



Laurel Valley

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HART



Tribulation Pass

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LAUREL VALLEY

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Pleasant it is, when over a great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from shore upon another's great tribulation; not because any man's troubles are a delectable joy, but because to perceive you are free of them yourself is pleasant.

~Lucretius

Chapter One



HATTIE KNEW SHE'D FOUND IT THE SECOND SHE CRESTED OVER the hill.

It sat like a perfect jewel nestled between rolling hills, the white clapboard buildings lined up like soldiers and the streets paved with brick. She could see for miles, past the town and across fields as green as emeralds, with white fences and horses dotting the landscape. A lake rippled like liquid glass and was framed by the majesty of white-capped mountains.

She'd left the top down on her Mini Cooper despite the threat of a storm. The wind whipped through her hair, leaving it unruly and tangled, but she didn't care. The sky was gray with clouds that hung low and swirled overhead. If it hadn't been so unladylike she would've let out a battle cry that would have put the rumbling thunder to shame.

For the first time in her life, she knew what it felt like to be free. There was no one to tell her where to go or what to do, how to sit, stand, walk, or make small talk. There was no one to tell her where to volunteer, what career path to take, or how many children she should have.

Freedom.

She breathed in deep and let the fresh air settle in her lungs. For the rest of her life, she wanted to remember this feeling—everything about it—from the smell in the air to the taste of the first raindrop on her tongue.

Bags and boxes filled every available space in the tiny car. Derek would have a fit at the thought of her driving something

so undignified, and her mother would have agreed with him, but Hattie had planned her escape for the last two years, down to the last detail, and she'd thought the little car was impractical and cute—two things she'd had very little of in her life.

Atticus Cameron had helped her get her new identification, and with that, she'd been able to open her own bank account. It was the first one she'd ever had that had only her name on it. Derek had made sure she added his name to the trust her father had left her. She hadn't had a choice. It was never worth the fight that ensued when she disagreed with him. Besides, her mother had felt having Derek control over the money was the best option as well. Margaret Ashbury had been infuriated when her husband's fortune had gone to Hattie. With Derek in control, she could still get her hands on it through him.

For the last two years Hattie had lived in numbness. Living wasn't even the right word. She was a zombie. Her pride always got her in trouble. And she wasn't one to flinch when a hand was raised in her direction. But that wasn't Derek's favorite form of abuse, though he wasn't above using physical force to get his way.

What he really enjoyed was the psychological warfare, tearing away her self-esteem and security. Calling her names or telling her she was stupid. If she displeased him he'd freeze her out or cut her down in front of her mother or his friends or co-workers. Or he'd make sure she knew when he visited his mistress and come to her at night with the scent of another woman's perfume still on his body.

She'd taken Atticus's advice, squirreling away the allowance Derek put in her account every month and tacking Visa gift cards onto her grocery bills so it didn't look suspicious. He never looked beyond what was put on the debit card, as long as it was spent where she'd told him she was shopping. It had taken patience and perseverance, but finally she'd made her escape.

Atticus and her father had been close friends, and they'd worked together on occasion. The day they stood over her father's coffin was the day he made her promise to come to

him for anything, no matter how big, if she was ever in need. She owed him more than she could ever repay, and Atticus had wanted to do a heck of a lot more than provide her with the means for a new life. He'd wanted to put a fist through Derek's face, but Derek moved in some powerful circles, and she didn't want anything to ever happen to Atticus or his family.

She'd scrimped and saved over those two years, and found the secondhand car in excellent condition at a roadside dealership in Connecticut. Atticus had let her keep it in the garage of his Manhattan offices until she was ready to leave for good.

And then fate had lent a hand, and Derek had left for a prolonged business trip to Europe. Hattie had given him her itinerary before he left so he knew where she'd be, and then on a foggy morning on the way to a ladies' luncheon, Harriet "Hattie" Ashbury had died when her car missed the curve in the road.

Again, Atticus had helped her with the logistics of it all. He'd taken care of the scene, the body, and the medical examiner's report. And by the time Derek had flown back from London, she'd been zigzagging her way through the country, checking media reports and newspaper clippings to make sure everything had gone according to plan. She'd become Hattie Jones. And Hattie Jones wasn't a high-profile attorney's wife. She was a wilderness woman with a taste for the great outdoors. And she was free.

She could only imagine what her father would have said if he were still alive. He'd have wanted to know how she'd gotten into this mess. She wouldn't have had an answer for him. Derek had been charming and sweet, and he'd swooped in to comfort her when she'd been grieving. She'd thought he'd been the man of her dreams, but instead he'd become her nightmare.

Her father...God, she missed him. Some days the grief reached out and grabbed her by the throat until she couldn't breathe.

Atticus had given her a second chance, and by God, she wasn't going to waste it. He'd given her a home to lease and a place to work. And with luck, she could settle in and make friends, become a part of something.

The contents of the boxes rattled as she drove over the uneven surface of the road. She looked down at her phone, but it was no use. No service. She was going to have to stop for directions.

Welcome to Laurel Valley.

There was a neat white sign with those words printed in block letters and a planter box beneath that was overflowing with purple and yellow flowers. The town was even better than Atticus had described.

She knew she was coming in at the end of high season. Atticus had told her the population of Laurel Valley was only a couple thousand during the off-season, which was spring and fall. But during the summer and winter the population could grow up to forty thousand people. The fewer people she had to be around the better. At least for now.

It was one of the most beautiful resort towns she'd ever seen, and she'd seen a lot of them. The architecture was Bavarian, and the chalet-style businesses made up the downtown area of Laurel Valley. Flowers rioted everywhere—out of planters and pots—the brilliant colors standing out against the white of all the buildings. The main tourist streets made a large plus sign, and in the middle of the plus sign was a seating area with tables and umbrellas where people could sit with their coffee or eat lunch. Atticus had told her in the winter it was converted to an ice-skating rink.

There were boutique hotels and tasteful condos that blended right into the mountainous landscape, but the downtown area was surprisingly empty. Only a smattering of cars lined the main strip. Obviously, people had enough sense to stay in out of the upcoming weather.

She slowed the car and read the signs that hung above each of the doors—florist, bookshop, ice-cream shop, bakery, feed store, mercantile, photography studio, and several boutiques

she was going to have to check out later. She watched as shopkeepers turned over their open signs to closed and locked the doors.

Hattie looked at the darkening sky again and her grip tightened on the steering wheel as the wind whipped across the open top of her car. People must think she was insane. She pressed the button to raise the top on the car and checked her GPS again. She couldn't be too far from the house she'd leased from Atticus. He told her she'd have as much space and privacy as she wanted, and views she'd never see anywhere else in the world. It sounded like heaven.

The rumbles of thunder were still in the distance, but the storm was moving quickly. She'd been traveling for two weeks, and now that she was this close to her destination, she couldn't wait any longer to get there.

Her goal was to find the house, make a hot cup of tea while the storm rolled in, and then sleep for a couple of days straight. She wasn't scheduled to start her new job as manager of the sporting goods store until next week, so she had time to catch her breath. And maybe over time, she'd learn to stop checking over her shoulder to see who was behind her.

Hattie parked the car in front of the restaurant on the corner, glad to see it was still open. *The Lampstand* was carved into the thick wooden timber over the doorframe. The restaurant was built in the chalet style like the other buildings, but this one was three full stories, though the shutters had been closed over the windows of the top two floors. But at the very peak of the roof was a bright light that was growing ever brighter in the darkness.

Time was of the essence, so she left the car running, struggling to get the car door open. The door slammed shut of its own volition and she ran up the short stairs, wincing as flower petals were ripped from their stems, swirling into the air in front of her.

As soon as she stepped under the wooden overhang she tried to put her hair back into a semblance of order before stepping through the door. Her stomach grumbled as the smell

of food assaulted her senses. Between the adrenaline and nerves, she'd mostly been living on caffeine and power bars, with the occasional drive-thru meal tossed in. Getting to Laurel Valley had been the most important thing.

She wasn't exactly sure what time it was, but the sun had been up for a few hours, glaring into her rearview mirror as she headed west. At least until the clouds had started rolling in.

The restaurant was charming. A replica of many of the European chalets she'd seen on her travels. It was the view she noticed first. The entire back of the restaurant was windows that faced the famous Twin Peaks and the lake.

The restaurant felt peaceful—all wood and light and heavenly smells. It was a casual place, open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but it was clean and well cared for. Obviously a staple for the locals as there was a section off to the side where several men were playing checkers and drinking coffee, seemingly unbothered by the weather.

There was a group of teenagers in the farthest booth, giggling and completely absorbed in their own world, and in the booth next to theirs was a single man in a deputy's uniform, reading the newspaper and eating his breakfast. He didn't seem to be bothered by the teenagers, or much else for that matter. He barely gave her a glance when she walked inside.

"Welcome to The Lampstand," the girl behind the hostess stand said. Her face was still soft and rounded with youth, and she couldn't have been long out of high school. Her dark hair was piled artfully on top of her head, and she wore a white button-down shirt and a black pleated skirt that came a few inches above the knee.

"Some storm coming in," she said. "You're smart to wait it out until it blows through. You look like you could use some coffee. I'm Mac."

"You're right about the coffee," Hattie said. "But I'll take it to go, please." She smiled cautiously at the girl. She'd been

amazed how friendly all the people she'd encountered on her journey had been. She'd lived in a bubble in New York, and most of Derek's associates hadn't been the nicest people.

"You're not from around here, huh?" Mac asked.

"What makes you say that?" Hattie asked.

"You've got a Yankee accent," Mac said. "We get a lot of visitors during season, and we're always trying to figure out where people are from. We're pretty good at it. I hope you didn't come all this way for tourist season. Everything wrapped up last week. Great shoes, by the way. I saw some just like them in *Cosmo*."

Hattie resisted the urge to run out the door and jump back in the car. Just because the girl could place what area of the country she was from didn't mean she was going to get on the phone to Derek and tell him she was alive.

The only person who knew her identity was Atticus Cameron. And it had to stay that way. If Derek knew she was alive he'd come after her with a vengeance, and there was nothing or no one who could stop him.

Chapter Two



“CREAM AND SUGAR?” MAC ASKED.

“Just black is fine,” Hattie said. She took the cup Mac gave her and pulled out the crumpled piece of paper from her jeans pocket. “I’m hoping you can help me find my way. My phone lost service about an hour ago.”

“Yeah, cell service sucks out here when the weather is bad.”

“So the season is over?” Hattie asked. “It’s only locals around now? I was wondering why it wasn’t busier downtown. I thought I had another couple of weeks to go.”

“There’s a few latecomers like you,” Mac said, taking the paper from Hattie and flattening it out on the counter. “But it’s been a busy summer and we’re all glad for the break. At least for a little while. For three months in the summer and three months in the winter, Laurel Valley is overflowing with people. It’s great for business, but it’s nice when they all go home.”

“Amen to that!” said one of the old men playing checkers.

Mac grinned and a dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth. “You caught us at a good time. Usually this place is packed for the breakfast shift, but with the storm coming, most everyone will stay home today.”

“Except for me, apparently,” Hattie said. “I was hoping I could make it before things got too bad. Am I close?”

“Let’s see,” Mac said.

A waitress came out from the kitchen with a tray and moved behind the bar, heading toward a man at the end of the counter. She set his food in front of him and smiled, and then she headed over to where Hattie and Mac were standing.

The waitress had strawberry-blond hair and her face was free of makeup, covered with a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose that made her look younger than she was. Her eyes were dark brown and only the fine lines at the corners gave her age as being a couple of decades older than Mac.

“I’m Alice,” the waitress said. “You want a table and something to eat? It’s going to get real nasty out there.”

“I just stopped in for directions and a jolt of caffeine,” Hattie said. “But I’ll be back. This is a great place.”

“Where you headed?” Alice asked.

“O’Hara land,” Mac said, giving Hattie a closer look. “You know that’s private property, right?”

“Yes,” Hattie said. “A friend of mine, Atticus Cameron, found me a house to lease.”

The girl’s brows rose almost to her hairline. “Wow, Uncle Atticus never does that. O’Hara land is for family only. Y’all must be close. Or maybe a long-lost cousin?” Mac asked hopefully.

“He’s your uncle?” Hattie couldn’t hide the surprise in her voice.

“Well, not really,” she said. “But he might as well be. I’m Mac O’Hara, so I know right where this house is. You’re not too far.”

“You’re an O’Hara?” Hattie asked.

“It gets complicated if you think about it too hard,” Mac said, grinning. “Basically, my great-grandpa settled here. And he had two sons. My grandpa was one of those two sons. And Atticus is the nephew of my grandpa’s wife. But Atticus is like some crazy-rich security military guy, and sometimes my uncles do some work for him.”

“How many uncles do you have?” Hattie asked, feeling her brain start to short-circuit.

“Four,” Mac said. “My mom is the only girl. But I told you my grandpa had a brother. And he has five sons too. So what I’m saying is Uncle Atticus is technically family, though I have no idea what he really is to me. Maybe a cousin?” Mac shrugged. “And this is his house on the property, though he’s never there. He lives in Dallas full-time. But most of the rest of the family lives on the land. There’s a lot of us.”

“Lord, isn’t that the truth,” Alice said. “You could throw a dart into a crowd and the odds of hitting an O’Hara are pretty high.”

“Though we prefer not to have darts thrown at us,” Mac said.

Another loud rumble of thunder made the glass in the windows tremble. “Can you tell me how to get to the house?” Hattie asked.

“I’d recommend you don’t,” Alice said. “It’s not an easy drive on a sunny day. You sure don’t want to tackle it in this weather. You sit right there in that booth and let me bring you some breakfast.”

“I do appreciate the offer, but I can’t stay. I really need to get settled.”

Alice nodded sympathetically. “You’re plum worn out, aren’t ya? I can see it in your face.”

Another rumble of thunder, this one closer than the last, had her looking out the front windows. The sky was getting darker and had a greenish tinge so it looked like an ugly bruise.

“There’s only one way to get there,” Mac said, taking a pen and drawing a map on the paper. “Just keep going down Main Street, and don’t turn off on any of the side streets. The buildings and everything will eventually end and the road will turn from two lanes into one. That’s where O’Hara land starts and there’s a big sign that says private property. You’ll see the cameras.”

“Cameras?” Hattie asked.

“Uncle Atticus is a stickler about privacy, and it gets a lot more intense the longer you drive.”

Hattie remembered the security she’d had to go through when she met with Atticus at his office in New York. Security was Atticus’s business, and though she didn’t know exactly what his job entailed, she knew that it was high risk, high profile, and the protection was probably more than warranted. But considering she was here to hide, maybe the privacy intrusion was welcome.

“You’ll pass some fenced-in pastures for a couple of miles, and then you’ll come to a fork in the road with an enormous tree that splits the fork. You can’t miss it. Now,” Mac said, with a dramatic pause. “Make sure you take the right side of the split.”

Hattie was going to ask what was so bad about the left side of the split, but knew the quickest way to get moving was to keep her mouth shut. Mac certainly didn’t need any prompting to keep the conversation going.

“The house Uncle Atticus has you in is on Tribulation Pass,” Mac continued. “That’s not too far from where I live. You’re in one of the lake houses. The numbers are on the doors, so it shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“I appreciate your help,” Hattie said, reaching in her bag to pay for the coffee.

“It’s on me, honey,” Alice said. “Welcome to Laurel Valley. And make sure you come back and see us. I want to hear all about what brings you here.”

Hattie fought the panic that rose inside of her, and told herself to relax. She and Atticus had talked over what she’d say when people asked her that question. His advice had been to stick as close to the truth as possible without giving too much away. It was easier to remember the truth than too many lies.

“I’ll be back once I get settled,” Hattie said.

She took her coffee and map and hurried back to the car, putting it in reverse before she got her seat belt fastened. The coffee went forgotten as she put the car in drive and headed down Main Street.

“Just stay on Main Street,” Hattie muttered. “You’d think that’d be easy enough to do.”

But she soon saw it was more complicated than that. The street opened up into what should have been chaos and there was a large roundabout that somehow tied it all together. Thank goodness there was no traffic. She and roundabouts didn’t have the best track record. She’d had a close call in Chicago, but she’d somehow passed through unscathed. Only terrified.

There was a sweet-looking church on the left with an A-frame front and a bell tower on the attached building. There were green wreaths on the front double doors and a lone black car parked to the side. On the right was a library built of wood and stone and glass that was as beautiful a structure as she’d ever seen. She decided it would be one of the first places to visit now that this was her home.

Next to the library was the police station, still under construction, but it promised to be as spectacular as the library. Being born into the Ashbury family hadn’t been her choice, but it had given her privileges most people only dreamed of. And she certainly recognized money when she saw it. Laurel Valley was exactly the kind of place Derek or her parents would have wintered for ski season.

Another boom of thunder shook the sky and this time it was followed by a crack of lightning so bright it had her seeing stars and her hair frizzing around her face.

“And that’s close enough for me,” she said, pressing the accelerator.

She saw the sign where Main Street continued, and she veered hard to the right, so she didn’t get stuck in the endless roundabout cycle. There were more businesses on each side of the road—mostly restaurants, adventure and sporting goods

stores, and places to rent seasonal equipment—but the farther she drove, the sparser they became.

The first drop of rain fell as soon as the road changed from two lanes to one, and she barely had time to see the sign proclaiming private property and the cameras situated high on poles, before the sky opened up and she couldn't see anything at all.

She'd never experienced rain like this—the big heavy drops that exploded as they hit the windshield. The electricity in the air made the hair on her arms stand on end. It was violent and full of rage.

Her wipers were doing double time, but she was barely inching along since she couldn't see two feet in front of her face. All she could do was pray she was the only person foolish enough to be on the road right now.

Her front bumper hit the tree before she could see it, and she jerked forward against the seat belt with a tiny *oomph*. The windshield wipers swished loudly, but they were fighting a losing battle. She couldn't stop now. If she'd found the tree then she wasn't too far from the house.

The palms of her hands were damp, and her heart thudded in her chest. She turned on the radio and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* filled the tiny car.

“That's the perfect music for impending death. How about something else?” She flipped the dial again until she found the classic rock station, and then she wiped her hands on her jeans and took the wheel again.

“Just a little farther,” she said, trying to reassure herself.

She put the car in reverse and then inched her way forward and back onto the road. She didn't know how long she crept along, but it felt like hours. Tall grass brushed her window, and she realized she was totally disoriented. And then the car stopped moving altogether.

