal table. Then she straightened as she pushed small purple-rimmed glasses higher up her freckled nose.

Behind her, a jolly plump woman brought a coffee carafe, a water pitcher, and petite cakes.

Surely, such nose-tickling foods were safe to eat. Anna breathed it in and filled her plate.

She ate all of her delicious selections, finishing with coffee and the most amazing piece of strawberry pie covered in a sweet glaze. Then she frowned. Martha, sitting there composed in her suit and pearls and coiffured bob, hadn't taken a bite. While devouring the food, Anna managed to forget about her. Now, with a full stomach, it was all back.

Why hadn't Martha eaten?

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Anna had always been timid. Hiding in her mother's shadow, she struggled for strength. But her mother was no longer her protector, and she'd watched life's hardships in silence for long enough. It was now time to find her voice. She squared her shoulders.

"I came all this way for answers. Let's skip to the part where you tell me who wrote the letter and why I am here. You're the one who asked me to come. 'Come to the mountains, Anastasia,' you said. Tell me why."

Martha was still. Her face pensive. She glanced down, wrung her hands, and avoided Anna's glare. "I found the letter."

"Found the letter?" Heat flashed through Anna. "What do you mean? Where?"

"This may be more than you want to know, but you must understand why I contacted you and the urgency." She smoothed her dyed-blond bob behind her ears, her stare direct in her pallid face. "Atticus had been so erratic. He has a reputation for being eccentric, and that fits. But people don't know him. They didn't see him like I did. When he was healthy, he had good qualities. This might not make sense now."

Anna leaned forward and touched the woman's arm after her voice softened and trailed off. She needed Martha to keep her focus. "Tell me why you wanted me here. What's this all about?"

"Atticus has always been complicated, but he wasn't always the way he is now, you understand?" Martha waved both hands in front of her, the pearls bouncing again. "I don't know why he was like he was about Sabina and your mother. How could he

sever relationships like that? He was so bitter. Maybe it was something with his father. He despised him. Most people speak kindly of your great-grandfather. Atticus inherited all his bad traits and none of his good ones. Peter always tried to love his family. He wasn't mean. He was stern—old-fashioned, as they call it now.”

She paused and twisted her grip around her pearls as if she were strangling them. “Well, anyway, even before he got ill, something was suddenly off. I almost thought he was searching for something and unsettled. His health was fine, but something else was wrong. Then, after Greta passed away—”

“Who is Greta?”

Darkness crept into the room.

“Greta was one of Atticus's friends, probably his only friend. Well, after she died, he turned cold and bitter. He seemed to give up. Almost despondent. Cruel. His health went downhill. He became unpredictable.”

Martha had drifted again. She could've been part of a This Is Your Life episode for Atticus.

Anna gripped the chair, the wooden armrest pinching the skin beneath her knuckles.

Martha's left eye was twitching, and her body bobbed with a slight rocking. “I began getting his things in order in case something happened. Going through one of the rooms, I came across a box tucked back in a closet. Alongside some letters, pictures, and other keepsakes, I found an envelope with your name on it. I recognized your name, mostly from household gossip, so—”

“Wait.” Anna held up a hand. Her throat felt dry. Who in Idaho would address an envelope to her? “The envelope had my name on it?”

“Yes. Something was inside, but it was sealed. I opened it. I read it twice because it didn’t make sense. I didn’t look at anything else in the envelope. I was already worried about reading the letter. Atticus is private and can have a temper, and I’d crossed the line.” Her head lowered, her grip released the pearls, and her gaze focused again on her trembling hands. “The letter was so sad, so remorseful. It almost explained everything. He was sorry for how he treated you. Sorry for how he treated your mother. It didn’t sound like him, but explained his emotions—so brokenhearted and regretful .”

The book-clad walls seemed to lean in, listening for new stories to tell. The smells drifting from the tray seemed cloying now. Sickening. Anna shifted on her hard leather chair, her knees urging her to jump up and pace, her stomach threatening to do the same.

“I didn’t do anything with the letter, just kept thinking and wondering. Atticus was getting worse, so I saw no downside to taking some kind of action. I had to do something. I always ‘fixed things’ for him. I thought I could help him if you knew how sorry he was. Then you’d come, and maybe he’d get back to his old self while there was still time. Go to his Maker in peace. That was my reasoning.”

Martha submerged her face in her hands, her blonde bob sliding forward to shield her cheeks. “So, I did what I always do. I took action. I called you and used some of the words from the letter. You didn’t react, so I called again. I became obsessed, driven. I wanted Atticus back to how he was. Maybe you were the key. I thought the letter itself might persuade you when you didn’t respond. That it would help you understand.”

“How did you find me? Get my number?” Anna pressed cold fingers to her head. Something like a vise tightened against her skull.

“Your number and address were in the box with the envelope.”

“He had my number and address?” Her stomach spun like she was on a roller coaster and just dropped hundreds of feet. “What did he say about the letter when you asked?”

“I tried to speak to him about it, but he wouldn’t hear it. I interpreted his reaction to mean it was all too hard for him. I never told him I read it. I wasn’t that brave. I just said I came across it when I was organizing. He went off the rails, yelling and acting up. All his medical alarms started going off, and I couldn’t discuss it with him again.”

A steady buzz hummed in her ears, making her dizzy. Steadying herself, she focused on something—a stain on her pants. She wet her finger, rubbed, wet it again, rubbed again until it disappeared. She had accomplished something—she was calm, the buzzing silent.

Martha raised her head, her amber eyes red and watery now. “I don’t know who wrote the letter now. I assumed he had. He was the only option. Who else could it be? It was here at the house. The writer needed closure and was sorry. When the doctor said he just had days, I had to get you here before anything happened to him. That’s why he wrote it—to make amends.”

Anna sprang to her feet, her arms hugging her hollow middle. She lurched a step closer, looming over this meddlesome woman. “You brought me to this dark house to see someone who never tried to contact us when my mother was alive?”

She traveled all this way to find her suspicions were right—a sinister prank.

What a cruel hoax.

“Why was I harmed at the diner that day? Why would someone knock me down and put me in the hospital?”

Martha shrugged as if giving up. “I hired someone who had worked for Atticus in the past. I got the number from his private contact lists. Atticus used him when he needed something delivered or things taken care of out of town.”

“The man who attacked me worked for you and Atticus?”

“I hired him. I told you that. He was supposed to put the letter in your purse. That was all. I imagined that if you saw the letter and read it—well, you now know what I thought would happen.” She waved beside her head, sending her pearls swaying like a pendulum. “But he panicked. I don’t know why. He was supposed to be a professional. Then I heard you were hurt.”

Anna dropped back into her chair. This place was dark enough without her angry shadow looming over Martha.

Martha buried her face in her hands again, rocking back and forth in her chair. “Something came over me. I was obsessed, delusional, somehow thinking I could make Atticus better. I contacted the man and told him I was coming, I wanted the envelope back, I’d pay him in full, but he should have no more contact with you. He wasn’t happy. I took the first flight available. Then I called you again. I put everything, including the money, in a fresh envelope and typed a new label with your name on it.”

Anna squirmed as if she were swimming in quicksand. Who was this woman? She was obsessed and irrational. And right now, she was all Anna had.

“Did the man you hired break into my house?”

“I don’t know, but I paid him in full as if he’d completed the job. He had the envelope in his possession at one time, so he had no need to steal it back.” Martha raised her head, smoothed down her hair, and drew in a steadying breath. “That might

have been someone else. When I returned to the house, the man's name was no longer in any of Atticus's records. I don't know why I checked, but I did."

Anna ground her fingers against the chair's ornately carved armrests. "You hired someone to put the envelope in my purse. Someone you didn't know. Someone who worked for my great-uncle." When Martha opened her mouth, Anna held up a hand to forestall any interruption. "A great-uncle I never heard of. One who never helped when my mother was ill or struggling financially. One who lived in this grand house where at least four people work in the kitchen while we struggled to have food on the table. Are. You. Kidding me?"

Martha didn't answer. Just peered at her with tired amber eyes.

So Anna eased out of the chair and edged around her toward the door. "How did I get from the hotel to the house? Someone put something in my drink because I don't remember anything for hours. What happened?"

Martha's face was an odd color, and her eyes looked crazed. "I fear I do know the answer to that one. It was Devlin."

Devlin? "Who is Devlin?"

"Greta's son. He's not related to Atticus, but he might inherit everything. You deserve your inheritance, and he's not even family."

"What are you talking about?" Anna's hands went clammy, and the room swayed. She gripped the back of the chair she'd sat in. Her sweaty fingers slipped against the hard leather. "Did Devlin put something in my drink?"

"He must've distracted the young lady carrying your drinks. When I saw him at the restaurant, I knew something wasn't right and I had to get you out of there. Shortly

after we got in the car, you slumped over as if you'd fallen asleep. I wasn't sure what to do. Then Devlin called and told me he'd have someone waiting to help me get you into the house. By then, it was too late. I started all this by contacting you about the letter, but Atticus must have gotten involved somehow."

Anna paced to the window, then jerked sideways, oddly afraid someone might see her. She spun back to her companion. "Do you know how crazy this all sounds? Let me speak with my great-uncle. I want to know who wrote the letter and why they mentioned my mother. I didn't even know my great-uncle existed. Why would that be?"

How her head hurt. She walked to the table hosting the tray, grabbed the water glass, and downed its contents. But the pounding only increased, and the room kept spinning. She gripped the table's edges, keeping herself standing. Only one thing made sense. "If he was involved with my drinks or the man you hired..."

She had to know. Otherwise, how could she protect herself?

"It's not possible to meet with Atticus today. It's already early evening, you know. He's already medicated and resting. He won't wake up until the morning."

Evening? Anna swallowed hard. They'd left the hotel just after eight. Just how many hours had she been unconscious?

Martha's left eye was twitching faster. Her eye was closing, and her lips shut so tight they disappeared.

Anna avoided looking at Martha's eye as she waited. Then Martha relaxed as if a decision had taken unbearable pressure off her.

"Time is growing short. He's dying. You're his only living heir. The letter didn't

match his nature, but the words searched for forgiveness. Your mother, now you, deserved to hear it from him and receive your rightful inheritance. Devlin will sell everything and destroy it. This is my opportunity to make a difference.”

“Did Atticus ever want to see me? Does he know I’m here?”

“Not from me he doesn’t. But I’ll tell him in the morning. We know he wants to see you. His letter said as much.”

“ If he wrote it.”

Martha pressed her lips into that invisible white line again, and Anna moved to stand over the woman’s chair. She didn’t fully understand Martha’s motivation, and she wasn’t going to stay here long enough to discover her hidden agenda. “I want to go back to my hotel room. Now!”

Blinking up at her, Martha waved a feeble hand. The pearls jerked side to side as if shaking their heads. “Everything you need is here. Go back up to the room and wait until morning when you can speak with Atticus.”

“No.” At least she managed a tone that said there’d be no negotiation. “I’m not staying here. I didn’t agree to come to this wretched house in the first place.”

She was going to be in charge whenever she was able. She may have limited resources, but she made her own choices.

Martha crossed her arms over her chest, bunching up her crisp blouse. “I don’t have someone who can take you back right now, and you shouldn’t take a cab. I always stay close to the house once Atticus is relaxing, just to make sure all is okay, even though there’s a night nurse. There are unanswered questions about the break-in at your house. You need to be cautious right now. You’ll not stay here just to be safe?”

Seriously? Who did the woman think she was kidding? Anna stretched her spine, standing taller. “No. I don’t feel safe here.” She firmed her voice. “You were at the airport in Houston when the man was injured. Did you know the man who was shot in the terminal—the man who sat right next to me before I boarded? Was he one of your employees?”

Martha paled, matching the color of her pearls. She twisted them so tight Anna flinched, expecting them to burst into every direction.

“I don’t know what you mean. I didn’t see anyone hurt at the airport.”

“These incidents are adding up, aren’t they?”

Martha’s eyelids fluttered.

Anna’s skin crawled.

“I’ll find someone to take you to the hotel. Someone I trust. Will you wait here?”

Anna’s taut muscles loosened a fraction. She’d not be held captive? “For now. But I’m not staying the night here. Know that.”

Martha left the room as the women came to collect the trays.

The freckled one fiddled with her petite glasses. “Do you need anything else, miss?”

“The food was wonderful.” Anna forced a smile. “Thank you. I don’t need anything else.”

Beyond an escape from this house. But she dared not say that.

Anna crossed to the bookshelves and skipped a finger along spines all the same color and size. The room seemed much darker than when she arrived. Was that her emotions, or was night falling? Who could tell with the thick drapes drawn? She picked one book up and put it back.

What had she done with her phone? She walked to the table. Was it still in the bedroom? Who would be calling her anyway?

Her heart sank. How could someone not expect anyone to call? Only Garrett Clarke, someone she still had a hard time calling by his first name, might call. When she returned to Texas, things were going to change. She owed it to her mother and herself. As much as she longed for a home and security and family, her mother was right—she had none.

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From the moment he stepped out of the house this morning, the hair prickled on the back of Wyatt's neck. Someone had their eyes on him. That feeling trailed him like a puppy the entire drive. It had been like this since his last meeting with Devlin. A sixth sense that someone was shadowing him, watching him. He didn't like it, and he hoped he'd catch whomever it was. Maybe have a little talk.

Still no information on Anna's whereabouts. If she arrived in Boise, why didn't he know? Was she okay? Why did he feel it was his business to know? Was that creepy? Was it because he'd kinda started the whole thing—whatever this “thing” was? Or was there some other reason?

Things were hectic at the office, meetings, acquisitions, property transactions, including the sale of the diner. If he were the suspicious type, he'd conclude Devlin was trying to keep him occupied. Two meetings today and an important one in the morning.

He stood at the window. The eagles by their nest. Were they tired too? It had been a long day. He wanted a breather, time to find Anna, maybe connect more dots, maybe even reconnect with the girl herself. Instead, he was jumping at his shadow, dashing from meeting to meeting.

His phone vibrated on the desk. He eyed the flashing contact.

Martha Jones. Why was she calling?

He hadn't worked with Atticus since before Greta died. Was this another Devlin distraction scheme?

He swiped to answer. “Wyatt Stone.”

“This is Martha Jones.” After a pause. “I need a favor.”

“You need an attorney? For a personal or professional legal matter?”

“No, actually, it’s more of a personal request, nothing that requires your legal skills. I just need someone I can trust, and I’m in a pinch. Oddly, you’re the only person I could think of who might be able to help me out.”

“It depends on the favor. I’m swamped with meetings this week. What is it that you need?” Martha Jones calling him for a favor made no sense. Had to be Devlin behind it.

“I have a guest—Anastasia Stanten. She’s here to see Atticus, but he’s been ill and was unable to see her today. She’s tired from her journey, has a hotel room, and doesn’t want to stay at the house tonight. I can’t leave the house to take her to the hotel. I didn’t want her to go by taxi if there was another option. We trimmed the staff while Atticus has been so ill, so I didn’t know who else to call.”

Anna? This was about Anna? He fumbled the phone. “Anastasia Stanten? She’s there—at Atticus’s house?”

“Yes, she’s his great-niece. Lila—Did you know Lila? Anyway, she’s related to Atticus, and I need to get her to the hotel and then back again tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t know, Martha.” A face-to-face with Anna? Was he ready? He eyed the distant nest and fingered through his hair, his heart racing ahead of him. “Is she expecting me?”

“No, no, of course not. But she wants to leave bad enough that it won’t matter who

takes her.”

Ouch.

“Can you do it?”

“I’m about to leave the office. I’ll wrap up a few things, then head that way. Just remember this next time we’re trying to negotiate something.”

“Sure, sure, whatever it takes. I appreciate it. I didn’t know who else to call.”

“I’m coming to the place on Warm Springs?”

“Yes, as soon as you can. The day may have been too much for her.”

What?

“Give me thirty minutes. You might let her know, though, so it isn’t a complete surprise.”

“Thank you. I won’t forget this favor.”

He strode to his office washroom, and his face heated as he splashed a hint of cologne and freshened up. He flashed back to the day in the diner, half a year ago. Anna, no longer the young girl in his dreams, but a beautiful woman he couldn’t forget. Brown eyes so deep the image drew him into a trance, hypnotized by the possibilities.

Anna Stanten was in Boise, and he was going to meet her. Was he dreaming, or had his dream come true?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

When Martha halted in the doorway, frowning, Anna's stomach tightened. Why was Martha nervous now ?

"The only person I could find on short notice that I'd trust is Wyatt Stone, our preferred attorney for company business. You don't know him, do you?"

Anna rolled her eyes. "How would I know an attorney at my great-uncle's company, a great-uncle I didn't know existed, in a city I haven't been to since I was a child? I'm leaning toward, no, I don't know him." Okay, so that came out more sarcastic than intended. "When's he coming? I'm ready to leave."

"It shouldn't be long. I'm kinda surprised he was available. Despite his busy schedule, he agreed without much persuasion. That's the reason I asked if you knew him. I'm going upstairs to check on Atticus. Do you need anything? Food, anything, before you leave the house?"

Had the woman forgotten she just fed her? Anna shook her head. She turned to pick up her purse, but it wasn't there. "I need to get my purse."

"Want me to walk you up to the room or have someone bring it down for you?"

"I'd like to go up and get it myself." This could be a good opportunity to study the wall of pictures again. "I want to make sure I didn't forget anything."

No need to say what she wanted to commit to memory.

"That's fine, dear." Ugh, the woman was using her sweet-Martha voice again. "I'll let

Wyatt know the name of your hotel and ask him to pick you up tomorrow as well. You can enjoy a nice breakfast and speak to Atticus once he's up and alert." Martha strolled from the room.

Again, Anna followed.

Martha took a different route, possibly avoiding the kitchen. Anna tried to remember each turn with a visual marker. When the stairs were in view, she slowed. This was the family she'd never know. All families are flawed, but she'd never know if anyone in her family would've been worth the effort. She slowed her pace and stopped on each step to study every portrait. One somber man with no smile stood in a stiff, emotionless pose. His eyes glimmered, hiding a secret smile, and his attire indicated he was older than the rest and from a different era. "Who is this?"

"That's Mr. Peter Urbacch, your great-grandfather, a man of distinction and character. He came from nothing and became a prominent and successful resident of Treasure Valley. He had a magnificent home with a great deal of acreage along the Boise River. Once he passed away, Devlin convinced Atticus to sell the land, and now it's subdivided with homes in its place." Martha bit off the last part, clearly disapproving of that transaction.

Anna continued up the stairs. Martha's mood had changed, so she'd best limit questions right now. Soon, she'd have more answers. But she had family and history. This is her family tree.

She recovered her purse and headed back downstairs. Martha kept the pace brisk, ensuring Anna didn't loiter for fear of getting lost. Once they were almost there, Martha pointed to the study doorway. "If you wait in here, I'll call Wyatt and suggest he meet you in there."

Anna had pulled a book off the shelf and sat when someone entered the room. She

closed the book and stood. It better be Wyatt so she could escape.

Instead, the man from the restaurant, the one who made Martha nervous, approached. Devlin? She waited for him to speak first.

“I am Devlin Alan.” He outstretched his hand, his shadowed eyes meeting hers with a lingering stare.

She extended her hand. As his cold fingers clasped hers, the chill went up her arm, then raced through her entire body. As a not-so-subtle shiver jarred her, she freed her hand. “Anna Stanten.”

She watched his eyes. Yes, he knew her name. Another game had begun.

“Didn’t I see you at the restaurant?”

“I wouldn’t know. Did you?” Did she keep her expression as blank as she intended?

A boisterous voice came from the hallway. Laughter followed. She hadn’t heard joy for too long. Hurry.

She edged past Devlin toward the door, hoping her distrust didn’t show.

Martha and another man came into the room, but Anna’s focus stayed on Martha as the woman and Devlin shared a glance. At the restaurant, Martha had become flustered, almost anxious when she saw him, but this glance was more an invisible stare or nod of disdain.

A firm tap on Anna’s shoulder interrupted her surveillance. She pivoted. Oh, wow, was this guy ever gorgeous. Muscular, with soft brown hair cropped on the sides and jagged on top, he’d used just the right amount of gel and sported a three-day beard

that made him look casual and outdoorsy. And—double wow!—he smelled of sandalwood and spice.

“Hi, Anna.” His killer smile made her feel like a weak-kneed schoolgirl, and her cheeks warmed as his husky voice said her name.

“Yes, I’m Anna.” Duh. Way to go, girl. Her face grew warmer, so she stood up straighter and controlled her tone. “You must be Wyatt.”

“Do you have your things?” He gestured to the door. “We need to get going. I have an important meeting to prepare for, and then Martha also insists I come by your hotel in the morning to pick you up.”

Well, that could burst any girl’s joy bubble. But why was she so disappointed? She knew the guy was playing taxi driver. She should’ve known he wasn’t thrilled by his role.

“Now, Wyatt, I trust you, and we want Anna to travel safely.”

Anna? When did Martha start calling her Anna?

“Sure. Ready, Anna?” The guy arched a golden-brown brow toward that too-perfect hair.

Rather than stumble over her tongue, Anna scurried to get her purse as Wyatt headed out the door. She followed, not that she’d follow him anywhere. But the guy knew the way out, and she’d better hurry to keep up. “Not very courteous, is he?” she grumbled, running behind Wyatt in his blue pullover sweater. Stretched over a broad back, that denim-blue knit sure looked good. Not that she’d noticed the way it brought out his intense topaz-blue eyes. No, not a bit. She felt her lips curve upward. Focus, Anna.

Huh. Even in his agitated state, he walked to the passenger side of his tall silver four-wheel-drive pickup and opened the door for her. He must've been raised in a home that emphasized traditional manners. She stretched to reach the grab bar, using the running board as a step into the cab, but she made it. Even after he settled into the driver's seat and started the engine, she remained silent, waiting for him to speak. Until she couldn't stand it.

"You seem familiar with the house."

The truck moved through the circular drive. A nearby street sign indicated Warm Springs Avenue.

Wyatt cocked his head, almost as if deciding whether she was worth his breath. Then he brushed something off his sleeve. "Not really."

That was it? That was his response? What about all that laughter she heard earlier? Where was that guy? Hadn't she had enough conflict and stress sorting through people she could trust? Right now, this guy wasn't in the trust column.

"What brings you to Boise?"

"Martha didn't tell you?" Should she tell him about the letter?

"No." He flexed his hands on the steering wheel—nice hands, strong, tapered fingers. "She just said she needed a favor and no one else was available. I have several contracts to finalize this afternoon. I was surprised she asked me, honestly."

Should she be relieved or worried that Martha trusted him?

"Well, evidently, I'm a relative of Atticus Urbacch."

Wyatt almost slammed on the brakes. “ You didn’t know?”

Hold up there. “ You knew Atticus was my great-uncle?”

“Most people in the area know Sabina was Atticus’s sister. Their father, your great-grandfather, was well respected and played a huge role in Boise’s early growth. Is that why you’re here—to see Atticus? Because he is ill?”

Anna rubbed her forehead. Everyone knew except her. Embarrassed to be so naïve, overwhelmed by emotions from the day, she wanted to get out of the truck—to hide.

The hotel came into view, and Wyatt slowed and turned toward the illuminated front entrance. She fought the urge to jump out while the tall vehicle was still moving. She might’ve—if she didn’t think she’d break a leg or worse from this silver skyscraper.

“Did I say something wrong?” He parked and raked a hand through that hair as if he didn’t know how perfect it looked. “It’s just hard to believe. I mean, somehow you knew to come here, to his house.”

He shifted sideways, the full power of those topaz-blue eyes striking her. He really was attractive. Not that she hadn’t seen attractive guys before and been immune, but something about this one drew her, almost a... a connection. If he wasn’t so frustrating.

“I’m here because someone kept calling me. I also received a letter urging me to come, but only after I was injured during its delivery. Before that, I did not know I had one single relative in the entire world— not even one .”

Why had she told him all that? She jerked open her door, even as he hopped out and rushed around the front of the truck. She slid off the seat without anything embarrassing happening, said a courtesy thank you, and headed for the automatic

lobby door.

She entered her dreary hotel room and dialed Martha's number. Maybe someone else could bring her to that dreadful house in the morning. She could drive herself if she had the directions. Ominous clouds hovering over a house couldn't be that difficult to find.

The call went to voicemail.

Oh well. And she'd a missed call. Dr. Garrett Clarke. That brought a toothy smile as she dropped onto the edge of the bed. He was gentle and steady. She was tired right now, but a pleasant call with the good doctor might be, well, just what the doctor ordered.

"Anna, I'm glad you called me back. I was afraid you wouldn't." Nice how he didn't try to play some type of power game.

"I just saw your missed call. I've been, um, busy." Was that the right word for a girl who'd been drugged and abducted? She puffed a pillow behind her and relaxed. "I haven't checked my phone all day. How are you doing?"

"I'm great, but I wanted to hear your voice and make sure everything was okay." Would he fly to save her from all this if she said rib? She needed a hero right now.

"I'm not sure how I am. I'm here for something with my family, and as with all families, I'm finding it more emotional than I anticipated."

"Mine can be like that sometimes too. Families are like that."

Are they? They chitchatted about nothing. It was nice. She tried to stay on the phone forever but finally said good night. Alone again. I am so lonely. Where does

loneliness start, and when does it stop?

The phone kept ringing like a fire bell. She pulled the pillow over her ears and tried to ignore the sound. She didn't ask for a wake-up call, but the phone continued to ring and ring. If she didn't answer it, she'd never rest.

"Hello." Her voice sounded scratchy.

"Anna, this is your ride. I'm in the lobby. Are you ready?"

She raised her head enough to check the clock while rubbing her eyes.

"It's only seven fifteen. I was still asleep. I thought you were coming later." They'd never discussed a time. She yawned, trying to wake up, then eased onto the side of the bed, and stretched her shoulders. "If you'd give me directions, I could drive myself since it'll take me a little while."

"Not a chance." He huffed. "Listen, this is one assignment I don't have any choice on. It might come across like I don't want to be here, and I sorta don't. I mean, I have other things to do, but I have to be here. So here, I will be."

Too bad the guy couldn't see her glare through the phone. "I do need to go to the house, and I don't know where it is, although I could probably locate it by searching Atticus Urbacch online." Or looking for ominous clouds in the sky. "That being said, I'll be ready in thirty minutes. You'll see me in the lobby."

"Okay, Ms. Anna."

His sarcasm grated. She stuck her tongue out at the phone as the line went dead. Even without an audience, her face heated. Apparently, Wyatt Stone didn't bring out the best in her.

When she reached the lobby, she spotted him in an overstuffed chair, a striking mountain view behind him and the sunlight hitting him just right. Whoa, this guy was fine! A girl could immerse herself in those clear, Caribbean-blue eyes. His mint button-up and jeans fit him nicely, thank you very much. And, with such hard-to-ignore perfect hair and scruff, he could be on a stylish outdoor magazine where outdoorsy, “cool” types go to find the latest looks and activities.

“Anna, Anna, are you ready?” He frowned like she was a puzzle to solve.

“Yes, I’m ready.” She strode toward the door, and he followed her.

The silver four-wheel-drive truck was waiting along the curb. Guess the place wasn’t busy now if he could claim such a spot.

With a click and a clank, he swung the passenger door open, gave a gallant bow, and reached for her hand. But she waved him away, stepped up on the running board, grasped the grab handle, and swung into the vehicle.

He sent her a wink as he slid into the driver’s seat and took off. “Do you remember me?”

“I do remember some things from yesterday,” she snapped, then frowned. Had she met him before? The name might be familiar, but surely, she’d remember that face and those eyes. She raised her chin. “Where would I know you from?”

“When we were children, we were neighbors.”

Seriously? She shifted to get a better look at him. “I don’t remember you. I don’t remember neighbors.” Did they even have neighbors?

“We also met at the diner in Grandville.”

A chill swept over her. She rubbed a palm against her forehead, just next to her eye. “I don’t remember seeing you. Why would you be there, at that diner?”

“I had meetings in Houston and Austin. I missed my flight out of Houston and decided to drive a rental to Austin. I stopped at a diner along the way. The other waitress mentioned your name. Then the way you carried yourself was somehow familiar.” He cocked his head at her. “You didn’t notice me?”

She shook her head.

“Yeah, thought not. I hoped you’d recognize me, but then that guy pulled you off to help an angry customer. Your jerk of a boss was yelling at you. It kinda ticked me off.” He waited for a response, but her voice had abandoned her. “Another waitress, bright-red lipstick and glittered nails, brought my coffee and let answers flow without a filter. She filled me in about your mother and confirmed you were the same Anna, Anastasia, I lived next to when we were young explorers on the mountain.” He sent her a wistful glance. “For sure, you didn’t notice me?”

“That does sound like Mr. Gray, and that had to be Sandy. She has the most outgoing personality of anyone, a dear friend.” But Wyatt at the diner in Grandville? What were the odds?

“When I called my boss, Greta, about the meetings, I mentioned I ran into Sabina’s granddaughter. She must have told Atticus or Martha. I mean how else would Martha have known where you were?”

Anna started picking at a cuticle, making it bleed. “Did you always know my grandmother was Sabina and my great-grandfather was Peter Urbacch?”

“Everyone knew. No one fully understood why your grandfather lost the property or why your mother lived in that older house. It was abhorrent that Atticus didn’t help or

reach out, but everyone knew.”

Everyone knew.