She pressed down on the accelerator, but the tires just spun in place.

“Okay, okay,” she said. “Don’t panic.” She checked her phone once more, but there was no signal.

She had two options. She could wait it out or she could start walking and try to find help. She looked at the map Mac had drawn on her paper. She was in the home stretch. It couldn’t be much farther. At least, she was praying it wasn’t too much farther.

With that decided, she dug into one of the boxes in the back seat and grabbed a windbreaker with a hood, not that it would do much good, and she grabbed her workout sneakers instead of the designer ones she currently had on.

“No time like the present,” she said after she’d zipped up the jacket and tightened the hood.

She grabbed the keys, said a little prayer, and stepped into chaos. The wind pushed her back against the car, and rain lashed at her face. She held her arm in front of her eyes long enough to lock the car, and then she stuffed the keys in her pocket and started walking.

Chapter Three



SUMMER WAS OFFICIALLY OVER. THE CHILL IN THE AIR HADN'T been there a week before, and the wind had shifted direction so waves rippled gently across the lake. Rain was coming. But for now...life was perfect.

Sunlight hadn't yet broken between the peaks of the mountains, but the promise of it was there, casting a pearly gray light over the land—*his land*. The quiet and his own thoughts were all he needed. He leaned against the cedar porch railing, his hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee, wearing only a pair of navy flannel pajama pants.

Winston lay at his feet, never as excited about a new morning as his owner, and snored lightly. He was a seven-year-old English bulldog who tolerated having a human living in his house.

Duncan O'Hara was a man of routine. Being the oldest of five and growing up on a ranch where something always had to be taken care of or tended to probably had something to do with that. He liked the mornings best and was up before most. He liked the way the sun rose like clockwork, but how it was always different—the colors, the light, the shadows. He liked how the light touched his land like radiant fingertips and spread until it reached the land of his ancestors. There was no more beautiful place on earth than Laurel Valley.

The problem was, everyone else thought so too. Over the past decade or so, Laurel Valley had turned into a vacationer's best-kept secret. Between the skiing and snowboarding in the winter, and the fishing and kayaking in the summer, their

sleepy, quiet town turned into a circus a few months out of every year.

But when tourist season was over, things slowed back down to a normal pace and the faces he passed on the street once again became familiar. His father had served as mayor for years, and his younger brother, Hank, was the developer for the area, and they'd done a good job of regulating the population and the kinds of businesses that could come into town. The people of Laurel Valley wanted jobs and stability for the locals, and they wanted the off-season population to stay small.

Duncan understood what the tourism meant for the town. It didn't mean he had to like it. He'd always considered the beauty of Laurel Valley to be his, and he made it a point to spend as little time in town as possible during tourist season.

In his experience, people were generally a nuisance.

His mother said he had an artist's temperament. He'd hole up for days or weeks at a time while he was working, be surly, or downright rude if someone interrupted him, and then he'd surface like a drowning man gasping for air and rejoin his family or friends in whatever they were doing, as if he hadn't missed out on large gaps of time.

He wouldn't apologize—couldn't if he tried—because he knew he couldn't change how he was. When a person was surrounded by so much beauty, it was impossible not to get lost in its grandeur. It was impossible not to get caught up in his art.

Speaking of work, he needed to get a couple of hours in the studio before the storm rolled in. He turned to head inside just as his phone rang. He looked at the number and scowled.

Jenna.

She knew he'd be up this early. She knew him as well as anyone ever had. That was part of the problem. The calls came less frequently than they had after they'd initially broken up. But for whatever reason, she wanted to know how he was doing and to tell him she missed him. It was a vicious cycle,

and he wasn't ashamed to say he'd used the emotion the breakup with her had caused in his work. He'd done some of his best painting over the last year. The only saving grace was she'd left before he'd embarrassed himself by asking her to marry him.

His parents and the rest of his family had taught him the value of marriage. It was a commitment that wasn't to be taken lightly, and when he did find the right woman, he'd be with her until he took his last breath. O'Haras mated for life, and that kind of contentment was a tall order to fill for the younger generation.

He knew he needed to block Jenna's number and move on. There was no need to hold on to those last dregs of a relationship that had fizzled so quickly. It didn't matter that he'd loved her. She hadn't loved him. At least not enough to stay.

But these occasional calls kept him tethered to her, and he'd stopped answering months ago and let it go to voicemail. And then he'd listen to her messages—the voice that was so familiar, yet so far away—and feel the faint tug to go after her. But Laurel Valley was his heart. And if she didn't love him enough to stay, Duncan could admit that he didn't love her enough to go.

He turned toward the sliding glass doors to go back inside and caught his reflection. He saw himself first as an artist would. Maybe he should paint a self-portrait today. Despite the scowl on his face, he shared the strong bones and angular face that all the O'Hara men had. His hair was dark blond and badly in need of a cut. He tended to forget such things when he was working, and he'd been working a lot lately. His eyes were hazel with flecks of brilliant green and gold, and the scruff on his face was getting long enough to irritate him.

He was tall and lean with the body and shoulders of a swimmer, which made sense considering he'd swum across the lake more times than he could count to get to one relative or another's house.

He'd spent his life outdoors, and had the rugged looks and calloused hands of someone who knew how to work and play hard. But he had the soul of a poet, the heart of a romantic, and the temperament of a crotchety old man when his art and space were interrupted. He was a contradiction, but to Duncan O'Hara's mind, life, just like art, should be contradictions. That's what made it interesting.

"Come on, Winston, it's time to go to work."

Winston cracked an eye open and immediately closed it again. Winston wasn't a big fan of work.

"Rain's coming," Duncan said. "If you stay out here you're going to get wet. And I'm not going to stop what I'm doing to come rescue you."

Winston gave an aggravated sigh and got up slowly, making sure Duncan knew how displeased he was, and then he lumbered inside to sit on the mat in front of the kitchen sink.

"Yes, you're right," Duncan said. "You deserve a treat for trekking the entire fifteen feet from outside to inside. You're a dog Olympian."

Duncan grabbed a treat from the canister on the counter and Winston took it delicately from his fingers before trotting off to the built-in doghouse in the wall under the stairs.

The two-bedroom cabin had been built with the views in mind. He and Hank had designed it together, and he couldn't imagine living anywhere else. The O'Hara land was vast—thousands of acres—which was good because there were a lot of O'Haras and the last thing he wanted to be was crowded.

He'd chosen his plot of land across the lake and a mile or so down the road where Hank's house was located. It was A-frame in structure, and had floor-to-ceiling windows on all sides. He didn't worry about privacy. There was no one remotely close to him, and no chance of stray hikers on the private property.

His studio was in the loft upstairs, and the view was incomparable. The floor plan was open—living room, kitchen,

and dining room—and the furnishings were modern, minimal, and sleek.

He touched the control panel on the wall and John Coltrane wailed through the surround-sound speakers as he detoured through the kitchen to refill his cup, this time adding a generous amount of sugar and cream. And then he padded into the master bedroom and stripped out of his pajama pants, tossing them across the foot of the king-size bed as he headed into the bathroom.

The bathroom was one of his favorite rooms in the house. It was large, and the entire back wall was glass and looked out over the lake, and there was a large walk-through shower with ceiling and wall jets. At the touch of a button he could slide the glass panel into the wall and walk out over the lake on the attached dock. There was an outdoor shower so he could rinse off before coming back inside when he spent a day on the water, and in the winter the tile floors and walls stayed heated.

Duncan turned on the water and walked into the shower with his coffee. He drank too much of it, but not drinking it in the mornings never turned out well for anyone. The water was hot, and he washed quickly, his mind occupied with the painting he'd left unfinished upstairs. There was something missing...

The morning light that had been streaming through the windows vanished and everything fell into shadow. Duncan had been so wrapped in his thoughts on the painting that he hadn't noticed the change in the sky.

Gray clouds roiled overhead and the wind made tiny whitecaps across the lake. But there was still a single stream of sunlight that split between the mountains, and the sight of it made his breath catch.

He turned off the water with a jerk of his wrist and grabbed a towel from the bar, halfheartedly drying off as he ran across the tile and into the bedroom, leaving puddles of water behind him. There was a pair of cutoff sweats on top of his dresser, and he grabbed them and then ran naked through the house and upstairs to the loft.

The view from the second floor was even better, and he knew he'd only have moments to capture the power and emotion of Mother Nature before it was gone. He haphazardly pulled on the sweats and then moved the canvas he'd been working on off the easel and propped it against the wall.

He grabbed a new canvas, his movements methodical and practiced, and mixed paint with the fanatic intensity of a mad scientist. The first stroke slashed across the canvas like the lightning that danced in the sky. His heart pounded and the exhilaration was like nothing he could explain. There were days art was work—where he had to tear it from his soul and he thought he might not survive—but there were times like this where he was no longer in control of his body or his mind. It was as if he were standing outside his body and watching from the outside.

Drops of paint littered the hardwood floors and sweat dripped down his back, despite the cool breeze of the air conditioner blowing through the vent overhead. He was in a battle, a warrior wielding a sword with every stroke of the brush, and he would be victorious. There was no other option.

The clouds changed color and rolled toward him, as if they were coming to swallow him whole, and he felt the power and electricity in the air. His gaze was focused, his smile triumphant.

Time no longer mattered. He could have stood there for hours or days. But he felt the aches in his body as he put the final strokes on canvas. His concentration broke and he stopped to stare at the painting, breath heaving. There was a thudding, a pounding, that kept intruding even as he tried to push it away. He used his palette knife to thicken the clouds and add layers of color, and then he made a final stroke as another explosion of thunder shook the house.

“Done,” he said.

It was alive. That was the only way to describe it. And he was exhausted. But he wasn't finished. When the creative energy was flowing through him like it was, it was best to ride

the dragon until the bitter end. He took care of his brushes and scraped his palette and thought of his next project.

But something nagged at the corner of his mind again, and he shook himself back to reality. He listened closely, trying to figure out what was off. And then he heard it again. A steady pounding from his front door.

A growl escaped his throat, but he headed for the door anyway. His family knew not to interrupt him when he was working, which meant there had to be an emergency of some sort. Or someone with a death wish.

Chapter Four



DUNCAN HAD FORGOTTEN HE'D BEEN WORKING IN OLD SWEATS, so he swung by his bedroom to grab a shirt. He was pulling it on as he opened the front door and a wet mass of something he was almost positive was human fell into his arms.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, trying to keep them both upright. “This is private property.”

“S-sor-sorry,” she said.

She was in shock. Her eyes were wide and unfocused and she was shivering with cold. *Great, Duncan. Why not traumatize her some more?*

Her fingers were clasped around his shirt and he tried to loosen them one by one. There'd been too many whackos over the years who'd tried to trespass on the family land and take whatever they could find. That never ended well.

Atticus had lectured and trained them well enough to be paranoid about any strangers *accidentally* popping up. Security was his business, and the O'Haras had vast resources and connections. There'd even been a kidnapping attempt at one time because of their political influence.

The woman was tall, close to six feet, and her skin impossibly pale. He immediately let go of her, and her knees buckled. He caught hold of her elbows to help her stay upright.

Her teeth started to chatter. “I'm s-sorry,” she said again. “My c-car. It's s-stuck. I'm looking for m-my house.”

She had an intriguing face—more interesting than beautiful—but she was crazy as a loon. Or someone with an agenda. His house wasn't a place *anyone* found by accident.

“Sell it to someone else, lady,” he said. “Who do you work for? Who put you up to this?”

His harsh tone must've struck a nerve because her head snapped back and the color started to come back into her face. Her hair was the white blond that women paid a lot of money for, but he had a feeling she didn't have to. Her brows were finely arched, her eyes almost black, and her lashes thick and full, clumped together by the rain.

Her lips were wide, full, and unpainted, her nose was just a bit crooked, and she had a sexy little mole at the corner of her mouth. A vision of her decked out in a gold breastplate with a sword and shield in her hands and hair blowing in the wind came so clear he could've reached out and touched it.

It made him all the more angry. He wanted to be back upstairs in his studio—*needed* to be—and whatever her scheme, it just delayed him more.

“Are you normally so chivalrous?” she asked. “I suppose you kick small dogs and run over the elderly as well?”

His brow arched at that, and the corner of his mouth twitched. He wasn't above seeing the absurdity in his behavior, and he tried to relax a little bit.

“And if you must know, Atticus Cameron sent me here. Feel free to call him if you must, but maybe we could move this conversation inside. Or I'm happy to camp out on your porch, but if you think I'm going back out into that,” she said, waving her hand in an unspecified direction, “then you are going to be very disappointed.”

She was magnificent in her anger. He'd have to paint her, loon or not.

“As exciting as that sounds,” he said, “maybe you could give me a little more information before I let you inside my home. This area is private for a reason. And we've had too many close calls.”

She managed to draw herself up to her full height, and dignity cloaked her like a blanket. There was a fierce determination somewhere inside of her, but he'd expect no less from the warrior he envisioned.

"I've just moved to Laurel Valley to be the manager at the sporting goods store, and I've leased the lake house on Tribulation Pass. The young woman at The Lampstand gave me directions, but my car got stuck some ways back and here I am. I don't mean to be rude..."

"Sure you do," Duncan said, enjoying himself now that she was getting her dander up. Women were fascinating. Their emotions and reactions. He wanted to draw her in charcoal like this. Fast lines and sharp, furious edges.

"You might as well come in," he said, moving aside to let her by. "You'll be camped out on my doorstep and then I'll never get you to leave."

"I appreciate your generosity," she said.

And she wasn't being sarcastic. He could tell she was at the end of her rope, and he'd only made it harder on her.

Despite the outward appearance of bravado, there was a fragile vulnerability hidden somewhere inside. Even warriors couldn't be strong all the time. He had another vision of her, this time in soft pastels and watercolors.

Inviting her inside was a mistake. He knew it as sure as he was breathing. His artist's eye picked out subtleties that others didn't pick up on. Her clothes were expensive, her speech refined, and she was running from something.

And when you put two and two together, Atticus had given her a home and a place to work. He'd given her a safe haven. The fact that his warrior needed a safe haven at all made him want to protect her, to shield her from whatever hurts she'd suffered.

She stood in the open space of the living room, and stared out the wall of windows. Her gasp for breath had him tensing.

"My God," she said reverently. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I'd never want to go anywhere else."

He closed his eyes and tried to breathe. That soft gasp of wonder had awakened things inside him that had been dormant too long. She turned to face him and he forgot to breathe altogether. She radiated light, and the beauty of her would be etched in his brain for eternity. He didn't need her to sit for him. He'd be able to draw her from memory.

"I've got tea," he said abruptly.

"Oh," she said, clearly surprised by the offer. "I'd love some. I got some coffee at the restaurant, but I was gripping the steering wheel too hard to drink it."

She was lucky to be alive. He scowled at the thought of her driving through such treacherous conditions and went into the kitchen to put on the kettle. And then he went into his room and grabbed a towel and dug an old pair of sweats out of the closet.

"Well, hello there," he heard her say from the other room.

Winston had come out to see what had disturbed his nap, and he gave Duncan a questioning look before turning his attention back to their guest.

"Aren't you a sophisticated old man," she said, reaching down so he could sniff her hand. He gave her his paw to shake. "And quite charming. You look a bit like my grandfather. All you need is a bowler hat and a cigar."

"His name is Winston," Duncan said, narrowing his eyes at the dog. He was never that friendly to strangers. "Because he looks like Winston Churchill."

She scratched behind his ears. "It's a very appropriate name. Does he always look this disgruntled?"

"Always," Duncan said.

"I want to apologize for showing up the way I did," she said. "I'm sure it was a great shock, especially if you're not used to having visitors. I can understand why you'd be cautious. Atticus will do anything to protect his family."

She moved away from Winston to look at the sleekly framed pictures of his family that covered the wall next to the

fireplace.

“Yeah,” Duncan said. “But he’s not much on giving information. It would have been nice to know I should’ve been on the lookout for a lost tenant.”

He handed her the stack of clothes.

“Thank you,” she said, making her way toward the guest room where he’d pointed. “I’m Hattie, by the way.”

“Interesting,” he said without looking at her. “You don’t look like a Hattie.”

“Harriet,” she said. “Harriet Jones. But I prefer Hattie.”

The way she said the name spoke of unfamiliarity, and it made him frown. He definitely needed to have a talk with Atticus.

There was only silence as the door clicked shut behind her. She had secrets. And he found it curious he wanted to start peeling back the layers.

Chapter Five



YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A HATTIE.

Panic had gripped her the second the words were out of his mouth, but it was just a reaction. She wasn't used to the name. And he was a stranger. Who was he to say what name she looked like? If she was going to live in Laurel Valley, she had to get used to hearing it. And she had to do better saying it.

The guest bedroom was large, with more windows and a queen-sized bed in the middle of the room. On one wall was a large painting in vibrant colors that had her staring transfixed. She'd seen the artist's work in a gallery in Manhattan, and Derek had paid a lot of money for an original piece for his office. The famous DWO. He only went by his initials and he never went to his showings. She'd been fascinated by the thought of a man who lived with such complete anonymity.

She moved from the bedroom to the bathroom, but there were floor-to-ceiling windows in there as well.

"So much for privacy," she said.

She dried off quickly and stripped out of her wet clothes. She'd had the presence of mind to kick off her muddy tennis shoes before she'd walked onto his porch. They were ruined anyway.

The large shower caught her eye, and she bit her lip in indecision. She'd already overstayed her welcome. He clearly wasn't used to company, and by the look on his face it seemed as though she'd ruined his entire day. But when it had come down to it, he'd been kind and given her refuge.

She looked down at her muddy feet and ankles and decided she was really doing him a favor by taking a shower. That way she didn't track dirt into his home. Or more than she already had. And what a home it was. If the house she'd leased had half the view this one did she'd be tempted to stay forever.

It took her a minute to figure out where the controls were for the shower, and she couldn't help the grin when the control panel lit up in the wall and multiple jets started spraying water.

The home she'd shared with Derek had been a renovated brownstone on the Upper East Side. It was big, stuffy, and boring, much like Derek. It had been a home with no happiness, and memories that only contained anger and violence.

The pulsing water felt amazing on her chilled skin, but she didn't linger. She wouldn't put it past her savior to barge in and dump her back outside if the rain stopped before she was finished.