“We’re almost at the house. I can give you my cell number if you want.” He looked at her. What did he see? Anna, the girl next door, vulnerable and all alone.

She fumbled with the phone in her pocket. “I’d like your number, just in case. Everything is kinda upside down. I’m not sure who to trust. I now know I have blood relatives, but I’m not sure I have a family.”

Wyatt felt like a frozen statue, standing there watching her walk away, dreading each step. She glanced up at the sky—expecting what?

He could at least give himself credit for hesitating before pressing his foot hard on the gas and abandoning her. He’d given her his number. Wasn’t that enough? He couldn’t turn his truck around—miss this meeting.

But—how small she looked.

Life can be so cruel.

Sorry, Anna.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Anna walked toward the house, dreading each step. The woman with her hair pulled into a too-tight bun ushered her inside, and Martha approached, the knot of pearls swaying over a paisley sweater. The Dr. Jekyll version again, no Mr. Hyde Martha visible, she smiled. “We have breakfast ready. Come along, and you can help yourself. Atticus should be up and ready to talk soon, I hope.”

Bacon-and-sugar scents lured Anna down a decorated hall. Martha turned into a room where two shimmering crystal chandeliers oversaw an oblong walnut table for twelve with a place setting for one. The rose centerpiece lent its aroma to the air.

Martha stood between the shimmering dining room and pristine kitchen. Anna couldn’t hear Bessie’s response over the clanking and clinking, but cooking up such a racket, she mustn’t be pleased with whatever Martha said.

A man and the young woman from yesterday brought in platters loaded with jellied rolls, crusted pastries, fluffy potatoes, syrupy waffles, and sizzling meats. Another tray displayed fresh fruit. Uncomfortable with the abundance, Anna shifted in place.

“Eat up.” Martha waved her to the table. “We’ll go up to meet Atticus in about thirty minutes.”

What happened to the troubled and confused woman Anna saw yesterday? Martha’s mood changes only added to the foreboding house.

Anna’s appetite had vanished. She’d have declined, but Bessie and the kitchen staff already had it made. And she wouldn’t waste food. It could be hard to come by. She forced bites down with hard swallows and cold water before the cinnamon rolls

melted in her mouth and smelled of butter and sugar. Oh my, had she eaten two already? She placed both hands across her stomach.

The grandfather clock ticked a steady rhythm. Alone, she raised her hands over her ears. It had almost been an hour. When would this be over, this series of events like chess moves intended as a mental challenge? She wanted this meeting, but she wouldn't wait a tick longer than an hour.

She pushed back her chair and stood. Her flats swished with each step on the wood floor as she searched for a distraction. She moved toward a walnut cabinet in the corner and opened a door. White china, elegant candlesticks, crystal bowls, and something blue tucked in back. She knelt and stretched to reach the blue-and-gold bowl. After moving it to her lap, she rubbed her finger around the smooth, undamaged rim of an antique, an exact match to her mother's treasured keepsake.

Both hands cradling the bowl, she thought about her great-uncle's lifeless portrait and yesterday's conversation with Martha. What kind of man was he? Ruthless, it seemed. Martha and Wyatt both seemed loyal to Atticus, which might speak to his character. Expect the unexpected, Anna.

Bongggggg. A brassy bell rang out once, demarking the half hour, echoed, then fell silent.

She nearly jolted, but her hands tightened on the bowl safe in her lap, her mind flashing back to her childhood.

She'd been warned not to use the bowl, but she couldn't resist. She'd stood on a chair, wobbling on tiptoe to reach it. Her fingertips slipped, and the bowl tumbled and hit the edge of the counter. Her outstretched hands saved it from complete destruction, but later, she glimpsed her mother inspecting it, a tear slipping free as she rubbed her finger across the chipped rim. Without a word spoken, she placed it on a

higher shelf. That bowl rode protectively in Anna's passenger seat during her move to Grandville, one of the few pieces salvaged from her childhood.

Now, she tucked its counterpart back in its place, then made her way to the door.

"Are you ready, Anna?" Martha stood in her path, framed by the opening to the hall.

How creepy. Anna flashed a nasty glare. "Yes, I'm ready."

They walked side by side before Martha picked up her stride, leaving Anna again pattering behind. They marched in a new direction, Anna trying to notice something familiar about the long hallway replete with paintings, tables, and vases no one could see or enjoy. After a few more steps, they entered an elevator and rode up to the third floor.

Her heart was pounding. She rubbed damp hands on her jeans.

Why had her mother never told her about Atticus? With this strange darkness hovering over the place, she may not want the answer.

They entered a sitting room displaying more paintings, many familiar, perhaps even originals. The books here could be first editions. "Another room of rare treasures no one enjoys," she muttered, raising a glance from Martha. Anna shrugged. "I struggle to see the point."

Martha's brow arched. "Wait here."

Anna turned a padded blue chair to face the direction Martha left in. She'd not be surprised again. She picked at her cuticle, pulling it deeper. She wiped the drops of blood on the side of the chair. "Hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait."

A knock came from the hallway. Then a stocky man headed where Martha had. Somehow, he looked familiar. What was wrong with her memory lately? She couldn't remember meeting Wyatt. This man looked familiar, and she couldn't place him. She'd ask Dr. Clarke— if she could remember.

Her phone slid off her lap, bouncing under her chair. She bent and reached underneath to grab it. Then her whole body jerked so hard her hand whacked the chair leg, smarting.

“He was the man on the plane!” she whisper-shouted. The man who scattered his things all over the floor. He'd been sitting right next to her!

Martha was on the plane, watching Anna and the item that dropped from this man's bag under the seat. Something is not right. Run, Anna, run!

Hands shaking, she sprinted toward the elevator and pushed the button over and over. It dinged as the door clattered open. She stepped in and pressed the one on the panel. Her phone was in her hand as she typed “Atticus Urbacch address” into the search. The screen showed a business address.

She brushed the side of her face, her hands clammy, her knees wobbling.

Who could she trust?

Anna pulled out Wyatt's business card. Wyatt Stone, Chief Legal Officer, Alan Corporation. He didn't work for Atticus?

She held the card with one hand and tried to dial as the elevator doors bumped open. She moved through, her head spinning. The call had gone through, and the phone was ringing.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Wyatt, I need your help. I don’t know what to do.” Her voice broke as she tried to keep it quiet.

“Anna, are you crying? What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“I’m at the house, but I’m trying to find my way out. As soon as I can, I’m going to start walking and call a cab or something. I am going home!”

“Let’s take a minute to go through what is happening right now. Did something happen? Did Atticus say something? Why are you trying to leave?”

“Stop asking questions! I need help, and I’m leaving. I’m—I’m scared .”

“I’m on my way. Get somewhere you feel safe and let me know. I’m coming.”

“Somewhere safe? Where?” Okay, get a grip. Just get away from here—now. “I’ll let you know when I’m out of the house.”

She kept walking and smelled the sweet scent from the kitchen. She followed that. Bessie would know the way out. She wouldn’t stop Anna from leaving.

When she discovered the kitchen, Bessie was giving orders, and someone was slicing vegetables. Bessie stopped, her eyebrows puckered, and her lips pinched together.

Anna wiped her face with the back of her hand. “I must be a sight, but would you please point the way out of the house?”

Bessie’s demeanor changed. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips became straight. “Franny, please show Anna the way out. She has requested to leave.”

“Oh, thank you.” Anna hugged Bessie, the woman’s arms hanging straight beside her, but when Anna sniffled and gasped for air, Bessie reached around and patted Anna lightly on the back. Then Bessie’s arms dropped down, and she turned toward the counter without looking back.

“This way.” The young woman with the small glasses pointed and started walking. “Have you been in Boise long?”

Read the room, Franny. Anna picked up her pace, the front door in sight. She reached for the knob.

Then the door rushed open.

She stepped back to avoid it before it slammed against the wall.

Wyatt stood in the doorway, his shoulders forward, head down, eyes flaring and wild. He grabbed her hand, sending shock waves to all her senses, then wrapped his fingers around hers, and guided her out the door.

“Are you okay, Anna?” His face softened, and his hand squeezed hers. “You had me concerned. I dropped everything.”

There it was, the you’re-bothering-me smart-aleck remark. But he was here, wasn’t he?

She burrowed into him. Deep sobs followed. Trying to stop only made it louder and stronger. A lifetime of rough patches and hard luck had bottled up like vintage wine.

He whisked her into his arms and then placed her in the truck.

The loud rumble of the engine drew her attention. She lifted her head to see houses

moving past. She tried to get her bearings and recognize the landscape.

“What happened?” he asked.

Apparently, that was Wyatt. What is the issue, and how do we solve it?

“I don’t know where to start. I don’t know why I’m here. I do know I want to go home. I want everyone to leave me alone.” Great. She sounded fragile and pitiful. She didn’t want to be that person. She wanted to be strong.

“So... what is the issue?”

“I shouldn’t have come here. I see that now.” Her finger wrapped around a strand of hair and twisted it around in circles. Her eyes stared out the window, but nothing came into her view. “Danger lurks around every corner. Martha lured me for some fantasy she has about Atticus becoming something he’s not. I can’t help her.” I can’t even help myself.

“Has someone threatened you or tried to harm you?”

“I was already harmed! I had a concussion and some bruised ribs.” Rib!

She drew in slow breaths, calming now. “Martha took me upstairs, and while I was waiting, a man who followed me from Houston to Boise entered. He sat right beside me on the plane with Martha. And with me. Now, that could be a coincidence. But right now, I’m encountering too many coincidences, and I’ve had enough.”

They were at some type of scenic park now. A small, crystal-blue lake gleamed as the truck roared into a spot. Another time, she’d have enjoyed it.

“Let’s get out and walk or sit.”

Didn't he hear her? "Look. I don't want to talk about it. I want to go—get out of here."

She had no family. She had no one. "Mother was right. I'm alone. I shouldn't have come."

Wyatt put his hand on hers. He didn't say anything. He just gave her hand a warm squeeze she felt to her toes. Then the truck door swished open, and he took a walk.

Alone, Anna leaned her head back. The shimmering lake and pine-covered mountains helped. As did the park empty of visitors. Somehow, she was feeling better when Wyatt returned, his cheeks rosy from his walk. The man was definitely in his element.

He swung into his seat. "It's time you start from the beginning and tell me every recent detail. I'll start with what I know."

He planted an elbow on the console and braced his chin in his hand. "About six months ago, I came through Grandville and saw you in the diner. That event started something. I'm not sure why. I only told Greta Alan, the chairman and founder of Alan Corporation. Her son, Devlin, whom you met at the house, is now the chairman."

"Greta was the chairman, and now it's Devlin?" Anna interrupted as something like a blanket of ice slipped over her shoulders, sending a shiver.

"She died a few months ago. Cancer. What a monster cancer can be." His face solemn, he looked out the window. "Anyway, when I told her about seeing you, she seemed interested—more than interested. I only mentioned it because you were from around here, and she was friends with Atticus—well, business partners, at least. I never understood that relationship. I guess she was interested since Atticus would

want to know about part of his family. Even after five years working for Greta, I never really got to know Atticus. And even after learning more about Greta, I haven't found clarity about what created their bond."

So Wyatt wasn't loyal to Atticus. Wyatt was loyal to Greta. And now he worked for Devlin Alan, the man who drugged her drink.

Anna's breath came too fast. She was trying to remain calm, to think, but she couldn't just sit here. "Maybe I should take a walk. Fresh air might help."

"Sure." Wyatt came around and opened her door, and she stepped into the brisk morning.

Soft grass whispered underfoot. Blue jays squawked high-pitched warnings in the distance. She ignored them. She needed air—to breathe. She closed her eyes, took a slow breath, and listened. A river's roar came from the distance, beyond a dense grove of trees. Rocks crunched under her feet along the path toward the alluring sound. The trees opened up to an oasis. Water rushed down the mountain and crashed against the rocks on its way into a pool of crystalline blue water.

"I've been to the park many times." He tossed a pebble into the pool. "I knew it had a couple waterfalls, but I've never taken the time to find them. I'm glad you found this, and I'm glad I saw it for the first time with you."

Tiny droplets of water hung in the air with his affectionate words, sending a chill through her bones.

"For some reason, it's exhilarating and poignant. The rushing water crashes against the rocks and flows like a river of tears."

The damp cold pressed against her skin when she sat on a flat boulder along the

mountain pool. The sun sparkled across the blue water, creating a God-made hypnotic charm.

“It’s magical. I want to be part of it—part of the water and the mountain—part of it all.” She dipped her hand down into the cold water. It made her feel alive. When her hand began to numb, she drew it out, rubbed it on her pants, then slid it into her pocket. A shadow covered the water, darkening it. “I lost track of time and didn’t realize the temperature had dropped. Do you mind if we head back to the truck?”

He pulled off his jacket and wrapped it over her with a slight linger that grabbed her imagination. Then he led the way as she slowed for one last glance back. He stopped to pluck a dandelion, fiddling with the vibrant petals. “If that guy at the gas station hadn’t suggested the diner—well, no matter now.”

“Greta was the one interested in the diner?”

“She expressed interest from my first call. Because of her relationship with Atticus, she allowed me to contact that jerk of a boss you have and introduce him to Rowan. We wanted Rowan to work there and watch out for our investments and for you, so to speak. Rowan’s primary role was to keep track of the books. Because Gray was such a loser, Greta thought it was a good idea for Rowan to report back any concerns, but he was there to make sure the books were in order.”

Her jaw clenched. Her hand itched as it thawed. How did she miss this? A shiver found its way into her depths, chilling her from within. Rowan was watching her and reporting to someone else. What stories had he told them?

“He didn’t do that part of the job very well.” She rubbed one pulsing temple, then the other. “Rowan works for Alan Corporation, and you spoke with Mr. Gray?”

“After Rowan called me about the diner incident, I contacted Mr. Gray and told him

whatever you needed was covered.”

The thrumming in her temples increased in tempo. She brought her other hand up so she could press against both temples. “Now Mr. Gray’s unusual attitude makes more sense. As does why an overqualified Rowan was working at our diner.”

But how was this conversation supposed to help her? She bit her lip and scratched at another cuticle. As she pulled a string of skin free, she imagined herself a marionette with multiple puppeteers pulling her strings.

Wyatt slowed their pace. He must see how hard his revelations were on her. He reached as if to touch her hand, then let his fall idle at his side instead. “I wasn’t trying to do anything to you or trick you. I was just trying to help you out and give you a break. I mean, that guy was so hard on you. When Greta suggested buying the business, it sounded perfect. Then we could keep a rein on Gray and tamp him down. He was too rough on you—on everyone. It was hard to witness. I thought you deserved better. You shouldn’t be treated like that.”

He stopped and brushed a hair from her face.

She flinched at his touch. “I want to believe you, but I gotta admit I just keep hearing something from an old horror movie. You know, ‘This is for your own good. We are here to help.’”

“Yeah, I get it.” He shrugged and resumed their stroll.

Would he say more? Could she handle more?

“After the incident, Rowan kind of lost track of you. He tried to pump Sandy or Mr. Gray, but they wouldn’t provide much. Then Martha, of all people, called me to take you home. That was, as you say, ‘quite a coincidence.’”

She shivered. What did she know about him? They were neighbors as children—or so he claimed. He treated her with respect. He came to her rescue. He stirred something in her and got on her nerves. But could she trust him? Trust him, Anna.

What did she have to lose? They stopped and sat at the base of an aspen. She leaned against the peeling bark and told him about her mother's death, the struggles, the bills, Sandy's kind offer for her to get away, the diner, the attack, the calls, the break-in, and the letter. She even mentioned Devlin and the tampered drinks. She didn't mention the locket, the money, or Dr. Garrett Clarke.

Midway through, Wyatt inched closer and put his arm around her, tightly but not too tight. Just right. And she didn't flinch. Didn't pull away. She regained her focus. Somehow, having him near gave her more strength. When she finished, they sat quietly, emotionally exhausted.

Then Wyatt gestured for them to return to the truck. "We should go to my cabin. We need to go through all this and decide your best move. Heading back to Texas without speaking with Atticus might not be wise. He isn't doing well, but a couple days should be fine."

She let out a slow breath, unwilling to be reckless. "I have to admit I feel safe with you, maybe because of our childhood?"

Did she trust him? For some reason, she did. But did she trust him with her life?

"That might not be a bad idea." She climbed into the passenger seat, then waited for him to settle behind the wheel. "Knowing I'm at risk, I'd be uncomfortable at the hotel by myself. Even though I don't know you, I'm going to trust you because I have no one else. Don't let me down."

"Never." He started the truck's engine. "We'll head to the hotel and get your things."

If you check out, you'll have an advantage. No one will know where you are. We can return your rental car. You won't be needing it for a while."

At the busy hotel, the redheaded clerk who served Anna at The Grill gawked, then ducked her head, scratching at her arm and avoiding eye contact.

"She seems nervous." Anna edged closer to Wyatt as the elevator doors bumped closed. "She served the drinks Devlin doctored. We should be careful."

"Agreed. Something doesn't seem right. Let me go into the room first."

At her room, she handed over her key card, and he swiped it and thrust the door open. Then he gasped, and she edged to peer around him. The room had been tossed, and her clothes scattered everywhere. She opened her luggage and sifted through it to identify any missing items. She was still taking inventory when a metallic click came from around the corner. She pointed toward the closet and mouthed the word safe .

A stocky man came charging from that direction, barreling through the room, papers in hand. "He's the man from the plane."

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Anna moved around the bed, out of the stocky man's way. "Watch out, Wyatt. He's moving fast!"

Wyatt stuck out his foot, tripping the intruder who landed with a hard thump before Wyatt grabbed him and twisted his arms behind him. As Wyatt reached for the papers, the man kicked Wyatt's thigh, his boot heel connected in a sickening thud. The force threw Wyatt off balance, allowing the stocky man to reach the door. It slammed shut behind the intruder. Wyatt stood up, ready to chase, but he stopped when he glanced at her.

"You're shaking." He crossed to her side, gripped her arm, and guided her to sit on the edge of the bed. "Don't worry. I'm not going to leave you alone right now. There's no point trying to run after him."

He rubbed her back. "We know where to find him—or at least who will know where to find him. Good thing you took photos of the documents and the originals are in a safe deposit box. Are you okay?"

Was she? Her whole body shook. She leaned against him, her head dipping to his chest. His strong chest. As he slid his arms loosely around her, she forced herself to inhale a deep sandalwood-scented breath. "We'll let the manager sort it out. There must be cameras around the hotel unless the nervous clerk did something to them."

Wyatt gathered her things and led her from the room. In the lobby, another clerk, a young man, manned the desk.

Anna strode ahead of Wyatt. "When we came in, a young redheaded lady was at the

counter.”

“She had to go home.” The youth kept his focus on his phone. “Sick leave, ya know?”

Adrenaline was pumping through her faster than she could process. Anna inhaled, composed herself, and planted her hands on the wood-topped counter. “I had an intruder in my room. He broke into my safe and stole its contents. The young woman in question was nervous when we arrived, and I now wonder if she was aware or provided a key.”

“Whoa. Hold up, lady. That’s some serious assumptions.” The youth set his phone aside and scratched his head. “I can’t tell you any personal information about an employee, but I can call the police if you’d like.”

Wyatt shook his head.

She pressed her palms harder against the countertop. “Please inform the manager about my intruder. Surely, you have a camera, and you should be concerned this occurred. We don’t have time to wait for the police, but your hotel put a guest at risk. Your manager should decide what’s best.”

“Your manager should be aware, Shawn.” Wyatt read the clerk’s name on his hotel badge.

They checked out and paid the bill. Next stop: car rental. Anna would drive ahead. Hopefully, it will go smoothly. They’d met their quota of dramatic events for the day.

After a seamless rental drop-off, Anna climbed into Wyatt’s truck, and they headed out of Boise on Interstate 84, then to Highway 21 to avoid Warm Springs Avenue. Then she sat up straighter. “That’s Lucky Peak Dam, isn’t it?” Her lips quirked as an

old memory triggered. “I remember going there, water shooting from the dam.”

“They still release using the ‘Rooster Tail’ in good water years, but it’s rare and only in the spring. It always draws a crowd.”

“I can see that. It’s rather unique.” The memory pleased her, relaxed her. “Man, I miss this feeling of joy. It’s been a while.” She traced a finger along her ragged nail bed. Wyatt felt like home.

But it was a memory, nothing more. Her peace of mind vanished with her next breath.

“Where is your cabin, Wyatt?”

“It’s on my grandparents’ old property. The land next to yours.”

“What?” She jerked upright, slapping the console between them. “Are you kidding me? We are going toward Idaho City? Why didn’t you tell me? You knew it would matter.” And here she was just beginning to feel relaxed.

He rolled his shoulders, then rubbed the back of his neck. “Look. I’ll take you back if you want. But you know you’re not safe there. With me, you can relax. You’re safe.” His voice, a soothing rumbling, harmonized with the engine. “I’m here, and I won’t leave your side until we figure this out.”

Those words melted her heart. “I haven’t felt safe since this began,” she admitted. “I want—no, I need— to feel safe.” She tore deeper into her cuticle. “But I don’t need surprises, Wyatt. No. More. Surprises. Okay?”

They drove in silence, and then he put some oldies on—Bread, Seals and Croft, and Loggins and Messina. The words of “If” slipped around them, moving and tender, and they drove on like everything was normal. Everything wasn’t normal, but a girl

could allow herself to pretend, couldn't she?

The storm was brewing again, not just figuratively. Clapping thunder and flashing lightning would arrive soon enough.

"Idaho City Limits," the sign said in tall black letters. Wyatt turned toward the old structures along both sides of the street. The antique gas sign had always been there. The truck jumped over a couple of big rocks as he pulled in beside the pump. An old wood wagon waited on a porch. The ding-ding of the gas pump whirred in the background. Then the bell on the door rang as Wyatt headed inside to pay. He returned with a grin and placed a potato-shaped magnet in her hand. She forced her lips closed to hold back a giggle.

"Let's get some groceries and then head on up the hill."

After they loaded up, the familiar drive was serene, and a wistful sigh escaped. "Wish I knew why Mother took us away."

His golden brows arched. "You don't know?"

"If she ever said, I can't remember."

"Well, we're almost there."

Her heart skipped. She pulled out her phone with a pout.

"Sorry, Anna, not much cell service up here. Once you pass Lucky Peak Dam, it's spotty. There are a few places reception works, but you never know where. There is a special place at the top of the hill, with the right cell carrier and the right angle of your phone—if you stand on your tippy-toes." He grinned at her. "Otherwise, you have to rely on the poles and wires that survive each winter. Landlines."

“Do you have a landline?”

“Yes. You’ll have everything you need.”

Wow, what a killer smile! But why did it send electricity from her arms to her toes? Her pulse raced, and she felt warmer.

“We’re here.” He pulled onto another gravel road, then pushed a button on his console. The solar-powered wrought-iron gate edged open, and while he drove past the brick fence flanking it, she tried not to act impressed.

The truck bounced up a long driveway that looped around a hill. Fruit trees and ponderosa pine lent shady spots to the grassy hills, and a low whistle slipped free. “What bliss.”

“Yeah, coming here rejuvenates me.”

They continued up a steep hill. A gurgling creek ran parallel along the road, its waters spreading wide, then narrowing, and then widening. She rolled down her window as the creek bubbled and smashed across the rocks.

“Will you please stop just for a minute? I want to see the creek.” With her voice so high and eager, he must think she sounded like a curious child.

Still, he didn’t hesitate, almost slamming on his brakes. As her seat belt stopped her forward motion, she sent him a surprised look. His smirk spoke for him before he jumped out long enough to open her door. Then he climbed back in and waited, allowing her time to remember.

She slid out of the truck and pattered toward the clear water rushing downstream. It was as if she were a child again. She slid off her shoes, stepped into the water, then

squealed. “Yikes.”

The water was clear enough to reveal her toes, but cold enough to be like putting her feet into the snow. But who cared?

A gust of wind swirled, blowing a leaf. It floated toward the truck. Her gaze followed it and then drifted to Wyatt. She never wanted to forget the way he was looking at her. It was a look she hoped to see for the rest of her life.

Her foot slipped on a mossy rock when she stepped onto the bank. Her leg flew into the air, and her bottom crashed into the water. Her scream probably reached Wyatt before the splash. After scrambling back to her feet and climbing the bank, she slowed her pace and took care with each step as she carried her shoes while watching for sharp rocks.

Wyatt stood tall in her path, holding a towel, then wrapped it around her, his arms snugging her in, his breath tingling her neck. Leaning back into him, she inhaled his sandalwood scent to slow her heart. What was this she was feeling? Anticipation? Attraction? Or something more?

He cleared his throat and released the towel when her hand brushed his. Then he hesitated, kicked his toe in the dirt, and moved away. His husky voice carried over his shoulder. “I’ll wait in the truck.”

She pulled the towel tight and steadied her knees before climbing in.

He faced forward, pressed on the gas, and drove up the hill. He nodded to the left. “That’s the cabin.”

“Whoa. Your definition of cabin so doesn’t match my definition. I’d say we’re using different dictionaries.” The cabin was spectacular! Green mountains behind and green

mountains in front. Undaunted trees shaded rolling land and dipped limbs into the bubbling creek where an incline seemed to continue into the blue sky. “Nothing like Texas—blue spruce, western and ponderosa pines.” Majestic blue spruce stood watch over the cabin. She hugged her arms across her chest and whispered, “This cabin must’ve been on the cover of some luxury retreat magazine.”

Hopefully, Wyatt, sliding from the driver’s seat, didn’t hear. As he walked around the front of the truck cab, she ogled “the cabin.”

Chimneys flanked the north and south sides, three balconies climbed the front, and a huge porch greeted visitors with rockers and swings. And she’d been his neighbor, living next door in a shack.

“My grandparents built this cabin after they bought the property.” He opened the back passenger door and hauled out her suitcase, then got her door. “I updated some things the past few years and added the pool, but it still feels like the cabin I remember from my youth. You will be comfortable here, and the place has excellent security.”

He must come from money. What had he thought of her growing up? She didn’t remember him, but he seemed to remember her. Why was that?

“The house on Warm Springs where my newly-found great-uncle lives is larger and grander, but dark and cold.” She accepted his hand, hopped down, and waved toward “the cabin.” “This is a home that became part of its surroundings.”

A home with balconies to sit on and appreciate life’s bounty. A home to spend time with family and live an adventure. A home for love and happiness. Her arms crept around her middle again. Why did she feel it was home?

Wyatt winced as he lifted her suitcase and lugged it up the front steps. “Did you bring

rocks? We already have rocks here.”

She blushed and eyed the two orange “heavy” stickers slapped on it. “At least I’ll have some dry clothes. I always over pack, but I never have everything I need.”

He grunted dramatically as he carried it in and nodded to her muddy clothes. “I imagine you’ll want to get cleaned up.”

“Thanks.” With the truck unpacked, she grabbed some of the cold groceries off the counter, its live-edge oak agleam. She let out a small gasp at the refrigerator like one at the corner market. “Wyatt, this fridge is huge.”

“Well, we have a generator, and it stays stocked in the winter if I’m here and the roads are closed.”

“Wow.”

“Look around and choose a room. They should all have fresh linens. Mine is the blue one on the left once you go up the stairs. It’ll have my bag inside the door. Any other room is available, but the one by mine has a balcony and a great view. Just sayin’. They all have restrooms, even the one downstairs.” He jerked his thumb toward a hall, then slapped his hands together. “Then how about a walk before dinner? We can unwind and explore before we get serious with all the things we need to sort out.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She began the quest for a room.

The moment she entered the second bright and cheery room, she settled in. Soft turquoise walls mirrored the sky, as did the creek running behind it. She rubbed her hand across the mosquito screen, eager to leave her window open to enjoy the burbling creek and the spring night air. She’d feel safer closer to Wyatt. Her lips quirked.

She laid a set of pink pajamas by the puffy white pillow, scurried to freshen up, then headed back to the main room, her feet slapping on each wooden stair on her way. Wyatt was already there, waiting, in a sage sweater, khaki jeans, and hiking boots. He scooped up the jacket hanging over the side of the couch. She'd brought an old coat, hoping it was warm enough.

He reached out and touched her coat, using his forefinger and thumb to test the thickness. When he shook his head, a glossy hunk of hair dropped over one golden-brown brow, and her fingers twitched to brush it back.

“What?” She shrugged. “There isn’t much need in Texas for a heavy coat. It’s cold like one month a year.”

Clicking his tongue, he walked to the closet and tugged something off the hanger. He held up a thick black hiking jacket. The tag was no longer attached to the white thread hanging from the pocket.

Her mouth slightly opened as he handed it over.

“This belongs to my younger sister, Summer. She keeps it here for her rare visits. She won’t mind.”

The front door moaned as he pushed it open. Cool air rushed in, welcoming her senses. He kicked a rock that bounced down the path, the stone stilling at a clump of wildflowers. The creek created music along the pathway—drums pounding on rocks, bells chiming in the whirls, and soft harps playing with the rushing water.

A white-tailed deer paused in the distance, and a coyote howled on the mountain with the promise of a full moon. Pine, rose, and a light scent of orange mixed with fresh crisp spring air. Their boots kicked up puffs of dust and bouncing rocks as they followed the path, the musical creek meandering beside them.

Wyatt pointed to the corner of the fence. “That’s the end of the property.”

The trees and mountains continued on the horizon. Seeing them only as a background, Anna focused on Wyatt.

“We should head back up to the cabin.” He adjusted a black wildlife camera watching the fence line. “We can grill outside tonight.”

She pushed her legs and feet harder toward the ground, exerting more force on the steeper incline. With him farther up the hill, she quickened her step, her endurance from walking in the diner paying off. The black top of the chimney and the tips of the blue spruce were peeking over the hill, each step taking them closer to the enchanting cabin.

Rocks crushed down in the dirt as they strode through the back gate toward an outdoor kitchen with a bar. He pressed three buttons on a door panel. As the glass doors opened, he stopped and waited for her to go inside first.

The flame flared into the air when he started the grill. Anna made a salad and sliced fruit. Charcoal and seasoning scented the evening. She dropped tart lemon slices into cold spring water and carried the glasses onto the deck, his casual, easy manner invoking an unfamiliar longing.

They ate while they chatted, discovering one another’s likes and dislikes. Ironically, she cheered for the Dodgers, and he supported the Astros. That rivalry could get them into trouble.

“What sits at the bottom of the sea and twitches?” she asked.

“A scared crab?”

“A nervous wreck.”

“Ha! Ha!”

The sound system played his favorite vintage rock, and he raised his lemonade glass in salute to her. “That’s why I stopped at your diner. Love the good oldies.”

“Well, some of them get old after a while.” His rolled eyes made her laugh so hard her eyes began to water. “What? Too cheesy?”

She grew silent and closed her eyes, listening to the music with her heart.

Then Wyatt’s feet thudded to the decking, dropping from the wrought-iron chair he’d had them kicked up on. “I guess we’d better shut things down for the night. You’ve had a long day.” He held out a hand for hers and led her back to the house, then paused to check the locks and the security monitor by the front entrance.

Their footsteps pat-pat-patted up the stairs and down the hallway together. At her door, he hesitated, and beneath the note of sandalwood and spice, she caught a whiff of hickory and pine—the mountains.

“Wyatt, thank you for rescuing me.” The whisper rasped her throat. Her pulse quickened as he moved closer, and she tipped her face up, awaiting his kiss.

“Good night, Anna.” He brushed his fingers across her cheek, then retreated to his room. He didn’t glance back.

With the full moon as her night-light, she slipped into her silky pink PJs and opened the glass door, leaving only the screen. She sat on the edge of the bed and hugged her knees to her chest, the intensity of her attraction unsettling her.

A chill arrived with the cool breeze. She closed her eyes, reliving the tingle of his breath warming her nape. Be cautious, Anna, the wind whispered.

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The sun's rays brightened her room, and crisp air flowed around her. Chirping birds overplayed the gurgling creek, and a sigh escaped as Anna hugged her arms around herself and stood in the open doorway overlooking the magical world waiting for her. "It's like a fairytale, too good to be true."

Then a shiver ran through her, not from the cold, clean air. As if she were a modern fairytale princess, villains lurked in the shadows waiting, their identities hidden. Who exactly? Manipulative Martha? The dark knight at the hotel and airplane lurking in the shadows? The conniving prince poisoning her drinks? Or was it the imperious king himself?

Anna slipped on a moss-green T-shirt with some jeans and fought the urge to bounce down the stairs. She didn't see Wyatt, but a whiff of French toast, butter, and syrup beckoned her to the kitchen. French toast waited under a plate intended to keep it warm. She picked up the note atop it.

Good morning.

I went fishing just down the hill. Help yourself to breakfast. There's coffee in the pot. Once you're done, join me. See you soon.

Wyatt

Her pulse raced. Giddy as a teenager on her first date, she poured some coffee, then ate, and cleaned up after herself. The door banged closed as she rushed outside. Tossing her Texas jacket over her arm, she headed down the worn path and dodged rocks and small critters past the trees. The trees stopped near the creek, and the bright

sunbeams flashed into her eyes. The scent of pine traveled with the cool breeze. She meandered along, her hand shielding her eyes.

Then Wyatt approached in a baseball cap, carrying three good-sized trout on a string. Oh my! Could he be better looking? She sucked in a quick breath.

“Breathe, girl. Breathe,” she whispered to herself.

“Good morning!” he hollered, his teeth sparkling in the sun.

“Thank you for making breakfast. What time did you get up?”

“Didn’t look at the clock. I make it a point to disconnect out here. Limited phone and no schedule. I’ve always enjoyed mornings.”

“Find your own treasure in life’s moments,” her mother’s voice overplayed Wyatt’s. Hmm. The mountains must be stirring Anna’s memories like a slow-boiling pot.

They strolled alongside the creek, skipping flat rocks on smooth water. How easy to relax around him. He felt familiar. With good reason to be wary, to stay clear, her mind urged caution, demanding her heart remain strong. But it wouldn’t listen.

An eagle soared overhead, its white head contrasting with the blue sky. “Look at its nest up in that tree.” Wyatt pointed. The eagle glided in circles, its shadow swooping along their path.

“Your sister doesn’t have extra sunglasses here, does she?” Anna teased with a bump against his shoulder as they entered the cabin.

He glanced up with a longing look. “Let me see.” He strode into the downstairs guest room. Drawers creaked and groaned as he searched through the desk for a spare set.

Then he hoisted an old pair of aviators. “Aha, victory.”

The sun was straight up with no clouds, bringing the temperature along. Anna headed to her room and changed into khaki shorts and a cooler white shirt. Wyatt set up a work area by the pool’s soothing waterfall with cozy cushioned chairs and a glass-topped table.

She carried two glasses of iced tea outside, one in each hand, and set them beside the pen and notepad he’d placed before both chairs. Sunlight bounced off the pool, sparkling so brightly she squished her eyes closed and almost bumped into the table. If only she could pretend things were different!

“I’d love to stay here and relax, but we both know why I’m in Idaho. Atticus’s health could fail at any time.” The chair legs grated the patio stones as she pulled it out. “Disturbing events continue to follow me. I must get to the bottom of this.”

He sipped his iced tea, then twisted the glass in his hand, wiping off condensation. “It does seem like trouble’s stalking you.”

“I’ll start with my mother since this all ties to her.” She flattened her palms against the table’s glass top. “I don’t remember much of the funeral. Mother wanted the ceremony simple, just a couple of her favorite songs. After the service, Sandy mentioned Grandville and that I was welcome anytime. I was going in circles—unfocused. When I couldn’t bring myself to face my college classmates and professors, I wanted to sell off the house, pay some of the medical bills, and take some time to grieve. I couldn’t pretend that everything was the same—that nothing had happened. Everyone handles grief in their own way, I guess. I needed a break and a fresh start. Although, I will admit my stint at the diner couldn’t come to an end soon enough.”

“Wow. I can see the return to school being difficult. I had a tough time after my mom

passed.”

“It’s the worst, right?” They were connected. Her heart swelled. “I know many people do it. I’m not proud of withdrawing. I wish I was stronger. My mother drew on something deep within her. I’m trying. Maybe that’s one positive about the grind at the diner. Working there has toughened me up.”

“You’re stronger than you realize.” He let the words linger. “Okay.” He set his glass down, scooted his chair closer, and picked up the notepad. “Let’s create a list with three columns. We’ll list their name, their suspicion status, and a note if needed. Sandy, I presume, should be a no?”

“Absolutely.” Anna drew her notepad closer, her steamy palm print fading on the glass surface. “So that’s one down.”

“Right.” Wyatt made a note.

“I don’t care for Mr. Gray’s personality or how he treats people. Still, I doubt he’d be part of anything complicated or sinister. He likes his routine and little kingdom. He’s not going to jeopardize that.” She bit the corner of a fingernail, then lowered her hand after a few seconds. “The only part that didn’t fit was him allowing Rowan to work there and his dramatic attitude change when I was injured. But you cleared that up.”

An eagle cried overhead. She shaded her eyes to watch its flight. “What about Rowan? Do you trust him?”

Wyatt tapped his pen against where he wrote Rowan’s name. “He’s more of a follower, and I supported Greta when she suggested he take that job. He kept me informed and seemed scared when you got hurt, but his vague reporting after the incident bothered me. He should be considered since he was there and the timing works. We’ll rule out Gray and Sandy but put Rowan in the maybe column. Who’s

next?”

“Martha. She’s involved in everything and erratic. She has some kind of weird attraction to Atticus and might be delusional. I don’t understand her role, but her fingerprints are everywhere. She insists she found the letter at Atticus’s house and it was from him, but I’m not so sure. What do you know about her?”

Feeling strangely constrained, Anna untucked her green shirt from her shorts and flapped the hem to let air onto her skin. Still, her stomach rubbed against the band, and a sweat rose on her skin. Why had Martha chosen Wyatt when he didn’t work for Atticus?

A trained professional, he didn’t give much away with his facial expressions. “I know her because of the relationship between Greta and Atticus. Honestly, Martha is the closest person to Atticus, even closer than he was to Greta.”

“What makes you say that?” She folded her arms across her chest, sinking back into the plush deck chair.

“Well...” He rubbed his forehead, then flicked a hunk of tousled hair back. “She’s always at events, ya know? Anything involving him also involves Martha. I don’t know how long she’s worked for him, but it seems like always. I’m usually dealing with her during the transactions between Alan Corp and his companies. She’s tough and willing to do what it takes—a pit bull for Atticus.”

Anna sparked. “I’ve gathered her loyalty to him is... unquestionable .”

“Martha goes into the maybe column with a side note about the calls. Why did she start making them? All my interactions with Martha included Atticus and his approval. He’s ill, yes, but I still can’t imagine she’d do anything without his knowledge. Plus, how did she get the letter to you?”

“I also wondered about that.” She tried to think about the letter and how it ended up in her purse after the first attack. She rehashed the attack for him.

“That was the morning after the call. If they were there for me, they knew when I was coming, knew my schedule. Granted, it’s posted outside the kitchen in a hallway by the public restrooms. I’ve complained about that to Mr. Gray, but as you can imagine, he might’ve even kept it there because I complained.”

He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “Did you see who was in the room? Do you remember anything about him at all?”

“Nothing, until I heard him moving. I turned, a shadowed form came toward me, and I was knocked to the floor. I was flattened by a man, so it couldn’t have been Martha. She hired someone to give me the letter. Someone who was supposed to be reliable, someone Atticus had used before. She said I wasn’t supposed to be harmed. She didn’t give me his name.”

“Martha again.” He added a check next to her name, then reached over, and rested his hand on Anna’s. “It’s hard for me to hear all this. I feel partly responsible since I’m the one who mentioned your location to Greta. I’m sorry you’ve gone through so much—truly.”

A delicious warmth spread through her, starting at the brush of his fingers. She slid her hand free, trying to stay focused right now, and he had a way of distracting her. “Could the man at the diner be the same man who was on the plane? His shape seemed a little different, but I didn’t see much in that dark room.”

“Is that when the letter was put into your purse?”

“If the intruder was there when I got there and then ran out, I don’t know when they could’ve done it. Someone was there almost the entire time.”

Wyatt wrote “intruder” and put a question mark next to it. “What was next?”

The letter. Her purse. The hospital. Her body tensed. She pushed back from the table. “I need a break—to make a call—check with a friend. There’s cell service somewhere around here?”

“Not reliable. Without a local carrier, it’s spotty. Use the landline. There’s a phone in your room.” He stood as well and reached as if to grasp her hand again, but he lowered his when she tucked hers behind her. “Is something wrong?”

She wasn’t sure if they were ready for a discussion about Garrett at this point, but the letter’s timing troubled her. Once she spoke with him, she could decide the next move.

“Are you going to stay out here? I’ll be back in a bit.” Her calf cramped, and she pressed her toe down when she stood up.

“I’ve been sitting for a while, and I’ll stretch my legs. Then let’s prepare an early dinner instead of lunch and dinner. How’s that sound?”

“Great with me. I’ll make a tossed salad or get some asparagus started if you cook the fish. I’ve never cooked trout and might ruin your fresh catch.” A pinch in her stomach made her twist.

“Sounds like a plan. We’ll meet in the kitchen in about an hour.”

Wyatt walked down the hill, his movements rigid. The gate that kept animals out of the yard and pool creaked open, echoing up to the cabin. Once he turned onto the path along the creek, she carried both tea glasses into the house. She preferred to avoid an uncomfortable situation of him listening to her conversation with Garrett. Call it paranoid, but she was getting that way.

Upstairs, she first checked for cell service. Having none, she found the number in her contacts, dialed Garrett on the landline, and dropped onto the edge of the bed. The plush white duvet pillowed around her, its billows like downy clouds against the turquoise-sky walls.

“Hello.” First ring again.

“Garrett, this is Anna.”

“Anna? Oh, I didn’t recognize the number. The caller ID’s for a Wyatt Stone. Is he a relative?”

That was Garrett—direct and not playing games.

“He’s a family friend, and I’m in the mountains with spotty cell service. There’s a landline, so we have communication if the cell phones don’t work.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Like I said, we don’t have cell service. I couldn’t see if you’d tried to call.” All true.

“Is everything working out with your family? When will you be back?”

“I’m not sure. Things are... complicated.” Yeah, that was the word. She stifled a snort. “The timing isn’t ironed out yet. There was something I wanted to ask. Garrett, is it possible someone placed something in my purse at the hospital?”

“I guess anything is possible. Nurses and staff are in and out of the rooms. What type of item?” Always direct.

“An envelope. It was in my bag when Misty took me to the house. Now I’m

beginning to wonder if it happened at the hospital.”

“Well, they are still trying to sort things out, so I didn’t want to alarm you for no reason. But something kind of unusual happened during the time you stayed.”

“What do you mean?” And why didn’t you mention it?

“There was an administrative review of the charts, cameras, and records. They discovered someone stole a nurse’s uniform out of the locker room and used it to dress up like a nurse. She went into a couple of rooms. One of them was yours. I was only looped in on part of it, but I confess that’s why I was taking my break in your room when you woke up that time. It kinda creeped me out, so I wanted to watch over you.” He let out a low breath. “I’m glad it happened, though. I may never have noticed you as more than a patient otherwise.”

Stay focused, girl . “What was the name of the nurse she impersonated?”

“Rita.”

“Rita?” Anna whispered. Could it get any more bizarre? “That was my nurse. I remember her during the night. I saw her name on her uniform.”

“Like I said, yours was one of her rooms, the only one we knew the imposter entered. She could’ve accessed your purse. I don’t know what else she did or why.”

Anna sat up straighter, her free hand fisting up wads of the duvet. Did “Rita” look familiar? The room was dark during the night. The nurse was an older woman, her hair pinned back. Was she Martha? Anna pressed a hand to her queasy stomach. Was she being played at every turn?

“Thank you, Garrett. That’s useful. I’m trying to put some pieces together, and this

helps.”

“What can I do? What’s wrong? Should I come there? Are you in Idaho?”

Caller ID was kind of a tattletale. If you wanted to be private, you needed that “unknown” feature Martha used.

A door screeched open and clicked shut downstairs.

“I’m okay. Truly. Please don’t worry. I appreciate you answering the phone and thank you for being honest.”

“I’ll always be honest with you. I miss you.”

How could her heart not melt more every time she spoke to this man? “Thank you, Garrett.”

I miss you. Did he mean her, or was he unconsciously mixing her up with his deceased fiancée?

It’d be nice to be missed.

“Bye, Anna. Please take care.”

They hung up. She pulled herself together and headed downstairs to help with an early dinner.

But what was going on? She was a normal person going about a regular job. She didn’t do anything exciting or adventurous. Why were these events happening to her?

It didn’t make sense.

Or maybe...

Maybe that was the question. Why her?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt was in the kitchen, clinking dishes and pans. As she approached, he studied her, his eyes hooded.

She bristled beneath his intense gaze. She wasn't an adversary in a business deal.

"Hey, there."

When she only murmured a response, he put down the tray and walked toward her, so she took a step back, unnerved by him in her space—so close she could smell sandalwood and spice, so close she could feel his pull as her heart began to beat faster.

"Anna, what's wrong?" He gripped her arm, and her senses reacted to his touch.

Why was she confused about him? "Don't analyze me, Wyatt. I'm already on edge."

He let out a boisterous laugh. "Well, I'm sorry—a force of habit."

It wasn't an apology, but she believed him. She had to believe someone. The list was getting too short.

He moved even closer, the magnetic force pulling her in. Then he hesitated, picked up his tray, and headed to the grill.

She tried to clear her thoughts, staring as he disappeared onto the deck.

The glass doors were opened wide, creating an amazing effect as she sprinkled nuts

atop the strawberry salad, eager to join him. She closed her eyes, savoring the murmur of the creek and the whisper of a crisp breeze.

“What if there is no pot of gold, Anna ?” Her mother’s voice joined the breeze. “You need to find your own treasure in moments because life is short and passing as we speak. Don’t waste it.”

With happiness warming her, Anna followed the tunes on the patio to Wyatt. He grinned at her, busy making magic at the grill. The smoke and spices created an amazing blend. Even the smell of fish didn’t spoil the balance, but every note seemed to belong as the breeze mixed it all together.

“Want some help?” she asked as she inhaled it all.

“Nope.” He pointed the tongs toward the table. “Enjoy yourself. Everything will be done in about ten minutes.”

“Then I’ll take a short walk.”

“Be careful. This’ll be ready soon.” His attention on the grill, he didn’t look back.

She moved toward a flower, inspecting it with her fingers, and then made her way up the path. When she glanced over her shoulder, Wyatt was watching her, one foot pointed toward the grill, the other turned in her direction.

What was up with that? She kicked the dirt, creating dust puffs. She hadn’t climbed far uphill before the breeze carried a familiar scent, a floral sweetness and pine dancing as friends. “What is that scent?”

Then it came into view. Syringa, the flower of a new beginning. The aroma overwhelmed her, making her happy and sad. She followed the clusters down the

hillside, bushes close enough together to form a flowery wall. A hummingbird fluttered in delight. Its iridescent throat shimmered as it turned its head to sing. The white flowers looked like white paint on the side of an old shack.

Anna froze, unable to will her feet to move another step, her body numb. Faint, she was gasping for air and struggling to breathe. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Then he was there, Wyatt. Standing beside her. He didn't touch her or move too close. He was just there, letting her process.

Mixed in with those wonderful flowers was the old house of her youth. A house representing love and struggle. Memories didn't flow back, only feelings in an avalanche trying to crush and smother her.

She couldn't take everything in at once.

"Anna, the food is done. Let's go back to my cabin now. Maybe we can come back here." He pointed to the old house. "If you want—when you're ready. But right now, let's eat and allow you some time to process all this."

He waited and didn't ask, but stated. "You're going to be okay. You're strong, Anna." Then he wrapped his fingers around her trembling hand.

They didn't speak, walking hand in hand down the path toward the cabin. She glanced back just once.

The old house was close by. They were neighbors. Close neighbors. How could someone live this close and not remember? How could someone live this close in the mountains, where there is always space? Was this part of the original property?

Then it hit her. Was this the land her grandfather lost? The land her orphaned,

teenaged mother was forced to leave when she moved to a shack?

Anna ground her teeth. She couldn't think of this now. She glanced at the sky, at the cabin, and at Wyatt and ambled down the hill. The gate creaked as it slammed open. Food scented the air again. She could breathe, relieved.

The food was scattered in the middle of the table, a cup tipped over, and the grill was wide open. He watched her climb the mountain and dropped everything when he saw her falter. She looked at him with her heart, not her eyes. He knew she'd need him. How did he know her that well?

He touched her shoulder. "Let's sit by the waterfall."

They carried full plates to the other side of the pool, the creek providing magical white noise and the water splashing and diving down into the glistening pool. They didn't discuss the old house or the land. They looked at everything and nothing. Wyatt sat close, his knee brushing against hers, and they let time pass.

After they straightened the kitchen, Wyatt swiveled on the barstool. He focused on a spot on his shirt, wet his finger in his mouth, and rubbed it.

"Should we continue with the list or play a little hooky?" he asked with a flirty wink. His heel thumped against the floor.

She pretended the wink didn't affect her. "I vote for hooky. But too much has happened to ignore."

He pulled at his shirtsleeve with his forefinger and thumb. "My grandparents purchased the land from the bank after your grandfather lost it," he blurted out while eyeing her reaction. "The land your house and the tree house were on wasn't part of the sale."

Well, there it was. Now they had to discuss it and deal with the past. Would that never go away?

She remained still, only allowing a subtle rock to provide comfort.. Her arms inched to slide around her middle, but she wouldn't look that vulnerable. So she picked at a cuticle. "Someone had to buy the property, right? Is the cabin the house my mother lived in?"

"My grandparents didn't keep the original house—I'm sorry to say. Unfortunately, everything had deteriorated, leaving it in pretty bad shape."

"Your family must have loved the land. I mean we're here." She waved toward the land beyond the kitchen window. "So either you or your family still own it. At least my mother was able to keep a piece somehow."

Could Anna hold anything against him for that? Was it his fault her family had issues and her grandfather lost the property?

He braced against the kitchen island and crossed his arms over his broad chest. "It's become a part of us. I hope to keep it in the family for generations." He shifted on the stool, a slight bead of sweat glistening on his brow. "Greta Alan bought the land you and your mother lived on from the bank around the same time my grandparents purchased their land. After you were born, she conveyed the property to your mother until you moved. No financial documentation to explain it. I don't know anything else."

She nodded and reached for a drink of water. She'd give this consideration later when she had time alone. After all, she was an expert at blocking things from her mind, and it was already swirling. Wyatt worked for Greta and Devlin. He lived on the property taken from her mother. Greta owned, then transferred the property. He was in Grandville. No. She willed her mind to ignore this now. But she'd have to return to it

later.

“Would it help you to go over and look at the property?” He pushed his hip away from the cabinet, one hand still braced on its live-edge oak countertop. “I could walk you part of the way or all the way. It might be good for you. Somewhere, there’s a connection between that place and the letter.”

“I’m not prepared to go over there now. Let’s circle back to the discussion about our childhood and the property someday. Now, we’d better focus on Atticus and the letter.”

His fingers drummed on the countertop, his stance taut. “You can tell me when you’re ready. I’ll try to support you however I can.”

“Wyatt, let’s see if we can sort through our list of suspects and what to ask when I meet Atticus. The old broken house could be a part of that, but we’d better stay with current events first and then move backward.”

His gaze softened. Was that admiration? Either way, the tension seemed to drain from his shoulders, giving her the encouragement she needed. “Shall we go out by the pool again?”

She shrugged. Could she handle that? The pool was magical in the evening, with the waterfall spilling and the lights glimmering. Keeping her heart from attaching itself to Wyatt was hard enough without a romantic backdrop enticing her.

Back in their spot, she shared her new information. “I think Martha put the envelope in my purse.”

“Envelope, meaning the letter?”

No reason to hide anything. Whatever was going to happen, she'd tell Wyatt everything. Either she trusted him or she didn't. She had the same risk either way.

"Several things were in the envelope. The letter, a locket with a woman's picture, and thirty-five hundred in cash."

His brows lifted. Was he more affected by her response or how his subtle questions resulted in more information than he anticipated? "Who was the woman?"

That was his response?

"I don't know. I tried to see a family resemblance. At the house, I saw a portrait of my grandmother as a young girl. She was wearing the locket. I didn't mention it to Martha, although I'm sure she knew."

"I can only imagine what a shock that was." He rubbed the brown scruff on his chin. "You suspect Martha put the envelope in your purse?"

"I recently learned someone stole a nurse's uniform and was in my hospital room." She tried to hold her hands still on her lap, but they kept twisting. "I do remember the person, and she could fit Martha's appearance, although I was struggling with the concussion's effects. Sometimes I wonder if I still am." She grinned but also meant it.

"That sounds kinda crazy." His eyes narrowed. "Why would Martha do that? I mean instead of mailing it?"

"I don't know. But she developed an irrational obsession about getting me the letter and getting me to Idaho. Another check on the column next to Martha's name."

He obliged. "What came next, after the hospital?"

“So much has happened in the last few days. It’s more than a little surreal.” She waved a hand. “I didn’t even have a way to get home from the hospital. But Garrett, Dr. Clarke.” Oops. Her face flash-heated. Her slip of calling Dr. Clarke by his first name wouldn’t get past Wyatt. “The hospital arranged for one of the interns who lived close to me to give me a ride. I don’t think she had anything to do with it.”

She didn’t look up, afraid to. Of course, he’d be studying her and dissecting her.

Seconds ticked by with no response.

Well, this wouldn’t do. Get some gumption, girl .

She forced herself to look up. Seriously? He was smirking ?

If he thought he’d make her squirm, she wouldn’t have it. Grinding her teeth, she moved on.

“At home, I tried to take it easy, but as I mentioned in the park, someone broke into my house.”

He closed his eyes, his lips clenched. “Anna, I did hear you earlier, but we were discussing so much. Could you go over this in further detail?”

Great. This next bit would complicate things. “Well, I was, um, shall we just say ‘scared’?”

Wyatt moved his chair over next to her, clearly shaken. His arm brushed hers.

She wasn’t going to stop. She had to be honest. Feeling him close strengthened her. There’d be no turning back. She was with Team Wyatt now. He’d been the kindest person she had ever met—well, except for Dr. Clarke—and he’d given her the

courage to find answers.

“What happened? Did you call the police?”

“Well, Dr. Clarke came to check on me and scared the intruder away. I was so relieved.”

His brows winged up, golden-brown arches over blue pools.

“Dr. Clarke, your doctor from the hospital? Does a doctor do that?” There it was again—attorney mode.

“He came to check on me. He probably felt sorry for me because I didn’t have anyone to take me home. He probably saved my life.”

“Could Dr. Clarke be involved?”

“No.”

Was that hurt in his eyes? “Okay, moving on. We suspect Martha committed a criminal act, stole a uniform, and broke into your hospital room.” He held up a finger for each charge. “All to put the letter in your purse.”

He leaned back and waved as if turning the case over to her. “Why? What’s in it for her to take that much risk? Why not just have the letter couriered?” His analytical mind seemed unconvinced that passion could lead to such erratic behavior.

“I don’t know. I have no family, no money, only debt. Why would anyone want something from me?” She cringed at the words used to explain her confusion. Her mother was right. It was time for her to stop being afraid of her own shadow. Her tone grew bolder. “I keep asking myself ‘why me?’ Not in a pity-party way, but

trying to solve all this. Why me and why now?”

“Martha put herself out there. She’d only do that for Atticus, but why?” He tapped his thumb on the surface, pressing back into the stool. His lips tightened. His head tilted as he pondered. “There has to be more to this—something below the surface. Why would he go to all that trouble? Why not just name you in his will or call you?”

“Martha has a real concern for Devlin receiving an inheritance from Atticus. She was irritated about the sale of some land along the Boise River for a subdivision.”

“It clearly matters to her to have you here in person, but it’s odd she’d show an interest in the inheritance.” He made more notes on his pad. Then he raised his pen and pointed it at her. “So then, after you received the envelope and Dr. Clarke scared off the intruder, you decided to come?”

Okay, that sounded sarcastic, but she’d move past it. After all, it was a lot to take in, no matter how skilled or experienced you were.

“Then Martha called and insisted I come. ‘Come to the mountains, Anna, the mountains of your mother’s youth.’ She could have just been repeating the letter. I don’t know.”

“Can I see the letter?”

“Obviously, I no longer have the printed copies that were in the safe.” She found the picture on her phone and handed it over. While he read it—a couple times, it seemed—she tried to occupy her mind with the waterfall and her surroundings.

“Anna, I had no idea.” He set her phone face down on the glass-topped table. “This is a lot. Do you need to take a break?”

She shook her head.

“If someone wronged my mother, didn’t I owe it to her to come?” Anna shrugged and scrubbed rising goose bumps from her bare arms. “I had nothing to lose, so I came.”

“You left Texas after the last call?”

Anna rubbed her fingers along the side of her neck, slapping at a mosquito. “Almost immediately.” She sat up straight. “And someone was shot. Shot right next to me in Houston, at the airport. Right as I was boarding the plane. I can’t believe I didn’t mention it sooner.”

“Someone was shot?” He jumped up from his chair, wrought-iron legs clanking against the patio stones. “This is getting real and crosses over into being serious. I’ll need to double-check everything. What’s going on?”

What? He acted like he’d half imagined she’d been exaggerating. She eyed him anew. Why had Martha called him to get her?

“Someone was shot.” He paced, checking something on his phone. Ah, the footage for every security camera he had.

While she recounted the incident, he just looked at her. She imagined he was seldom speechless. But there was a first time for everything, and this must be it. He returned to her side, his body tense.

Again, she chased the shivers from her arms. “On the plane, I tried to sleep. When we landed, the man next to me dropped his bag from the overhead cabinet. It almost fell on me. I picked up something from it. Martha was watching him, the items that fell, and me. As soon as I saw him at Atticus’s house, I panicked and called you. I never looked in the bag I picked up. I forgot about it until now.”

“You should go look for it. Maybe it’s a clue or even the key to everything.”

She slapped the table. “Maybe it is.”

She sprang to her feet and dashed inside and up the stairs to her room. Her suitcase had been ransacked at the hotel. She hadn’t checked to see if the bag was still in it.

She searched her carry-on’s outside compartment, sliding her fingers into every pouch. Empty.

Her racing heart made it harder to think. Where had she put it? She dumped everything onto the bed. Clothes, laptop, and earphones. Shirts, pants, and socks. No bag.

She searched every pocket and pouch, then stepped back, hands on her hips, weight on her chest. A groan slid loose. “He must’ve taken it from the hotel.”