She turned off the water, dried quickly, and then put on the sweats he'd given her, very aware of the fact she didn't have any undergarments. The clothes smelled clean, and she breathed in the scent before gathering up the wet towel and her dirty clothes. She made sure she left the bathroom as spotless as it was when she'd entered, and when she was satisfied, she went back out to see if his mood had improved. Hers most definitely had.

The smell of something delicious greeted her when she came back into the kitchen.

"Oh, God," she moaned and held her stomach. "I didn't realize how hungry I was until just now."

"Oh, did you want something too?" he asked, raising a brow.

She felt the heat in her cheeks before she realized he'd set two plates on the pub table next to the window.

"Do you have a plastic bag I could put my clothes in?" she asked.

He grabbed a trash bag from under the sink and handed it to her. “All I had was leftover pizza,” he said. “Worst of the storm should be passed by the time we finish.”

“Here’s your hat, what’s your hurry?” she asked, making him grin. She took a seat at the table, and decided maybe he wasn’t humorless after all. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“I don’t remember giving it,” he said, putting a round pizza tray in the middle of the table.

He took the seat across from her and looked up, and she arched a brow at him.

“Duncan,” he said. “Duncan O’Hara.”

“Ahh,” she said. “I guess that makes sense. Alice told me you could throw a dart and hit an O’Hara most anywhere around here.”

“That’s mostly true,” he said. “But maybe a little exaggerated. We claim a lot of families that don’t share the last name, but we have a heck of a family reunion every year.”

“Why have a family reunion if you all live right here?” she asked.

“We don’t all live right here. And a lot of those who have homes here, don’t live here full-time. We’re like Grand Central Station.”

“At least you’re not Hotel California.”

“Are you usually this much of a smart aleck?” he asked.

She frowned. It had been a long time since that side of her had come out—had been *allowed* to come out.

“No,” she said, and left it at that.

“Well, you’re a natural.”

She’d not really taken the time to look at him before. There weren’t many men who didn’t make her feel like a giant when she stood next to them. Her height had always been a source of embarrassment for her mother, and Derek had never let her wear shoes that made her taller than him.

But this man had at least a couple of inches in height on her, and his shoulders were broad and his arms muscular. All she remembered when she collapsed against him was that it was like hitting a brick wall.

His skin was dark enough to let her know he spent time outdoors, and he was obviously in very good shape. *Very* good shape.

There were flecks of colored paint on his hands and smeared around his nails, and she found it curious. He definitely didn't seem like the type of man to sit all day in an office. His forearms were strong, and her gaze lifted higher until it rested on the sensuous curve of his mouth. And then she met his eyes and saw he was staring back at her. They were green with flecks of gold, and the look he gave her was so intense she had to look away for fear of being swallowed whole.

Whatever was going on, she was not equipped to deal with the feelings a man like Duncan O'Hara brought out in her. She'd spent the last five years keeping her emotions bottled up inside, putting a smile on her face, and pretending everything was okay. She didn't know what it was to have a physical connection with a man that included kindness or gentleness. Derek had made sure on their wedding night that sex was something to be feared, and she thanked God every day for the mistresses he used in place of her throughout their marriage.

Duncan reached toward the pizza and picked up a slice, putting it on her plate.

"You're safe here," he said.

It was everything she could do to keep the tears welling in her eyes from falling, so she picked up the pizza and started to eat.

Duncan looked down at Winston, who sat with great dignity by his chair and looked at the slice in his hand longingly. "You can't have pizza," he said. "We've been over this. It's not good for you."

Winston made a strange mewling noise, and mixed in a growl and a couple of barks, very clearly communicating his displeasure.

“Don’t blame me,” Duncan said. “Blame Dr. Vance. He’s the one who put you on the diet.” But Duncan tore off a bit of crust and gave it to Winston.

Winston ate it delicately and then looked at Duncan expectantly.

“Maybe you should buy gluten-free pizza,” she said. “Then you don’t have to feel guilty.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Duncan said. “I’ve never eaten a meal alone with him around. Have you known Atticus long?”

“Since I was a child,” she said. “He’d pop in when he was in town to see my dad. And I remember meeting his wife once.”

“Jane.”

“Yes,” Hattie said. “She was beautiful, and very kind to a very awkward girl. I was devastated to hear she was killed.”

“Murdered,” Duncan said, his face darkening with anger. “It was a shock to us all. It’s one of the reasons we’re so careful up here. Atticus has made a lot of enemies in his line of work. People look for ways they can get to him. We’re the only family he has left—even distant though we are—but he brings his daughter up every summer and most Christmases.”

“She’s...okay?” Hattie asked.

“Anna is still in the hospital, but she’s getting stronger every day,” Duncan said. “She was named after my mother. Which means she’s much too stubborn to die.”

“The last time I saw Jane was just after Anna was born,” she said softly. “It seems like a lifetime ago. But Jane left an impression. Like I said, she was very kind to a very awkward girl.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being awkward,” he said. “You’re one of the most striking people I’ve ever met.”

He made the comment casually, and it took her off guard. There was no pretense or hidden meaning. He just said what he thought and went ahead eating his pizza. She couldn't remember the last time someone had given her a compliment, even an off-handed one.

“Did I interrupt anything when I came to your door?” she asked.

“You're just now asking that?” He grinned, and she felt the slow rush of pure attraction flow through her veins. His smile changed his face completely. He'd been attractive before, but now...

She winced. “Sorry.”

“It's fine. I was working.”

“What do you do?” she asked.

“A little of this and that.”

“Does it involve paint?” she asked.

“You know what they say about curiosity and cats?”

“That they're knowledgeable and interested in people's lives?” she asked sweetly.

“Why did Atticus lease you the house?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Talk about curiosity.” She blew out a sigh.

“I want to be knowledgeable and interested.”

“I told you. He and my father were like brothers, and they worked together from time to time. And when my father died, Atticus was there. He's always been there in some way or another.”

“Atticus always takes care of family,” Duncan said.

She guessed Atticus was probably as close as any family her father ever had. He hadn't had any siblings, and his parents had died when he was young. His first wife had died young and tragically, and Margaret, her mother, had been there to

swoop him up in his grief, much like Derek had been there to do the same with her.

“And Atticus thought moving you to Idaho was the best thing for you?” Duncan asked.

She almost said safest, but she changed her mind at the last second. “He thought I’d fit in here. That it was a place I could belong.”

“Did he tell you about the snow?”

“He might have mentioned it,” she said. “I’m sure it’ll be an adjustment, but most things are. If it’s this beautiful in the rain, I can’t imagine what it looks like covered in snow.”

He grunted as if to say, “We’ll see,” and then he scooted back his chair.

A nerve had been touched somehow when they’d started talking about the change in weather. And she got the impression he didn’t expect her to last the first winter.

The pizza was gone, and so was the moment they’d shared, but at least the hollow ache in her stomach had disappeared.

“If you’re up to it,” he said, “the rain has lightened enough for me to get you to the lake house. I thought for a second you were going to fall asleep in your plate.”

“I’m up to it,” she said, thinking of crawling into the first available bed she could find. “I do appreciate the meal and the dry clothes. And I’m sorry I interrupted your work.”

“It is what it is,” he said. “Come on. I’ll drive you over, and we’ll see what’s going on with your car on the way.”

He grabbed his keys and went into the garage, leaving her in the living room alone with Winston.

“Well, Winston,” she said. “It was a pleasure to meet you. Come visit me sometime.”

Winston woofed at her and then went back to his bed. She guessed that was as close to a yes as she was going to get.

Chapter Six



DUNCAN HAD TO GET HER OUT OF HIS HOUSE. HE'D WATCHED her try to take stock of him, and then her gaze had rested on his mouth and it had been everything he could do not to toss the pizza to the floor and take her in his arms.

She'd gasped in surprise—as if she hadn't expected to feel that level of attraction—and then her eyes met his and what he saw in their depths made him want to shout in triumph and run in the opposite direction at the same time.

He wanted her—and not just on canvas. He wanted to know her, and to get her to trust him. And he wanted to take the sadness out of her expression when she thought no one was looking. But he'd learned with Jenna you couldn't always have what you wanted.

Idaho was many things—beautiful, majestic, friendly, and wide open—but it wasn't very forgiving if you didn't have the wherewithal to take proper precautions. And Hattie was about as green as you could get. The snow could be beautiful at times, but it could be brutal and violent at others.

Atticus obviously cared for her, and Duncan knew he could trust him. If Atticus and Hattie's father had really been as close as brothers then that's all it would take for Atticus to give her anything she needed. Maybe it was as simple as that. But it didn't feel simple.

Maybe it was him. He hadn't even thought of another woman since Jenna left. But since a half-drowned warrior had

entered his life only a couple of hours before, he knew he'd be thinking of nothing else but her.

Duncan had a stripped-down Jeep he used in the summer months when the weather was nice, but the rest of the time he relied on the Hummer he'd had for years. He was in the car before he realized she hadn't followed behind him.

"Hattie?"

She appeared in the doorway a few seconds later with her bag of clothes in hand. His sweats fit her perfectly. Her hair had started to dry while they'd been eating, and he was pleasantly surprised to see the curls spring up around her face.

"Sorry, I was saying goodbye to Winston," she said. "He promised to come visit."

"That sounds like him," Duncan said. "He's always making social commitments and forgets he doesn't drive."

She laughed, low and husky, and the sound shot straight down his spine. "Maybe you could call him an Uber."

She climbed into the passenger seat and buckled her seat belt, and he took a slow, steady breath. He was an artist. And when something captivated his interest he knew it wouldn't go away until he'd painted it. That's all this was. Once he painted her, the attraction would pass. Feeling better about the whole situation, he put the SUV in reverse and backed out of the driveway.

The weather had given them a little bit of a reprieve, but he knew it was short lived. These end-of-summer storms came in with a vengeance and then blew out with the cooler temperatures of fall. The rain had turned into a soft drizzle, and the sound of the wipers swishing seemed loud in the silence between them.

He was about a mile down the road when he saw the tiny car sitting at an odd angle on the wrong side of the road.

"Good grief," he said, shaking his head. "I'm going to assume that's your car?"

“That’s it,” she said. “I must’ve gotten turned around. I had no idea I was on the other side of the road.”

“If you’d driven another three feet you would’ve ended up nose down in a ditch full of water. You’re lucky to be alive. I still don’t know how you managed to find your way to my place.”

“I was very determined. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other, and then I saw the gas lights lit at the entrance to your driveway. It was like a sign from God. I’d never been so happy to see anything in my whole life.”

“I can imagine,” he said. “Is that a rental car?”

“No, it’s mine.” She sighed. “That car has gotten me all over the United States without a hitch, and I’m the one who did her in just before her final destination.”

“Well, she’ll probably survive once she gets towed out of the muck, but you should probably have my sister-in-law take a look at it. She’ll be able to tell you anything you want to know about cars.”

“Your sister-in-law is a mechanic?” she asked, making him grin.

“The best there is,” he said with pride in his voice. “You probably passed her shop on the way into town. Dylan’s Automotive.”

“Yeah, I did,” she said. “Who’s Dylan?”

“I told you, my sister-in-law,” he said. “Her name is Dylan, and she’s married to my brother Aidan. They just got married last year. Finally.”

He looked at her little car again, and just shook his head. “I don’t mean to rain on your parade...”

“Ha, ha,” she said.

“But how many inches of snow do you think that thing can drive through?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” she said. “But I’m sure Dylan can tell me. And if I need something else, I’m sure she’ll tell me that

too. I've got time to figure something out unless we're going to get twenty inches tomorrow."

"As long as you're thinking about it," he said. "What do you need to get out of your car?"

"I can make do until I can call a tow truck tomorrow. I really don't want to get wet again, and I'm too tired to do anything with it anyway."

Duncan hated to break it to her, but she'd be lucky to find a tow truck driver to come all the way out here in the next century.

"I'll get it," he said.

"I appreciate it," she said. "The suitcases with my clothes and toiletries are in the trunk.

He pulled the Hummer up so the back seat was even with the trunk of her car, and then held out his hand for her keys. She passed them over wordlessly.

He zipped up his rain jacket and then pulled up the hood, tying it beneath his chin, and then he got out into the rain, waiting until the last minute to pop her trunk so her things didn't get wet.

For someone who'd uprooted her whole life and was starting over in a new location, she sure didn't bring much with her. There was a designer carry-on bag with fancy initials all over it and a matching duffle. He grabbed them both and tossed them in the back seat of the Hummer.

There were boxes in the back seat, and two more in the passenger seat, so he went ahead and grabbed them too.

"You travel light for a woman," he said when he got back in.

"I can't decide if I should be insulted or not," she said.

"It's just interesting," he said. "My mom packs this much for a weekend vacation."

He put the SUV in drive and headed back toward the fork in the road. When they passed the big tree, he saw her shiver

and he turned down the A/C.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said. “It’s just that I might have hit that tree a little bit.”

“A little bit?” he asked.

“Maybe Dylan can look at that too when I take it in,” she said.

“You said you met Alice and Mac at The Lampstand,” he said. “I can’t believe either of them let you get in the car and drive knowing a storm like this was coming in.”

“Oh, they told me,” Hattie said, grinning. “But I decided to go for it.”

“Maybe next time a local gives you advice you should take it.”

“I’m thinking that’s probably a very good idea.”

Atticus’s property loomed ahead, at least the ten-foot privacy fence and the gate. Cameras were visible at the corners of the fence posts, and there was nothing welcoming about the entry. There was a discreet plaque that said Dynamis Security in the center of the gate.

“I didn’t realize he had an office here,” she said.

He wasn’t entirely sure how much she knew about what Atticus did for a living. “We’ve all got more acreage than we could ever use, so we can pass it on to our own children and grandchildren. And we can all do with it what we want except sell it to an outsider. This is a place Atticus can escape and be at home, but he’s running a major global company.”

Duncan didn’t necessarily agree with it, but the land was Atticus’s to do as he pleased. But Duncan wouldn’t have been happy with anything that brought more outsiders to this corner of the world, and Atticus definitely used his compound as everything from a retreat space to a place his agents could rendezvous before leaving for whatever it was they did. No one *really* knew what Atticus did.

“They don’t have walls this big at the offices in London or New York,” Hattie said. “But they’re well protected. You’d think royalty lived there with all the security measures.”

He didn’t bring up the slip she’d made that she’d seen both locations. She wasn’t British, which meant it was fairly good odds she was from New York.

“The compound serves its purpose for Atticus,” Duncan said. “His land is well protected on all sides, and it doesn’t block anyone else’s view.”

“But you don’t like it?” she asked.

“I don’t like to be closed in,” Duncan said. “But believe me, Atticus doesn’t take chances. Especially after what happened to Jane.”

“Jane and Anna were gunned down in broad daylight,” she said. “Atticus can’t be everywhere all at once. He’ll make himself crazy thinking he can.”

“Yeah, well,” Duncan said. “He blames himself. He’ll do everything he can to keep everyone as safe as he can.”

“It must be terribly stifling to live within walls like that,” she said. “Don’t you think?”

“The land goes on for thousands of acres,” he said. “It goes all the way to the mountains and then it becomes a national park, so it’s impossible to breach from that side. You don’t even notice the gates unless you’re right up on them. You’ll have plenty of space and no one else is here right now.”

He typed in the code for the gates and waited as they opened, then continued along the long, winding road.

“You said you were on Tribulation Pass?” he asked. “Which number? There are several cabins down there for guests.”

“Number three,” she said.

“That’s the best one,” he said, nodding. “That one has the most privacy. You’ve got plenty of space between cabins, but you’re sheltered between the trees and the lake. On a clear day, you can see my house across the lake.”

She sat up in her seat when he pulled into her driveway. “Oh, how cute. It’s a log cabin. I’ve always wanted to stay in one.”

“You’ve got your own dock, and there’s a skiff and kayak if you want to get out on the water. Though I wouldn’t recommend it in this weather.”

“So noted,” she said. “I can’t wait to see the view.”

“In this part of the country, you’re going to have a view anywhere you go.”

“I bet it never gets old,” she said.

“Never,” he agreed.

“Atticus said the keys would be under the mat to the kitchen door.”

“Then that’s where they’ll be,” Duncan said. “Atticus doesn’t miss a trick.”

Duncan pulled the Hummer under the portico, but he left it running, and then he started grabbing her bags from the back seat.

She found the keys under the mat and unlocked the door, while he carried in her boxes.

“You look like you’re about to fall over,” he said.

“I don’t think I’m far from it,” she said. “I’ve been driving for a couple of weeks, and there hasn’t been a lot of time for sleep. But now that I’m home...I might sleep for days.”

She opened the refrigerator and stared long enough he thought she might have fallen asleep standing up. But when he looked over her shoulder he saw it had been stocked with enough food to last her a week.

“He thought of everything,” she said, and to his complete and utter horror, her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, no,” he said, panic washing over him. “Don’t do that.”

“I’m just tired,” she said, blinking her eyes rapidly. “And the gesture was so sweet.”

“That would’ve been my mother’s doing,” he said. “She doesn’t miss much either. And Atticus would have let her know you’d be here.”

He closed the refrigerator door and put his hands on her shoulders. “You’re all set here,” he said, pushing her gently out of the kitchen and through the house until they reached the master bedroom.

He flipped on the light and had to admit, his mother didn’t miss much. Anne O’Hara knew every person who stepped foot on O’Hara property, and Atticus would have told her about Hattie coming to stay and any pertinent information. Maybe he needed to pay a visit to his mother.

There were fresh flowers in the vase, the bed was turned back with bedding that reminded him of clouds, and there was an electric fireplace against the wall she could flip on with a switch if she ever got cold. If the curtains were open, she’d see a view of the lake, and the other door led to the bathroom.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said.

“Remember how I told you to take the advice of locals?” he asked.

“Mmm,” she said.

“My advice is to go to bed and stay there for a while.”

“Good advice,” she said.

He heard the rain hitting the roof a little harder than it had before, so he gave her a gentle shove toward the bed and watched her fall face first onto it. He shook his head and pulled the covers up over her, and then he headed to the bathroom to turn on the light so she wouldn’t wake up in complete darkness.

When he was standing at the door to her room with his hand on the light switch, she rolled and managed to open her eyes a crack.

“Duncan,” she said. “Thank you for your help. I think you saved my life today.”

“Get some sleep,” he said. “I’ll be back in a couple of days.”

“What for?” she asked, starting to sound grumpy from lack of sleep.

His mouth twitched in amusement. “Because I want to paint you,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” she mumbled. “A little of this and a little of that. Recognized your work from a show in New York.”

He couldn’t help himself from asking. “Did you like it?”

“Beautiful,” she whispered. “But you can’t paint me. He’ll find me.”

And with that, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Seven



HE'LL FIND ME.

What did that mean? Who would find her?

Atticus would know the answer. Of course he would. But getting the answers out of him was another matter entirely.

Duncan did a walk through the house and made sure everything was locked up tight, and then he let himself out through the kitchen door.

He knew he'd caught her in a moment of weakness there at the end, and he should have stopped her from saying anything more. She'd seen his show in New York, and she was familiar enough with his work to recognize it. And then he remembered she'd seen one of his paintings in the guest bedroom.

None of that bothered him. He worked hard at keeping his identity a secret, along with a little help from Atticus, but there were people outside his family who knew who he was in the artist world.

What had really bothered him was the three little words she'd uttered at the end. Even in delirious sleep, there was fear in her voice.

She'd said she'd driven all over the country, and he brought the image of her falling into his arms back into his mind. What had she been through that had made her that desperate? What had she survived to give her the strength and courage she had?

When he got back in the SUV his phone was ringing, and he saw Jenna's name once again lighting up the screen. He let out a sigh. It was time to end the cycle.

"You can't move forward if you're holding on to the past," he said. And then he hit the answer button.

"Jenna," he said.

"Oh, Duncan," she said, the surprise evident in her voice. "I didn't think you'd answer. I was going to leave another voicemail."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Well," she said. "I wanted to see you. I'm doing a shoot in Boise in a couple of weeks. And...well...I miss you. Maybe we need to talk things out."

He let out a sigh and closed his eyes. Six months ago he would've agreed to do it. But it wouldn't have changed the outcome.

"Jenna," he said. "I don't think so. Living in the past isn't going to solve anything. I'm not part of your life anymore. And you're not part of mine. Let's just call this what it is and be done with it. No visits, and no more calls."

"You're angry with me," she said. "That's why I wanted to talk to you. I could give it another chance, and move back to Laurel Valley."

"And it's still going to snow for nine months, and you'll hate it as much this time as you did the last."

"You could paint anywhere," she said, sounding puckish.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I could. But I choose not to. What we had was great while it lasted. It's time to let it go."

His words were met with silence, and he'd decided there was no time like the present to practice what he preached.

"Goodbye, Jenna," he said, and hung up the phone. And then he blocked her number.

And then he backed out from under the portico and headed to the one place he knew he could get his thoughts together

and make sense of things.

Home.

His parents still lived in the same house they had when they'd first married, with a few additions added on through the years. It was a working ranch, though it was much different than when he and his brothers were growing up. Long gone were the days of sunup to sundown hard labor—tending animals and mending fences and anything else that broke down—which was always something. But the horses they'd started breeding had changed the course of Clann O'Hara Ranch, and they now had a legacy of champion thoroughbreds, including a Triple Crown winner.

His father still worked with the ranch hands and trainers, but not like the early days. His parents enjoyed the freedom of doing whatever they wanted to do in their retirement years, though they were both tied to Laurel Valley through several committees and boards. The truth was, there were O'Haras in Laurel Valley before there was a Laurel Valley, and they'd grown up hearing their grandfather say, "If you want to make change, you have to be the change." Fortunately, Duncan had plenty of other family members to take on that mantle. He was content putting Laurel Valley on the map through his art.

The farmhouse sat on top of the crest of the hill—gray stone and fresh white paint—and all the barns and outbuildings were also white with dark green metal roofs. White fences lined the paddocks and fields, but they were all empty because of the storm.

He'd been the oldest of five, which had been a huge responsibility in those early days when there hadn't been much money and times were harder. There'd been no resorts in town or easy places to earn extra money. His art had been his escape, a way to dream of something...more.

But it was family that anchored him. Who knew? Maybe he'd made art too much of an escape. He'd put distance between himself and people, choosing to be an observer instead of getting too involved. But that distance had helped him see things that most people never got to see—compassion,

empathy, anger, joy, peace, despair—he saw people’s emotions as clearly as if they’d been wearing them like clothes.

The driveway housed a basketball hoop where’d they’d played many an evening game, and he pulled up under the covered area that connected the house and the garage. He remembered his mom had insisted on having it built because she was tired of getting rained and snowed on while trying to pack the cars with kids or unload groceries. And what Anne O’Hara wanted, she got.

The kitchen door was unlocked. Kids and family were always welcome.

“It’s me,” he called out, waiting a few seconds before he went too far into the house. Family was always welcome, but he’d also learned you never knew what you might be walking in on. His parents had never been able to keep their hands off each other. But there was comfort knowing they still looked at each other today like they had when he was a kid.

He heard footsteps hurrying down the stairs and his mother calling, “Duncan!”

She launched herself at him with a whoop and wrapped him in a hug, and he couldn’t keep the grin from spreading across his face. She was a small woman, but she was a force to be reckoned with.

Her red hair was pinned up in a knot on her head, and tendrils fell around her face. She’d only been twenty-two when his dad had taken one look at Anne Winslow on a Broadway stage and fallen head over heels in love. She’d left her career behind and followed Mick O’Hara across the country to Laurel Valley, Idaho. And he, Duncan Winslow O’Hara, been born eight months later.

Anne’s face was still youthful, though a few laugh lines had snuck in around her eyes. She was beautiful, and he’d always loved painting her, capturing the joy that emanated from within. She didn’t sing or perform on the stage anymore, but instead, she’d found her niche in writing lyrics for some of the greatest theatrical songwriters of the century.

“What a pleasant surprise,” she said, giving him another squeeze and then pulling back to give him a long look like she liked to do. “Especially in this weather. Work not going well?”

“No, it’s actually going very well. I finished a piece this morning. Caught the storm rolling in.”

“I can’t wait to see it. The clouds were amazing. I’ve been working in the office, but I had a front row seat to the show. Looks like it’s not over yet.”

“Forecast is calling for rain the next couple of days,” he said, taking a seat on the barstool at the big kitchen island.

“You hungry?”

“I just had pizza,” he said.

“Some things never change,” she said. “But your dad made brownies this morning, and I’ve got ice cream.”

“Always room for dessert,” he said. “Too bad Aunt Simone didn’t make the brownies. Hers are the best.”

“I’m crushed,” Mick said from the doorway. “And here I was, coming to greet my oldest son, only to be met with cruelty.”

“You win some, you lose some,” Duncan said, getting up to give his father a hug. “If it makes you feel better, yours are a close second to hers.”

“As long as they’re better than your mother’s, I’ll be content with that,” Mick said.

Anne O’Hara could do many things well, but cooking wasn’t one of them, and everyone knew it.

“It’s a good thing I like both of you, or I’d eat all of this by myself,” she said, scooping ice cream on top of the large brownie slices she’d put into bowls.

“What have y’all been up to?” Duncan asked. “I haven’t seen anyone in a while.”

“Got a new yearling last week,” Mick said. “And I can smell champion all over him. Spirited thing. Nasty temper. You’d like him. I named him Duncan.”

Duncan's grin was quick. "Sounds like a winner to me."

"You know, we have family dinner every Sunday just like always," his mother said, raising her brows at him and putting his bowl in front of him.

"Been working," he said. "Got a showing coming up and I've got to get everything shipped off next week."

"Where at?" Mick asked.

"LA," he answered. "And no, I'm not going. I'm going to enjoy the off-season as long as I can before the hordes of people start coming to fall off the mountain. Maybe you could tell Hank to stop building so many condos."

"Not likely," Mick said. "We're all stockholders in O'Hara Construction. You'll get a nice dividend check at the end of the year."

Duncan just grunted and took another bite.

"I'm surprised to see you out and about," Anne said. "If you'd gotten here earlier you could've helped get all the horses in. That was fun."

"He always did have good timing," Mick said. "And not that I'm not glad you're here, but if you stay too long you might get stuck overnight. It's supposed to start up again."

That made him think of Hattie. What had she been *thinking* getting out in this weather? Alice or Mac should've thrown themselves on her hood instead of letting her leave. And boy, was he going to have a word or two with them the next time he saw them.

Duncan noticed his parents give each other one of those silent looks—the kind that only they understood, but somehow held all the meaning of a full-blown conversation.

"So..." Mick said. "Who is she?"

"Is it Jenna?" his mother asked. The look that passed across her face made Duncan realize something he'd missed the entire time he and Jenna had dated.

“Definitely not Jenna,” he said. “How did I not know you don’t like her?”

How had he missed that? His mother had always gone out of her way to be friendly to Jenna and make sure she felt comfortable. But he guessed now that he thought about it, the warmth she shared with everyone else had never been there.

“Of course I liked her,” Anne said. “She was a sweet girl. I just didn’t like her for *you*. But you get to make your own choices, and if she’d been your choice I would have loved her like a daughter.”

“How do you know she wasn’t the right one for me?” he asked.

“Duncan...” she said.

“No, I really want to know. How do you know?”

How had his mother known that Jenna wasn’t for him when he’d been so sure she was the right one?

Anne paused and looked at Mick again.

“Don’t look at me,” Mick said, holding up his hands. “You stuck your foot in your mouth on this one.”

“But you agree with her,” Duncan said, looking at his father. “I can tell you do.”

“Sure, but I’ve found it wise over the years to always agree with your mother,” he said, winking at Anne. “I don’t like sleeping on the couch.”

Anne rolled her eyes and then looked back at Duncan. “It’s just one of those things, son. You can just tell. When you’ve met your match, you’ll feel it. You’ll see it. It’s not just a friendship or physical connection when you meet the person you’re supposed to spend the rest of your life with. Your souls...”

“Are connected,” Duncan finished for her. It worried him to hear her say it. That kind of soul-searing love went into his painting. He wasn’t sure there was a woman he was capable of connecting with on that deep of a level. And if there was...

maybe she'd crashed through his door that morning because he'd definitely felt a connection.

He'd never believed in the idea of love at first sight. In his mind, love was so much more than how people often described it. Hearts and butterflies and physical attraction were all surface. Love—real love—was making the choice to be there when things got hard. Coping with the death of a loved one, through sickness, and through the fights where it felt like things might be hopeless. *That* was real love. But he'd never been able to see himself doing any of those things with any woman. Until now.

“Why does that bother you?” Anne said.

“No,” he finally said. “It doesn't bother me. I just don't understand it.”

“Not yet,” Mick said. “But you will. You're gifted in a lot of ways. You can look at something or someone and understand them with a depth I've always found astonishing. It's intuitive and insightful. But love doesn't work that way, and I think you pull back from it because it doesn't come easy to you like other things do. It takes patience and unselfishness. And it takes time.”

“I think I'm just tired,” he said. “Work has been going well for the most part. I've got enough to ship for the gallery showing. But I was on a roll today and got interrupted, and I guess I've been out of sorts all day.”

“Gee,” Mick said. “I have no idea what that's like.” He gave Anne a pointed look. “If you creative types would just find a good physical outlet when you get stuck or things aren't flowing right, then life would be so much easier. And it'd make the people who live with you not want to kill you.”

“It takes a special person to love people like us,” Anne said, grinning. She took Mick's hand and kissed the palm. “We're so moody and prickly.”

“What was it that interrupted you?” Mick asked.

“Someone knocked at the door,” he said, shrugging.

Mick and Anne both raised their brows in surprise.

“Does Atticus know?” Mick asked, worry replacing the surprise.

“He knows,” Duncan said. “When I opened the door a woman all but fell into my arms. She was soaking wet. Her car had gotten stuck almost a mile down the road.”

“Yes, but what was she doing there?” Mick asked. “That’s quite a wrong turn to make.”

“Atticus leased her the lake house. Apparently she missed the fork in the road, and the rain was so bad she veered pretty far over and the car stalled. She just started walking. When I opened the door she fell right into my arms.”

“Holy smokes,” Anne said. “She’s lucky to be alive, poor thing. Atticus said we were going to have a long-term guest but I wasn’t expecting her until sometime tomorrow. I went and freshened up the cabin early this morning before the storm hit.”

“She’s very...resilient,” he said for lack of anything better.

Anne tilted her head and studied him. “And what is it about this woman that has you so bothered?”

“I’m not bothered. I just want to paint her.”

Mick snorted. “What else is new? You’ve been painting or drawing pretty women since you were twelve. Remember that nude I caught you drawing of Stella Hanson? I saved your life that day. Bart Hanson would’ve hunted you down and skinned you alive if he’d caught wind of that. Man’s always been a jealous fool.”

“Maybe if Stella wasn’t so free with her favors Bart wouldn’t be so jealous,” Anne said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s true,” Duncan said. “I didn’t have to use much of my imagination to improvise the sketch after she was doing her gardening in nothing more than a bikini and sun hat. Twelve-year-old me got an important education that summer.”

“There were men three times your age that got an education that summer,” his mother said, shaking her head. “But there’s something different about this woman. You don’t

just want to paint her. When something beautiful catches your eye you put it to paper no matter what. Nothing has ever gotten in your way. But you hesitated when you were talking about her. Like you're confused as to *why* you want to paint her."

"Have I ever told you how irritating your perception is?" Duncan asked.

"You've mentioned it a time or two," Anne said, putting her hand on top of his and squeezing affectionately.

"I don't know," Duncan said. "She's hard to describe. She looks like an Amazon warrior ready to lead her troops into battle. I can see it on canvas so clearly. White-blond hair that flows behind her as she rides her stallion full speed ahead. She's a queen and regal with it, with bones that could cut like a knife and a presence that's both strong and submissive at the same time."

"She sounds...interesting," Anne said, biting back a smile and giving her husband a look. "I can see why you want to paint her."

"Oils, watercolors, charcoal, pencil...it doesn't matter the medium. I just have to get the images of her out of my head. There's a sadness about her...I want to know. She's a puzzle. And Atticus is helping her escape something. I'm sure of it. He's hired her as the manager for the sporting goods store. Dollars to donuts she doesn't know anything about fishing rods or kayaks. And he's leased her the lake house, so she's in the middle of family and protected."

"Maybe she needs family," Anne said. "I did when I came here."

Duncan nodded. "She said her father had died and he and Atticus were close as brothers."

"Then that's all the reason you need," Anne said. "Family is family, whether it's by blood or not. And to Atticus, that girl is family."

"And you're halfway in love with her," Mick said. "I've never heard you talk about Jenna the way you've talked about

a woman you've known a matter of hours."

"Love is a far cry from art," Duncan said.

"You and I both know that's the furthest thing from the truth," Mick said, chuckling.

"Is she still at your place?" Anne asked. "Lord, son. I know I raised you with manners. Please tell me you didn't leave this woman in your house, sopping wet, while you came to bum brownies and ice cream from your parents."

Duncan's lips twitched. "It sounds like Dad isn't the only writer in the family. Y'all are both a little dramatic this morning. And no, the rain let up a little while ago, and I drove her to the lake house. I even stopped by her car and got her stuff out. I didn't drop it in the mud or anything."

"You're such a romantic," his mother said, patting her hand across her heart.

"And then I drove her home and dumped her in bed, where I'm sure she'll stay for a couple of days. She drove pretty much nonstop from New York."

"The plot thickens," Mick said.

"Yeah, she's let a couple of things slip," Duncan said, remembering what she'd said before he'd left her. "I can get her car chained and towed sometime tomorrow. She needs to stay put and rest."

"I can swing by and check on her tomorrow," Anne said. "See if there's anything she needs."

"She appreciated you stocking the fridge," Duncan said. "I got the impression she's not used to people doing simple acts of kindness for her."

"Then we'll change that," Anne said. "So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to go home and paint her. And then I'll wait until she's coherent and see if I can convince her to sit for me."

"What if she doesn't want to be painted?" Anne asked.

“I can be charming when I need to be,” he said, making his father laugh uproariously. “All that matters is that I get her out of my head.”

“Good luck with that, son,” Mick said, clapping him on the shoulder.

They waited until he'd pulled out of the driveway before either of them said anything.

“Well,” Anne said. “This is an exciting new development. I can't wait to meet her.”

“Yeah, me too,” Mick said, coming up behind her and massaging her shoulders. “Why don't we plan on a big family dinner soon?”

“You're so crafty,” she said. “Atticus moved her here for a reason. She's either got trouble or about to have some.”

“Or maybe it's like you said,” Mick said. “Maybe she just needs family. What circumstances would lead a young woman to pick up and move everything to a place she knows no one unless she was alone?”

“I was just about to call and ask him,” Anne said. “And maybe he can give us a little more information about her than what she looks like leading her Amazons into battle.”

Mick shook his head. “It's just sad. Duncan really needs to get out of the house more.”

“Oh, he's hooked,” Anne said. “He won't be able to stay away from her for long.”

Chapter Eight



HATTIE DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG SHE SLEPT, AND WAKING IN an unfamiliar darkened room had given her more than a moment of panic. As it was, an even more pressing matter was finding the bathroom.

The bathroom light had been left on, and she breathed out a word of thanks as she threw back the covers.

When she was done with the necessities, she was able to take stock of the rest of her body. Her legs felt weak, her joints were stiff, and she was sore all over. Walking into rain and strong winds used muscles she didn't even know she had. Then her stomach growled and she remembered the pizza she'd eaten that seemed so long ago.

She hadn't taken time to look at the house earlier. It was pitch black outside, and she assumed it had only been earlier that afternoon that Duncan dropped her off and not days before. Rain still pattered against the roof.

It was a good space. Just two bedrooms and the one bathroom, but it was more than enough to meet her needs. The living room, kitchen, and dining area were all open and built to face the windows across the back of the house. She couldn't wait to see the lake on a clear day, but for now, the thought of all that darkness was unsettling. Anything or anyone could be out there.

The clock in the kitchen said it was just after midnight, and her stomach rumbled again. She opened the refrigerator,

hoping she hadn't imagined it being completely stocked, and gave a sigh of gratitude to the O'Haras.

There was a fresh fruit tray, sandwiches, and several pieces of Tupperware with instructions taped to the top. There were individual bottles of water and juices, coffee creamer and milk, and a selection of condiments. They'd thought of everything, and this small act of kindness touched her more than she could express.