She took her time on the way to the pool. Wyatt was still sitting there, staring at nothing, muscled arms crossed.

“It’s gone. It might have been the only thing he came for, and what he took from the safe was just a bonus. Who knows?” She slumped into her chair. “I should have looked at it sooner. I didn’t know he had any connection until I saw him at Atticus’s house. After that, well, it was too late.”

His fingers rubbed his nape. “Should we continue or take a break?”

“Well, we are almost done. We ought to finish and see where that takes us.”

“Okay, let’s do this then.” His dreamy eyes were baggy, his pep gone. His gaze kept drifting to her and away.

She shared her arrival at the hotel and meeting Martha and the events of the next day.

Wyatt's shoulders straightened. "You truly believe Devlin Alan put something in your drink?"

"Martha is erratic, and I don't trust her. But on this, it rings true. Nothing makes sense, but there's something between him and Martha."

"Oh? As in what?"

"I don't know, but they exchanged some type of combative glances before you arrived at the house. I was trying to watch them. Then you arrived, and I was... distracted."

Distracted was a good way to put it. Dazed would have been better. Bewitched, even. She smiled. But why not? At this point, shouldn't they try to find something to enjoy or be happy about?

But he kept frowning. "What do you mean glances?"

"Well, some kind of stare down—no, not exactly that either. They acknowledged each other in a unique way. And I hate to say this about your boss, but he made me uncomfortable. I don't think Martha likes him, and I know she's worried about Devlin being in Atticus's will."

Wyatt seemed unconvinced. "I wouldn't believe this possible a few months ago. But since Greta's death, I've seen a negative change in Devlin. He's been arrogant and distrustful. Why would Martha think he'd be in Atticus's will?"

Anna shrugged. Wyatt worked for Greta and Devlin. Wyatt lived on the property taken from her mother. He was in Grandville, and Martha called him.

He didn't speak for a couple minutes. "Martha will be vital in getting any answers. As would identifying the man on the plane. Could he have broken into your house as well? And what about the man who was shot at the airport?"

"I suppose we should add Greta to the maybe column."

His head jerked up, and he gave her a surprised look. "Why? Let's not forget she's, um, deceased—has been for months."

"Why would she go to that much effort with the diner? Now you've mentioned the ownership of the land. It's nagging at me."

"Okay. I'm not inclined to put dead people on the list, but you're the primary player in this whole thing." He scribbled down the name, not writing it clearly like he had everyone else's as if making it legible were an affront to a woman he admired. Then he pushed back his chair. "What do you say? Is this a good stopping point?"

He mustn't want to hear anything more, so she nodded. "For today, we're done with puzzle-solving. Let's relax for the night."

He tucked the notepads into his back pocket and reached for her hand. "It's getting late, and I could do with a snack. Come inside with me while I double-check the security features on the property?"

"Sure." She stood as well but didn't take his hand as they traversed the stone path to the well-lit "cabin."

He slid open the back door. "How about a drive tomorrow before we head back?"

"That would be nice," she answered, still distracted.

He scooped bowls of vanilla ice cream and topped it with the strawberries left over from her salad and set them on the kitchen island. She pulled out a barstool beside him, and he cocked his hip against the island as they lingered, enjoying each other's company.

“Let's call it a night.” He clattered his spoon back into his empty bowl, pushed it aside, and folded his arms on the live-edge countertop. “It's been an emotional day, and you've been amazing. Few people could weather this. With a new day, we may see something new.”

“Sounds good, and... thank you, Wyatt.”

His stunning eyes hooded, he regarded her. What was he thinking? Seeing? A friend from childhood, a woman in distress, or something more?

With his gaze almost too intense, she ducked her head and traced a shaky finger along the wood's burlled edge as she whispered, “Good night.”

He started to say something, then stopped himself, almost looking angry. “Good night, Anna. I'll check all the security and monitor the alarms. Sleep well and know you're safe with me.”

She believed him. Was she a fool?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Anna stretched, standing on the balcony to welcome the dawn. Wyatt was already downstairs doing who knows what. Apparently, he wasn't one to let the day start without him.

Racing down the stairs, she missed a step and landed hard on one knee. Her mouth tasted like blood, and her tongue throbbed. "That'll leave a bruise," she grumbled. "Missing a step is getting to be a bad habit of yours, Anna."

She slowed her pace amid visions of tumbling down the stairs.

Streams of morning light brightened her mood. The open sliding glass doors welcomed nature's sounds and scents, and Wyatt stood on the patio, having his coffee in the spring sun.

She moved into the kitchen, poured a steaming cup, and joined him. A chilling gust stole her breath, so she pulled her arms close around her like a blanket.

Wyatt's eyes were gray while he stood by the pool, and her mood dimmed. But as he strode toward her, sunlight changed his eyes to deep blue. Metal screeched against concrete when he yanked the patio heater toward a chair. She returned his smile.

"We had someone on the property last night." At least, he didn't try to shield her from the truth.

"What does that mean? Someone was trying to get into the cabin?" The cabin was her haven. She'd found a safe place—or so she thought. She started to shiver, and small bumps rose on her arms.

Tenderness softened Wyatt's face. He slipped off his fleece jacket and tucked it over her shoulders, his arms lingering around her, the jacket and his nearness enveloping her in heady sandalwood. When she tipped her face up at him, his gaze dipped to her lips. His eyes darkened, his pupils dilating.

Did she just stop breathing? Without her permission, her eyelids fluttered closed, and her face angled toward his.

Then he released her, leaving her unbalanced.

"No one tried to break into the cabin." He stepped back and raked a hand through his hair, mussing the perfect tousling. "The security system picked up some movement by the gate and the fence line. The camera captured images—a couple guys, youngish, maybe even teens."

"Teens?" She loosened her grip, planting her feet more firmly to ground herself, though the heady sandalwood lingered. She breathed it in. Not helping!

What were they talking about? Right, teens. "So they could've just been out messing around at night, trespassing?"

"Right. I've had that before. We're remote, but people know about the cabin when they wander around in the mountains. It's why I installed the security system. Locals were coming up and swimming in the pool. I didn't want any kind of accident, so I added the fence. When that didn't work, I had to put in the security system."

Made sense, but was it wishful thinking? Her cuticle beckoned. At this rate, she wouldn't have much skin left. "What do you think happened?"

"I don't know, Anna. We'll be cautious and consider that someone might know we're here. I have the cameras, so someone won't just sneak up on us."

She rubbed her aching head and let out a low breath before her stomach rumbled. “Um, let’s pretend it was teens looking for a place to party. Nothing else we can do right now, and my tummy’s thinking of those bagels and bakery items we picked up in town two days ago.” She spun around, heading toward those goodies. Denial was hungry work.

“Then let’s pack some sandwiches and go on a picnic. There’s a wonderful place I enjoy on the north side of the mountain. You said you wanted to go over there, right?” He stood at the refrigerator with an endearing smile that sent warmth through her veins.

She started toward the door, muted her doubts, and gave in to an unexpected rush of excitement.

“Sounds like an amazing adventure.” She pivoted to him. “Mother used to tell me stories about that mountain. She’d make things up to keep me entertained while we traveled. We came back once after we moved, ya know? I don’t remember why. Maybe I never knew.”

She backtracked, stopping at his side. “You said my mother owned the property. Who owns the property next door now?”

“Well, the short answer is Greta owns it, now maybe Devlin. But something’s going on with it. Greta purchased it from your mother when you two moved to Texas.”

Greta again. Anna would think about that later.

“I always kinda wondered.”

They finished getting everything together for their picnic, including coats and plaid wool blankets. Wyatt pulled the truck closer to the cabin, the engine revving. Once

everything was loaded, he opened her door, waited for her to get in, and took off.

A tingle went through her. She was in his truck for no reason other than doing something she wanted to do. No errands, no chores, just because!

“Mother and I never could afford vacations,” she confessed. “We always joked we were ahead of our time and invented the staycation.”

He downshifted. “What did that mean for you two?”

“Not much. Just that we’d plan low-cost activities together. Watching old movies, listening to music, going for walks, or riding bikes in the park, just spending time with each other.”

His lips quirked. “Sounds like you have some fond memories of those times.”

“I do actually.” She clamped her hands on her knees. “Mother was good at making something out of nothing. It seems practice makes perfect.”

Ouch, had she said that aloud? Wyatt just adjusted the heating, tipping the vents her way when she shivered.

The sun was brilliant. And a warmth filled her to the brim.

“What are you thinking about right now?” He must’ve caught her smiling.

“I’m excited for this adventure. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone somewhere for no other reason than wanting to. I needed this.”

He didn’t make a funny remark or belittle her. He didn’t try to agree. He just looked at her and let her enjoy this moment. Then he smiled that smile, melting her heart.

Anna adjusted her sweatshirt sleeve as she tried to pull herself together. Would she ever get used to Wyatt and that smile? The way she reacted to everything he did made her vulnerable. But today, it didn't matter. Today, she was on an adventure.

He wiggled his finger toward a clearing. "A town stood there years ago with almost three thousand people, mostly miners, and a post office. Now it's just a few falling-down ruins, but the old school's still down that road."

She shivered. "I remember that building."

"Sounds like bad memories this time."

"Not my happiest. The children's taunting still haunts me."

"Well, over here's a happy memory for me." He jerked his thumb to the right. "My favorite swimming hole. The water was so cold you only dared to get in by jumping all the way, water over your head, and you didn't get back out until you were done."

"I imagine that's because the water came from the snow runoff."

"You'd be right too. You'd get so cold, you wouldn't even know you were cold until later."

"Makes me think of that bubbling hot tub at your place."

He glanced her way, his eyes a bit... steamy? "Yes," he drawled, his gaze dipping along her. "That's a much better idea. Maybe tonight?"

"Mmm. Maybe."

He didn't ask if she'd brought a suit, and she didn't offer the information.

At least, he seemed to be enjoying himself too as the truck bounced along the dirt road, some sections like washboards after spring runoffs created ruts as it washed the dirt away. Sometimes it felt like they might just bounce right off the road. But it was bliss.

She giggled. “Your truck’ll need a wash after all this.”

He slowed. “We can keep going, but the snow’s getting lower on the mountain, closer to the road with each turn. As we approach the shaded side, a snowbank might make us turn back.”

“Will we be able to turn around if that happens, or would it block us in?”

“There isn’t any traffic. We should be okay to turn around with this beast.” He patted the four-wheel drive’s dashboard, then winked at her. “Not to mention my excellent driving skills.”

“Then let the adventure continue,” she sang out, on top of the world.

The air was cooling. The dashboard temperature gauge indicated 41 degrees, which was cold for someone who lived in Texas most of her life. Good thing he’d suggested she bring the warmer coat along. “It was over sixty when we left the cabin.”

“Yep, we’re on the mountain’s shady side now.”

“Can we stop for a minute and feel the snow?”

“Sure thing.” He stopped when he had a wide enough spot to pull off the road.

Nice of him not to lecture about how there’d be snow where they were going as well as plenty of opportunities to stop later. He stopped because she asked, then let her get

out and play. She formed two snowballs before her hands froze, numb. Her tennis shoes weren't holding up well, either.

"Okay, that's enough." She hauled herself back into her seat and patted it. "I'm ready for these heated seats. I don't know how people handle this cold or how they dealt with it years ago without such luxury items."

"True. We hope we're never pushed hard enough to reveal our true strength. It's surprising how someone can have the ability, when challenged, to find a little more strength somehow."

They rode quietly. "I've been to some historic fort reenactments." Eager to plunge into the details, she slid back, angled her legs toward him, her back toward the door. "People dress in the styles of the time. Tools, food, and lodging are historically accurate. At one event, trappers carried a load as heavy as the actual load. They could only carry it a few feet before the next person took over, and it went on like that."

"Sometimes, it's beyond imagination how they managed. At least canoes and water travel helped them. Of course, that only worked for some destinations."

She had much to appreciate.

Wyatt pointed up ahead. "We're almost to the spot I know you'll enjoy. There used to be an old fire lookout atop the mountain during the early gold rush days. Someone up there saved much of the area when he spotted a fire."

"Right." She shifted in her seat, the heated pad almost too warm when considering fire. "I remember it was called the Great Wilderness Fire because it caused miles of damage."

"It happened during the early gold rush. Rumor has it that some miners had to leave

their gold behind or they were killed trying to take it. There are always rumors of lost fortune.”

The search for gold and fortune. So people came to find their fortune only to die of starvation, cold, or bushwhackers.

“I can see why this place is special to you.” She let out a sigh. “The views are already spectacular, and we haven’t even gotten to the top.”

He pulled into a wide turnout. A couple of picnic tables waited high up the hill—very high up. Maybe she should’ve asked if his sister had any boots she could borrow. With the snow going through her tennis shoes, she remembered that cold-wet feeling from her childhood. Tennis shoes didn’t stand a chance against snow.

A historical sign marked what looked like the mine, and another stood closer to the picnic tables.

“Let’s unload. I can’t wait for you to see this.” Wyatt hopped down. She almost expected to watch him bounce along up the hill like a little boy.

He stopped at her door. The latch clicked, and cold air rushed in as the door opened. It took her breath.

“Whew. The word brisk doesn’t cover this, at least not to a Texas girl.” She glanced over to the console to see the temperature, but it was no longer displayed.

Wyatt was still standing at the door, holding something. He wiggled it in front of her—a pair of white snow boots.

She goggled at them. “Where’d you get those?”

“My sister had them at the house. I measured using the bottom of the tennis shoes you took off by the door. I couldn’t see the size inside the boots. Hopefully, they work.”

She slipped off her tennis shoes and tried the first boot, feeling like Cinderella trying on the glass slipper—okay, a fuzzy, frosted glass. She giggled at the rest of what she was thinking— something about a prince.

Wyatt looked at her, half amused, half concerned.

Good thing he didn’t ask. She slipped the other boot on and zipped the jacket all the way up, then slid off the tall seat, using the running board.

They unloaded and headed up. She’d read the historical signs later, after they’d set up and eaten.

She was puffing with the incline. “Wow. This cold, thin air makes the hike more challenging, doesn’t it?”

Her thighs burned already, and the new boots gave her some feedback. She pressed on, glanced at her load, then his stack so high and heavy.

“Thank you for carrying everything. I may have embarrassed myself with a second load. I’m not sure I would’ve made it.” She pretended to dramatically fall from exhaustion.

He was already at the top, looking over the horizon. “When you’re ready, check out this view.”

Their breath became clouds of frozen words floating up into the air. She set her box on the picnic table and hurried over. Why wait?

He was right. They were on the snow-covered summit, the vista spreading in every direction. The tree lines colored the mountains, blackened by the dark shadowy sections from a fire, maybe even the Great Wilderness Fire. “From here, the other mountaintops look like rolling hills. What a colorful canvas. First, green, then dark blue, and all capped in brilliant white. This is beyond words. Thank you.”

Their light breakfast was wearing thin. They set out the cheeses, fruit, and sandwiches. He’d managed to sneak in some hot chocolate and a thermos of some type of soup.

Once they were done, they picked up all their trash and rewrapped their food. Leaving nothing on the table, they took it all down to the truck, secured it inside, and kept cups of hot chocolate.

They climbed and explored, eventually finding their way to the abandoned mine. Beyond the dirt piled at the boarded-up entrance, a fallen beam and more dirt blocked the cavern. “Guess it’s closed. I’m sure it’s no longer safe. Makes sense that they would ensure no kids get in there.” She shuddered. “Imagine how dark and lonely it is inside.”

She walked over to the first historical sign. It wasn’t a traditional historical marker, though the shape and style were similar. It was a donation plaque more than a memorial. Her eyes widened.

Wilderness Pass Memorial Park

1985

Wilderness Pass Park was made possible by a land trust donation of forty acres from the Alan Foundation in loving memory of Jon Alan.

Jon Alan inspired many modern-day prospectors after he discovered a new vein of gold. Unfortunately, he was ambushed from behind and killed on April 1, 1985. His body was later found in an abandoned prospect hole near the mine. The murderers remain unknown to this day. One can only hope they come to a day of reckoning.

The donated picnic and recreation area will allow visitors now and in the future to enjoy the pass with its scenic views. The entire park is maintained by funds from the Alan Foundation in coordination with state and local agencies.

Anna reread the marker. Slowly. Jon Alan. “Wyatt, is this Greta’s husband? He was killed near here?”

“Yes, around here somewhere.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve seen the sign every time I visit. I forgot about it, though.”

Anna held her breath, a bit woozy. No way was that true. He wouldn’t forget something like that, especially if this was his favorite place.

This man, who had been wonderful, who had that smile , who could warm a room with his laughter and send shock waves through her with just the brush of his hand on hers. This man couldn’t disappoint her or be part of something sinister. She couldn’t take one more disappointment.

Anna stiffened her spine. She better toughen up—right now .

She was still looking at him and waiting.

He shifted his weight from side to side in the snow.

She was still waiting, and it was still cold. Was it even colder now, or was that extra chill inside her?

“Okay.” His breath whooshed out, fogging around him. “Maybe I didn’t ‘forget’ the entire time we were driving here, but I did at first. I remembered the sign once we stopped for you to get out and see the snow. Then I wasn’t sure how to bring it up. I mean, you were so happy. I was hoping you wouldn’t notice.”

He shrugged and ran a hand over his hair, smoothing down the tufts. Seconds, maybe minutes, passed before he huffed. “It’s old news, Anna, and I was enjoying seeing you this happy.”

Could she buy that? She pressed her lips together. One slow breath, then another. No time to count to thirty. “I wouldn’t have been upset if I wasn’t taken off guard. You should’ve told me. There’s already so much uncertainty.”

Bracing for the next reveal, she hiked up to the marker near the summit. Titled “Wilderness Pass,” it mentioned that the trail on the pass was used by trappers and then by miners who traveled the mountains and creeks in search of gold. Many found their treasures—others found their end. Years later, Jon Alan apparently found both.

The wind whistled past, bone-chilling with the shadows coming over the mountain. They followed the path back to the truck and the heated seats. She snapped a picture of the historical marker as they left. What happened years ago to Greta’s husband?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

On the drive back, Anna absorbed the quiet until they reached some old buildings. Then Wyatt found his voice again. He pointed to a building behind some trees, bringing it to life with his description of a “burly man with scratchy whiskers” and a cat that looked like a “leopard” rolling across the grass, fighting over a tiny ball.

Though disappointed with Wyatt about Jon Alan, Anna couldn’t avoid being entertained. She giggled, half afraid that if she didn’t stop laughing, she’d have to stop for “a little break.” She studied the trees and dilapidated structures, their windows now covered with thin pieces of honeycombed wood. Then she stiffened, fighting where her mind went.

“I’d like to see the old house. Is it still intact, or have people changed it?”

“I doubt anyone’s been inside since you and your mother moved to Texas, probably afraid it would fall on them.”

“Can we go by before we go back to Boise?”

“Sure, but be prepared. Childhood memories are powerful. They can wallop you.”

She smiled. Childhood memories.

“Where’d you go to school, Wyatt?”

“Boise. I never actually lived at the cabin. It just seemed like it since it was my happy place. Dad was overwhelmed by everything going on with Mother. Now that I’m older, I get that. He went through a lot.”

She shifted sideways, bracing an elbow on the console between them and planting her chin in her hand. “We all had a lot going on. Lost in my world, I guess I didn’t realize other people had things going on too. Did you live in the cabin when I lived next door? How did you know me?”

“I was at my grandparents’ house a lot when I was a child. My mother was ill. I stayed there for summers and almost every holiday. Her illness started with more mental things, then deteriorated into other health issues. Everything just kind of stopped being in sync or something.”

She waited before speaking, thinking about what he’d revealed, then reached over, and placed her hand atop his on his knee. His lower lip and cheek flinched, but he remained facing forward, watching the road. She’d have missed the flinch if she wasn’t watching. She understood his pain. The cab held their silence as they connected.

“My childhood memories of you are vivid, Anna.” He turned his hand, threading his fingers through hers. “I roamed all over the hills, and so did you. You had a tree house in one of the squatty trees, and I’d slip notes or flowers from the field in there, something goofy like that.”

He smirked, but it faded fast. “I was bored, and I was a kid. I wasn’t that much older than you. I knew you were sad. I was sad. I guess I just wanted to help make it a little better for you, and that would make it a little better for me. It’s still that way.”

His voice seemed young and childlike, his grin shy before he turned it away. “You don’t remember anything about those days?”

She shook her head. “Just a blur of days spent in a broken-down shack. There are some good memories, but most aren’t. I was still young when Mother announced she found a better position and we were leaving for Texas. She struggled to find work

here since we lived in such a remote area. The only jobs were really in Idaho City. I don't know why she didn't break away sooner or what kept her here. She didn't discuss that type of decision with me. I was too young. One day, she announced we were moving. Less than a week later, we were gone. I never looked back."

That was a skill her mother perfected, a skill Anna tried to learn early. Long ago, she'd pushed those memories, even the good ones, from her mind.

Now, sitting beside Wyatt, she could smell the fragrance of flowers. She was back in the dream from the plane. She was a child lying on the green grass with flowers—from Wyatt—in her hand.

She'd blocked the memories, the flowers, the notes. But they were flowing back. "Oh my." She pressed her free hand to her heart, her other fingers still secure in his. "I do remember my simple, childish notes to you and yours to me!"

She closed her eyes and rocked her head back against the headrest as her heart continued to soften. She remembered everything. How had she forgotten? She remembered her first love through the eyes of a child.

She kept her eyes closed, afraid they might reveal her secret, but she sensed his probing glances as the silence lingered. She used the time to regain her strength and realize the depth and power of their connection.

Then he slowed for the gate, and the truck bumped up the driveway. When she opened her eyes, the headlights probed the night shadows.

He came around, opened her door, then helped her out. "What if we do a simple dinner with leftovers and try out the hot tub?"

As they meandered past, she glanced at the oversized hot tub elevated above the pool.

Stones the color of a muted rainbow surrounded the steaming water. With the lights' illusion, the crystal-blue water seemingly reflected a sky asparkle with stars.

"I didn't bring a swimsuit." Her lower lip curled down as she thrust it out in a pretend pout. With everything she'd packed, no swimsuit.

He blinked rapidly, then tilted his head to the side with a suggestive shrug.

Ignoring the tease, she kept her voice steady. "I was coming to meet the caller." She gave him a playful wink. "It never occurred to me this trip would be anything involving water or fun."

He scuffed his toe across the deck. "There might be something stashed in one of the drawers. You'll have to meet my sister sometime. It's hard to believe she rarely comes here but still leaves so much lying around. Now I'm sorta glad she's a hoarder."

His feet thudded up the stairs. Then wood banged, and hinges creaked as he opened and shut drawers. He soon returned, holding up a green-and-black one-piece swimsuit.

"Wow. Tag still on and all. I approve." She snagged it from him and bounced up the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, she joined him. His head lolled against the hot tub's tall back seat when she reached the open glass doors, a towel wrapped around her waist. At her footsteps, he jerked his head up and gave a sheepish look and a soft teasing whistle.

She shed the towel and touched her toe in the boiling water, and her heartbeat jittered as she stepped in. The water covered her higher and higher before she lowered herself onto the bench.

Then he pushed a button on the built-in remote, leaving only the hot tub and pool lights remaining. The waterfall glistened and splashed and bubbled down over the lights. The twinkling sky glowed.

She stretched her hand up as if she could touch a star, giving in to the intimate setting's magic.

Wyatt scooted closer, his arm pressing against hers.

“You’re so beautiful.” His husky voice caressed her ear. His tender eyes greeted hers. “I need to tell you something. I’ve been waiting because I didn’t want to go too fast or scare you.”

Her body tensed as she braced herself.

“I’ve been struggling to keep some distance from you because I have to tell you a secret.”

She held back a gasp. Not another secret!

He lowered his gaze, fingers trailing in the bubbling water. “Anna?” His Adam’s apple bobbed with his hard swallow. “I’ve loved you since we were children roaming this mountain. There’s been no one else for me—only you. When I saw you in Grandville, well, I couldn’t believe it. I wanted to tell you then, but I didn’t want to scare you. For years, I kept a note to you in the tree house.” He paused, almost basking in the relief of finally saying it all out loud. “And then when Martha called me, of course, I volunteered.”

Her heart thundered over every thought of reason, every whisper of warning.

He raised his gaze and searched hers. The longer he looked, the more his shoulders

relaxed. Then he lifted a warm, wet hand and traced the outline of her jaw, his finger slipping toward her lips and pressing against the plush center. “I love you,” he repeated. “I always will.”

She became dizzy with emotion, her thoughts jumbled. Then a calm settled over her, accompanied by a feeling—not physical. It was deeper, stronger than anything she’d ever felt in her entire life. She was content—complete.

She covered his hand, cupping it against her cheek. “I—I’ve had doubts about you. Greta, Devlin, Grandville, and this property, it was all too much. I couldn’t remember you, and that scared me too.” She tipped her face just enough to let his hand slip, his palm gliding to her mouth, and she held it there to press a kiss, captured in his hold, the way she felt when his eyes met hers. Then she moved his hand back into the water with hers. “I have felt an attraction, one I didn’t fully understand. But now—now, I remember. You were my first love.”

Wyatt reached over, just one finger at the base of her chin was enough to guide her in, draw her closer without forcing her. Then he kissed her lips, his heated fingers brushing her cheek.

She snuggled against him, sliding onto his lap as he wrapped her in his arms. Her response seemed to overpower him, and he drew back to catch his breath, then yanked her closer, his kiss now more intense. He whispered sweet words with another kiss, soon close enough for his heart to thud against hers.

Then she scooted away, drifting across the hot tub to her seat, a sudden heaviness on her chest. “What does tomorrow look like for us? There’s so much uncertainty, so many unanswered questions.”

His hand closed the chasm between them, his fingers finding and lacing with hers. “We will face this together—you and I—just as we did when we were young. I can’t

answer more than that, but I'll never leave you. I am forever yours."

Never leave you . She'd never had anyone stay with her. Not even her mother. She let him guide her in and laid her head against his broad shoulder. "I am ready to go to the old house," she whispered.

His hand stroked her arm. "We'll go tomorrow."

They remained silent. The evening turned to night, and the air continued to cool. At length, he pushed a button on the remote, brightening the lights, then helped her from the tub. He picked up her towel and wrapped it around her like a loving hug. She faltered as their gazes locked, and he held her tight for another moment—for a lifetime.

He checked the security monitors, and they walked beside each other up the stairs. At her door, he placed his arm around her waist and his hand behind her head, lifting her lips to his. "Good night, my love," he said before he retired to his room.

She turned back, her mind full of dreams long after his door closed.

Somehow, morning seemed to come too soon—maybe it was all the daydreams she'd entertained throughout the night. Now, the air was cool, so she pulled the covers up around her for one last snuggle. Then the silence in the house prompted her to hurry.

When she headed downstairs, he was there. Already moving around, making things happen. With the coffee calling her, she almost didn't have time to speak. She sidestepped him, holding up a hand to silence his good morning. "Coffee quotas don't just happen, ya know."

She grabbed the filled cup too hastily, the heat radiating against her skin. She jumped, setting it down on the thick slab-oak island.

Then she stepped closer to him. She took in a subtle breath. Instead of sandalwood and spice, he smelled like the outdoors—earthy and clean. Her eyes widened. Here in this cabin, the morning sun shining over his shoulder, he was a part of this outdoor wonder, like the creek and the pines.

“Are you going to help me or what?” He smirked, cutting ham into little cubes, the cheese waiting to be grated.

She picked up her coffee again, took a couple sips, and reported for duty. “How can I help, sir?”

“The omelets are started if you want to take care of the fruit.”

She nodded and brushed her hand down his arm, the touch a reminder of last night. She lingered, savoring the unexpected feeling of being immersed in the perfect temperature of warm water while looking at the starry night. His glazed eyes focused on her, so he felt it too.

After breakfast, they grabbed their jackets, locked everything, and followed the path back to her memories. Anna’s heart was beating fast, her pulse racing. Wyatt held her hand as they started up the grass and dirt hill, but he released his grip after a few steps. She moved freely, facing her past at her own pace.

Atop the hill, the familiar sweet scent of syringa danced into her senses. She stood still, overlooking the clustered bushes and the old broken house. Hummingbirds fluttered about, chirping and clicking where they hovered over fragrant flowers.

“I’m ready.” She focused on the old house. As she crossed the path leading down the property, she remembered chasing scruffy white chickens in their fenced pen and the sweet taste of freshly picked huckleberries. She could almost taste the sweet, sometimes bitter, flavor in her mouth and feel the bucket tug against her fingers as it

grew heavier with each added handful. She half expected to see her mother standing on the makeshift porch to make sure the berries made their way into the bucket.

The powerful scent tingled her senses. “I remember bright-yellow flowers alongside the front porch and Mother’s battered white car in the driveway. Molly, our milk cow, always mooing by her weathered water trough.”

They walked the property. The old barn was a pile of fallen wood. Pieces of plank remained where the wood fence once existed. The wired fence was twisted and rolled into a rusted ball.

“Everything looks much smaller now.”

At the old house, she hesitated. Sometimes things were better left in the past.

“We can walk in together.” He threaded his fingers through hers. At her nod, he opened the door. Hanging by one rusty hinge, it gave little resistance other than a creak. The musty smell of mold and dust wafted out, and she covered her nose. The cracks in the walls didn’t help move air stagnant and heavy with dampness and dirt.