She took one of the Tupperware bowls out of the fridge. The label said it was corn chowder and it gave the microwave instructions. While that was cooking, she made a small plate of fruit and took a sandwich and bottle of juice to the table.

For a moment, she thought the ten hours of sleep she'd gotten were going to keep her up the rest of the night, but halfway through the bowl of soup, when the warmth started to seep through her bones, she felt the heaviness in her eyelids.

She put the lid back on the soup to put back in the refrigerator and cleaned up her mess. Then she went back to the cozy bedroom and pulled the cloudlike covers up to her chin. Just as she was drifting off, Duncan's face came to mind, and she remembered what she'd told him when he'd asked to paint her.

He'll find me.

She couldn't let him do it. She'd recognized the genius of the work in his guest bedroom, and it hadn't been hard to put two and two together. He might as well put a billboard of her face up in every major city in America.

Before she drifted off to sleep she wondered if anyone had ever told Duncan O'Hara no. There was always a first time for everything.

Hattie woke again midmorning the next day, the sky still gray and the rain still falling, though considerably less, and she repeated what she'd done the night before. In the daylight she

had an entirely different view, and she realized there was a covered porch that looked out over the lake.

So she made her plate and wrapped a blanket around her and sat in the rocking chair out back. When she was finished, she went back to her bedroom, opened the curtains so she could watch the rain fall, and then fell back into sleep.

The cycle repeated for another day—sleep, eat, watch the rain—and when she woke up the morning of the third day, there was sunlight streaming through her window. There'd been many a sleepless night while she'd been married to Derek, and she couldn't remember the last time she felt this refreshed and looking forward to what was to come.

When she got up this time, she showered and dug through her suitcase for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She'd been lazy long enough. It didn't take her long to unpack her suitcases and put everything where it needed to go, and she unpacked the boxes as well. She'd only brought the things most precious to her. Some family heirlooms and a picture of her and her father when she'd graduated with her master's degree in business.

She studied the picture and traced the smile on his face. If only she'd known how soon he would be gone after that picture was taken. She'd been high on life, the whole world in front of her, and he'd already been dying of cancer.

She set the picture on her dresser in the bedroom, and finished up with the boxes. And then she did a walk-through of the house, making a list of supplies she needed and anything she could add to the house to make it her own. The furniture in the cabin was beautiful, but they'd purposefully left things as basic as possible so she'd have a chance to leave her own fingerprints. Everything was white—the walls, throw pillows, and bedding. There was no art on the walls.

It was a blank slate for her to do as she wished, and Atticus had said she could do whatever she wanted with it. It was hers. She wanted a permanent home, and for once, she wanted home to feel like it belonged to her and not on the pages of some snooty magazine.

She'd been emptying her accounts for months in preparation for when she'd be out on her own—hiding away cash and gift cards. Derek had monitored everything, especially when it came to her money. She had enough to start a new life here. And once she started working, her salary would be enough to cover anything else. Independence felt good.

Until she remembered her car was stuck in a ditch, and she was going to have to call a tow truck. She checked her cell phone, but there was still no service, and she laid her head against the wall.

Atticus had left her the new cell phone at a drop location they'd agreed on, along with her new identity and other essential paperwork after her "death." When Harriet Ashbury-Bancroft had died, Harriet Jones had risen from the ashes. Atticus had told her it was always best to stick as close to the truth as possible. Creating a completely new backstory and identity would only trip her up at some point. So she'd stayed Harriet.

She put her cell on the coffee table and wandered into the kitchen, wondering if cell service was always so spotty. There was a house phone on the bar, and beneath it was a phone book. It had been so long since she'd seen either she wasn't sure she remembered how to use them. Were the O'Haras listed? Atticus's number was in her cell phone. She could always call him.

She picked up the phone and started to dial when something caught her eye out of the window of the kitchen door. Her car was parked under the little portico. She opened the kitchen door and stuck her head out, and sure enough, it was there, big as life. Not only was it there, it had also been cleaned.

Then she remembered she'd given Duncan her keys, and he'd never given them back. It was just one more thing she owed him for.

She went out to see if he'd left the keys, and she saw them sitting on the seat of the driver's side.

“I’m definitely not in New York anymore,” she said. “I guess you don’t have to worry about car thieves out here.”

Hattie breathed in the fresh air, feeling the tension roll out of her shoulders. There was freedom here, and she’d spent enough time resting. She ran back inside and grabbed her purse and her list, and then came back to the car. She wasn’t really sure what day of the week it was, but the weather was nice and the sun was finally out, and the need to explore was taking over.

So maybe the car wasn’t practical or ideal for Idaho winters or torrential downpours, but it was perfect for the summer. She decided one of her stops would be by the mechanic shop to make sure she hadn’t done any damage, and to also see if anyone knew of a good secondhand four-wheel drive she could buy for cheap.

It was a good half-hour drive back into town, and it looked like she wasn’t the only one who’d had the idea of getting out. Everyone had been cooped up and was desperate for sunshine and conversation by the looks of it. The parking spots on Main Street were full, so she looped around and found a place to park behind the library.

She wanted to walk. To get a feel for Laurel Valley. This was her home now, and soon, she’d be working and interacting with the people, and she wanted to absorb as much as she could. She was Hattie Jones, a woman who’d recently lost her father and was now without any family. She had a master’s degree in business and her middle name was Elise.

Stay as close to the truth as you can get.

The ground was still damp in places, and there were several puddles along the cobbled streets of downtown, so she carefully made her way to the sidewalk and nodded to a couple of people as they passed her by.

American flags waved over the shops and bright red umbrellas were open over the outdoor tables. All in all, they had things put back together after the storm. She passed by a bright red door and stopped, checking out the window display.

Raven Layne.

She'd noticed the clothing boutique the day she'd driven into town. The clothes in the window were fashionable and well made, but also functional, and Hattie thought the store would've done very well in New York.

She opened the door and was greeted with the smell of cinnamon and the soothing sounds of a rainforest. There were clothes displayed on mannequins and completed ensembles artfully displayed on the walls. There was everything from daywear to eveningwear, and everything in between.

"Hello," a voice called out from the back room. "Come on in and make yourself at home. Can I get you some coffee or champagne?"

A gorgeous dark-haired woman came out from the back, wearing a long flowing skirt in a bright fuchsia and a draped top of black lace and a rainbow of colors. She looked like a gypsy with her crystalline blue eyes and hoop earrings.

"Oh," Hattie said. "No thank you, but I appreciate the offer."

"I try to keep my customers happy," she said, smiling. "I'm Raven."

"Hattie," she said, taking the woman's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You wouldn't happen to be the Hattie who's staying at the lake house, would you?"

The look of horror on her face must have been obvious because Raven rushed on to reassure her.

"News travels very quickly here," she said. "You'll get used to it. Besides, your car got stuck pretty close to my house. If you'd made your way to the right instead of straight ahead, you would've fallen through my door instead of Duncan's. And probably about an hour sooner."

Hattie let out a laugh. "Now you tell me. I take it you're an O'Hara?"

“Guilty,” she said. “I’m Wyatt’s wife. He’s Duncan’s younger brother. We don’t get a lot of action around here, so you’re going to be news for a while. But everyone in the family can’t wait to meet you.”

“Everyone in the family?” Hattie asked, her eyes going wide.

“As soon as Duncan told his parents what had happened to you, the story spread across the network. I’m amazed no one showed up at your door. O’Haras aren’t known for their patience, though I like to say they’re just nosy. You must be tough. Duncan is not pleasant when his work is interrupted.”

Hattie’s lips twitched. “There was an...adjustment period.”

Raven snorted. “That’s very diplomatic. I’ve got something for you,” she said, moving to the rack in the back. “You’ve got great bone structure. And I would kill for your height. Did you model?”

“Oh, no,” Hattie said. Derek’s words came back to haunt her. She was too tall, her hips too big, her face too angular, her nose too crooked. “I’m just plain old me.”

“Plain is the last thing I’d call you,” Raven said. “You’re very unique. You’re not meant to wear the same kinds of clothes other women wear. You should be showing off your attributes instead of trying to hide them. You’ve got the height to carry those curves. Very sexy. I’d love for you to model some of my lingerie. I do shoots several times a year for the catalogs I send out.”

“Lingerie?” Hattie asked, feeling dazed. She hadn’t seen any lingerie in the store.

“Sure,” Raven said, pointing to a curtain that was discreetly hidden in the back corner of the store. There was a neatly printed sign that said adults only. “The lingerie shop is the most profitable part of my business. I keep the women sexy and the men happy in Laurel Valley. What do you say? Could I get you to pose for me for the magazine? I wouldn’t put you in anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“I’ve never really photographed well.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Raven said. “But it’s really your body I want. I promise I’m not a creeper. You can ask anyone for references. I’m just determined, which is also an O’Hara trait. Plus, I’ll pay you five hundred dollars.”

“Can I think about it?” Hattie asked. If it was only her body, she wasn’t above making a little extra money however she could. It was her face being put out there that gave her pause.

“Sure,” Raven said. “Now go try this on. I’m pretty sure I have the size right. I have an eye for these things.”

It was the color of royalty—a purple rich in depth and texture—and it gathered at one shoulder and flowed to the ground. It was completely impractical, but Raven had been nothing but kind, so she did as she was asked and went into the dressing room.

The dress felt like heaven on her skin, and she saw, after she got it on and zipped it up, the skirt slit all the way up her leg. Raven had been exactly right on the size.

“Here, this belt goes with it,” Raven said, handing it over the top of the dressing room door.

It looked like Roman coins had been strung together, and when she put it on, it cinched her waist and accentuated the hips Derek had always found so offensive.

“I’m dying to see it on someone,” Raven said. “I fell in love with it when I ordered it, but it’s rare to have someone so perfect to try it on.”

“I don’t know...” Hattie said, as self-conscious as she’d ever been. “It’s really not me. I’m more of a plain Jane kind of woman.”

“You keep saying the word plain, but I don’t think that word means what you think it does,” Raven said. “Take my word for it. You’re not plain, average, or ordinary.”

Hattie opened the door and stepped out into the area that had the mirrors, and she turned only to see Raven’s face. She looked like someone had hit her with a two-by-four.

“Oh, my God,” Raven said.

Hattie’s heart sunk, and she started to step back into the dressing room to take it off.

“No,” Raven said. “Don’t go anywhere. You took my breath away. It’s better than I ever could have imagined. I am so good. I knew it’d be perfect for you.”

“What?” Hattie asked, sure she’d heard wrong. And then she turned and saw herself in the mirror and gasped. She looked like a goddess. She didn’t see any of the flaws Derek so often called out. Her curves looked lush, her waist small, and she stood with her shoulders straight and her chin held high.

“What size shoe do you wear?” Raven asked.

“An eight,” Hattie said.

“These run a little big,” Raven said. “Try a seven and a half.”

“Oh, I can’t wear heels,” Hattie said automatically. Nothing that would make her taller than Derek.

“Why?”

“I’m too tall,” Hattie said.

“Nonsense,” Raven said. “Put them on. They’re perfect.”

They were gold sandals with a spiked heel and straps that crisscrossed halfway up her calves. It had been so long since she’d worn heels, she wobbled for a second or two before she caught her balance.

“It’s you,” Raven said. “I want you to have it.”

Hattie hesitated, trying to figure out how to tell her she couldn’t afford something so impractical. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “But it’s not in the budget just now.”

“No,” Raven said. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m giving it to you. Think of it as a welcome to Laurel Valley present.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Hattie said, heat rushing to her cheeks in embarrassment. “It’s too much.”

“And I’ve got the perfect undergarments,” Raven said, steamrolling over her protests.

Twenty minutes later, Hattie found herself agreeing to meet Raven for lunch one day and with two shopping bags’ worth of things Raven had picked out for her. She hadn’t had a chance to get a word in edgewise.

She made her way down each side of Main Street, stopping at each shop and picking out things for the house along the way. Some of the items were too big for her to carry in her car—like the gorgeous trifold screen she’d found at the mercantile that would be perfect for her bedroom—so she paid and said she’d come back later to pick them up. Only now she had to find a truck to haul her purchases.

She took all her packages back to her car and was loading them up when a familiar black Hummer pulled up beside her.

Duncan got out of the SUV and hooked his sunglasses in the neck of his shirt. His jeans and T-shirt were well worn and fit him like a glove. She swallowed hard and then stuck her head back in the trunk so she wouldn’t make a fool of herself.

“I heard you were buying out the town,” he said, coming up to stand beside her.

She answered from inside the trunk, not quite ready to look at him. “Well, I *tried* to buy them out,” she said. “Every time I ran into an O’Hara they were shoving me out the door with a bag in my hand and telling me it’s a welcome present. It’s a wonder anyone can stay in business.”

He chuckled, and the sound sent a shiver down her spine. Get a grip, Hattie. He’s just a man. A very attractive, very successful, very sexy man. Besides, Duncan had that look about him. The kind of look that let everyone know he wasn’t the kind of man to be messed with. He was tough and surly and a little bit dangerous. She’d had to fake her death to get away from the last attractive man who’d been a little bit dangerous. It turned out Derek had been a whole lot more than a little bit dangerous.

“That’s how they lure you in,” Duncan said. “You’re fresh meat. Next time you go shopping you’ll visit them again, right?”

“Of course,” she said. “But surely they can’t do that with every customer.”

“No,” he said. “But as far as you’re concerned, you’re the long-lost O’Hara cousin they never had. Don’t worry. By the end of it you’ll have spent a fortune many times over. Sometimes I think they charge me double.”

He stuck his head down in the trunk so it was next to hers. “How many times are you going to keep moving that one bag around?” he asked.

“I was just trying to make sure it fit,” she said.

“Uh-huh. Do I make you nervous?”

She jerked her head up and hit the top of the trunk, and she uttered a word that probably wasn’t said very often on Laurel Valley’s public streets.

Duncan grinned at her and pressed his fingers to the top of her head to ease the sting. “Good one,” he said. “Very creative.”

“No, you don’t make me nervous,” she said.

“Good, because that would be silly. Especially since you fell into my arms and I’ve tucked you into bed.”

Her face heated before she could help herself and he grinned again.

“Good,” he said. “I’d hate for the attraction to be one sided.”

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked. “Have you been drinking?”

“You’ve got to be hungry,” he said. “Let’s get some lunch. The Lampstand should have cleared out a bit from the lunch crowd.”

“I…” But Hattie found herself walking back across the street to the restaurant she’d visited her first day in Laurel Valley.

Before he could open the door to the restaurant for her she put her hand on his arm and stopped him.

“I’ve about had my fill of being steamrolled by O’Haras today. I don’t know if it’s hereditary or if you’re just used to being in charge, but how about you ask questions every now and again instead of giving orders?”

His lips twitched and he nodded. “I can do that,” he said. “If it makes you feel better, I did it on purpose. You’re beautiful when your mad is up.”

Her mouth opened in shock just as he ushered her inside the diner.

“Hey, stranger,” Mac called out. She ran at him and gave him a huge hug, and he swung her around before putting her back on her feet.

And then Mac did the same to Hattie. “I wondered when you’d be back.”

“You mean you wondered if she survived the drive out to the lake house?” Duncan asked pointedly.

“Geez,” she said. “I already got a strip torn off me from Mom. I don’t need you to lay in too.”

“Oh, no,” Hattie said, patting Mac on the back reassuringly. “It wasn’t her fault. She did try to stop me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mac said. “Alice and I both felt guilty for letting you leave. I worried about you all afternoon until I got home and I heard the news about you on the network. It’s a miracle you ended up falling into Duncan’s arms.” And then she winked at her cousin. “Seems like fate if you ask me.”

Chapter Nine



“NOBODY ASKED YOU,” DUNCAN SAID, TAPPING MAC ON THE nose. “But we’ll be taking the corner booth.” Then he turned to Hattie. “Do you want the special? It’s what I always get. You can’t go wrong with Johan’s cooking. Aunt Simone brought him here all the way from Sweden when she opened this place several years ago. She posted on the network this morning he’s serving bison meat loaf and mashed potatoes.”

Hattie had no clue what was going on, or why people kept talking about a network.

“Why do y’all keep talking about a network? What network?”

“The O’Hara network,” Mac said. “How else are we supposed to know what’s going on?”

“It’s a lot,” Duncan said. “I mostly ignore it. You’d think the family didn’t see each other every day or have Sunday dinners once a week by the way they carry on.”

“The O’Hara network is better than the news,” Mac boasted proudly. “We work all over town, so we can keep our finger on the pulse of all the interesting stuff going on. And right now, you’re interesting stuff.”

Hattie had no idea how to respond so she said, “I think I’ll have the special.” And then she slid into the booth across from Duncan.

“Drinks?” Mac asked.

“Sparkling water,” Hattie said. “With lemon.”

“Same for me,” Duncan said.

“Two sparklings with lemon and two specials,” Mac said. “Coming right up.”

Several people greeted Duncan by name, and she looked on with jealousy. How incredible it must be to be interwoven into this community for generations so that everyone knows your name. And then she realized all eyes were on Duncan.

“Why is everyone staring at you?” Hattie asked.

“They’re not,” he said. “They’re staring at you. Can’t say I blame them.”

“Do you have an evil twin or something?” she asked. “You are the same Duncan O’Hara I met three days ago? The one with the perpetual scowl and penchant for making people feel welcome?”

He smiled unrepentantly and she wished she didn’t find it so charming. He looked like a little kid who’d gotten his hand stuck in the cookie jar.

“I told you,” he said. “You interrupted my work three days ago. I’m over it now. I’ve been working nonstop the last couple of days. I’ve been incredibly productive. And now I’m hungry.”

“Congratulations,” she said. “I’ve basically slept the entire time since I saw you last.”

“I figured you would,” he said. “I wasn’t sure how much longer you would be able to stay upright. My mom tried to stop by a couple of times and see if you needed anything, but she said it looked like the place was deserted. My dad had to talk her down from breaking in and making sure you were okay.”

“That’s lovely,” she said, smiling. “Tell her thank you. I just needed to catch up. I woke up this morning refreshed and ready to shop. I was going to check out the sporting goods store while I was out. I’m supposed to start work next week.”

“I can take you by,” he said. “You’ve got a good staff, and they’re all very knowledgeable. They’ve been unpacking

inventory and getting things set up. October is a big bass fishing month, and then deer season starts in November. Then it'll be time for all the skiers to come in. You're going to be very busy. Do you know anything about sporting goods?"