With everything in disrepair, Wyatt kept his head on a swivel and his gaze moving, probably monitoring the structure to ensure it wasn’t going to topple as they breached the threshold.

A small shoe lay in the bedroom, and some toys remained in the closet. Dilapidated furniture hunkered about. “I can’t remember if we left in a hurry or just abandoned what we couldn’t take.”

She shivered. “It doesn’t seem like my mother to leave the place untidy. We always had to clean the house before anyone came over. I’m surprised to see even one personal item still here, but I’ve seen enough.” Glad to have come, she was ready to

go. “Funny, I didn’t feel a rush of emotion or a flood of memories. It’s just a building.”

They’d started out the door when something caught her eye. A worn book with a frayed cover. She picked it up and rubbed her finger across the rough edge. She could hear her mother’s voice as she read it to her as a child. She slipped it into her coat’s large pocket, walked out the one-hinged door, and headed to the waiting cabin, her safe place, feeling much stronger than before.

Wyatt reached over and put his fingers around her hand, covering it with love. It was as if he were somehow proud of her—proud of her courage, proud of her for facing her demons.

“Where was the tree house?”

He tipped his head up the hill, then pointed past undergrowth and bushes toward a cluster of trees.

“Do you mind if we walk up that way before we head back to Boise?”

“No problem.”

They hiked up the path and then found an overgrown trail, but he clearly knew the way. With his pace increasing, she had to hurry.

“Wyatt, slow down,” she finally said.

He slowed and stopped. The trees stood closer and closer, guarding the trail as the forest became dense and thick. Long branches on dead trees seemingly reached out, blocking the path.

They struggled through. She was about to give up when she spotted broken wood planks hanging from a squatty tree. “It’s smaller than I remembered.”

As she walked toward its remains, she felt its pull. With each step, she seemed to get smaller and smaller until she was a girl again, surrounded only by trees. She was by herself. She circled the base, remembering each tree and each scent. It was her haven, where she went to think, to dream, and to read her notes. Her notes from Wyatt—Wyatt. He was standing there, watching and waiting, her only friend.

“I remember the flowers and the notes—roaming the hills.” How they would peek at each other as children. Some of their notes were childish pictures or short bursts of kindness. But each had power. Notes written by children trying to be strong.

Then her eyes grew large, and her mouth opened. She clamped her hands over her ears as she heard the thundering crash. She heard a man’s voice calling her name and a child’s scream.

She spun toward the tree house, her pace now a run. She was racing, tears following. She was there, and so was the tree not far beyond. It was rotten now. The years had begun to destroy it.

She searched around, panicking, looking for him. Where was he?

The memories crashed in, and she pivoted toward Wyatt.

He hadn’t moved. Still watching, still waiting. She approached him, remembering why they left.

He wrapped his fingers around hers, and they stood there watching the past. When she was ready, they took their time moving away from the tree house, toward the cabin.

The burgers were on the grill, and the air smelled of wood and spices. The splashing waterfall glimmered with the lights. Then a jarring sound interrupted the peaceful balance. Anna blinked as Wyatt stared at the ringing phone as if it had broken some type of forbidden rule, eyebrows raised. He mumbled something about unlisted numbers and walked to the landline.

“Hello?” He twisted the receiver in his hand while she made the final touches to her pasta salad. Then his tone stopped her. “Who is this? How’d you get this number?”

She scanned the cabin, the windows, and the wide-open door. Her pulse quickened, and she didn’t know where to hide.

“She called you from here? What’s your name?” Wyatt raised a golden-brown brow at her. “Garrett?”

She walked over as he checked himself, getting back under control, and handed her the phone. He seemed careful to slow things down and avoid a forceful handoff.

“Hello?” She cringed as she made it a question.

“Anna, Anna, is that you? Are you okay?”

Wyatt hadn’t moved. Not one inch. With him standing so close, he could speak into the receiver, and his breath heated her neck. When she gave him a give-me-space look, he stepped back. One baby step.

“Garrett. Yes, I’m fine. Why are you calling? Is everything okay?”

“I hadn’t heard from you. I was worried.” Hadn’t it just been a day? Or two at the most? That was a little extreme, wasn’t it? Although he had seen a few things happen to her.

“I’m fine. Just busy. Wyatt took me to my childhood home today.”

Wyatt made a grunting noise, his face all twisted up. When she gave him another glance, he didn’t read it, or if he did, he didn’t move.

She clenched her teeth, her stomach tightening as she tried to listen to Garrett but also pay attention to Wyatt. What was this? Jealousy or a concern for their safety?

She didn’t have time for games. She’d speak how she wanted and to whom she wanted. She’d earned the right to decide who she trusted. She didn’t ask Wyatt to get involved with all this.

Or did she? Yes, actually, she did.

“Hey, Garrett. We have food on the grill, and we’re about to eat.” At her words, Wyatt disappeared to tend the meat. “I can call you tomorrow, maybe, but don’t worry if I don’t. I do appreciate you calling and checking on me. I promise I’m okay.”

Wyatt strode back in, stopping too close to her.

“Okay, Anna.” Garrett’s long exhale rattled the receiver’s tinny speaker. “After all that’s happened to you, I want you to be safe. I feel I should be there somehow to make sure you’re okay. You’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m okay. Yes, I’d tell you. It’s thoughtful of you to call, but I’ll call you in the next day or two. I’m okay. No code words needed.” That made her smile. That is, until she saw Wyatt’s face.

“Goodbye, Anna.”

“Take care, Garrett.” She hung up, took slow, purposeful strides into the kitchen, and remained silent. They weren’t discussing serious topics at dinner. Let that begin now.

But with Wyatt still standing there, wearing a poker face, it seemed like she was passing a handsome wooden carving of an athletic hiker. The kind that stood beside a resort gift shop.

In the kitchen, she grabbed the pasta salad and splashed in more Italian dressing to moisten it. Then she passed the handsome statue and headed out to the poolside table. What was he doing? Life was short. She didn’t have time for drama. Don’t disappoint me, Wyatt.

She set the salad and checked the meat. He’d covered it beside the grill. She carried it to the table, the foil crunching under her grip. She was hungry. Would he ever come outside?

She’d already stuffed her mouth with a delicious burger bite when he headed her way. She averted her gaze and tightened her lips. She’d not discuss the call. She could be trusted, and she knew— mostly!— who she could trust.

“That was your doctor?”

“We don’t want to have this conversation.” She took another bite.

He scraped out his chair and sat, scowling those gorgeous eyes at the foil-wrapped burger platter. Hunger strike or just a kid pouting?

Great. She huffed. “Yes, Garrett was my doctor.”

“Didn’t sound like a doctor-patient checkup.”

No denying that one. “He’s referred me to another doctor for ethical reasons. He’s shown me nothing but respect and courtesy. He was there when I needed him, and he is a stand-up, trustworthy guy.”

He picked up his iced tea glass, clattering the ice around as he didn’t drink.

“Look. I don’t know what you’re thinking or where your concern is coming from—if it’s for you, for me, or something else—but I won’t have it. I make my own decisions. I decide who I trust.”

He set the drink down, one finger tracing the condensation along its side. Funny, she could see the little boy in him now.

“Wyatt...” She softened her tone. “You know how I feel about you and that I appreciate everything you’ve done. But these things lately have really gotten to me, and I haven’t been able to stop all of it. So, when I have control over what I can control, I will. I’m not ungrateful, and we both know I am attracted to you—more than attracted. But I’ll make my own decisions. I’ve earned that. So have you.”

“Whew.” He let out a low whistle, one side of his mouth quirking. “You’re something else. You know that, right?”

What was that supposed to mean? She cocked her head at him.

He reached over and traced a damp finger along her jaw. “Maybe the most amazing person I’ve ever met. Here I am, acting like a schoolboy on the playground, and you’re this incredible grown woman, still intact, positive, and on the offense.”

When she snorted, he moved his finger to tap her lips into silence. “Nothing about you begs for a big strong man to save you. You are strong, but you bring out strong emotions in me.”

She kissed his finger. “Thank you for being honest in return and for everything you’re doing for me, but you need to slow down and trust me. Let me be myself.”

“I’ll work on that. As long as we’re being honest, I’ll admit it’s more than physical, this attraction. I’ve been attracted to you since I was a child watching your strength and imagination. It sounds like Garrett and I have the same instincts. We want to protect you, and I’m glad he was there to scare off the intruder.”

Anna cupped his hand to the side of her face, then scooted back. “Let’s eat and enjoy our last night here. We can play some music, talk, have something to drink, or just be still, but let’s enjoy this glorious night and let everything go. Reality will come tomorrow. Tonight, we’re here.”

She shuddered. Who knew what they’d face tomorrow when they returned to Boise.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

A nna inhaled and held her breath, hoping to store a little of this magical place. The silver truck bumped along the dirt road as they left, the morning sun streaming through the trees. The tires hit ruts and hurled rocks to the side.

“I’ll miss this place. The letter had one thing correct. I belong here. This is my home. Not Houston, not Grandville. This is where I belong.”

“It’s a good place to let into your soul.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “The people in this remote area were strong and independent. They fought for their way of life and asked nothing except for everyone to let them be. Hard not to admire their strength and their character.”

Like her mother.

“Do you think you should stay at the hotel? It could be a risk.” His fingers flexed their grip, and his stunning eyes slanted her way. “You’re welcome to stay at my house. We’ve done fine staying at the cabin together, and this way, I wouldn’t have to worry.”

She tried to maintain a blank expression, hiding her inner conflict as she considered his offer. Spending more time with him sounded appealing. But a nagging voice kept reminding her to slow down.

“I don’t know.” She smoothed wisps of hair from her eyes. “I like being on my own, but I can also see your point.”

“I can work from home for the week. I need a break from my office—from Devlin. I

have a four-bedroom house on Warm Springs, a couple of miles from Atticus.” He grinned. “It makes sense. Then you don’t need a rental, and you can have coffee anytime.”

“Oh, playing the coffee card.” She matched his grin. “You could be right, especially after the spiked drinks and break-in.”

“Well, that’s decided. I’m glad. I want you near me all the time now, it seems.” His voice was husky and upbeat. The console clicked open. He reached inside, pulled out a new pack of spearmint gum, and offered her a piece while opening his.

She shook her head.

“Maybe we should talk about our list.” A mosquito distracted her when it buzzed around her arm. She slapped it a little too late. “Sorry. They love me.”

He had an odd expression, then said, “At least you got it. Must’ve been hiding in the back.” The console snapped open and shut. A white napkin rested on top.

She grimaced as she folded the red inside the napkin.

“We still have quite a few people on our list.” She wiped a spot she missed on her arm. “They cannot all be involved in the recent events.”

“I always wondered if Martha was in love with Atticus, although I can’t imagine why.” One hand steady on the steering wheel, Wyatt tossed the gum wrapper in a cup holder, then rubbed at his chin. His jaw muscles flexed as he chewed the gum, spreading the minty aroma. “Her obsession seems to suggest it. You often hear about women attracted to famous murderers or criminals in prison. He’s never been what you might consider nice. He’s ill and doesn’t have much to lose. You have to be cautious because that’s when someone reveals their true character. What he reveals

might be more than anyone can handle.”

“I agree. So... should we call Atticus, show up, or contact Martha?”

“Well, she started all this. Maybe we should start with her.”

“I’ll call her, then.” She pulled out her phone, then frowned. “Never mind—no cell service.”

She laid her head back and closed her eyes. She could feel the green grass as she smelled Wyatt’s flowers. It was a good dream.

“We’re getting close to Boise.”

At his words, she opened her eyes. They were passing Lucky Peak Dam. Her phone let out endless chimes, announcing the return of cell service.

He glanced over, then returned his focus to the road. Good. He trusted her to tell him if there were any important messages.

She reached over and placed her hand on his arm relaxing on the console, slid it down his muscled forearm to a hand strong and warm. With no way to predict the next few days, they’d need to be strong together. Expect the unexpected, Anna.

Most of the texts were from Garrett, the messages brief, just asking if she was okay. Sandy didn’t leave a voicemail. Martha did the day Anna left the house.

“Martha left a voicemail on my phone. Should we listen to it now or wait until we get settled at your house?”

“Let’s wait so we can both listen carefully.”

They didn't go on I-84 but along East Warm Springs Avenue. Historic homes and charming landscapes lined the scenic drive.

"I traveled this road with Mother. She said the street was named for underground hot springs." Huh, Martha had texted an address in Boise. Anna had Atticus's address all along. Why was she still forgetting things? She'd have to ask Garrett.

She scrolled for the text, then inspected the house numbers to determine if they were close. It could be near here. She had no memory of her arrivals at or exits from Atticus's house, not even which side of the street she was on when Wyatt came to get her those times. "Which house belongs to Atticus?"

His eyes narrowed and his lips flattened. Why? She'd already been there. She even had the address. She might as well see it from the outside.

"It's about ten more houses."

"I really only saw it from the inside—you know, being drugged the first time I went there and distracted the second time with you."

"It's coming up on the right now."

She scooted forward in her seat and moved closer to the window. What was this feeling? More anxious, not eager or excited.

"There it is." He pointed.

Most of the houses were close to the road. Magnificent and historic, they hinted at all the exciting and glamorous parties the important people within may have celebrated over the years.

This house, tall with high pitches and darkened windows, was farther back, ensconced behind a brick-and-metal fence. She didn't wonder about exciting events and parties. This house only knew sorrow. There were shrubs, but no flowers. "It might be the tallest house I've seen." She pressed her palm to the glass. "It's magnificent in its own way, all alone back there. The property must be vast."

A quivering started in her legs, then jittered to her teeth.

"What's going on?" Wyatt frowned at her, then freed a hand from the wheel, and reached for hers. "Anna, what is it? What's wrong? Did they do something to you when you were at the house?"

"I remember it." The memory came with a dark, bitter feeling. "I've been here before—with Mother."

It wasn't a good memory. She could hear crying. She wasn't crying. She looked over at the driver's seat and saw her mother, broken and crying.

How old was she when this happened? "Oh my. That was the only time we came back to Idaho."

Anna couldn't think. Tears were flowing. Not her tears. Her mother's tears. Why was her mother so sad? Her mother never cried. "Wyatt—I can hear the sobbing and feel the seat vibrating with each sob. It's as though she's right next to me, her heart breaking. Oh, this is a dark house, indeed."

She set her jaw. "He did something to my mother. He tried to break her somehow. I remember coming here as a child." She planted her elbows on her knees and leaned her head down, her forehead braced on her hands. Cold fingers rubbed her temples as even colder feelings flooded her veins. "Atticus is not a good man. Nothing good will come from that house. I need answers, and I won't stop until I have them. Somehow,

I added to her sorrow, so I owe this to my mother.”

“Are you okay?” Wyatt rubbed her shoulder, still somehow concentrating on the road.

Was she? No, but she would be. She would make this right. She nodded. About a mile later, they pulled into a driveway.

“This is my home.”

She raised her head. The white cottage was as she’d have imagined. Antique lights lined the entrance, and flower beds surrounded the welcoming front porch. “Hmm, I’d forgotten how well roses grow here.”

“Let’s get unloaded,” he said. “I’m famished.”

Whoa, he was already on her side of the truck. The door clicked as it opened, and his warm hands grasped her waist as he helped her down. He lingered there, his grip on her, his gaze on her, his heart open before her. His head lowered, but rather than kissing her, he pressed his forehead to hers. How safe that felt! “I thought you said you were hungry?” she whispered.

“I am.” His breath feathered over her cheeks, his lips lowering.

She scooted away. “We’d better go get you something to eat.”

He gave her a hooded-eye look that sent her blood rushing. Then he swung her bag from the truck box.

“Ugh, my back!” he teased as he lugged her two-stickered bag up the stairs.

Wood floors added just enough wood embellishment to the white interior to make the place feel rich and warm. “Not bad, Wyatt.” She trailed her fingers along the back of a tasteful dark-brown leather reclining couch. “Looks comfortable and inviting.”

A quartz waterfall island sectioned off the kitchen, with a dining table to the side. Tall white cabinets, warm lights, and hidden appliances created a welcoming atmosphere for someone who enjoyed cooking and spending time with guests. “It’s nothing like Atticus’s home.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It is, trust me.”

He nodded to the stairwell. “You’ll find three guest rooms to choose from. The two upstairs each have a bathroom. Choose whichever you prefer.”

Her feet made a tap, tap, tap as they took her upstairs. She found a room with French doors onto a balcony with a clear glass rail overlooking an amazing backyard, and the rose aroma drifted in. This was the room she’d enjoy during her stay.

Wyatt’s feet tapped on each step, making their way to her. Her heart skipped a beat with each footstep. She hoped this feeling would never go away. He stopped, braced his shoulder against the doorjamb, and crossed his arms. “Chose the one with the balcony, did ya?”

“How come you didn’t?” She spread her arms and twirled. “This is spectacular. I can’t imagine how your room looks.”

He flashed a knowing grin. “This would be my favorite too. After mine, of course, which is just down the hall from the room you selected.” Then he pushed off the jamb and crossed to her side, invading her space with his sandalwood-spice scent and

Caribbean eyes. He tapped her lips. “Why are you smiling so much? Doesn’t the quote that goes with that grin mean I should worry?”

She swatted at his hand. “It’s a happy place, a lovely home. Welcoming and bright. Your backyard smells alive with the roses in bloom.”

Wyatt brushed her hair away from her face, waited for a beat as if asking permission, then bent in, and kissed her. Leaving her breathless, he pulled back enough to rock their foreheads together. He breathed in deeply. “Hmm... I see what you mean about the roses. Intoxicating. I wish I could take all the credit for that, but I have an excellent gardener. He has a green thumb like your mother. She always had something beautiful growing on your property.”

A laugh bubbled free as she scooted away. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

His eyes hooded, assessing her, before his gaze slipped to the bed across the room. “I remember more than you think, but I’m too hungry to be in here now.” Then he patted her shoulder and strode to the door. “I’ll show you my room, and then we need to go get something to eat.”

They walked down the hallway, and it was true. His room was better. The airy space with soft sage walls played host to stunning antique furniture. Filmy drapes covered a wall of windows over another balcony. She walked over, glanced at Wyatt, who gave a nod, and then opened the French doors, letting in the aromatic scents.

“Okay, you win. This room is amazing.” She poked him in the ribs as she passed by. “Now let’s head downstairs and see if we can find something in your fridge to eat before you perish. That way we can stay here, unpack, and relax.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Anna found enough ingredients to whip up a homemade dip. He slipped a carrot into the dip and sent a nod of satisfaction. They enjoyed grilled sandwiches, chips, and veggies with dip. After a quick cleanup, Anna and Wyatt sat on the back patio, drinking steaming coffee to balance their slices of tart-sweet lemon meringue pie he'd thawed. Hummingbirds fluttered over the flowers until one found the single red feeder on a limb. A bully hummingbird torpedoed as fast as its fluttering wings would fly toward another petite bird, trying to knock it to the ground. I know how you feel.

She went back inside, returning within a minute. Her phone sounded like two taps on a bass drum as she dropped it onto the table. She adjusted the volume to hear Martha despite the backyard sounds.

"Anna, this is Martha. Where are you? I came back to get you, and you were gone. Atticus wanted to see you, and we had everything ready. I don't understand. Why did you leave? Why would you go with Wyatt? Where are you? Atticus is upset."

She set aside her phone. "That's it. No other voicemails or missed calls." She picked up her phone and hit the blue call icon on the voice message. It went straight to Martha's voicemail.

"Hey, let's wait a sec. I'm not sure this gives us much to go on. She's going to be unhappy with us now. It means the world to her to be on his good side." He rubbed his chin, and his blue eyes looked like steel. "We'd better go slow. Too many things have happened over the last weeks. I'm not sure there's any value in meeting with Atticus. If he sets his sights on you, it might not go well."

When he reached over and touched her hand, she jerked it away as if it burned her skin.

"Not meet! Not meet! This is why I came here." Her clenched teeth produced an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

Disappointment hit a nerve. After an awkward silence, she became resolved. “I’ve always hidden or run instead of standing and fighting, but I’m not going to anymore. It wouldn’t even matter if I did. Someone has found me. Whoever this is, well, they’re chasing me. I’d rather see them coming toward me than get it in the back like Jon Alan.”

“We disagree on this.” He folded his arms in front of him, rocking his chair onto its back legs, his jaw ridged. “I don’t want to be part of anything that might put you in harm’s way.”

Her ringtone interrupted her response. She glared her we’re-not-done look, then answered.

“Anna, this is Martha. I saw your missed call. Where have you been? Why did you just disappear like that? What kind of child are you?”

Anna took a breath before answering the curt questions. “Martha, I’m sorry. I kinda panicked and needed to get myself together. I’d still like to meet with Atticus and find out what the letter is all about.”

Silence came from the phone.

Wyatt’s gaze fixed on her, his eyes fierce as if he wanted to turn her to stone.

Anna flinched and raised her chin. A drum in her head began to pound. The chant I will be strong, I will be strong matched the beat .

Martha was speaking over the chant.

“Atticus has taken a turn for the worse, and you’re not going to be able to see him. He was agitated and didn’t understand why you were coming. I didn’t want to tell him

everything. I wanted him to be happy to see you. He did love Sabina when they were young.”

“Look, Martha, I don’t care about any of that. I just want answers.” I am strong. I am strong. “See if he’ll meet. I’m not too far away, and I can be there within thirty minutes. Wyatt is going to come with me.”

A metal chair screeched against the patio stones. The door slammed as Wyatt stormed inside.

“Wyatt?” Martha squawked. “You don’t even know Wyatt. Why would you want him here? Is he your lawyer now?” The woman let out a low breath, either exasperated or trying to calm herself. “I’ll mention it to Atticus. He’ll decide who does what. I’ll call you if he’ll meet with you.”

The phone went dead.

Anna stared at it, then at Wyatt’s abandoned chair. She walked inside and pulled open the blinds. The silver truck was still in the driveway. I am strong. I am strong .

The soft tone of her phone began to play. She swiped to answer.

“Atticus can’t see you until he recovers. We’ll schedule it for nine a.m. three days from today. Don’t come unless I confirm.”

The phone was dead before Anna had time to speak.

Am I strong? The drum fell silent.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Wyatt and Anna hadn't spoken all morning. Not a word.

"Can I take your order?" She looked up at the face belonging to the gentle voice. A young woman with a sparkle on her eyebrow ogled Wyatt. He didn't respond and sent a sharp glance toward Anna.

"I'll have coffee, fruit—cantaloupe if you have it—and the veggie omelet with no onion and Gouda cheese." Anna controlled her voice.

The waitress turned back to Wyatt, the crystal eyebrow ring sparkling in the light.

"I'll have the special. Just like it comes."

Anna calmed herself with a slow rocking in her seat. They ate in silence as she simmered. The sparkly waitress brought their ticket early, slipping it beside Wyatt. His "humph" brought Anna to a rapid boil, but her phone's musical ringtone saved her from saying something. "Garrett Clarke" scrolled across the screen. The ding from a voicemail soon followed. A flared glare from Wyatt helped her decide to listen to the message privately.

Ten minutes later, the white cottage came into view. Normally, the truck's rumble as it crunched across the gray cobblestone driveway would relax her. Not today. Once he parked, she grabbed her purse, ready to jump and run. Before she could reach for the door handle, the metal latch clicked, and the truck door swung open. Wyatt stood beside the door with his denim shirtsleeves rolled up and his hair casually tousled. And what girl could ignore the impact?

“Thank you. I can’t imagine returning to an empty hotel room right now.” Did she make that sound grateful despite her gritted teeth?

Wyatt didn’t smile. His steel-blue eyes were focused, unblinking.

“Did you get a call?”

“Yes. Garrett. I didn’t feel like talking to him, and I didn’t want a battle with you right now. We’re both angry. Although I’m not sure what you’re angry about.”

His shoulders stiffened, and when he looked away as if to hide something she didn’t want to see, she cringed.

“Look, Wyatt.” She softened her voice and touched his arm. “I have enough fireballs in the air for this dangerous juggling act right now. I don’t need one more, or I’m going to burn my hands as the balls fall. Someone is trying to destroy me. Please don’t help them.”

“That’s what I mean!” The words burst from him, and he shook away her touch. But he stood there out of habit, like a well-trained guard. “You shouldn’t meet with Atticus. You’re not ready. You could be hurt.”

As he stomped into the house, she stood stunned when he went inside without looking back, shutting the door.

Her fingers clamped tight, her nails digging into her palm. If she was going to be strong, she needed an army to fight the forces against her. She didn’t need an unpredictable, ill-tempered child. He’d said he loved her and she could trust him and count on him. Didn’t that mean predictability? Not this.

She entered the house and willed her feet to be silent as they tiptoed up each stair.

She grabbed the doorknob and opened it without a sound, then held the knob in place, and wiggled past. In her bathroom, she splashed cold water on her heated face, mumbling to herself. “You said we’d be a team. I shouldn’t be feeling the need to hide.”

Still grumbling, she stepped out onto the balcony, brought up her voicemail, and held the phone close to her ear.

“Anna, this is Garrett. I just arrived in Boise.”

Her phone slipped out of her hand, crashing to the deck. As she was picking it up, she imagined Wyatt jolted at the thump. She scooped up the phone and played the rest of the message.

“Are you feeling okay? I’ve never been to Boise, had some vacation time, and thought why not? Maybe you were lonely and needed a friend. Anyway, I’ll text you my hotel information once I’m settled. Maybe we can meet for dinner this evening. Call when you can.”

Her mouth was still wide open, so she closed it and bit her lip. She trusted Garrett—Didn’t she? Why was she becoming so paranoid?

Her phone dinged, and a text came through with the address. She dialed.

“Hey, I bet that you were surprised to hear my voicemail.”

“Surprised?” She laughed. “That doesn’t cover it. I’ve been pretty wrapped up in family situations. Unfortunately, this isn’t a vacation for me.”

“Wow, it didn’t even occur to me that this might be a bad surprise. You seemed so alone. I’m sorry if I overstepped.”

She considered the timing and its impact while angling for a view of the flower garden out the window. “Well, it’s thoughtful of you, and with the weather so beautiful right now, you can enjoy all the local adventures—kayaking, fishing, and four-wheeling. Why don’t we meet somewhere for dinner around seven tonight? I do need a break and a friendly face.”

“Sounds great. Let me know the address and if I need to wear anything special. Unless you want me to come pick you up at your hotel.”

“No, I’m staying with a”—a what?—“a family friend. The one from the cabin. I’ll text the address.”

Okay. Awkward silence. Was he still there?

“Sure. I’m game for anything. I’m here for you and for you only. See you then.”

She disconnected with a silent swallow and searched for local restaurants. A nearby grill had great reviews, amazing views, and an excellent menu. She secured reservations for two, then texted Wyatt’s address and the restaurant information. Garrett responded saying he’d be here at seven.

Digging through her purse, she found crackers and nuts from the flight to hold her over. She lingered on the balcony until it was time to change, the birds overplaying Wyatt’s pacing, heavy-footed down the stairs and then tiptoeing back up, then tiptoeing back down. He’d mentioned he’d be working from home, but it didn’t sound like he got much done.

She rummaged through her suitcase, then smiled. Yes! She’d packed the salmon-toned dress she only wore on special occasions. She slipped it on, added some taupe sandals, then consulted the mirror with a shy pride. A simple shoestring tie gathered the scoop-necked dress across her ribs. Midthigh and flowy, it accented her fit frame.

Wyatt's footsteps were going down the stairs again. She added a splash of blush and mascara, then bracing herself, headed to meet him before Garrett arrived. Man, her stomach felt like a racetrack bombarded with speeding cars.

Wyatt turned. His head tilted, his eyes widened, and his breath released in a slight whistle. Suddenly, warm and then cold at his reaction—every girl's dream—she prepared for what would come next.

“You look amazing.” She'd been told that before, but Wyatt obviously meant it. “I've been miserable since our fight. I'm just worried about you—about your safety. This is a pleasant surprise. Saying you take my breath away doesn't cover it.”

Anna put on her armor and inhaled her strength. “Garrett is coming to pick me up. I wanted to let you know ahead of time.”

“Wait. What? Your doctor ? He's here?” That look alone could have won an entire battle as his nostrils flared and his fists clenched, then went flat against his legs. “Your doctor is coming to pick you up at my house?”

“Hold up.” She raised a hand in the universal stop signal. “Wait a minute. You offered this house to me. You didn't say it came with any preconditions. If you want, I can load up that bag you complain so much about and take it to a hotel.”

“You don't need to leave. It's just...” Groaning, he palmed his face. Then his gaze met hers, and she wavered.

Guilt rose inside from her cruel, childlike behavior. Timid and withdrawn, she withheld her emotions—bottled them up inside—for most of her life. She wanted to be stronger, but she didn't want to become mean and calloused. His sudden reluctance to help left her feeling confused and betrayed. She could see his point, and Garrett's timing didn't help. Her feelings for Wyatt hadn't changed, but she needed a

breather, time to sort through her emotions and deal with his unexpected withdrawal.

“Wyatt, I know this timing is awkward, but I could use a break. I’d ask Garrett to meet you or invite you to go to dinner with us, but you’ve been so unexpected. You changed everything when I didn’t agree with you. I need you on my side. I was always clear on the plan.” She grabbed her purse, shut the door, and walked toward the road.

Outside, she heard the country music before the purr of the high-performance engine whirled onto the cobblestone driveway. The black soft top down, his hair blew in the wind. She sank into the seat and glanced back at the house as Garrett threw the car in reverse. His teeth sparkled beyond his smile. His green polo showed off his athletic build, the attire sporty and perfect for the occasion.