"No," she said, letting out a nervous sigh. "But I know a lot about business. If I've got good employees, then I only need for them to know a lot about it. But I'm sure I'll pick up things along the way."

Mac chose that moment to deliver their order, setting down the tray of food with a practiced hand.

"They're really excited to meet you at the store," Mac said, not even pretending like she hadn't been eavesdropping. "Mom said Hank really went above and beyond on the building. There's no place like it at any of the other resort towns. And Grandma said you're going to be great. She said Atticus told her you're a business genius and that when the other stores open you can manage the whole region."

"A bunch of gossips," Duncan said, inhaling the aroma of the food set before him. "Ahh, talk about genius. No one comes close to Johan."

"I'm gonna tell Grandma that," Mac said, shaking her head.

Duncan shrugged. "Aunt Simone retired and she hasn't left cookies on my doorstep in weeks. I don't even know if she can cook anymore."

"Maybe if you'd come to Sunday dinner every once in a while," Mac said.

"Now you sound like my mother," Duncan said. "Besides, that has nothing to do with this family's gossip problem. Hattie just got here. You should all be ashamed of yourselves."

"It's not gossip if it's news," Mac said. "And Hattie is news. How'd you know she was in town today?"

"Yeah," Hattie said, narrowing her eyes. "How did you know?"

Color rose in Duncan's cheeks.

“I can answer that,” Mac said. “It’s because Raven called my mom the second you left her store. And then my cousin Jillian called her mom when you left the bookstore. Besides, after Duncan told Aunt Anne that he wanted to paint you everyone is dying to meet you. He’s super picky.”

“You told your mom you want to paint me?” Hattie asked.

Mac raised her eyebrows and then made a quick exit from the table.

“Sure,” he said, shrugging. “I’m pretty sure I mentioned that to you when you fell into my house. By the way, I’m supposed to invite you to family dinner. O’Haras are very big on family dinners.”

Hattie saw him shudder. “You don’t like family dinners?”

“I love my family,” he said. “But there are a lot of them. And by a lot, I mean it’s ridiculous. And while I love my family, crowds are not my forte. There’s no privacy, everyone is always talking at once, and someone always ends up getting tossed in the lake. It’s exhausting.”

“And you love every minute of it,” she said. “I can tell by the look on your face.”

“Yeah, well, I go from time to time. When I’m not working.”

“How often are you not working?” she said.

He shrugged and said, “It’s been a pretty hectic year. I’ve had seven major shows all over the world to get ready for. I pop in when I can.”

There was more there than he was saying. It was obvious he loved his family, but it was also obvious he was keeping his distance. She decided there was no point in pressing. He had a stubborn set to his mouth that told her he was done talking on the subject.

“You said you saw my art in New York,” he said.

She froze, fear taking hold of her, and the food she was trying to swallow seemed like it was swelling and almost impossible to swallow.

“No I didn’t,” she said, taking a drink.

“Right before you went to sleep,” he said. His voice was steady. There was no condemnation or accusation. “You told me you knew who I was. I’m assuming you put it together after you saw the painting in my guest bedroom. And you mentioned New York when you said you’d been to the Dynamis Security offices there. Is that where you’re from?”

“Yes,” she said. Stay as close to the truth as possible.

“Laurel Valley takes care of its own,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“It means you’re safe here.”

She didn’t say anything—couldn’t say anything.

“You’ve moved a long way,” he said. “You’re on your own, but whether you like it or not, you’ve been adopted into the nosiest family you’ll ever meet.” He grinned. “You can trust us. Any of us.”

Hattie nodded, even though she had no intention of trusting anyone but Atticus. The more people who knew the truth the more dangerous it would be for her. It was a secret she’d have to keep.

“While you’ve been sleeping the last couple of days,” he said. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.”

“I thought you’ve been painting,” she said, arching a brow.

“No one told me you were a smart aleck,” he said.

“You’ve only known me three days. There’s still time.”

He laughed and she appreciated the dimple at the corner of his mouth and the sun lines around his eyes. She’d never have guessed he was a painter by looking at him. She’d always thought of artists as somewhat frail and pale. But Duncan was everything but. If she’d had to guess, she would have pegged him as some kind of outdoorsman or construction worker. He was in excellent shape—broad shouldered and slim waisted—and he obviously spent a great deal of time in the sun because he was anything but pale.

“Anyway,” he said. “I’ve been painting and thinking and doing quite a bit of wrestling where you’re concerned.”

“Me?” she asked. “What have I got to do with anything?”

“I’m getting to that,” he said. “You see, my parents always said I’d been given gifts when I was a kid. Sometimes I get a sense of things before they’re going to happen. And sometimes I have this discernment to know things about certain people. I think it’s what helps me tell great stories as an artist.”

“Okay,” Hattie said, not as shocked by this conversation as she normally would be. She was a very practical and straightforward person. Her upbringing had demanded it and her experience in business had perfected it.

“And what I finally came to the conclusion of this morning after I’d finished working, is that I’m going to have to be completely honest with you and tell you some things that most people would never say after knowing someone for three days.”

“You’re not a stalker are you?” she asked. “Or crazy? Have you ever killed anyone?”

He grinned again, but didn’t reply. “I’m going to tell you these things, but I want you to promise me something in return.”

“Look, Duncan,” she said, pushing her plate back. “I like you well enough despite first impressions, and I’m oddly attracted to you in a weird sort of way. But I have terrible taste in men, so that shouldn’t mean anything. But—”

His laughter interrupted her and he held up his hands. “That confession somehow makes this easier. Besides, I’ve already asked you once.”

She felt the heat rush to her cheeks. “Asked me what?”

“I want you to sit for me for a painting,” he said. “And before you say no, I want you to hear me out.”

She was already shaking her head. She’d known he would bring it up again. And her answer was still the same.

“Duncan, I can’t,” she said.

“Because he’ll find you?” he asked softly.

The blood drained from her face, and if she hadn’t been sitting she would’ve ended up on her knees.

He reached out and took her hand. “Hey,” he whispered, gazing into her eyes. “Take a deep breath. You’re safe here. You’re safe with me. You’re safe in Laurel Valley.”

Her breathing started to slow and her hand was unsteady as she removed it from his grasp and reached for her drink.

“That was the last thing you told me before you fell asleep,” he said. “You were so tired, I knew it had to be true.”

“Then you understand why I can’t let you paint me,” she said. “You’re too well known. Your paintings are all over the world.”

“I’ll make you a promise,” he said, leaning forward so their faces were closer together. It was as if they were the only two people in the restaurant. “Anything I create with your likeness will never go to the public. It’ll never be sold. And no one will ever see it but you and me.”

“Why would you do that?” she asked.

“Because my work isn’t about the money,” he said.

She could see the fierce passion in his eyes as he talked about his love. “I paint because I have to. Because there’s a vision or a story that has to get out of me or I’ll explode. I don’t have a choice in what I do. It’s a beautiful gift at times, and sometimes it’s a curse. But I can’t stop it. Something takes over and the need gets louder and louder until it’s screaming in my head unless I do something about it. So I paint. And the visions in my head come to life on canvas.”

She nodded. She could see it so clearly. And because she could see it, she could understand it.

“I saw a painting of yours once,” she said. “It was so beautiful. A little boy, no more than a few years old, was sitting on a stool staring at the rain through his bedroom window. It was as if I could have reached out and touched the

windowpane, it was so clear, and as if I could have felt the wetness of the raindrops on my fingers. But it was one of the saddest things I'd ever seen."

"*Boy on a Stool*," he said, remembering it well. "It went to the New York gallery."

She nodded.

"Why did you find it sad?" he asked.

"You might look at it on the surface and think he's sad because it's raining and he'd rather be outside playing. Or you might expand the imagination a little more and think maybe he'd been sent to his room as punishment. But there were little touches, so subtle they made my breath catch. The hem of his pajamas was frayed. There was a button missing. His feet were dirty. There was a crack in one of the windowpanes, just a sliver that was hard to see at first because it looked like a raindrop had smeared across the surface."

She sighed and shook her head. "And then there was the smudge on his face. At least, I'd thought it a smudge at first. But then I realized it was a bruise. And there was a look of such hopelessness in his eyes I wanted to yank him right off the canvas and pull him into my arms. You're so very talented. It's an incredible gift you've been given."

He stared at her for several seconds and then he took her hand again and squeezed it. "If that painting hadn't sold I'd get it back for you so you could have it."

She laughed awkwardly, but didn't remove her hand this time. "You guys really need to stop giving stuff away."

"O'Haras are eccentric, and we pretty much do what we want. It's a family trait. Do you understand why I have to paint you now? If you can see what it does to me to give life to these stories, then you know I've got to do the same with you. I wanted to paint you the second you fell into my arms. Before I knew your name. Before I knew anything about you."

She paused and looked at him—really looked at him—and she saw the passion and integrity for his work in his expression. She knew he was talented. She'd seen it firsthand.

Critics and curators had dubbed him as the artist of the century—a rare talent who would span generations like the old masters. Hattie knew it was true. She just didn't understand why he wanted *her*.

“No one will ever see them?” she asked.

“No one,” he promised.

“Okay,” she finally said. “I'll do it.”

Mac came back and removed their dishes. “Duncan must be trying to get you to let him paint you,” she said. “He's got that bullheaded O'Hara look on his face. My mom says whenever they get that look it's best not to argue because you'll never hear the end of it.”

Duncan snorted. “Your mother is the champion of this look. And Hattie already agreed to sit for me so don't try and talk her out of it.”

Mac rolled her eyes. “It takes forever. And you're just sitting there. It's torture.”

“Hey, that's what you get when your mom gets the bullheaded O'Hara look on her face. Blame her.”

When Mac walked away Duncan said, “Her mom, Sloane, is my first cousin. Between me and my four brothers and her four brothers you can believe that she grew up knowing how to handle herself.”

“I can only imagine,” Hattie said.

Duncan subtly put his credit card in the folder Mac had left with their ticket, and set it on the edge of the table.

“Now that we've got the hard part out of the way and you've agreed to sit for me,” he said. “There's something else I need to tell you.”

“So serious,” she said, noting the change in his tone.

“Very serious,” he agreed. “Remember how I told you I sometimes just know things.”

“I'm sure your artistic ability makes you sensitive to certain things,” Hattie said diplomatically.

He nodded. “You could say that. I don’t believe there are coincidences in life. Everything happens for a reason. Do you hear me? The good and the bad. They’re all experiences that help us grow and shape the people we become.”

Hattie swallowed, but there was a lump in her throat.

“No coincidences. Your relationship with Atticus is what brought you here, along with whoever you’re hiding from.”

She started to shake her head but he stopped her.

“No, don’t deny it,” he said. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. I hope you will trust me enough at some point, but not now.”

“Duncan—”

“No coincidences,” he said. “Once I came to this conclusion I debated on whether or not to tell you upfront or let it play out the natural way. But you strike me as a woman who needs the truth. You strike me as a woman who’s been deceived by the people in your life and you don’t trust yourself any longer. So I decided the truth is the only way to go. There’s a reason it was my house you found and that you fell into my arms.”

“So what are you saying?” she asked, her throat going dry.

“I’m saying I’m not crazy,” he said. “And I can’t say I’m entirely happy about this because my painting has always been front and center of my life. I can be selfish at times and I like to do what I want when I want to do it. But then you came along.

Hattie had no idea what was happening. Duncan didn’t look crazy. In fact, he looked bewildered and a little bit aggravated. It reminded her of how rude he’d been when she’d fallen through his front door, and she couldn’t help but smile a little.

Duncan was right. Derek had deceived her from the first moment they’d met. She’d thought he was handsome and charming and that he loved her. But it had all been a lie. But Duncan...Duncan was a passionate man. You couldn’t look at his art and not see that. He lived life fully and embraced all

aspects of it. She'd only spent a short amount of time in his company, but she knew that much about him. He loved his family and was fiercely loyal to them. There were emotions and hidden depths inside him that he only allowed to be seen through his art. But that passion and emotion was part of him. She would always know what Duncan was feeling.

The irritation didn't leave his face, but he seemed resigned and said, "I come from a long line of O'Haras who know when they've met the woman they're supposed to spend the rest of their life with. And whether you can admit it yet or not, you feel it too."

"Umm, Duncan," Hattie said. "Are you feeling okay? Maybe you're just overtired from work."

"I know what I know," he said. "And however you got here, by whatever means, you came here because you were supposed to meet me. Because you're supposed to be my wife."

Chapter Ten



THREE WEEKS PASSED AND HE DIDN'T SEE HATTIE.

After he'd dropped his bombshell, he thought he might have to revive her when the color drained out of her face, but she'd recovered quickly enough, paid her portion of the check, and told him thank you for the lunch. He hadn't seen her since, though not for lack of trying.

He could see how a declaration like that might be alarming, but it was like his mom had said, when you know you know. And if you know, you might as well start the process of fitting the missing pieces together. He'd only told her what was in his heart. He didn't say they had to get married tomorrow. Or next year for that matter. There was still the question of whether or not she'd like Laurel Valley a year down the road.

He wasn't a patient man. And his parents had told him patience was necessary when it came to love. But for this—for Hattie—he could be patient. He would get to know her, let her get to know him and his family. They had all the time in the world. She just needed some time to get used to the idea. And to trust him.

The days were getting colder, and the nights even more so, and they'd start seeing the first flurries of snow sometime in the next week. His work was coming in fits and starts, and he'd spent a lot of time outdoors, hiking and biking, to clear his head. He'd delayed going to see her. All he had to do was drive a few minutes down the road with his sketchbook, knock

on her door, and get her to sit still a few minutes so he could get them back on track.

As much as he liked to live as a self-proclaimed hermit, he'd missed talking to her. She was sharp and sarcastic, and he'd known the second she started talking about his painting that she understood him in a way no one else ever had. She just didn't realize it yet.

He might not have seen Hattie over the past three weeks, but the O'Hara network had been in full force. It wouldn't have been a surprise at all if carrier pigeons had started seeking him out on his hikes to deliver messages from his family about what Hattie had been up to lately.

His family had made it a point to drop by her house and lend a hand with moving furniture, painting, and whatever else she wanted done to the place. They'd introduced her to people, and she'd started work at the sporting goods store.

Laurel Valley Sports and Outdoors had its grand opening the past Saturday. He'd gone by as a show of support, but the place had been packed, and every employee had been up to their eyeballs in customers. But according to the network, Hattie was off Sunday and Monday of every week, and he'd given her enough time to get her thoughts together.

He packed up his sketchbook, pencils, and charcoals, and loaded everything into the Hummer.

"Come on, Winston," Duncan said. "It's time for you to be more sociable. You don't just ignore an invitation when someone invites you over."

The fact that Winston had received the invitation instead of him only smarted a little.

Winston considered his options for a few moments and then followed Duncan to the garage, where he suffered the humiliation of being lifted into the car since he couldn't jump in himself.

"I know, buddy," Duncan said. "The things we'll do for a woman."

Winston didn't have much to offer to the conversation, so Duncan rolled down the window so Winston could stick his head out. Hattie's little car was pulled under the carport when he arrived, and he parked right behind it.

"Come on, Winston. Time to use your company manners."

He lifted Winston out and unloaded his stuff, and when he turned around she was standing at the kitchen door, looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Hi," he said.

Bringing her image to mind day-to-day didn't do her justice. Nothing compared to seeing her standing in front of him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He almost laughed. That was exactly what he'd asked her when she'd stumbled across his doorstep the first time they'd met.

"You invited Winston for a visit," he said. "He wouldn't take no for an answer."

Winston stared up at him with two parts disbelief and accusation.

"Uh-huh," Hattie said, looking back and forth between him and Winston.

"And I figured as long as we were here I could get started on some paintings. The light is good today, and I've been told you have the next two days off."

"O'Hara network?" she asked.

"It's a powerful force," he said.

"You're not going to go away, are you?" she asked.

"If you really want me to," he said. "But I don't think you'd want to disappoint Winston like that. He's very particular about his friends. And you did promise to let me paint you."

“Come on, Winston,” she said, holding the door open. And then she looked at Duncan. “You too.”

Hattie had done a good job the last three weeks of putting Duncan O’Hara out of her mind, and now here he was, standing in her living room and taking up far too much space.

It was a lie, of course. She hadn’t done a good job of putting him out of her mind at all. His words had haunted her every day. There were no coincidences in life. She was here because she was supposed to be. Because they were supposed to be together.

She felt the connection, just as he’d described. But just because he spoke the truth didn’t mean she was ready to hear the truth. And just because it was the truth didn’t make it possible. She was a married woman. Just because she’d been declared dead and Atticus had given her a new identity didn’t mean the slate had been wiped clean from her former life.

Duncan had told her he would let her dictate the terms of when she felt comfortable confiding in him. That there’d be no judgment or condemnation. But she wondered if he was really capable of giving her what he’d promised once he found out the life she was living in Laurel Valley was a lie.

It was the life she wanted. And she’d discovered during her time in Laurel Valley that it was a life she loved. But it was still a lie. No one here had ever heard of Hattie Ashbury-Bancroft. They didn’t know she’d died in a fiery car crash in New York, or that her husband was the cruelest sort of man. And the people in Laurel Valley *would* care about such things, not because of her past, but because she’d lied to all of them.

The O’Hara women had treated her like family. She’d met friends and co-workers. And she could only imagine the look on their faces if they knew the truth. She’d never be able to live down the shame and embarrassment of hurting so many people if she were caught, and she’d be forced to move on. Maybe she’d made a mistake by living in such a small town.

Maybe she needed to be anonymous in the big city and keep to herself.

She went to the pantry and pulled out a box that had Winston going on high alert.

“Can he have a treat?” she asked.

“If you didn’t give him one,” Duncan said, looking down at his companion, “he’d probably go in and get it himself. Winston is more of an ask forgiveness than permission kind of guy.”

Winston woofed in agreement.

“Wonder where he gets that from,” she said, handing Winston a dog biscuit.

“You keep dog treats in your pantry?”

“I like to make sure I’m prepared for visitors, no matter who they are,” she said.

“This doesn’t even look like the same house,” he said. “You’ve got a good eye for color. I like the contrast of the pale yellow walls and the bright blue streaks of color. I’ve got a painting that would be perfect for over your mantel.”

“I’ve seen how much your paintings sell for,” she said. “It’s not in my price range.”