At the restaurant, the attentive valet pointed toward the entrance and handed Garrett a blue card. Then Garrett escorted her into a posh room where gleaming mirrors reflected intimate lighting, crisp damask linens muted the clatter of silverware, and soft music underplayed a myriad of conversations.

Subtle admiring glances followed Garrett through the restaurant, and Anna scarcely resisted the urge to roll her eyes as even the hostess giggled and batted her eyes, taking a longer route to their table overlooking the lake.

The wooden chair sounded like an eraser on a chalkboard as the felt slid across the floor. Garrett stood behind her chair, helping her get seated, then sat, and opened the impressive menu.

Ice smacked against the water glasses, announcing the return of the giggling hostess, her lipstick fresh and glossy. “I’m helping Carrie out.” Another giggle escaped while she placed sweet-smelling rolls beside Garrett, the steamy vapors rising into the air.

Anna fiddled with her water glass. “I’m not certain what you were expecting when you came to Boise.” She shifted in her chair. “I’m caught up in serious family drama. It’s been intense.”

“I understand. I should’ve discussed this trip with you, but when you were hard to reach, I decided to be spontaneous.” He shook his head, but his green eyes twinkled in the light. “There’s no expectation. I’ll make the best of it.”

Her throat tightened, making it difficult to swallow. “I’m happy to see you. Truly.” She twisted the glass in her hand, then dried her fingers on a napkin. “But I didn’t ask you to come, and you need to be aware that Wyatt and I met at one of my family meetings. We’ve been spending a lot of time together. I have strong feelings for him.”

“Wow. I’m clearly rusty and missed the mark.” He grimaced. “This whole spontaneous grand-gesture thing played out so well in my mind.”

Unable to sit still, she fiddled with the strings on her dress, tangling them around one finger, then uncoiling. “You mean a great deal to me, but I’m so conflicted right now. Is it the concussion? My memory, my emotional frailty, or is it something else? I’d sure love to blame something or someone for all this.”

“Sweet Anna. You remind me so much of my fiancée, Janine. She died last year in a car accident. I didn’t want it to be awkward to mention her, and I don’t mean it in a weird way. It’s just that you have so many of the traits that attract me to someone. I knew we would get along instantly. That’s why I swung for the fences.”

“I understand more than you realize—certain characteristics and wanting to find them in someone. I’m sorry that it didn’t work out how you planned, Garrett.”

He reached across the table, stilling her twirling fingers. “Maybe you need to get

away from your family and the pressure. Can we spend tomorrow together? Take a day to see what that looks like for us. No intruders, no attorneys, and no meddling family.”

“I sure could use a distraction.” She gave a jittery laugh, sliding her hand free from his too-hot grip. She needed time away from Wyatt. He was supposed to be her ally—no, much more than that. Now he was fighting her. “Maybe we could go up to the local ski resort and ride the lift? You can see the entire valley like a colorful quilt. It’d be a refreshing outdoor adventure.”

Wyatt’s heart chilled as the sports car backed out of his driveway.

“No, no, no. This isn’t what I waited my entire life for—to watch her disappear with someone else from my own home. I don’t think so,” he mumbled, standing up and shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

His effort to prevent her from getting hurt backfired and increased her risk. He promised she could trust him and count on him. His protective instincts hammered a wedge between them. It wasn’t the first or last mistake he would make, but he needed to fix this—and fast. Whatever it took, he better get this right.

Grabbing his phone, he dialed his friend, Jim, a detective he worked with on occasion.

“Hey, what’s up?” Jim answered.

“I need a little help.”

“I’m listening.”

“What do you know about Atticus Urbacch?”

“Not sure I understand the question.”

“Any kind of issues related to his behavior? Anything to worry about that isn’t public record?”

“I can check, but I don’t think so. Guy keeps a low profile. Haven’t heard of anything that I can recall. I’ll do some asking and let you know.”

“Thanks, man.”

It wasn’t much, but maybe Jim could narrow the concerns. Then a plan of attack could be prepared. A winning team needed a well-thought-out game plan, and he had no intention of losing this. It meant too much to Anna.

He glanced at the clock and paced the floor as he waited for her return. A flash of car lights announced their return. His pulse quickened. He slowed it with calm, relaxed breaths.

The door clicked open. Her unique scent drifted in his direction. Stay calm, buddy .

But it was too late. Her mere presence blasted his heart into orbit, and the wait for the reentry made it thunder all the more.

The powerful, refined convertible engine whir combined with the tires crunching across the cobblestones. Garrett stopped, then patted the top of her hand. She slid out and clicked the sports car’s door shut. Two porch lights lit her path, but the solemn house remained dark inside. Anna swallowed and gripped the doorknob. Garrett waited until the door closed behind her. Then the crunching of tires and the soft sound of the engine drifted back to the road, and she tiptoed across the floor, found the handrail, and dropped her foot onto the step.

“Anna.” A soft voice spoke from the dark.

Her foot slipped. Her hand saved her head from hitting the rail. Shaking, she spun toward the sound. Wyatt was sitting in the dark, the porch light sneaking through the blinds enough to outline his slouching shoulders.

“You almost made me fall.”

His behavior was becoming erratic. Wasn’t Martha already filling that role in this game of crazy?

“Anna, where were you? I was worried.”

“Wyatt, it’s late. I’m not gonna stand here and speak to someone in the dark. If you want to discuss this now, turn on the light. Otherwise, I’m going to bed.” Her eyes burned. “I don’t understand what happened here. You promised I could trust you.”

“Is your doctor coming back here?” He stood, his shadow seeming to fill the entire window.

“Yes. I’m about to fall apart and need a break from all the drama—drama you’re adding to.” She spun around, feet hitting the steps the only sound.

The next morning, her pulse pounded in her head. She packed her things into her bags and rolled them to the door. The wheels moaned and squeaked along the way. She lifted the smaller carry-on and her other items, leaving the bag with two orange stickers—the bag of rocks—for her second trip.

The smell of coffee lured her down the stairs. She braced herself, slowing her pace. Men spoke in the kitchen. Her pace slowed further. Garrett was leaning against the counter, a cup of coffee in hand. Whoa. How’d that happen?

“Garrett was here promptly at eight.” Wyatt studied her.

Seeming to sense the intensity, Garrett saluted her with his cup. “I came early to meet Wyatt. You spoke so highly of him.”

Wyatt had been so different. She didn’t know him anymore or know what to expect.

“Why do you have your bag, Anna?” He nodded to the carry-on she was pulling behind her.

“I thought I might change to a hotel before I meet with Atticus.”

“Nonsense. Dr. Clarke and I were talking about your plans for the day. He’s going to take you up to the ski resort. Then I’m going to pack a lunch and meet the two of you at the park. Maybe give Dr. Clarke and me a chance to visit.”

What was up with this guy? Anna gritted her teeth, not in the mood for Wyatt’s personality changes. “Wyatt, can I please speak to you outside?”

“Sure.” He downed the last of his coffee, then pushed off the barstool he’d claimed.

“What are you doing?” she asked as soon as they’d stepped into the backyard. She fisted her hands at her sides. “You’ve been a jerk, and now you’re my best buddy. I am so confused right now. I can’t put it into words.”

He gripped her shoulders and held fast as she tried to yank away. “I know, Anna.” His fingers trailed down her bare arms. “I’ve been thinking only about myself, my concerns, and how everything impacted me because I thought that was in your best interest. I should have considered how it impacted you, what you wanted, and how you felt. I realized that last night, but you went upstairs before I could apologize. I don’t want you to go to a hotel. I’d worry about you. And I’m serious about getting to

know the competition.”

She stepped backward, shaking loose his grip on her wrists, and glared at him. “I don’t know what to say right now. I do know I need some time away, some space.”

Hooded blue eyes regarded her. “What do you think about the picnic?”

“I’ll speak with Garrett and let you know. You’re so all over the place right now. It’s making me uneasy.”

He walked into her space again, reached over, and touched her, stroking her shoulder. “You can always count on me when you’re in a jam. I promise.”

Anna ignored her attraction, flashed a frustrated look at him, and opened the door. Garrett was waiting.

“I’m ready.” She left the carry-on bag against the wall and walked out of the cottage as Garrett held the door open. She fought the urge to look back.

Shortly later, the wind blew their hair and brought a chill as they rode up the steep roads. Garrett turned the heated seats on and adjusted the temperature higher. Then he pulled his rental a couple of spaces from a four-wheel-drive utility vehicle.

Anna held back a giggle at the contrast of oversized tires almost as tall as the convertible.

“I see you smirking. Don’t laugh at this baby.” He pressed the button, creating a hum as the convertible top began to close. “She’s tougher than she looks—like someone I know.” He reached into the back seat and grabbed their jackets after pulling in and parking at the ski resort.

Anna slid her arms into the Texas jacket, zipping it up halfway, and hiked alongside him to the ticket booth, then the lift.

The metal dangling chair clanked and swayed as the pulley brought it closer. He held his hand out to assist her into the seat, then climbed in beside her. The chair lunged forward, once again swaying up along the steep piney mountain.

She zipped her coat up to her neck. Mounds of snow began to overtake the colorful fields. “Glad we brought coats. The unobstructed view’s marvelous, but the cold nips.”

At the summit, the chair slowed, and they stepped off. She closed her eyes, shielding them from the blinding sun reflecting off the snow-covered ground.

“Wow.” He breathed deeply. “This sure isn’t Texas snow that comes and goes before you have time to take a picture.” He stomped in a drift. “This snow’s deep, and there’s plenty of it.”

White blankets covered the mountain range as far as the eye could see. “It’s beautiful.”

“It is, but do you mind if this Texas boy admires it from the warmth indoors?” Garrett reached for her hand.

Maybe he’d heard her teeth chattering. She gripped his fingers and let him help her over the shoveled walk.

Inside, he disappeared while she picked through stacks of magnets and painted souvenirs. A hot-chocolaty smell drifted from two cups when he returned. The marshmallows danced and bobbed on top as she eagerly grabbed the cup he held out to her. “Hmm.” She tested a sip. “Hot chocolate tastes like winter and happiness.”

“I like that.” He laughed and led her onto the wraparound balcony overlooking the valley.

Anna sipped her warming drink, savoring it and the view.

Then he slugged back the last of his drink and twisted his watch into view. “We’d better head down soon, but they have a mountain coaster. Do ya want to give it a try?”

She eyed the contraption, her heartbeat quickening with what might be a thrill or fear. “Let’s do it.”

After purchasing tickets, they climbed into a bright-yellow car they could control along its downward race around sharp curves and lower and lower toward the end of the track. He sat in the back and held on to the brakes, his arms on the sides of the car, bracketing her in. As she clutched a handgrip in the front, they started through pine trees and wound around into the rocky grassy hill. They turned and dropped, the car creaking and clanking in its descent. He didn’t pull the brake but let them fly down fast enough to make her squeal.

“Garrett, slow down!” Anna managed while holding on tight. With him laughing so hard, they might keep going and miss a turn, tumbling down the mountain. When the coaster slowed and faded to a stop, she puckered her mouth and squinted the meanest look she could muster without giggling.

And he just patted her arm. “You’re more adventurous than you let on. It was fun, right?”

Somehow, she managed to keep her complaining expression while smiling on the inside.

They hiked back to the convertible, stepping over rocks and weaving around fences. When he placed his hand on hers, she patted it and moved it away. She stopped at the rental car and leaned against the side. “Are you okay with Wyatt meeting us at the park? He’s been unpredictable lately.”

“Haven’t we all? I flew to Boise on a whim. Life is unexpected, and we all adjust differently. We’re both worried about you. We may just react to that concern in different ways.”

“I’m not sure that answers my question.”

“It’s fine for Wyatt to meet us. He’s in the lead right now.” He glanced at her hand, wrapped his arm around her with a strong pull, then opened the door. “We might as well face this head-on.”

He slid into the driver’s seat, then revved the engine.

So she shrugged. “I’ll give him a call so he has time to get the lunch together and meet us there.”

“I suspect he’s already at the park waiting.”

She reached for her phone as the car whizzed along, winding toward the valley. Flashes of colored patches flew by.

Wyatt answered on the first ring.

“We’re headed down the hill and would love to meet for lunch.”

“Great. I’ll see you there and snag us a table by the lake.”

She frowned at the screen. How could the guy act like nothing had happened? And how would this lunch go? Why the feeling of premonition as if something more was about to occur?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Anna approached and straddled the picnic bench, Wyatt's shadow falling over her. His sunglasses hid his eyes as he sat atop the wooden table, but the lake beyond him sparkled as blue as those eyes would be. And, of course, he looked like a model for an outdoor photo shoot in his casual moss-green sweater. He'd pushed the long sleeves up to his elbows and tucked the sweater behind a brown leather belt threaded through his khaki cargo shorts.

White ducks were quacking around him as he tossed torn pieces of bread. Half the loaf was gone. Garrett must've been right. Wyatt had been waiting a while.

Now, his head turned toward her, then Garrett, and a shiver coursed over her. Great. He was in attorney mode. Assessing his opponents.

"Wyatt, have you ever seen Anna ride a coaster?" Garrett added a wink. "She's a screamer."

Her cheeks heating, she cleared the bench and walked toward the lake.

"We're hungry." Garrett slapped the tabletop, evoking consternated quacks from their guests. "You pack a lunch for us or just the ducks?" His teasing followed her.

"Nah." Wyatt hopped to his feet and brushed off his hands. "It'd be better to eat at the burger stand. They have good burgers and secret sauce for Anna's fries."

As the guys took off, chatting as if they were friends, she walked behind, dodging rolling balls and running children.

Laughter and oldies music mixed with the smells of garlic fries, grilled burgers, and caramelized onions when they neared the crowded outdoor pop-up restaurants. Excited chatter and bustle created a buzz while blue, green, and red tents hovered over tables filled with vintage or custom jewelry, carved wooden sculptures, and blown-glass designs.

“The one called Burgers and Fries is my favorite.” Wyatt pointed toward an outdoor building with an eager line. Hickory smoke drifted from the rustic wooden structure. Two women floated back and forth behind the counter like synchronized swimmers.

Wyatt pulled out his wallet. “I’ll get the burgers if you get the drinks.”

Loaded up with the juicy smoked burgers, icy drinks, and spicy secret sauce, they headed back to the wooden table to eat. Afterward, Wyatt disappeared and returned with three root beer floats.

“Don’t ask.” He beamed. “I’ll return the mugs when we’re done.”

“Okay, I’ll need to make a quick call to check on a patient.” Garrett accepted his frosted mug, foam and ice cream escaping down the chilled glass.

“I’m so full. I’ll have to walk it off, take a stroll.” She slurped up shivery cream. “Maybe snap a couple pictures.”

Five minutes later, she headed down the path toward a playground filled with kids. One running young girl looked back at her friend and crashed into Anna’s leg.

“Are you okay?” Anna knelt and smiled at the girl.

The girl’s eyes went as large as saucers, and she bounced backward, then raced back to her staring mother. Anna pushed to her feet and brushed the debris off her jeans. A

prick pinched her heart as the girl flung herself into her mother's loving arms.

Then someone tapped Anna's shoulder.

She gasped, spun, and clamped a hand to her mouth. The man from the plane! He was so close his shoulder almost touched hers. She wobbled a few steps back to give herself some space.

"Hey." He fidgeted, jingling his keys. "I need to talk to you."

Wyatt and Garrett weren't in view.

"Look, I didn't try to hurt you. I was paid to do a job, and I did it. But I have information that might be worth something if you're willing to pay. It'll be a bargain for what you'll gain."

Mothers and fathers were still at the playground within sight. They would hear her scream. She squared her shoulders and raised her chin. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Who I am doesn't matter, and I just told you what I want. You want the info or not? Don't you want to know what happened in Houston? Wouldn't you like to know who hired me? It's probably not who you think." He grabbed her shoulders and slammed her to the ground, falling on top of her.

Her chest heaving, she couldn't catch her breath to scream under his weight. She couldn't breathe. She pushed hard, but she couldn't budge him. Her hands were wet and dark red. Her throat was full. She needed out!

She closed her eyes, trying to calm herself, but her mind kept replaying her dark-red hands.

“Anna, Anna, where does it hurt?”

Someone adjusted her arms and neck with a gentle movement. The weight was now off her stomach. She opened her eyes.

Garrett touched the side of her neck. “Are you okay?”

Anna tried to speak. Her crushed chest ached. She checked where it hurt. Her blue shirt was now red. Gasping, she tried to push up from the ground.

The man from the plane lay a few feet away. He wasn’t moving.

Sirens whirled.

She needed to get up.

“You were knocked down. You seem okay. Do you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m o–okay.” She held up her red hands, her voice shaking as much as they were.

“My chest and back are aching from him shoving me.”

“Do you know him?”

“I’ve seen him. Why isn’t he moving?” She wiped her wet hands down her stained shirt. Her pulse throbbed in her temples, and her woozy head wobbled.

“He’s been shot. He’s dead. Did you see anyone else? I thought I recognized a guy beside the tree.”

She closed her eyes and her mind. She hummed a sweet song from her childhood. Strong arms pressed tight as they wrapped around her. Someone wiped her hands.

She was warm. She didn't open her eyes as she was lifted from the ground. She didn't want to see the dead man.

After she'd been carried several cautious steps, she opened her eyes. Her legs dangled limp and wobbly, but Garrett had her in his muscled arms, his jacket wrapped around her, his body providing the strength. She couldn't hear his calm, soothing words now. Sirens blared—or was she imagining that? She overplayed all sound and thoughts by humming the song over and over.

Wyatt sprinted toward her like he was trying to win a race. He was speaking, but she couldn't hear him or Garrett. She kept humming her song.

"Now that the police and paramedics are here, we should take Anna to your house," Garrett said. "She may be in shock. I have something in my vehicle that might help her, but I need to keep an eye on her."

"I'll get the police our limited information and make sure it's okay for her to leave. I'll let 'em know where you're taking her, and I'll unlock the cottage door on my phone. Whatever you need, take it." Then Wyatt clamped a hand on Garrett's shoulder. "Take care of her."

"Of course." Garrett shrugged off Wyatt's hand. "Take it easy, man."

Wyatt opened the sports car door, and Garrett settled her inside the car. Wyatt handed Garrett a business card. "This is my card for special contacts. It has my personal cell number on it. Call me if you need anything."

After Wyatt walked toward the police, Garrett waited. One officer headed over and asked some brief questions, then informed her that he would be in contact to schedule a time to come in for a follow-up interview.

At the cottage, Garrett found a fresh shirt for Anna and now stood looking out at the patio as she changed on the couch. Then he covered her with a blanket and fluffed the pillow he retrieved from her room. He tucked it under her head, set two white pills from his bag on a plate, and carried it to her with a glass of cold water.

“Take these. They’ll help you rest.”

The last thing she needed was to be incapacitated now. Anna shook her head.

“They’re not strong.” He held the plate closer to her. “At least take one.”

She settled back down after taking the pill and closed her eyes. She barely heard Wyatt’s truck rev and only imagined his concerned face when his steps entered the cottage.

“How is she?”

“She’s okay. I worried we might have to take her to the hospital. She’s pretty shaken up.”

Wyatt hit a fist into his other hand and stomped into the kitchen. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Nah.”

Wyatt’s footsteps paced the kitchen, then returned to the living room. When she peeked, the guys were sitting in recliners, staring at her. She closed her eyes again.

Sometime later, Wyatt’s phone rang. “Officer Daniels, thanks for the follow-up.” Wyatt started pacing again. “Yes, this is Attorney Wyatt Stone. We want to help but don’t have much to add to the statement given by Ms. Stanten at the park. She is

currently under medical care and isn't in capacity to give her testimony at this time. However, I'll bring her to the station when she is able. Here's what I can tell you, though."

After a few minutes, he hung up. "The victim was Clyde Beason. They've linked him to Anna because his mother is the head chef at Anna's great-uncle's house. The police are looking at park cameras for further information. Interestingly, according to the officer, camera footage at the hotel already identified him as the man who broke into her hotel room. Plus, in his wallet, he had a ticket stub for the flight she was on. She isn't safe."

Bessie's son? Anna tried to even her breathing.

"Not sure you want to tell her all that. She's pretty traumatized by the events today."

How awkward to have them talking about her in front of her. But she wasn't ready to join in.

"We'll have to keep a close watch on her." Garrett's voice rumbled. "I didn't want to say much in front of her while she was so upset, but I informed the officer that I recognized a guy standing beside the tree. It looked like the accountant from the diner. But that couldn't be, right?"

"Rowan?" Wyatt sprang to his feet. "You saw Rowan at the park?"

Rowan? How was that possible?

"Right. He came to the hospital and had me sign some workers' comp paperwork regarding Anna's incident. It sure looked like him, though I can't be sure. But the police can check his whereabouts. If he's in Texas now, that should be easy."

Wyatt's pacing resumed as if keeping pace with her thudding heart. "I have an extra room downstairs with its own bathroom if you want to stay and keep an eye on Anna. It's obvious she trusts you."

Whoa. That was huge of him. Why would he do that?

"That's a generous offer. I'll stay tonight to make sure Anna is okay. I don't have any of my things, though. I've witnessed some of the events Anna's been through, and they haven't been for the faint of heart. This woman is tough. As tough as I've ever seen. That's part of why I'm here. I do care, and I understand how much it's been. I caution you, though. She's been under tremendous stress."

"I hear you. Whatever is best for Anna. Also, no problem with the clothes. I've got you covered." Wyatt's steps drifted upstairs, then came back down. "I imagine you want to get out of your hiking gear. You can pick what you want and leave the rest on the dresser. I'll get them after you leave."

"Thanks, Wyatt."

Rowan? The thought circled her head again and again, overplayed by the blood on her hands and Bessie's son's face before she drifted into oblivion. After a while, she woke up more alert.

Garrett helped her stand up and held onto her as she went up to her room. He added another pillow behind her head and turned on the bedside lamp.

Wyatt came up shortly after, and they all sat and chatted to make certain she was okay, then they left so that she could rest.

Anna came down the stairs the next morning feeling refreshed. "Coffee, please!" She grinned while batting her eyes at the guys.

“How are you?” Garrett pivoted on his barstool, his assessing gaze probing for signs of trauma as he handed her a cup of brew.

“Much better—thanks to my excellent care.” She managed a perky voice, even as her insides churned. Maybe she’d even fool him. “I don’t know if I’m tough or just becoming numb. Maybe a little of both. Let’s have our coffee outside, boys.”

Garrett’s head tilted. He touched her arm as he moved closer. “You’re trying to conceal something. It’s okay to tell me if something is wrong.”

Her shoulders relaxed. Wyatt was standing in view, just behind Garrett. Anna didn’t recognize his expression, so she patted Garrett’s hand with a gentle rub as she pushed it back.

“I’m okay, really. It could all hit in a bit, but right now, I feel safe and okay. Thank you, Garrett.” Their gazes locked until she noticed movement in the background. Wyatt was gone.

“You still want to drink your coffee outside?” Garrett moved toward the glass doors.

“Maybe we should have it on one of the balconies today.” Wyatt beckoned from the top of the stairs. “That way, we have a good view of everything.”

“I vote for Wyatt’s balcony,” Anna chimed in.

Garrett’s eyebrows rose as he reached for her cup. Then he followed her up the stairs with a coffee cup in each hand. They didn’t discuss the night before.

“You’re an amazing patient. Or you’re receiving excellent care.” He grinned and handed over her coffee. “You seem to be recovering nicely, and if Wyatt is going to hang around to monitor, I’ll head to the hotel to take care of a few things.” His hand

closed over hers as she took her drink. That grip and hesitant eyes said he didn't want to leave.

"I'm not going anywhere." Wyatt spoke with a firm tone. "I'll walk you to the door."

Garrett shrugged and gave Anna a warm hug, careful not to jostle their full drinks.

"Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

Garrett disappeared through the door, with Wyatt turning to follow.

The purr of Garrett's high-performance engine drifted to the balcony as it sped out of the driveway. Anna closed her eyes and saw her red hands and then Garrett's face when she was lying on the ground. She shook her head to clear her mind.

A gust of wind brought the fragrance of roses. She stood and walked toward the glass railing, savoring the sweet scents of roses, lilacs, and honeysuckle. She held her finger to her nose to fight back a sneeze as Wyatt's feet thumped up the stairs.

"Hey. You okay?" He made his way over and placed his hand on her shoulder.

She adjusted her shoulder, causing his hand to fall. "Look, we can't pretend our relationship is the same. You changed everything."

Wyatt crossed the balcony, staring into the distance. "You're still going through with your meeting, then?" His broad shoulders taut, he hunched over and leaned on the hands he had clenched around the glass railing. "The man on the plane was Bessie's son, Clyde Beason. He worked for Atticus."

"I know. I heard you guys last night. That means we need more answers. He wanted me to pay him to know who hired him, said it wasn't who I thought. This might

explain the tension between Martha and Bessie.”

Wyatt rubbed his temples, revealing his frustration. “There’s no changing your mind on this? Even when my suggestion is not to pursue it?”

There was a time in life when one must stand up. Sometimes it came from inside, sometimes from God, sometimes because one was left without a choice. She couldn’t speak for God, certainly, but she had no choice. Her body relaxed with confidence, and her gaze found his. “You’re in denial. Usually, that’s my role. It’s not going to stop. Something dark and sinister has begun, and it won’t end without everyone and everything coming into the light.”

He glanced over his shoulder, his sun-golden skin paling. “I care about you. That’s why I think you should avoid a confrontation. Atticus will be gone soon enough.”

“And have no answers? I’ve got to try.”

“If you’re determined, then I’m here. Maybe you should contact Martha to see what’s going on. The house might be in chaos. Bessie has worked for Atticus for a long time. If he had a hand in this, she’ll be livid.”

“Deal. But right now, believe it or not, I’m starving.”

“You’re not up to cooking right now, but I can whip something up. Or the bistro not far from here serves a great brunch and delivers. We shouldn’t go out yet—at least not until we’ve met with Atticus.” He shifted, turning his back to lean on the railing. “So much has happened. Let’s stay close to the house.”

“Wise decision. I’m glad one of us is thinking clearly. I’m going to freshen up. Then I’ll meet you downstairs.” She strode to her room.

The stairs creaked with the tap of his feet as he headed down to the kitchen. She finished up and soon followed.

Wyatt rummaged in the refrigerator. “I’ll make French toast and sausage. I have some canned peaches from a neighbor by the cabin. Does that sound okay?”

“Sounds great. Thanks.”

Settling into a barstool, she dialed Martha’s number, got voicemail, and left a message.

He cracked the eggs, then cocked his head toward her. “You told Martha you had questions. What questions?”

Seriously? She rolled her eyes. “The same questions that haven’t been answered. It’s time to finish this instead of dragging it out over time. Soon, it might be too late.”

“I understand. We just want to be on the same page here. If Martha shows up, we need a unified front. Our meeting with her and our meeting with Atticus might be a one-shot only. From now on, we work it out together—as a team.”

Anna’s phone rang. She checked the screen. “It’s Martha.”

Wyatt crossed his arms and set his ingredients aside as she answered.

“Martha, I hope Bessie is doing okay. Clyde’s death is all part of this mystery and quite a shock.”

“Of course she’s upset!”

“Can we still meet with Atticus tomorrow? We’re concerned, especially now, so I

also have more questions. I'm trying to prepare for what I'm stepping into. Please help me understand why you contacted me. You owe me that."

"Maybe. I don't know." Martha's sigh drifted through. "The house is tense, and I want to get away. Atticus is changing. I could meet you in an hour somewhere—not here."

Great. Anna could almost hear the unsure, erratic version of Martha wringing her hands. "Okay. Please don't let me down. I didn't care about any of this until you involved me. Now I need some answers."

"I know what I've done." She huffed. "You don't need to remind me. I've told you everything I know. I'll meet you, but don't ask again. Send me the address."

The phone went silent.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

A gentle breeze drifted across the patio. Anna tipped her face toward it. Maybe the scent of roses and the relaxing vibe would put Martha at ease. Wyatt brewed a fresh pot of coffee, set out some frozen coffee cake, and adjusted the outdoor chairs around the table. Now they just needed Martha.

Anna sipped her coffee, thinking about the cabin. "I can't remember my father, but the memory of the tree house made me wonder."

Wyatt settled his cup on the glass tabletop, then folded his arms against its edge, leaning in as if her words mattered.

So she shrugged, not sure she wanted to reveal more. "Mother never spoke of him."

Was that him in the memory under the tree? Was he dead or alive?

"Didn't you ask?"

"Not really." She traced a finger over the rim of her coffee mug. "For some reason, I always assumed he'd died when I was a young child."

If not, why didn't her mother want her to know anything about her father? It was yet another secret hidden in the past.

A sorrowing smile tugged at her lips. "In my mind, I always created some type of imaginary father. I even dreamed of finding out he was a wonderful man of great character and he'd been looking for me and my mother."

He reached over and touched her hand, stilling her finger's endless rounds over the coffee mug. "I guess it's a universal feeling. A child wanting to know their parents, to be loved and feel safe."

Yes, that's what she'd always wanted. To feel valued and unconditionally loved. Her mother loved her unconditionally, but she maintained a small barrier to be strong. There wasn't true honesty. Did Anna now hold back from Wyatt because she only knew how to be strong, not how to be vulnerable, like her mother's example? She shook off that thought and laced her fingers through Wyatt's. "I'd imagine that, due to some unfortunate event, he hadn't been able to locate us. In my childish creativity, there was always some type of obstacle. He'd be wealthy or wonderful in some other magical way, and he'd arrive and rescue us from our struggles."

She squeezed his hand. "Maybe that's the reason I can't ignore the letter. I initially resisted responding because it was so similar and familiar to what I always hoped for."

Now the reality of having no one left weighed on her. Atticus was not loving, and he wasn't going to be her family.

How surprising, this renewed longing for a family. Maybe it was all the recent events—reconnecting with Wyatt. Sandy was genuinely kind. Anna's mother had always been wonderful, but she had barriers. "I've never felt a strong connection with anyone else before I returned to Boise and reconnected with you."

There. She'd said it. He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed a knuckle.

And she allowed herself to dream and hope a little. How she wanted him to be all that he seemed!

But his recent behavior alarmed her. Her heart pleaded that there was no big reveal

coming or some type of mystery surrounding him. Did she dare to hope for all that? Yes, she dared!

He sank back in his chair and released her hand. "I've been meaning to search the internet for what happened to the man shot at the airport."

"I did try a couple times after the incident, but I never saw anything. Maybe it was too soon. I never looked again."

He opened his search engine and typed in a few keywords. Frowned, erased them, and typed again. "What day was it?"

She twisted her mouth and said the date.

"I found something." He sat up straighter. "One of the news stations has a small article." He brought his chair around beside hers and held his phone so she could also read.

Police are investigating an apparent murder at Bush Intercontinental Airport. The incident happened near a boarding gate inside the terminal. The victim, a man in his thirties, appeared to have a single stab wound and died before emergency personnel arrived. The victim's name won't be released until relatives have been notified.

Airport security and police are working together to review camera footage to identify a suspect and determine how the weapon breached security. The investigation is currently ongoing.

Update: Police have released the name of the victim. Frank Trent of Roseburg, Oregon. More details will follow as they become available.

"The man was stabbed. And he died." Anna shivered. "I knew something unfortunate

had happened to him, but seeing this in print somehow makes it real.”

He was sitting right next to her. Just like Clyde was standing right next to her. And now, Wyatt was sitting right next to her. She hugged her arms around herself. “You’re right. We shouldn’t be out in public.”

She’d never get used to all this. Could Martha provide some answers? The letter and Martha played roles.

“That’s two men, Wyatt. Both right next to me—both dead. I don’t understand all this.”

Wyatt slipped closer and put his arm around her. She felt his strength, felt as though she wasn’t alone. And shivered harder. Would he be next? How many men who’d been right next to her would die?

She looked up at him, almost overwhelmed by his presence. She wanted to trust him, yet she was now cautious.

He pulled back enough to pat her shoulder. “Do you have any missed calls or messages?”

“Oh! My phone’s still in my purse.” She went inside and wiggled the phone out of the side pocket and hurried back. “One missed call. Martha, of course. She left a voicemail about ten minutes ago.”

Anna dropped into a chair and put the message on speaker.

“Anna, I’m on my way but running a little late. A great deal’s going on at the house. But I gave my word, so I’ll be there soon.”

They both let out a pent-up breath. This gave them a rare laugh. Something they needed.

Then there was a knock on the door.

“She’s here.”

Wyatt opened the door and escorted her out to the patio, Martha’s steps slogged. Her lips pressed tight beneath eyes smudged with sleeplessness, her black blouse rumpled, and her pearls missing.

Anna sat up straighter. Not daring to provoke the woman, she took a deep breath to maintain her calm so her questions would be answered. This might be her only chance left.

“Well, I made it.” That wasn’t the sweet, concerned Martha’s voice. This was something entirely different.

“Thank you for meeting us. Would you like something to drink?”

Martha shook her head, then frowned. “Yes, I’ll have coffee, two sugars, no creamer.”

“You look like you could use a cup of coffee.” Wyatt jumped up before Anna could move. He returned with the pot, sugar, and a cup before Martha was fully settled.

“Well?” Martha drummed her fingers on the glass tabletop. “You asked me to come, and I’m here. I was surprised you asked me to come to your house, I’ll admit.”

Great. That foul attitude wasn’t helping things. Anna exchanged a look with Wyatt and then looked directly at her. “Have you learned anything more about who wrote

the letter?”

Martha rolled her eyes. “We already had this conversation. I’ve told you all I know.”

Wyatt topped off his coffee and filled Anna’s cup.

Hmm. Caffeine probably wasn’t such a good idea. Those drumming fingers picked up their intensity, and Martha’s whole body seemed to vibrate. Maybe it was yesterday’s news or something else. Maybe she was ready to have some peace. She stirred her drink and took a generous swallow, then clattered it back to the table. “Clyde helped get you upstairs that day. He’s been around the house more than usual this month. Now he’s dead.”

Clyde was there that day? Anna’s gut twisted. “The man at the airport, Frank Trent, and Clyde Beason, Bessie’s son, sat next to me during my travels. Now they’re both dead. Was the man at the airport the man you hired to deliver the letter at the diner? How did Clyde know where to go? What about Devlin? How did he know I was at the hotel?” Anna slowed down. Another deep breath helped her keep a calming voice. “We hope Atticus will have answers, but we want to be prepared.”

“Frank Trent is dead? Is that what you’re saying? I didn’t know that.” Martha scowled at her drink like she’d tasted something sour. Maybe she thought it was poisoned.

No one spoke.

“Frank Trent was the man you hired?” Anna asked.

Martha nodded.

Anna wasn’t finished. “Why would Atticus harm the man you hired? Do you think

Devlin's involved?"

"I don't know Devlin well. Atticus never cared for him, so Devlin kinda avoided the house. Honestly, that's why Devlin being named in the will is so odd."

"How do you know he's in the will?" Wyatt asked.

"I don't know for sure. Who else?"

Anna fought the urge to pound her head on the table. She wanted this for her mother, who would never know, of course, but Anna could rest easy knowing she stood tall. That whoever was behind all this was made accountable. It was something—maybe everything.

"Are we still scheduled to meet tomorrow?"

"Atticus seems eager now." Martha shoved her drink away and leaned over the table, her coffee breath fogging Anna as she came in close. "He's in rare form, and some serious things have happened. Are you sure you want to meet with him? I believed I was helping, but I was wrong. I'll let you know if I find out anything about Clyde, Devlin, Frank, or the letter. But this is over for me. It's all over."

Martha stood up, shaking her head, and started for the door. Midway there, she stopped and eyed Anna over her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Anna. I was wrong."

And she was gone.

At dinner that night, Wyatt suggested a gated private restaurant not far from his home. It was owned by a friend who'd promised the secure location would provide a table in a quiet corner with floor-to-ceiling windows for a view of the mountains and the river. Sean, a former Navy SEAL, personally promised to keep a close eye on

things.

Now, Anna watched the attentive hostess's reaction when Garrett walked in. All smiles and hair flips, the hostess laughed and chatted her way to their table. What girl couldn't relate to the woman's reaction to Garrett?

"I'm hungry." Garrett rubbed his hands together, taking the stress level down. "Any recommendations from the local?"

"Indeed." Wyatt opened his menu and pointed.

Anna ordered grilled fillet kebabs, fresh asparagus, and Idaho potatoes.

"Let's each choose one item to share from the dessert or appetizer section," Wyatt suggested.

"I'll choose lemon meringue pie. It's a nod to my mother and her legendary pie."

"Cheesecake for me." Garrett closed his menu.

Wyatt chose cherry pie.

The orders arrived, smelling of garlic, hickory, and spices, with the vegetables seasoned to perfection and fresh. "Hmm." Anna breathed in deeply. "Farm to table at its best."

After finishing the entrees, Wyatt dug into his cherry pie. "Nowhere makes pie like Idaho."

"Texas boy here might argue, but I gotta admit that looks good." Garrett leaned back in his chair. Not touching his cheesecake. "So, folks, your most embarrassing

moments.”

Anna eyed him. “Aren’t you eating that?”

He winked. “I’m a doctor. Cheesecake is something I look at. I’ll let the winner with the best story have some, though. Anna, you start the stories.”

“Deal. Sounds like you’re pretty sure you won’t win.” She dipped her spoon into sweet meringue and savored lemony tartness. “Okay, how’s this one? One afternoon, I took an order to the wrong table.”

“Lame.” Wyatt scooted the plate closer, cut off a corner of Garrett’s cheesecake slice, and claimed it.

“Hold up.” She pointed for him to return the plate. “That wasn’t the embarrassing part. That came when I spilled the order, a glass of red punch, on the mayor. And it was right before he was going to give an important televised speech! Everyone was scrambling to get that resolved. Mr. Gray almost fired me.”

“Oh man.” Garrett groaned and handed over his plate. “Any arguments, Wyatt, or did the lady win?”

Without waiting for a response, Anna claimed the prize. “It wasn’t so funny that day. For that and other reasons, I now hate red punch.”

The waiter brought the bill, and Wyatt snagged it before the guy could lay it on the table. “This meal is on me.”

Garrett frowned. “You don’t need to do that.”

“This is me getting off cheap.” Wyatt grinned. “If someone had me make an all-night

house call, well, it'd be a lot."

"I did it for Anna." Garrett shrugged. When she stood and walked toward the side deck, he followed.

She touched his arm. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"Anna—"

"You two ready?" Wyatt interrupted.

They both nodded.

"Why don't we head to my house?"

"Sounds good." Anna leaned closer toward Wyatt. "I'll ride with Garrett since he may have to head home soon."

Wyatt's eyes flashed, but he remained expressionless. "I'll meet you there."

At the house, Wyatt grabbed some fleece throw blankets. "How about relaxing around a warm fire in the backyard?"

"Sounds good." Anna parroted herself and took the armload from him, and soon, a fire crackled in a fire bowl, orange flames lighting their faces and warning away mosquitoes.

"What's your best advice, Garrett, to deal with an angry patient who's mean when they are about to die?" Wyatt fiddled with a fire poker. "We want to ask questions while allowing Atticus to feel in charge so he'll provide answers."

“That’s the right approach. Everyone is irrational at that phase of their life, but it sounds like Atticus has a running start.”

“I need to go in and check on a couple of things.” Wyatt braced the poker against the bowl and pushed to his feet. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Anna’s eyelids drooped, the warm air and monotonous glow making her drowsy. She let out a long, tired breath. “What must you think of me? My life was boring up until recently. I promise.”

“You’re the same person you were, only stronger. Nothing anyone tells you about your past will change that. Use what you learn to know more about yourself and more about your family. It won’t alter who you are already. Whatever the future holds, you’re ready.”

You’re ready . What nice words. He seemed to believe them. Could she believe them?

Garrett reached over and rested a hand on her knee. “You need to work through your meeting and whatever this is with Wyatt. I would stay, but there’s nothing for me to do right now. So I’ll return to Grandville to see my patients.”

He squeezed her knee. “I’ll be here as fast as I can manage if you need me. I’m here for one reason, and that’s you, Anna Stanton. I don’t know why we met when we did, but there’s a reason for everything. You can always count on me, but I’ll give you time to make your choice. You know where I am and how to reach me.”

A hot tear slipped down her cheek. Garrett was a good man—better than good. Maybe perfect. If only he were the one. Funny how the brain can point in a certain direction, like north on a compass. But the heart remains an internal magnet with a draw to someone. A force both uncontrollable and unstoppable.

“I respect and feel safe with you, and that’s rare.” She rested her hand atop his. “I can never thank you enough, but I’m somehow connected with Wyatt. I can’t explain it or change it, even though sometimes I wish I could.”

His shoulders sloped, and her heart ached. But she had to continue. “It may not be what you want to hear, but it’s all I can offer. I can’t tell you in words how much you mean to me and how much I’ll miss you. I’m sorry if I hurt you. I’d never mean to.”

He slid his hand free and gave her a hug and a soft kiss on her wet cheek. She held on an extra moment. He was going back to Grandville, and that left her empty and sad. What irony that two strong, amazing men would enter her life at the same time. “I’ll never forget you, Dr. Garrett Clarke,” she whispered.

Then they walked inside. Wyatt wasn’t in the living room. He came downstairs as they headed to the front door.

“Are you leaving?” Wyatt asked.

“Yes, I’m flying out in the morning. Thank you, Wyatt.” Garrett shook Wyatt’s hand. “You better treat her right and take good care of her.” Garrett held on, perhaps waiting to ensure Wyatt got the message.

“I’m glad I had the opportunity to meet you.” Wyatt clamped his other hand atop their clasped ones. “I know you mean a great deal to her.”

“Not enough, evidently.”

Anna walked him to his car and wished him well. Even though the air was chilly, she remained there, watching him drive away before she went inside.

Standing in the foyer, she hugged her arms around herself. “I’m going to turn in. It’s

been a long day. Do you want me to pick anything up outside?"

He shook his head. "I've got it. Good night, Anna."

She grabbed her things and lumbered upstairs. It was still early, but she was tired. She thought about Garrett. She thought about Wyatt.

How could she define her relationship with Wyatt? She had strong feelings for him. But she'd never been in love, and she was still cautious with her heart. Sometimes, the magnetic force between them seemed too strong to resist, but his recent behavior frightened her.

How would things progress from here?

"Doesn't matter," she muttered flopping fully clothed onto her bed. "The next step's now our meeting with the devil tomorrow."

Wyatt knocked on her door. "Are you still up?"

"Yes." She sat, then crossed the room to open the door. Gripping the doorknob, she leaned against the door. "Garrett's leaving kind of depresses me. I'll miss him."

"I understand. He proved to be a great man and a true friend. He cares deeply about you."

She opened the door wider and gestured him inside. "Do you want to sit out on the balcony for a while? I could use some company."

He followed her through the French doors, then moved a wrought-iron chair beside hers. "I'm sorry about my behavior. I felt protective and scared and acted like a child who didn't want his parents to have a new baby." He reached over and stroked her

hair and then touched her cheek. When she didn't protest as he tipped her face up, he leaned over and kissed her. With one kiss, then another, he lingered near her lips, kissing her again with building passion.

Breathless, he drew back and rested their foreheads together. "Let's look at the stars and dream of life beyond all this. Maybe a life with a little calm at the cabin."

She smiled, closed her eyes, and shared his dream of a life beyond all this drama. She felt like she was home. She belonged here.

But would all that change tomorrow?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

After pattering downstairs the next morning, Anna got her hot coffee and eagerly went to greet Wyatt on the back patio. He sat staring into the yard. Her stomach fluttered.

“Good morning.”

“Did you sleep okay?”

“What’s wrong, Wyatt?”

He was so serious. Too serious. Her skin was itching.

“I don’t want you to go to this meeting. But if he is as sick as they all say, you’ll always wonder if you should’ve tried one last time.”

She sipped her coffee, the scent and taste grounding her just as firmly as the sunlit paving stones were warming her bare feet. “I’m now suddenly starting to wonder if there will be any value to it at all.” She didn’t mean it.

One side of his mouth quirked to prove he knew that. He hoisted his no-longer-steaming coffee mug from the side table and saluted her with it. “I’ll go with you if you choose to go.”

“If Martha is no longer at the house, I’m not even sure how we’d get in.”

“I wondered about that too. I’ll call her and see if she’s there or if she has any ideas. Let me get some fresh coffee. Then we can enjoy the morning before we begin.”

Anna nodded.

Shortly later, he put the call through and tapped it onto speaker for Anna.

“Why are you calling, Wyatt?”

Apparently, Martha wasn’t in the mood for chitchat.

“Martha, are we still on for this morning?”

Martha didn’t speak. Perhaps mulling something over. “He was eager to see her, but he changes with the wind. I can go back to the house and get you in. I owe her, I guess. Although I’m not sure she’ll consider this a favor once it’s over.”

Wyatt stepped closer to Anna’s chair, resting a hand on her shoulder. “She wants to do this.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Seems I can’t talk her out of it.”

“Okay. I need to wrap some things up anyway. I told Atticus I was going to retire. I’m not sure he believed me. He’s probably agitated and complaining that I’m not there. I’ll call once I feel everything is calm—or rather, not complete chaos.” A huff came through. “I’m not staying or anything, you understand? I’m just letting you in. I have no way to predict what happens next. But, yes, this might be their last chance to speak.”

“I’ll let her know.” Wyatt’s hand continued to warm Anna’s shoulder. “Thank you, Martha.”

“Don’t thank me. Just make sure she realizes what this could look like. There’s no way this ends well.”

“She’s heard. I have the phone on speaker.”

The phone call ended. His hand remained.

“She’s right, Anna. It could be rough.”

“We know that.” She pushed to her feet, dislodging his hand, not sure whether she wanted to or not. “But this might be our last chance.”

Inside, they made a simple breakfast and started a list of questions before Wyatt’s phone rang. He frowned. “It’s her.”

“Already?”

He held up a finger, then swiped to answer.

“I’m at the house.” Martha spoke immediately. “He’s awake. That’s the best I can give you. Wyatt, he’s bitter, and his end is near. He has nothing to lose, and he knows it.”

“We’ll be over in about fifteen minutes.”

“I warned you.” She hung up.

Wyatt arched a brow, and Anna nodded, smoothing her hands down her gray pants.

There’d been no time for a dress rehearsal, but she knew what she wanted to ask. She grabbed her purse. They barely spoke on the drive. She kept wiping her shaky hands on her pants. She shivered almost as if she could sense the darkness about to befall her now. I am strong. I am strong .

The crackling of the tires over the pavestone driveway created a sense of foreboding. When Wyatt opened the door for her, Anna grabbed his hand and squeezed it just to

feel something kind and good. He wrapped his arm around her, pulled her toward him, and whispered into her ear, followed by a kiss. They hurried up the walk to the gloomy house before Martha changed her mind—or before they did.

Martha approached them, cutting their distance to her in half. “Someone wants to meet with you before you see Atticus. She’s here getting some of her belongings. She wants to tell you something—something about your mother and her visit.”

“Bessie?”

With a nod, Martha walked them into the house and down the hallway to the Ruby Dining Room. Apparently, the room was still named after Sabina’s beloved horse. Or maybe the horse was named after the room. Focus, Anna.

There was something about Bessie as she approached, a sense of angry determination. “Anna, I knew your mother. We were around the same age. I wasn’t close to her, but I knew her, felt sorry for her if that’s okay to say.” Bessie reached as if to touch Anna’s arm, then lowered limp fingers to her side. “I was here when your mother came to visit Atticus. She found some kind of letter in an old book. She worked up the courage to come back to the devil, I guess.”

Letter? Anna’s head jerked up. Wyatt moved closer as if to shield her.

“Atticus was furious.” Bessie stepped closer, gripping both of Anna’s hands this time. “She asked if he had anything to do with your grandfather’s death.”

Anna wobbled. Her fingers tightened around Bessie’s.

“He denied it. Told her she was after his money and wasn’t getting a dime. She wasn’t anything to him—not his blood. That didn’t make any sense. Of course, she was his blood. And she should’ve received some inheritance.” Bessie’s gaze softened.

Her grip did as well. Then one hand lifted to touch Anna's cheek. "But she wasn't here for that. She was like you. She was here for answers. Then she asked about your father, Niklaus."

Anna gasped, prying free as she jerked back a step. "Why would she ask him about my father?"

"That connection, Atticus didn't deny so quickly. I don't know what he did to your father, but he had something to do with his disappearance."

"Disappearance?" Anna wobbled. Someone helped her into a chair. A black cloud seemed to drift through her thoughts. The room, the voices, all blurred behind its swirling darkness. "Wait. What were you saying? I didn't hear. My father disappeared?"

Somehow, a cup of something cold appeared in her hand. Then someone was guiding her to take a sip. She gulped once or twice, the room coming back into focus. Water splashed and dribbled as she slammed the cup onto the nearby side table and spun to face Bessie.

The sturdy woman frowned at her, perhaps thinking Anna wasn't as strong as she'd assessed. She eyed Wyatt, then at his nod, continued. "Your mother and Niklaus, Nick I called him, were in love. They met in town. He worked with her at the general store. They were inseparable, but they were young—very young. He made her happy. They got married—secretly."

"Secretly?" Anna asked.

"Yes, I don't know why. Maybe they didn't want anyone in their business because they were young. I can't say. After that, she was able to stay on the property. Adult by marriage, rumor had it as their secret got out. I knew Nick in school, nice guy. But

after he married your mother, he changed a bit. He flashed cash here and there. Where would he get cash? Your mother always seemed to be looking over her shoulders, like she was afraid of a ghost or something. Then he disappeared after you were born.” She snapped her fingers. “Poof, gone.”

“Did anyone report it?” That was attorney-mode Wyatt.

“Of course. There was a search. People say it reminded them of when Sabina went missing. I think that’s why your mother stayed here so long. Somehow, she hoped he’d come back to her. While she lived here, I don’t think she ever gave up hope.”

Bessie fell silent. No one breached the quiet.

“Anyway,” Bessie spoke at last, “when your mother accused Atticus that day she visited, he only said that if someone disappeared so easily, they weren’t worth much. Your mother wouldn’t listen to him and his vile accusations. She had a strength that only comes from knowing who she was and being right with her Maker.”

Martha mumbled something. Something like “Atticus won’t tolerate people who don’t break.”

“I’ll never forget how her strength and resolve made me feel.” Bessie patted Anna’s shoulder. Then with a wave of her hand, she started toward the doorway. “You should be proud. I should’ve followed her out the door. It would’ve changed everything for me. Instead, I welcomed the darkness by staying here. That’s all I know.”

Wyatt cleared his throat.

But it was Anna’s place to speak. So she shook her head at him, swallowed down the lump clogging her throat, and hurried to the woman’s side. “It’s more than I knew

before I came. Thank you, Bessie.” She hugged her. “No matter what’s occurred, I’m sorry for your loss.”

It was time to meet the vessel of wrath and destruction.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Anna braced herself. Moments shape one's life. Small moments woven together like fabric are used to shape our lives. Moments of impact—first love, loss of her mother, today—are part of the main design. She would stand tall, be brave. Shoulders back, head high, she stepped forward.

“I don't know if this is going to work. Atticus said he would meet, and then he changed his mind. I'm not sure why.” Martha's left eye twitched. “It isn't like him, but he's been getting more and more agitated lately.”

Anna's head jolted back. “We discussed this at Wyatt's house.” She held her hands still by squeezing her fingers on one hand with the other. She did not blink, staring with resolve into Martha's eyes. “I'm here, and I expect to see my great-uncle. Convey that to him.”

Martha and Wyatt gaped at her. Then the oddly frazzled Martha headed down the hallway, mumbling.

Wyatt's eyes narrowed, but he stepped closer, his hand on the small of Anna's back offering a show of support, a smidgen of strength. “You can do this.”

She stiffened. He'd been against this. He probably still was. But she couldn't fight him now too. She unclenched her teeth, her face tight, her hands firm against her as she stood like she was standing watch at the gate. I am strong. I am strong. I am—

Martha's footsteps headed back their way. “He'll see you now.”

It was as if they were at a doctor's appointment. “Well, here goes everything.”

Martha marched ahead.

Anna and Wyatt followed down a dreary hallway. No wonderful scents from Bessie's kitchen and no laughter or noise. Just the lifeless elevator heavy with the odor of antiseptic and varnish, hoisting them. The cold stainless-steel doors bumped open, and Anna squared her shoulders.

Years ago, her mother stepped through these doors to be insulted and cast away. Today, Anna would find answers and right wrongs. Today, she was here for her mother.

Martha's hand now had a tremble.

Then an odd odor tinged the stagnate air, thick and heavy.

Martha continued to lead, marching them toward the study full of books and paintings. The floor moaned with every step closer to Atticus's private sanctum. A dingy light crept down the hall from the right.

Anna scrunched her nose, the scent growing stronger. She'd never experienced this smell before. Was it the smell of death?

"Martha, you come here right now!" Atticus shouted like a red fox from a high bluff, wild and savage.

Almost submissive in an all-black suit, her head down and shoulders slumped, Martha walked toward the room. She didn't look at them, but she probably cursed them for being here.

As Atticus started yelling, the words muddled behind the closed door, Anna continued to think of the red fox, angry, biting and clawing in a corner.

“Um.” Wyatt shifted his feet, his hand still on the small of her back. “Should we return to the study or wait?”

She couldn’t respond. Only shrugged.

Then he leaned closer, his breath warm on her neck. “How are you after what you’ve heard?”

She shook her head. Now wasn’t the time to discuss that. It wasn’t even the time to think of it. Now was the time to be strong for her mother.

I am strong. I am strong .

A door opened. Martha hurried back, her face flushed, her lips flat and twisted, but her chin high and steps brisk.

“He wasn’t ready. He wants you to go back down and wait in the elevator lobby so he can meet you in the study again.” The woman jammed her hands on her hips and stomped right up to Anna. “This isn’t going to be what you want. I was wrong about everything, and this is a grave mistake. He’s the most agitated I’ve ever seen him, and that’s not a good thing. Just remember, I told you so. This one’s not on me.”

Without waiting for a response, she pivoted and walked so briskly Anna had to double step to keep up.

The elevator carried them back to the cold lobby, dinged, and released them through the open doors. As Martha reascended, they waited without speaking, not knowing what could be heard. Soon, the box clattered at the top, and then the cable returned for them.

“Mr. Urbacch will see you now. Follow me.” A large man in pale-blue scrubs

beckoned before the doors fully opened.

This was all part of Atticus's game, wasn't it? His house of mirrors so they wouldn't know what was real and what wasn't.

Wyatt's hand on her back, Anna stepped into the elevator, and it delivered them back to the familiar study with its dark wood and old books no one was allowed to read. Stagnant air seemed to suppress Atticus's strained breaths. Each one echoed through the room.

He sat facing them, perched on a red Victorian leather throne with dark trim and mahogany arms. The modified high-back chair was centered along the wall, his IV and medical equipment behind. He wore a navy velvet jacket and a white button-up shirt. A customized red ascot was tucked in his collar, probably hiding the probes and wires for his monitors, and gel held his coarse white hair away from his face.

He'd commanded respect during his imperial life, and his demeanor reflected that arrogance. With his head slightly turned up, his cold fox eyes fixed on her.

As the sight repulsed her, her skin rose in defiant bumps.

Two small tan chairs cowered toward him. No doubt so staged with purpose, but she played along and took one, Wyatt the other. She'd traveled far, not just in miles, and she hadn't come to participate in juvenile mind games.

"You're Anna?"

"Yes, I'm Lila's daughter and your sister, Sabina's granddaughter." She shouldn't provoke him, but she wasn't her usual self. Something dark stirred inside. Maybe she, too, was playing games. Maybe she should stop.

“Why are you here?” He didn’t flinch, apparently still strong and comfortable in this setting.

“I received a call—multiple calls—to come here. I also received a letter and some cash.” Now he flinched. So he knew about the letter.

“I didn’t write a letter. Why would I write a letter to you ? I’ll tell you what I told your mother. There’s nothing for you here. Nothing! Your grandfather was worthless. Sabina married him to spite her father. She married someone she never loved just in spite. I don’t know anything about any cash.” He flashed a vile look in Martha’s direction. “There was no money for your mother, and there’s no money for you.”

Wyatt started to stand up, jaw forward, fists clenched.

Anna touched his arm, easing him back down. “I’m here to find out about the letter. Who wanted forgiveness, and why?”

Silence. Atticus jutted his jaw forward, but a blue vein pulsed behind the nearly translucent skin at his right temple.

“The letter expressed great remorse. It mentioned my mother and me. Who would want to send such a letter, and again, why?” She scooted to the edge of her chair, lowering her voice. A part of her hoped Atticus would lean forward to hear her. Would meet her on common ground. “Then there’s the locket. Was that Sabina’s? Who’s the woman in the picture? And what about my mother’s visit here when I was a child? Why’d she leave broken?”

Atticus glared at her, unfazed. Then he waved a hand with a royal command. “Stop rambling, you ridiculous child.” Head cocked, he eyed Wyatt. “Why are you here, boy?”

“I’m here with Anna as her friend, not as her attorney.”

Atticus made an obnoxious sound. “You think I don’t know you were neighbors? Don’t you have a job?” He lunged forward. “You work for me . I own forty percent of Alan Corporation.”

“Atticus, who wrote the letter addressed to Anna?”

“You’re all so gullible.” Atticus snorted. “All the relevant questions are there to be asked, and this is the one you continue to focus on? There’s so much you don’t know. So much no one knows. I know. Greta knew. You all walk around thinking you know what to ask. ‘Why did my mother come?’ ‘Who wrote the letter?’” Juvenile and sarcastic, he mocked a whine, then frowned. “Actually, why Lila came may be one of the more relevant questions, now that I think of it.”

Anna pressed a hand to her swirling stomach. She had prepared for this. Was this deliberate provocation the medicine, his illness, or him?

Didn’t matter. She faced an unfiltered version of someone who didn’t care what happened when he went to meet his Maker. He wasn’t looking for forgiveness or to make amends. He wanted to go out in a blaze of glory, like the Great Wilderness Fire burning down everything and everyone in his path.

No wonder her mother was so adamant. They had no family. No one. No mere blood relationship could bind them together. This was not family, at least not the kind anyone would want or the kind in a feel-good movie.

No, this wasn’t what she was seeking at all. What was she seeking?

“What would you like us to know about you, Atticus, that we don’t already know?” Maybe she could turn the tables by sounding meek and interested. She detested this

man, but he wanted to prove he was in charge even now. She could use that.