“Consider it payment for being my muse for the next few weeks. I can be bossy and demanding when I’m working.”

“No,” she said with a gasp, covering her mouth with her hand and her eyes going wide with surprise. “Surely, you jest.”

“Ahh, that smart mouth has been haunting me over the last couple of weeks.”

She couldn’t help but grin. “My dad always said if something is worth doing, it’s worth doing right.”

She had such fun with him. The little time they’d spent together had never been dull. It had been filled with conversation and playfulness. They’d listened and learned about each other. He was *interesting*. How many people could she say that about from her life in New York? They’d all been

drones, kowtowing to Derek's every whim. None of them had an original thought, and most of their wives had been chosen for their fortunes or their looks instead of their brains.

"I want to start on the back porch," he said. "That porch swing is perfect, and the light is hitting just right."

"And you're just going to...paint?" she asked.

"No painting today," he said. "I'll do a series of sketches at first to see what clicks for me. And then I'll do a more detailed drawing. Once I have that I'll start painting."

"You know I have to go to work at some point. I can't just dedicate my life to sitting for you."

He smiled and pushed the sliding doors into the walls so the area was open from inside to outside. The weather was perfect and cool, just a hint of fall in the air.

"Pity," he said. "I guess I'll just have to come over every day when you get home from work. I'll bring dinner, and then you can kill two birds with one stone."

"You're going to make me dinner?" she asked.

"Absolutely not," he said. "I unfortunately inherited my mother's cooking talents. But Aunt Simone owns a catering business along with The Lampstand. All I've got to do is stick it in the oven."

She was feeling self-conscious. She was wearing gray lounge pants and a matching button-down top in the same color. Her hair wasn't fixed and she wasn't wearing any makeup. There was nothing about her that was worth all this time and trouble.

"The air is a little cool, so you might want to grab a blanket," he said, handing her the cerulean afghan that was lying across the back of the couch. "And maybe a book to use as a prop."

It was fascinating to watch the transition as he changed from a regular person to an artist. His eyes sharpened, and there was an intense focus behind them, telling her he already saw everything clearly in his head.

“But my clothes,” she said.

“No, they’re perfect. Nice and casual and relaxed. That’s the real you. Just be comfortable.”

He told her where and how to sit on the porch swing, and he brought her a couple of pillows to make her more comfortable. He was fast and efficient setting out his supplies, and she was curious to know what he was using. He had a black box filled with various kinds of pencils and charcoal.

He moved the lounge chair across from her to the angle he wanted, and then he looked at Winston and said, “Go find something to do. When we’re finished you can have an extra piece of meat for dinner.”

Winston licked his lips and then went inside to lie on the rug.

“That dog understands way too much,” she said.

“Shhh,” Duncan said. “He doesn’t know he’s a dog.”

He’d been drawing her from memory the past weeks, so the angles of her face and the curves of her body were familiar.

He worked quickly, doing loose sketches until she became more comfortable. She didn’t consider herself worthy enough to be captured like this. It was easy to see that she didn’t recognize her beauty. If anything, she only recognized her flaws.

In her mind, her looks were what they were. She had a sharp wit and quick mind, and that more than made up for anything she lacked in her appearance. But it was that uncharted knowledge, the humbleness that was so appealing. There was a naïvety about her. And a woundedness that made him think of a sparrow who’d injured a wing and was tucked in on itself, trying to protect itself from any other injury.

“Tell me about your dad,” he said. “You’ve mentioned him several times. You were close?”

“Very,” she said her face transforming into a genuine smile, and then it turned a little sad. “He was tall. Like me.

I've always been told I favored him, and I'm glad. It's nice to look in the mirror and see his eyes."

"It's one of the first things I noticed about you," he said. "You have those beautiful dark eyes. They're a touch heavy lidded and your lashes are full and dark. A contrast to your hair. Bedroom eyes."

He glanced up in time to see her blush and look off into the distance. She'd not gotten enough compliments in her life, and he made a vow to change that.

"The dark eyes and hair as light as yours is an unusual combination. A contradiction even."

"The hair comes from my mother," she said. "She's Swiss. Very pale and delicate looking. My father was the complete opposite. Dark and swarthy. So handsome. They were a beautiful couple."

"But not happy," he said, knowing it intuitively.

"No, but I don't think that was ever their goal. They both came from prominent families and it was a good match. Both personally and in business. My mother's father eventually merged his corporation with my father's. People will get married for a lot less than two hundred billion dollars."

Duncan whistled. "I imagine so. You make it sound like feudal England."

"Things haven't changed that much between the wealthiest families."

Duncan tucked the comment away for later. It was a different class system altogether when you got into the billion-dollar mark. There were only so many families she could belong to, and it wouldn't be too hard to do a little digging and find out where she came from. But he wouldn't. It had to be on her terms.

"Dad wasn't like anyone else," she said thoughtfully. "He never cared about the money. They called him a black sheep, and even his father disowned him, so he had to make his way on his own. Unfortunately, my mother didn't know that when she married him, and she was very resentful.

“But my dad was a man of integrity. He wanted to make a difference, so he joined the Secret Service out of college and worked his way up. He protected two presidents.” Her voice held a note of pride.

“Really?” Duncan asked, his pencil never stopping. “That would explain how he knows Atticus.”

Hattie nodded. “And then he went into the private sector and the money was everything my mother always expected. But there was a downside. He was gone a lot, and my mother was embarrassed by what he did because he actually *worked* for a living instead of trotting after her all over the world while she fulfilled the socialite lifestyle. So I got stuck with a nanny. When he came back home he had no clue where she was, or who the woman watching me was. I was six years old, and he decided things had to change. That’s when he met Atticus.”

“He sounds like a great man,” Duncan said, shading in around her mouth. Her smile had softened as she was talking about her father, and he wanted to capture the sweetness.

“He was,” she agreed.

“Did your mother ever come back?” he asked.

The smile disappeared and frown lines marred her face. “Eventually,” she said, and left it at that. “She’s never been part of my life. Not unless she had an agenda.”

“You’re angry at her,” he said.

“Oh, yes,” she told him. “Very. And I’m thankful every day she’s out of my life.”

He turned to a new page in his sketchbook. The light had changed and a soft afternoon drizzle had started to fall. It wouldn’t last long. It never did. But he changed the focus of his new drawing to her face—from those bedroom eyes to the sexy mole at the corner of her mouth.

“How’d you break your nose?” he asked, rubbing the tip of his finger on the crooked line he’d just drawn.

“Car wreck,” she said automatically, but her voice had gone flat. She didn’t volunteer the fact that Derek had been

driving them home from a party, far too drunk to be behind the wheel of a car. He'd been in a mood and wouldn't let anyone talk him out of driving, and none of the crowd he ran with tried very hard anyway.

He'd been angry and belligerent because he'd seen a man talking to her at the party, and he was sure she was having an affair with him. It hadn't seemed to matter that Derek was making the accusation with another woman's lipstick on his collar from a quick tryst he'd had in the bathroom. And it didn't matter that the man he accused had only been asking if she wanted a refill on her drink.

Derek had railed at her the entire way home, his anger growing until she saw stars from the backhand he gave her. That was what broke her nose, but it had only been seconds later that he'd smashed the car into a light pole. It had been easy enough to blame the broken nose on the car wreck.

"I didn't mean to make you sad," he said, noting the change in her expression.

"It's in the past," she said. "What about your parents? I don't even need to ask if you're close. It's obvious your entire family is close."

"Oh, sure," he said. "But my parents are special. I never take it for granted. Our land has been in the family since the late 1800s. My dad took some time after college to decide if ranch life was really what he wanted, so he and some friends decided to travel across the States. When they got to New York he just happened to see my mother in a performance of *Kiss Me Kate* on Broadway, and it was love at first sight."

He stopped sketching to grin at her. "I told you it runs in the family."

She rolled her eyes and her cheeks pinkened again, but she didn't say anything.

"My mom gave up her career to come back here with my dad, but she's never regretted it and she's as much a part of this town as anyone who has multiple generations of family from Laurel Valley."

“That’s nice,” Hattie said softly. “That she didn’t resent your dad or her children because of what she lost.”

“She found something new instead,” Duncan said. “She’s a brilliant lyricist, and has won several Tonys and an Emmy for some of the music she’s written. Howard and O’Hara are as popular today as Rodgers and Hammerstein.”

Hattie’s mouth formed a silent *O* and then she said, “I guess I didn’t put it together. I know your mother’s work well.”

“She’ll be glad to hear it,” he said, grinning. “She does have an ego.”

“It appears creative talent runs deep in your family.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I have an ego too.”

“I’ve heard about that over the last couple of weeks,” she said. “Eccentric, temperamental, brilliant, demanding, meticulous, generous, compassionate...your family knows you well.”

“Ha,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve gotten an earful. My family does not hold back what they’re thinking. Especially if they think there will be another wedding at the end of it. Don’t let them pressure you. I’ve told them everything has to be on your terms.”

Hattie decided the best way to handle Duncan’s talk of the future they might have together was to ignore it altogether. “They say you’re a hermit. And they miss you when you’re not around.”

“I know,” he said. “But it’s hard to explain. I love them. And I can’t imagine not having them within easy reach. But I like being on my own. I need to be on my own. My talent is a gift, yes, but it can be difficult to pull the emotions I put on canvas out of the depths of my soul. It doesn’t always make me someone people want to be around.”

“I think they understand you more than you think they do,” she said. “They love you fiercely. That is easy to see. Especially since I’ve been asked questions even my doctor doesn’t ask so they know that I won’t break your heart.”

Apparently, someone named Jenna left a bad taste in their mouths.”

Duncan rolled his eyes and blew out an aggravated breath. “It would’ve been nice if someone had spoken up while I was with Jenna.”

“Would you have listened?”

His smile was a quick slash across his face and she thought in that moment he looked something of a pirate. “Of course not. I’ve been told my head is as hard as the Blarney Stone.”

She chuckled. “But you never married?”

“No,” he said. “That would have been a disaster. At least with Jenna. But when you see the relationship my parents and brothers have, and the relationships my aunt and uncle and cousins have, it sets a pretty high standard. It’s not worth settling for anything less.”

“Hmm,” she said, looking down at her hands nervously.

And then she looked back up and his breath caught. She was beautiful. Despite the strength she showed the world there was a raw vulnerability about her that made him want to protect her. And in her gaze was something else...

Longing? Hope? Love? Maybe it was wishful thinking on his part. But he wouldn’t be able to paint her any other way.

“It’s raining,” she said, never breaking eye contact.

He put the sketch pad and pencils aside and slowly got to his feet, making his moves deliberate so she had plenty of time to tell him to stay where he was. But she didn’t. She just stared at him with those slumberous eyes, her pulse hammering in her neck.

His body vibrated with energy, and he held his hand out to her, waiting for her to take it. And when she did, he pulled her to her feet, so their bodies barely brushed. They were almost eye to eye, and her lids fluttered closed as he moved closer, so close he could feel her breath across his lips.

Her hands came up and rested on his chest, and her head dropped back the slightest bit. That was all the invitation he

needed. His mouth pressed against hers with a gentleness that surprised him. He wanted to breathe her, taste her, become one with her. But he sensed the timidity in her own kiss and knew she needed something softer, sweeter.

He danced with her, holding her flush against his body as the rain fell softly around them. He took the kiss deeper, swallowing her gasp of surprise, and he wound his fingers through the thick length of her hair.

The sweetness of it surprised him. It was like coming home—like being starved and walking into a banquet—or like thirsting in the desert and coming upon an oasis. She was the missing piece of his soul he'd never realized he needed. His painting had always filled that part of him. But it never would have filled him completely. But now he knew and there was no turning back. She was his present and his future.

Chapter Eleven



HATTIE COULDN'T REMEMBER A TIME IN HER LIFE WHERE SHE'D felt so content.

She'd never felt such joy. Such love. She'd not really understood what the word meant—not until Duncan.

They fell into a comfortable rhythm, and if the memories of her past haunted her from time to time, it was easy to push them away when Duncan was near. They spent their days working, and their evenings were spent talking or hiking or eating out with friends or family.

And the longer they went, the more she felt the dread in her stomach as she waited for the other shoe to drop. He wanted more. She could tell he did. His family talked about their future as if it were inevitable, and Duncan never protested. He spoke of having his brother Hank draw up plans to expand his home, and flashes of a little girl with her father's eyes and a little boy with Hattie's pale hair filled her mind. Those were dreams she couldn't afford to have, but she couldn't bring herself to squelch the joy she saw on Duncan's face with the truth of her circumstances.

She loved him. There was no doubt about that. And they talked about everything—goals, hopes, dreams, and the future. They talked of his past and his family. The O'Haras were deeply rooted in Laurel Valley, and remembering the legacy of past generations was obviously important to all of them. There was a deep pride and love of family that she'd never understand.

But there was one subject she'd diverted with expertise—and that was her own past. She'd give away nuggets of truth, remembering what Atticus had told her. But she'd learned how to redirect questions and take the attention from herself when the questions got too personal.

Duncan watched her closely during those moments, and she knew he was waiting for her to come clean. To tell him about her past and why she'd come to Laurel Valley. One thing she'd learned about Duncan during their time together was that he wasn't a stupid man. He saw things in people that often went overlooked. He saw something deep within her that she wasn't ready to reveal, and it made her nervous because once that layer of her soul was exposed there was no going back.

And if she was honest with herself, it wasn't just that she didn't want Duncan to dig beneath those layers of who she was, but it was also that she wasn't ready to face the woman she'd been. Those were wounds that were still raw. And maybe there was a small part of her that wondered if he'd still love her if he knew the truth.

And there was part of her that wondered if the past mattered at all—if she could keep it all buried for the rest of her life and have no regrets. Those moments were the angel and devil sitting on each of her shoulders. And the irony didn't go past her notice that every time she drove along Tribulation Pass to get to her tiny cabin, the angel and the devil showed up, whispering in her ears.

She needed to talk to Atticus, to see what could be done to untangle the mess of her past life. She'd gotten to know all the O'Haras during the months she'd spent in Laurel Valley, and it was impossible not to love them. Duncan's mom had even found her a reliable used SUV for the winter and showed her how to put chains on the tires. They treated her like she was one of their own, and they were the big extended family she'd always longed for as a child.

Being in Laurel Valley was a dream come true. She couldn't have imagined a more perfect picture of her life—if it had been her real life. Even her first Idaho winter hadn't deterred her, much to Duncan's surprise. It wasn't a New York

winter, that was for sure. She loved the snow. Loved watching it fall from her second-story office at the sporting goods store, and she loved sitting on her or Duncan's back porch with the fire pit lit while wrapped in a blanket as snow fell onto the lake.

This was her home. And she never wanted to be anywhere else.

But she really needed to talk to Atticus. Duncan wasn't being as subtle about their future together as he'd once been. He was a traditional man from a traditional family. She knew it was only a matter of time before he asked her to marry him. And she wanted that more than anything she'd ever wanted in her entire life. But she wasn't prepared how to answer him if he asked.

Atticus normally traveled frequently, making stops at the Dynamis Security offices in Dallas, Washington, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London, and Rome. But since his wife's murder, he'd stuck close to home to be with his daughter while she recovered from the same attempt that had been made on her life. They'd even missed Christmas with the family, opting to stay in Dallas instead.

But the word through the O'Hara network was that Atticus was due to arrive at any moment, and there was going to be a big family dinner that night at "the barn" since that was the only place big enough to hold the entire family. Since the O'Haras seemed to have family reunions at fairly regular intervals since everyone was close, Hattie had been to "the barn" on more than one occasion, and it wasn't like any barn she'd ever seen, though her mother still would've looked her nose down at it despite the thoroughbreds that were being raised and bred in the functional barn right next door to it.

But "the barn" had been built with family in mind, more like a private restaurant or a club, with lots of seating, a bar, a stage and dance floor, and a gourmet kitchen. Not to mention the loft upstairs with a full-fledged movie theater and seats, plus pool tables, ping-pong tables, and every class arcade game. The O'Hara grandkids loved to have their birthday parties at "the barn."

“We’re going to be late,” Hattie said to Winston, looking at the clock on the wall.

Winston shook his head in disgust, being a timely fellow himself, and padded off to lie on the rug in front of the fireplace.

“A lot of help you are,” Hattie said. “You could go upstairs and get him, but you’re too chicken to interrupt him when he’s working.”

Winston sniffed delicately and turned his head away.

She could hear the quiet bass of the music playing overhead in Duncan’s studio, and she chewed her bottom lip nervously. They were supposed to be there at six, and it was already twenty till. It was hard to break him away when he was in that zone, and she’d learned quickly to give him his space when he was working. But he’d promised they’d be there, so she thought it best to give him a reminder.

O’Hara dinners were a casual affair, so she wore leggings and a thick sweater the color of plums. Her waterproof boots were laced up to the middle of her shins and lined with soft fur.

She crept up the stairs, peeking around the landing to observe before she entered his domain. He stood in front of his canvas, the muscles in his back rigid, but he moved the brush with such delicate strokes.

She didn’t call out. His concentration was so fierce he wouldn’t have heard her anyway. Instead, she crept the rest of the way up and waited for the chance to break in. But there was a long table pushed in the corner that caught her eye. Several of his drawings had been laid out, but they were all of her.

It amazed her how he saw her. She didn’t look like that, not really, but he made her so much more when he put her on paper. There were hundreds of drawings with a myriad of expressions on her face.

Stacked around the table were canvases of every shape and size. Again, her face and body were the subject. But where the

drawings were literal interpretations, he'd used the paintings to create his own visions. There were several of her wearing armor and holding a sword, covered in battle scars and someone else's blood. And there were others painted in watercolor that were so delicate and ethereal it looked like she might come out of the canvas as an apparition.

It was exceptional work. She had enough of an eye to recognize it. And no one would ever see it but the two of them.

Her eye kept going back to the painting of her in armor on the battlefield. It was beautiful. *She* was beautiful. The woman who stood in that portrait never would have married Derek. She never would have put up with the anger and abuse. She was a woman who'd face her enemies head-on and without remorse.

"It's my favorite," he said, startling her from her thoughts. "I'm going to do an entire series in oils. I think it will be the finest work I've ever done."

"Duncan," she said, turning around to meet his gaze.