“What do I want you to know about me? Well, I was told I have days, not weeks, months, or years. Days! Why shouldn’t you know it all?”

Her heart thudded, warning her she wasn’t ready. No! I am strong. I am strong.

She dug her fingernails into her palms and waited as he cocked his head and eyed her the way a red fox would a wounded bird.

“First, you mean nothing to me. Nothing! You’re not blood to me. I don’t know you. I don’t want to know you.”

Anna flinched. Okay, maybe she wasn’t prepared, but she’d let this lunatic talk. He had no power over her. He was nothing to her .

“Your grandmother liked to blame everyone else for the consequences of what she started. Selfish and immature, she manipulated others to satisfy her whims, leaving a trail of heartache. To escape her dull and loveless life with your grandfather, she’d ride her horse, Ruby. During one such adventure, she found an enormous gold stash in an abandoned mine.”

Wyatt let out a whistle. “Seems those joyrides paid off.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Atticus eyed him. Then he rubbed his hands together and started up again. “She called it the Magnificent Mine, but she didn’t tell your grandfather for fear she’d have to share or do something practical. She wasn’t even sure who it belonged to, although it was probably left by a miner or miners. Someone who either escaped during the Great Wilderness Fire and couldn’t find the gold later or was killed in the fire. So she plotted and planned. Then she met Jon Alan.”

Atticus hooted and slapped his thigh, though the feeble action merely emphasized the man's frailty. "Whew, were they ever a perfect match! He was ambitious and greedy, like her. She was beautiful, fun, and exciting. They improved her plan—that master plan. She craved to be free of the demands of a small child, free to do as she pleased. Her father, your great-grandfather, never allowed her any freedom. He never gave her a penny because she married Flynn. She couldn't forgive him for that. Then he gave Sabina nothing when he died, while he gave his son everything. Even I considered it low. Atticus was no different from their father. She blamed him for influencing their father to disinherit her."

Anna held her breath and fought the urge to look at Wyatt. Why was Atticus speaking about himself in the third person?

"Then Atticus followed their father's footsteps and tried to destroy her. He taunted her about her lost inheritance. Then he couldn't handle the irreversible rift. He became reclusive, grew a beard, and disappeared from public life while still trying to sabotage her."

Wyatt reached across the space between them. His hand grasped her cold one, and his warmth seeped into hers and eased the chills that started tracking up her spine.

"Jon decided to make Sabina disappear." Atticus pressed a hand to his chest, gasping. Pain contorted his face. "Sabina disappeared. Several months later, Greta appeared. Greta looked very different from Sabina. Money can do that for you."

"So you're saying Greta was—"

"Don't interrupt me!" Atticus glared at her.

So Anna ducked her head pretending to be properly cowed. But was it possible? She clenched her teeth and gripped Wyatt's hand so tight her fingers hurt. All those years

her mother struggled, all that time, Mother's mother had been... alive ?

Atticus cleared his throat. "Jon and Greta publicly fell in love and married. Then Atticus blamed Sabina's disappearance on Flynn. He was such an easy target."

How this decrepit man beamed, rejoicing in darkness and deception. Anna couldn't look at him for fear she'd turn to stone. With her stomach churning in reverse, she needed a break, but she couldn't allow him to stop. Whatever this was, she needed to hear it. It was their last chance.

"Since Atticus had been a recluse, no one remembered or paid attention to what he looked like. I lured him to his destruction by saying I'd found his sister, she'd found an immense treasure, and she yearned to see him. He was irrational when it came to Sabina. I met him along with a 'little helper,' who shall we say 'helped' Sabina rid herself of him. We shot him and stuffed him into an old prospect hole filled with snow runoff. It was a fitting burial. Later, someone found him. But we'd changed clothes, added a ring, made the man in the hole appear to be Jon Alan.

"When his grieving wife, Greta, whom everyone knew and respected, identified the body of her missing husband, who would question it? No reason. They assumed it was Jon. There was water in the hole, so by the time they found him, he didn't look quite the same. Now, Jon became Atticus. Sabina, now Greta, had her revenge. Jon had a fortune—a fortune Greta couldn't otherwise claim since she was no longer Sabina."

Anna remembered the names the Great Bisaan and the Magnificent Magsman from her mother's stories during their journey to Idaho. Did her mother know something about this? Was any part of it true, or was this just another play in his game?

She scratched her nails across her scalp. Wait. Greta Sabina—Great Bisaan. Magnificent Magsman/Swindler. Were the names her mother used in her stories a

clues? One name an anagram for Anna's grandmother's names and the other a reference to Jon Alan, a magnificent con man and a swindler?

Atticus sat up straight, gloating over their reaction as if he didn't intend to leave the earth without everyone knowing how treacherous and clever he was.

"I took over Atticus's role, and we waited to see if that worked. People follow a strong leader. When you have money and power, no one dares to question you.

"When Greta changed her looks, she no longer resembled Sabina. All she had to do was stay clear of Flynn and Lila. We sold all the gold. Then Sabina started to get soft. She had Devlin and got distracted. I didn't expect or desire a child."

Anna moved her free hand to grasp the top of Wyatt's needing something to hold onto. Could she believe this man? If she could, if she did... "Then Devlin's my"—what?—"my uncle?"

Atticus—or was he Jon?—glared at Peter's portrait. "Then she decided I should give your mother and grandfather money from Sabina's inheritance. Sabina didn't have an inheritance. She wouldn't listen. She tried to say we owed them something."

He snorted. "Not a chance. I went over there and told your grandfather to get it together. He lost his strength after Sabina disappeared. But he couldn't get himself together. He didn't know how. Greta kept getting more and more unreasonable. It was supposed to be just her and me. That was the deal. It's not on me. It wasn't my fault. She broke the deal."

The room was dark, the stench stronger, and the air thicker. Choking on the staleness of it all, feeling like her chair was spinning, Anna pressed her feet hard against the floor to ground herself. Time to bring him back to reality. "Did you write the letter?"

He lurched. “What’s your obsession with the letter?”

She flinched. A shiver tormented her arms and legs. She steeled her eyes.

“The letter doesn’t matter, a mere symptom of an illness. The illness is the concern, not the symptom. It was her obsession for amends, some banal penance. I don’t know why she was so driven to write it and fixated on getting it to you. When she heard Lila was dead, she hungered for forgiveness. She was still so immature, still had some unrealistic idea you don’t have consequences for your actions and everything is okay if you say ‘I’m sorry.’”

“My grandmother wr—wrote the letter?” Her whole body was shaking now. Heat built behind her eyes. But she dared not believe him. Did she? Could she?

“DNA.” Wyatt whispered so low perhaps Atticus couldn’t hear him.

Yes! There were tests. Such wild tales could be proved or disproved.

Atticus cocked his head. The veins pulsed at his temples, adding a visual accompaniment to the hoarse rattle of his breath. “But she wasn’t realistic. There’s no going back on the choices you make. Just as there was no forcing me into something that wasn’t part of the agreement. The letter doesn’t matter unless you want to know that she was sorry. She was sorry, but what did that do for you?”

Everything. If it was true.

“Why did Anna’s mother drive up from Texas?” Wyatt asked.

“Oh, now you’re trying to be clever, aren’t you?” Atticus/Jon’s shoulders rocked forward in the delight of the chaos. His face hardened and his voice deepened. “You’ll find no good answers here, Wyatt. Somehow, Greta got Lila to question her

father's death and her boyfriend's—oh, yes, I later learned—husband's disappearance.”

He flashed a devilish grin.

“Did they think I wouldn't know?” Evil delight danced in his eyes.

Pressure on her chest threatened to choke her. Anna sucked in shallow breaths.

“Did you kill Anna's grandfather?” Wyatt asked, attorney-mode calm.

“I didn't have to do anything to him after I spoke with him. He was weak. Couldn't take the pressure.”

“And Anna's father?”

“Well... that's a mite more complicated. That boy was smart. And too curious for his own good, he figured out things others couldn't. Let's just say I paid for him to disappear.”

Anna's skin was itching. She needed a shower and a scream session under soothing hot water.

I am strong. I am strong. I am strong?

Maybe not, but this was for her mother. She'd deserved better, but at least, she'd never be part of this man's life. Man? No beast, serpent.

Anna raised her chin and kept her voice steady. “Did you have someone break into my house to get the letter?”

“The letter means nothing. Why must you harp on that? That idiot Martha hired tried to blackmail me. Had the nerve to threaten me. Me? What a fool.” He swayed with pride, his arrogance on full display. A shadow crossed his face, and he shook his head. “I sent the incompetent Clyde, who lost the blackmail note on the plane and called attention everywhere he went. Worthless. Worthless idiots couldn’t do anything without specific instructions.”

How many people had this man killed? How many lives had he ruined? Bile churned in her gut and soured her mouth. Her throat tightened, and her tongue thickened. Maybe she wasn’t as strong as she imagined.

“Did Rowan have something to do with all this?” Wyatt asked.

Atticus stopped, head cocked to one side. “Rowan doesn’t work for me. Well, not officially, but he could’ve been recommended by someone close to me to help me out.”

“What does that mean?” Wyatt spread his hands out and taunted, “You said you weren’t playing games now, you’re revealing it all, putting it all out there, nothing to lose.”

“Once I knew he was working for you, I paid him to work for me, my eyes, ears, and more.”

Was the man half mad, or did he still have his mental faculties? “If the letter wasn’t important, why would you care if someone tried to blackmail you?”

“Why, indeed. Why did that idiot that Martha hired think the letter could be used to blackmail me? Well, for one, I made Sabina disappear. Why would I benefit from everyone knowing that she was alive? That we tricked you all. That couldn’t help my reputation. It might even cause speculation and have people ask more questions about

Atticus and his money. What if everyone knew she became Greta, found gold belonging to some poor, unknown miner, and used it to start her business—the business that employs you, Wyatt.” Atticus pointed at him, the gnarled finger shaking. “Or that Greta continued to apologize to Lila and Anna or implied we did something to Flynn. After all, we don’t need to add things that aren’t true. But now none of it matters. I’ll be gone soon, so no reason not to brag. I ask you—Who else could have pulled off what we did?”

Anna swallowed hard. With her throat so dry, could she form words? “Why did you ask Devlin to drug me and bring me to your house?”

“Ah, you are still with us, young lady. I wondered if you’d gone catatonic. Devlin needed to know what you knew about the blackmail note and the items in the envelope. Greta told him everything when she was dying. Then that whelp became more sinister than I am when he learned about our accomplishments and the missing key—and you. The secret things that might hold him back from an empire.”

Atticus sank back in his seat, his head against the headrest, his words now a whisper, his energy a wisp.

His eyes started moving without control. He winced and groaned, gasping for air.

When his eyes reddened, Anna pushed her chair back, waiting for flames to shoot from them and watching the top of his head for curled ram horns to appear. He mumbled something about Sabina. That he loved her? Then reached as if to touch something or someone.

Anna clutched her armrests. “Is he hallucinating?”

“Atticus?” Wyatt spun toward the doorway. “Where is that medical attendant?”

Medical alarms started going off. Martha had left the room. Why wasn't someone responding to the buzzer?

This went on for a few minutes.

A woman dressed in a white uniform entered the room, looked at Atticus, and started checking some monitors. She didn't say a word. She gave Atticus a shot of something.

Then he regained his strength.

Had Atticus—Jon?—ever wanted peace? He seemed determined to cause destruction, showing no compassion or kindness. Mother wouldn't have asked this man for money.

Anna pushed from her chair and stood over him, over this fading shadow that had loomed so large over their lives. "I hope I can forgive you. You'll go to your Maker and have to explain your actions, but it'll not be on my conscience or in my mind. You're now just a faded memory to me."

Atticus grimaced as he pushed the nurse away. "Don't worry about me. We had everyone fooled. Now it'll be just me and Sabina." He gripped the chair arms as he gasped for air, and his lips contorted into a wicked smile that would make the devil himself take notice. "Did you find the key for your treasure, Anna?"

Then he slumped over.

Anna gasped, spinning to the nurse. "Is he gone?"

The nurse and the medical assistant rushed about taking his vitals and shook their heads. Wyatt gripped her elbow and ushered her from the room. Alarms still rang as

she and Wyatt got into the elevator. The door's movement didn't stir her.

"Did that just happen?" Anna slumped against the back wall and brought cold fingers to her throbbing temples. "Was that man Jon Alan or Atticus Urbacch? Was Greta Alan really my grandmother, Sabina?"

She was trembling.

Her mother's voice whispered, "Anna, we only have each other. There is no one else we can trust. They're all gone."

"Did your mother know Atticus was Jon?" Wyatt's voice intruded. "Did she suspect Sabina was Greta?"

"I... don't think so." Then Anna remembered the stories. "Maybe she suspected."

Martha rushed into the elevator when the doors opened on the main floor. She eyed them, then stepped back out. "Let's go into the side study so the paramedics can use the elevator." She guided them along. "Are you okay?"

Anna's heart thundered in her ear. She inhaled to slow the pounding and rubbed her hand up and down her arm to feel something—anything.

Was she?

I am strong.

Yes, yes, she was!

She stopped in the main-level hall and took in air no longer scented with death. Or was that smell something evil? "Atticus claims he's Jon Alan. He isn't my great-

uncle, rather he killed him.”

“Whoa.” Martha’s steady steps faltered. She spun around to Anna. “I can almost see how it could be true if it weren’t impossible. I mean it would be impossible, right?”

That “right” echoed in the hall. Or maybe it echoed in Anna’s head. Oddly, she couldn’t bring her voice to echo it. As if... as if she believed that man, whoever he was.

“He didn’t have his original staff.” Martha’s voice dipped low. “They were all replaced. And there were some things he should’ve known about his past or his family but didn’t. Yet, he knew a great deal.”

Reeling, Anna couldn’t think logically, but a part of her—an illogical part maybe—felt something. Felt a truth in his ugly words. Or did she just not want to believe her blood carried any connection to the corpse upstairs?

“Anna...” Martha’s voice came low and slow. “He might be telling the truth. We should ask for DNA tests to determine if he was Atticus. You need to know. You were the only heir, it seems. Of course, who knows what secrets lurk?”

Anna held back what he said about Greta—Sabina? This was enough for now.

Wyatt’s hand pressed to the small of her back, then rubbed gentle circles.

She wouldn’t cry. It was such a stereotype.

Yet... this was too much.

Then the sobs came, and she couldn’t catch her breath. She tried to stop the tears. That made it worse.

Wyatt wrapped his arms around her, and she nuzzled her head against his chest, her fingers curling around his shirt.

“So much in such a short time.” Did that even make sense? Would they understand what she was trying to say?

She burrowed in closer. Wyatt was a professional who dealt with last-minute reveals all the time, and this had him stunned. So surely, he could understand her reaction. She let herself cry. For everyone. For her grandfather, for her father, for herself. But also, and most especially, for her mother. She bore it like a champion. She raised Anna while enduring, well, this. Deception, lies, murder, and unnecessary hardship. What a vile man that man—whoever he’d been—was. And what about Greta? Could that be true? Was she moved by the injustice of a brother not taking care of his sister’s family, or was it as sinister as this dying man implied? Was she Sabina? Anna needed to see the picture in the locket. But not now.

“Wyatt, do you think Anna should go back to your house?”

At Martha’s words, Wyatt eased Anna away from him, his hands gripping her shoulders as she wobbled. He quirked a grin. “I almost wish I could call Garrett to come help,” he teased. “Almost.”

Anna tried to smile, appreciating his attempt to lighten the mood.

“Yes, we need to leave.” He released her shoulders and slid an arm around her waist, still supporting her physically and emotionally as he faced Martha. “I’m available if you need anything for the DNA request.” He kept his arms wrapped around Anna and guided her down the dreary hallway to his truck and home.

Anna settled back in the heated truck seat. Her shakes lessening, the movement lolling her, she kept her eyes closed. They’d been on the road for over thirty minutes.

She sat up. “We’re not going to the cottage.”

“I’m taking you to the cabin.”

Her heart gave a leap. She reached a shaky hand across the console to grip his. “Thank you.” For that. For so much she couldn’t say. What would she have done without him today?

I am strong. I am strong.

Was that true? Was any of what happened today true? Would she ever know?

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“Wyatt, is this over?”

He glanced at her. Maybe he hadn't heard her. Maybe he couldn't answer. The cab was silent. Anna folded her arms in front, one hand on top of the other, as she slumped against the seat. Wyatt fidgeted. She didn't need an answer. But she needed an escape, a break, and some peace, and he was headed to the cabin. That would be enough for her for now.

She didn't speak again the entire drive. Wyatt's shoulders were tense, proving he was as upset as she was. Dear man to feel this with her, shoulder it with her.

He let out a low heavy breath, and his shoulders relaxed when the property gate came into view. He pressed the button and nudged her. Slumped awkwardly in the seat, she eyed him through half-closed lids as the truck bounced beyond the gate and rumbled up the driveway and hill. Soon, all was silent, the engine killed. Then he opened her door, and she fell into his arms, clinging to him as her legs gave way.

He pulled back and brushed a strand of hair away from her forehead and cheeks. “Anna, you continue to amaze me—overwhelm me even.” He cupped a palm to her face, his other arm supporting her. “I love you. I don't know what we'll have to work through after everything we heard today, but I'm here. I've always been here. We'll work through this together.”

Anna shivered under love's power and understood its addiction. She craved it. Had she always loved him? Yes, perhaps. Either way, she would always love him.

She hugged him close. “You helped get me through some tough times as a child. I

now understand why you were so protective. And I, too, feel the stirring emotional power of love. I want to feel this way the rest of my life.”

She longed to trust him with her entire heart. Could she?

For Anna, losing her mother was the most difficult emotional challenge she’d ever faced. Less than one week ago, she was thrown into the fire and survived her second with the help of God and the handsome man sitting next to her. She managed to survive, head high, while the darkness engulfed her, by holding to her purpose, staying grounded in her principles. She held strong and found the light. Her mother would be proud—she had become strong.

She closed her eyes, relaxing her head back against the doorjamb, enjoying the peace. The cabin’s glass doors were open. Rays of sun warmed her face. The waterfall and creek provided the relaxing music for her ears.

Wyatt’s voice interrupted her refuge. Her peace shattered again.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s up to Anna. She has a say in this, Devlin.” Wyatt’s voice thundered, then came the lull in the storm as he listened. Perhaps she should have insisted he put the call on speaker.

“You know who I am.” Wyatt’s low tones held power. “I’m not gonna stand by and watch you do anything to Anna.” He jammed the receiver onto its switch hook, its bell clattering. Then he covered his eyes with his hand, taking deep breaths.

Anna stood silent, waiting for him to speak.

At length, he turned to her. “Devlin is going to fight us on everything. This isn’t a surprise now that I’m seeing him for who he is. Greta would be heartbroken.”

“I hate to say it, Wyatt,” Anna whispered, hugging her arms around herself. “But

don't dismiss Greta's role in all this."

"Maybe you're right. But Greta may have anticipated this. If what 'Atticus' said was true, then she was sorry in the end. She gave me an enormous bonus package that made no logical sense. Maybe she did it for this reason. She must've noted my reaction when I mentioned encountering you. She'd have known it would be me and you against the power of Devlin's newly inherited fortunes."

I am strong. I am strong. Anna uncoiled her arms and drew in a deep breath. "What's our next step?"

"I'm going to file something with the police and with the court requesting a DNA test verifying Atticus was who he said he was. If it reveals he's Jon Alan, things get complicated."

"How complicated?" Was she ready for this? For her mother, she'd have to be .

"Atticus likely named Devlin as his heir. Greta also named Devlin as hers, but he has delayed the reading of her will. No one waits with this large of an estate. He says he's still mourning, but there's gotta be more to it. The DNA tests are the first step. Right now, you are Atticus's only living blood relative, which gives you some standing. Also, I'm going to speak to the police about what Atticus said. His estate is so vast, so it seems like a logical step. Devlin is fighting it, though. Maybe he believes the story about Jon Alan assuming Atticus's identity. It's pretty messed up."

Anna pressed a hand to her swirling stomach. What a disappointing and bizarre family. "Some things should be left alone. Maybe I shouldn't have come."

Wyatt just eyed her.

No, she had to do this. She'd promised herself for her mother. "No matter what you think, I don't care about an inheritance, but it should've gone to my mother. And if

Devlin drugged me and had anything to do with the break-ins or deaths, he needs to be held accountable. There's been enough death and deception."

Wyatt moved closer and wrapped his fingers around her trembling ones. "We'd better go back to the cottage. I should return to Boise, and I can't leave you here by yourself. Plus, the police are still expecting your statement. Another thing, do you have the locket's picture on your phone?"

Anna perked up, now finding purpose. "I left it upstairs on the charger since we don't have reliable cell service." She made her way past the open doors and gave a wistful glance at the pool and hot tub. Her feet flew up the steps, then slowed coming down, making certain to touch each step. Her phone felt heavy in her hand.

"Here it is." She held up the phone. "Do you know her?"

Wyatt reached for the armchair to steady himself as he sat. "This is Greta Alan."

"Does that mean...?"

"I should call Martha. Maybe she can get us something of Atticus's. A comb or something. Enough so we can make our case for testing. Anna, we may need to do something about exhuming Greta for testing also. If Devlin knew, I'm surprised he didn't have her cremated. But let's focus on Atticus and ensure his remains aren't destroyed before we can obtain proof."

Anna nodded, still stunned.

Wyatt found Martha's number on his cell phone, then dialed her on the landline.

"Hello, Wyatt." Martha sounded despondent.

"Martha, you're probably going through a lot right now, but I have to tell you the

photo in Anna's locket is Greta Alan."

"What are you talking about?"

"The locket you delivered to Anna. The photo is of Greta Alan. Martha, we need to do a DNA test for Atticus. Is there anything at the house? A comb, toothbrush, or something, maybe?"

"I don't know. Devlin has practically moved in, and I'm not sure if I'm staying or going. Most likely going. He's searching through everything. I don't know what he's looking for. He's acting strange. He doesn't even want a funeral. He just wants to cremate Atticus."

"Martha, see what you can do. If DNA proves Atticus isn't Anna's blood relative, we all know that isn't possible. Please try."

"No promises, but I'll try."

The landline went dead.

"We'd better head back to Boise right away. Atticus and Greta are gone, but Devlin has something in mind. We're still not sure where Rowan is right now. We don't have dependable cell service here and shouldn't be so far from first responders. Plus, we need to be close to get things moving before Devlin gets ahead of us."

On Warm Springs Avenue, Anna stared at Atticus's dark and sorrowful house as they passed by.

Wyatt's phone was ringing. He hit the truck's speaker.

"Wyatt, this is Martha."

“Hey. You’re on speaker.”

“I have several things for you. I’ve already left the house and can meet you, but we need to be careful. Devlin’s acting... strange. I don’t trust him.”

“Can you meet me at my house?”

“I’m not far from there. I’ll see you soon.”

The phone went silent.

“Anna, everything is going to move fast now. I know the attorney for Greta’s will. I’m not sure I know who drafted Atticus’s will, but Martha should know. Getting everything resolved is the only way to ensure you’re out of danger.”

Martha’s black sedan already blocked the driveway. Anna’s stomach bounced like acrobats tumbled inside. Wyatt parked beside Martha, and she walked toward the truck.

“I brought you several things. More than enough. I also brought you Atticus’s recent will and a copy of one from years ago, before the split with Sabina. I thought you might want both. It has the attorney’s name.”

“Wow.” Wyatt hopped down and took the satchel she passed over. “This is a huge help. I hope this doesn’t get you in trouble.”

“I can’t go back to that house. Devlin is on a tear, and something isn’t right. He’s digging through everything. Not electronic stuff. Papers. He’s looking for a key.”

Wyatt raised his eyebrows at Anna, then touched Martha’s arm, his voice gentle. “Is there anything you need?”

“Let’s see what this all brings, but I’ll disappear for a while. I stirred a hornet’s nest with the letter. Take care, Anna.”

Anna climbed from the truck and crossed to his side as Martha slid into her driver’s seat, backed out, and drove away.

Wyatt’s hand pressed to the small of her back. “Let’s get you inside after I check my cameras. I’m going to move my truck into the garage.”

After he pulled up the monitors and opened the doors with his phone, she went inside and waited. Soon, the door banged shut, and his footsteps clattered across the floor.

Then he called out. “Anna, I know several people who can help us. I don’t want to leave you at home by yourself, though. I’ll make some calls, and then you should come with me.”

“Okay, I am anxious. I’ll admit it. I’ll freshen up and be back in a few minutes.”

Wyatt nodded, already dialing his contacts.

After a break and breather, she made her way downstairs toward the voices. Her heart racing, her hands clammy, she breathed in the grounding scent of fresh-brewed coffee. Spoons clanked against porcelain, and her steps slowed as she approached Wyatt and his guests at the table.

“Anna.” He beckoned. “I invited some colleagues and friends to help us sort through everything. Jim thinks he can have the test results back to us today, depending on what information is available. I spoke with the attorney who created Atticus’s original will. I know the other attorney personally, so we’ll wait on that. Things are going to move quickly.”

He crossed to her, pulling her close to whisper in her ear. “I need to tell you

something disturbing in private.”

She let him guide her onto the patio, then leaned against a waist-high planter, and waited.

“Rowan was found in the river today—dead.”

Emotionless and calm, she turned away and closed her eyes. “I’m ashamed. It’s almost a relief. Only Devlin is left.”

Wyatt put his strong arms around her. She could no longer smell the pines and the scents of the mountains.

“Wyatt, we’ve got something already!” one of the men called. “Come in here. You’re not going to believe it!”

His arm around her, Wyatt guided her back.

The men fell silent, giving focus to a voice on the speaker of someone’s phone. “Wyatt, Wyatt, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“Wyatt, Devlin Alan has his DNA in the database from a burglary at his home last year. We can check it later, but it may need a court order. In the meantime, can we get a sample from the relative of Atticus? That might be enough to show cause and get things moving through the system. Walter should have a kit that she could spit into. Then we can test against the samples. If it matches, that tells us something. If it doesn’t—well, that means some deception was going on and there’s a whole different investigation to pursue. We may have something to test against Greta Alan too, but that one will probably need a court order as well.”

Wyatt glanced at Anna. Her heart was beating in her head.

“I’ll let you know.” He looked at Anna. She was walking over to the table. Walter pulled out a kit, and Anna moved into the other room, handing it back to him on her return.

“What does all this mean?” Anna bit her lip as they sat in Judge Walker’s conference room.

“It means you’re the heir to half of Greta Alan’s estate, which includes Atticus Urbacch’s estate. Atticus’s original will left everything to Sabina. Since the “real” Atticus died with that will, it should have gone to Sabina. Jon Alan has no right to anything belonging to Atticus. Because Sabina was still alive under the new identity of Greta, she would still be entitled to Atticus’s estate. She updated her will before she died. That leaves half to you and half to Devlin after obligations are paid. Greta also gave you, Anna, the property with your old house and the magical tree house on it.”

“So Devlin is my uncle?”

“Yes, and who knows what will happen with him. The police are investigating the deaths of Clyde Beason, Frank Trent—the man at the airport—and Rowan Landinger. But regardless, you are very rich, Anna.”

It was over. She’d righted the wrongs done to her mother. So why didn’t she feel any satisfaction? All those years, all those struggles... If only...

She pushed to her feet. “Can we go now?”

“Yes, we’re done here. It’s over. Greta’s will stipulated that her body could not be cremated, and she added one unusual bequest—for you. You are to receive her key, along with any form of current or future value associated in any way with the

possession of the key. Any idea what that might mean?"

"I don't know. Atticus mentioned a key too, remember?" She rubbed her forehead, her temples thrumming beneath her cold fingers. Then she raised her chin. "It's all too much to process right now. Wyatt, let's go, please."

Anna stepped back as she stared at the old wooden shack from her youth. The bulldozer's roar and rumble bellowed through the air. Then came the cracking of wood as it split under the machine, collapsing like a house of sticks. Wood tumbled to the ground. No sorrow struck her, only relief.

Her heart skipped a beat when pebbles and puffs of dust drifted about as Wyatt hiked up the hill. His sway with each step sent the flutter of butterflies in her stomach. But he wasn't coming toward her. He was going farther up the hill, up to the grove with the squatty tree.

At the grove, he stood still, then turned with a look she didn't recognize. He was waiting for her. Her feet moved without warning, and her heartbeat quickened. Her pace grew faster and faster. When she reached him, he took her hand, wrapping his fingers around hers, and they started up the once-familiar path.

The path transformed from dirt into flat gray stones. Wildflowers basked in the sun along each side. The path continued, only stopping at a white picket fence near the squatty tree. Whiffs of fragrant roses drifted from an enchanting, colorful garden inside the fence, and she stepped through the open gate into the sweet-scented air, then hurried to a wooden bench next to a deep crimson rosebush.

"Oh, Wyatt!" She rubbed her hand across the inscription, her finger tracing the words, In Loving Memory of Lila. Heat stung her eyes, and she welcomed the warmth created by a love so deep, so real that she could feel it in her blood, through her entire body, stirring every sense.

Wyatt's strong, handsome face softened as she crossed to him on wobbly knees. "Here we are," he whispered. "Together, at the place where it all began."

He smelled of musk and pine and placed one hand around her waist, drawing her closer. He kissed her, his fingertips grazing her cheek. "I'm forever yours, Anna."

"My forever, my love," she whispered back.