"The image of you in that scene came to mind the second you fell into my arms. The sight of you literally took my breath away. I went and got my sketch pad and spent the next two days drawing you from memory. I dreamed about you. I know it sounds crazy, but you were as real to me in those dreams as you were in the following weeks when I was actually with you.

"I don't know if you believe that something like this is even possible, but I believe you were sent here for a reason. I knew I was going to love you from the moment we met. I wasn't happy about it," he said, his mouth quirking slightly. "But I knew it was true. And once I got to know you I realized I'd do whatever it took to keep you. Even if it meant leaving Laurel Valley."

"But I love it here," she said, her voice catching. "This is my home."

"That's just an added bonus," he said, smiling.

He looked like he'd just fought a battle, as he often did when he was working, and she said, "You should paint yourself like you are right now. Next to me on the battlefield. You're a striking figure."

"I've been known to do a self-portrait from time to time," he said. "But I'm guessing you came up here for a reason other than paying me compliments? Not that I'm complaining."

"Oh, crud," she said, eyes going wide. "We're supposed to be at dinner. We're late."

"I'm sure they'll understand," he said. "They'll expect it. I'm rarely on time."

"That's a terrible habit," she scolded.

"I'm eccentric," he said, dropping his paintbrush in water and wiping his hands on a towel.

"No excuse," she said. "Go change clothes."

He took his shirt off and she sputtered and laughed and said, "Not right here, you fool."

He grinned and said, "All right, all right," and went downstairs, disrobing as he went.

Hattie snuck a peek over the balcony and whispered, "Good Lord," as he turned and headed toward his bedroom.

"Sorry, Winston," Duncan said. "Don't mean to alarm you. Though you're something of a prude for someone who never wears pants."

Hattie came flying down the stairs and said, "Winston, maybe you could get him to move faster. Maybe nip at his heels a little."

"Winston never nips," Duncan said. "He's a civilized dog and would settle any dispute with fisticuffs like a gentleman."

"Of course," Hattie said, pursing her lips. "My apologies, Winston. Maybe you could formally invite your master into the ring if he's not ready in five minutes."

"That'll teach me," Duncan said, shutting the bedroom door behind him.

Duncan parked in the field next to the barn and checked the clock on the dashboard. Hattie was tense beside him, the idea of being half an hour late completely offensive to her sensibilities. But by his estimation, they were right on time. That had been the plan all along.

He and his family had been planning her surprise party for weeks. It had taken all their cunning and persuasive powers to get her to share her birthdate, but if anyone could get information out of someone it was an O'Hara. The Inquisition had nothing on them. And February fifteenth had been the date, though they were three days early to throw her off the trail.

"I hate being late," she said as they approached the big barn doors.

She twisted her hands nervously, and he put his hands on her shoulders to calm her, though she jumped slightly at his touch, making him frown.

"Relax," he said. "No one is going to care we're a few minutes late. They won't punish you. I promise."

"That's not necessarily my experience," she said under her breath, but it was loud enough for him to hear.

He pushed the barn doors wide open, and the deafening shout of "Surprise" knocked her against him.

"Wh—what?" she asked, shaking her head in denial.

"Happy birthday," he said, leaning down to kiss her temple.

"But my birthday isn't for three days. I don't understand."

"That's what makes it a surprise," he said, pushing her gently into the room.

His entire family was there, and one by one, they came up to hug her and wish her happy birthday. His parents were first

in line and he loved the way his mother wrapped her in a tight hug and held her with a warmth that made his heart full.

His brother Wyatt and his wife, Raven, were next to wish her well, and it brought him joy to see Raven whisper something in Hattie's ear that had her laughing out loud. Hattie was normally much more reserved and her manners impeccable, her wealthy upbringing a dead giveaway even if she'd never shared that bit of information with him. But Hattie and Raven had becoming close over the last months, the two as opposite as could be.

Then Hank and Colt came up, and Duncan frowned as Colt picked Hattie up and swung her around. His younger brothers were only a year apart and they excelled in getting into mischief.

And then his brother Aidan came up with his wife Dylan, treating Hattie as if she was the sister they'd never had. Even his cousins treated her that way. It was hard for Duncan to remember a time when she hadn't been in Laurel Valley.

They wound their way through the room, dodging waiters passing hors d'oeuvres and drinks and kids playing hide-and-seek. Mac was there, along with her parents and siblings, and there was a great deal of noise and laughter and chaos, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Immediately an idea for a painting came to mind—a large canvas, vibrant colors, constant motion—an accurate representation of his family. In fact, it would look stunning hanging above the large stone fireplace. It would make an excellent Mother's Day present.

Duncan heard Hattie gasp with surprise and he turned in time to see her launch herself at Atticus. His cousin looked thinner than he had the last time he'd seen him. But thinking back, the last time he'd seen him had been at his wife's funeral. He was only in his mid-forties, but he'd aged a lifetime over the last year.

There was genuine relief and happiness to see Hattie though, and he could tell their relationship ran deep. He knew Atticus and Hattie's father had been as close as brothers. And

he was trying not to let it drive him crazy that Atticus knew the *real* Hattie.

Duncan knew Hattie was hiding from someone. He also knew she was afraid, though she tried not to let it show. But from time to time when she was caught off guard he would see the flash of fear on her face or the way her body braced for impact.

There was too much at stake—too much between them—for the secrets to go on much longer. And maybe now that Atticus was here he could get some real answers and know what he was up against. Because he would protect her with his life, especially if she said yes to the question he was about to ask her.

The second Hattie saw Atticus, she ran toward him and threw her arms around him. He'd been her father's closest friend, and he knew parts of her better than anyone else on the planet. After her father's death and the will and succession plan in place, the shares of the company had been divided between her mother, Hattie, and Atticus. But her mother had immediately sold her shares to Derek and put all her support behind him to the board of directors, putting things in turmoil with the company.

And then Derek had filed a lawsuit against her claiming Hattie was depressed and showed signs of irrational behavior after her father's death, so he was demanding her shares be turned over to him for the good of the company. That's when Derek had upped his game. He'd poisoned her food so she'd been sick and hospitalized. He'd hired men to keep her under surveillance, watching her every move until she was jumping at shadows. And when she tried to report it to the police he told them she'd been having hallucinations and was crazy. He'd built his case very steadily, and all for money. He'd told her it was the reason he'd married her in the first place. Access to billion-dollar companies didn't come along every day.

The only loophole Atticus had found was that in the event of a major shareholder's death, there was a twelve-month hold on any transference or sale of shares while the board conducted a full audit of the company and where the remaining shareholders and board members could vote on how best to divide up the company.

She hadn't planned to stay "dead" forever, but her death had been the only way to keep her safe. Derek would have eventually had her committed to a hospital or he'd have left her in a vegetative state so she was out of his way.

There had been no other way. Atticus was the best at what he did. She knew that he'd used this time to compile evidence against Derek. But she wasn't sure how much longer she could play this game. She loved Duncan. She loved his entire family.

"We need to talk," she said.

He nodded. "I never imagined this would happen when bringing you here, but the network said things are pretty serious between you and Duncan. And the network is never wrong." He smiled wryly.

"I thought between running the store and your natural introvertedness that you'd be able to hide effectively. At least for the first year until we can get everything sorted out."

"It's not your fault," she told. "You did what you do best. And I had no plans of anyone ever knowing the truth. If things were different, no one ever would. But...I love him."

His lips twitched. "Like I said, the network is never wrong. I've already put in some calls to move the timeline up. We've got everything we need to put Derek away. Don't worry about any of that. Your father's legacy is safe. Go enjoy your birthday."

She nodded. Atticus would know what to do. He had the connections and the power to make things right. The hardest part was going to be making things right with Duncan.

"You're right," she said. "I trust you. And once Duncan knows the truth he has to understand." She swallowed nervously. "Don't you think?"

Atticus grimaced. “O’Haras are a hardheaded bunch. And no man likes to feel like he’s been made a fool of. Just keep the status quo for a few more days and then the three of us can have a family meeting and straighten everything out.”

“Status quo,” she said. “I can do that.”

“That’s the spirit,” Atticus said, squeezing her shoulder.

Hattie hadn’t realized that a band had been playing until things went unusually quiet. There was a murmur of voices and then Duncan jumped up on the stage and grabbed the microphone. Everyone’s attention went to the stage.

“Oh no,” she said, her skin flushing with heat and her heart pounding in her chest.

Duncan tapped the mic to make sure it was on.

“Are you going to sing for us, Duncan?” his father yelled out. “Are you taking requests?”

There were groans and Hank yelled out, “Please don’t sing! Everyone old enough still has trauma from when you sang in the *Music Man* production in fourth grade.”

“True,” Aidan said. “If I recall Mrs. Hartegan ended up muting his mic.”

“I’m going to save my payback for that for another night,” Duncan said, narrowing his eyes at his brothers. “Because tonight is for Hattie and I don’t want to embarrass y’all when I knock your heads together.”

“I promise y’all I raised them the best I could,” Anne said from across the room. “I blame their father.”

“I thought tonight was to celebrate Hattie,” Mick said. “Now grab your glass of champagne and zip it, O’Haras.”

“Well said, Dad,” Duncan said, raising his glass and waiting until everyone followed suit.

Someone had put a glass of champagne in her hand, but she couldn’t be sure who. There was no one but Duncan in the room. She knew he was completely out of his comfort zone.

He was an observer, someone who liked to stand in the shadows. But he had put all of this together for her.

“Hattie, I can speak for everyone in this room that you’ve made our lives brighter and better since we’ve known you. You’re one of the strongest and most incredible people I’ve ever met. You’ve charmed me and Winston, which is not easy to do considering present company tends to call us both temperamental and standoffish.”

“You can say that again,” Mick called out, making everyone laugh.

“And maybe I should give a quick shout-out to Atticus as well,” Duncan said, toasting his cousin. “Because you gave Hattie a place and a family when she needed one most. I’ll forever be grateful.”

Atticus was still standing beside her and he raised his glass in salute even though his smile was tight.

“So…” Duncan said, clearing his throat. “I was going to wait until later to do this, but the timing seems right, and all the people I love most in the world are in the room. Even Wyatt.”

Hattie gasped audibly and it felt like molten lead was coursing through her veins. The room started to spin. She felt Atticus move in closer, steadying her by putting a hand on her elbow, and she was almost positive he uttered a word under his breath that wasn’t used in polite company.

“Hattie Jones,” Duncan said.

The utterance of the name that didn’t belong to her had her closing her eyes in shame. Maybe if she closed her eyes this would all go away.

“I’ve loved you since the day I met you. I never understood what it was to be in love. To be in another person’s presence and feel your soul answer the call of theirs. To know without a shadow of a doubt that you’d move anywhere, go anywhere, or be anywhere just to stay in their presence.

“I can’t imagine living the rest of my life without you.” Duncan took a ring box out of his pocket and someone

grabbed the champagne out of his hand so he could open the box. And then he got down on one knee.

“Oh, God,” Hattie said, just as the crowd started to cheer.

“Will you marry me?” Duncan asked, love shining in his eyes as bright as the diamond he held.

“Pretend to faint,” Atticus said. “Now.”

It wasn't very hard to pretend.

Chapter Twelve



HATTIE FELT ATTICUS'S ARMS COME AROUND HER, AND THEY were moving quickly through the crowd and out of the main hall. He bumped open the doors to what looked like a men's lounge and laid her on a leather sofa.

Several people came rushing in after them, asking if she was okay. And then she heard Duncan's voice as he tried to get through, and she closed her eyes again.

"Sorry, kiddo," Atticus said. "It won't work a second time. It's time for both of us to face the music."

Hattie sat up carefully so she was propped against the arm of the couch, and someone handed her a bottle of water. Someone else put a cool washcloth on the back of her neck. All the faces that stared back at her were filled with love and concern

"Sorry about that," she said, looking up in Duncan's parents' faces. Wyatt and Raven had also come in, along with his aunt and uncle. And then Duncan's brother Colt pushed his way through.

"Let me take a look at her," Colt said.

Hattie winced, forgetting that Colt was a doctor. The last thing she wanted was anyone poking at her.

"No, it's okay," she said, holding up her hands. "I'm fine. I was just...overwhelmed. And I forgot to eat lunch today. We got busy at the store."

“Well, no wonder,” Anne said, pressing her hand against Hattie’s cheek gently and then moving out of the way so Duncan could sit next to her.

There was worry in his eyes, and she hated that she was the cause of it. She could only hope it wouldn’t turn to hatred by the time she was through telling him the truth.

Hattie took a deep breath, but before she could summon the courage Atticus spoke up. “I think we need a moment of privacy with Duncan. I need to explain why I brought Hattie here. We’ll need to explain it to all of you eventually, but to Duncan first.”

There were somber nods of agreement and the rest of the family filed out of the room and closed the door behind them.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you to ask questions,” Duncan told Atticus.

Atticus’s smile was sharp. “I know. I’ve been avoiding you. You know what I do for a living, and I don’t like lying to family. It was easier to just avoid your calls until the time was right.”

“And why is the time right now?” Duncan asked.

“You’ve always been perceptive,” Atticus said. “An excellent trait in my line of work.”

“Mine too,” Duncan said. “How long are you going to stall?”

“Long enough for Hattie to get some color back in her cheeks. Drink some of that water, kiddo.”

Hattie nodded, happy to let Atticus take the lead. She had no idea where to even start.

“Her father was one of my closest friends,” Atticus said. “As close as a brother, and I would’ve done anything for him. He’d been sick for a while before he finally went to the doctor, and by then the cancer was too far spread. He was gone within the month.”

Hattie felt the tears on her cheeks. He’d been a larger-than-life presence who never showed weakness. And then he’d

been gone in the blink of an eye.

“Harry’s last request had been that I take care of his daughter, and I didn’t do that,” Atticus said. “Not like I should have. Hattie was only twenty-four when Harry died, and she would inherit a whole lot of money, plus shares in her father’s company. But she’d already been dating Derek Bancroft for a year before Harry’s death, and I figured Harry had already run a full background check on him. Maybe he did, but Derek came from a wealthy family and had an Ivy League degree. They seemed happy enough so I didn’t press, figuring Hattie would need whatever comfort she could get since she wouldn’t get it from her mother. I’ve never met a colder woman. No offense,” he said to Hattie.

“You speak the truth,” Hattie said. “I’ve often wondered, and prayed, that she wasn’t really my biological mother, but the resemblance is too strong to think otherwise.”

Atticus had been standing ramrod straight in front of the fireplace, and he finally relaxed his posture and massaged the back of his neck. And then he sat in the club chair across from them. The weariness in his eyes was almost her undoing.

“I’m sorry I didn’t check in with you after Harry’s death,” he said. “I’ve lost friends and agents my entire career. It’s part of the job. But I was not prepared for what losing Harry would be like. Work was the easiest way to escape. The irony is it was me working like a demon that brought the wrath of God down on me. I made a lot of people mad during that time. And my wife and daughter paid the price for it.”

Hattie swallowed hard and looked away from the raw grief on Atticus’s face. “Derek is a high-powered attorney. And he knows how to play the long game. He was a fantastic actor. Everything a father could want for his daughter. He was smart and successful. He was charming and lavished me with gifts and attention. We were quite the thing in social circles. He loved that part. The attention.

“I have a master’s degree in business and my father had been training me to run the company one day. And by one day,

I mean a couple of decades down the road. None of us were prepared for it to be so soon.

“When my father got sick, things were in total chaos.” She stopped to take a drink of water. “The board shoving papers in front of my face to sign. I was numb. And then Derek told me he’d visited my father in the hospital because he wanted to ask him properly to marry me. He made things so easy, and I just let him take control. It wasn’t like me at all, but I was just so tired and so broken.”

Duncan took her hand and she looked down, surprised to see his fingers entwined with her own. She took a deep breath, knowing she had to press on.

“I felt like a zombie,” she said. “Or like I was underwater. He’d told me my father asked that we get married there at the hospital, so he could still give me away. I couldn’t say no to that. So we got our marriage license and the day before my father died in that hospital bed Derek and I got married.”

Her breath hitched, but she held back the sobs that wanted to break free.

“My father hadn’t even been lucid during the ceremony,” she said. “Derek told me later that he had asked my father to marry me, but do you know what my dad told him? He told him he wouldn’t give his blessing. He suggested we wait another year because a man can pretend to be something he’s not for two full years before things start to come to the surface.”

“Your dad was a wise man,” Atticus said. “And what he told Derek is true. That must have put him in panic mode.”

“It was all lies,” Hattie said. “The wedding was a final insult to a dying man. He hated my father. But he loved the idea of a billion-dollar company and all that entailed. And I went along with it, believing it was what my father wanted. I was so stupid.”

“No one could fault you for grieving, Hattie,” Duncan said. “You can’t blame yourself. All you could do at the time was survive. And that’s what you did.”

She laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Survive. I barely did that. After my father died everything was moved and shifted around quickly. We’re a global defense company, and the last thing we could show was weakness. The funeral was delayed almost a week so my mother could fly in from where she’d been vacationing in the south of France. She’d never bothered to visit him in the hospital. And she was definitely not a grieving widow. She brought her latest boyfriend to the funeral.”

“I don’t think I like your mother,” Duncan said.

“Most people don’t,” she said. “Immediately after the funeral they gathered us all for the reading of the will. Atticus was there too.”

“It was a moment I’ll never forget,” he said. “Hattie’s mother thought that she’d be given majority shares in the company. That had been the terms of the original will. She was a brilliant businesswoman, and it was her father’s company merged with Harry’s that had made it such a success. Harry was a man who played fair, and despite her blatant disregard for their marriage vows and the way she treated Hattie, he wasn’t going to cut her out completely. Harry believed in legacy, and no matter how he felt about his wife, her father had helped build the company. So he left her a third of the shares.”

“Which is not a majority,” Duncan said, wincing.

Atticus nodded. “Harry left a third to me and a third to Hattie. The rest of his estate and homes also went to Hattie.”

“When they read the will she went into a fit of rage, and the estate attorney had to go to the hospital to get stitches. She contested the will, of course, but there was nothing she could do. She did manage to tie up all of the assets that were left to me, but that didn’t matter because Dad had put them in a trust until I turn thirty-five anyway. I didn’t need any of that. I make a good salary from the company and it was always more than enough.

“What I hadn’t realized was that Derek and my mother had been plotting and planning together. They’d met long before

he and I started dating. They'd even been lovers for a time. And they both had one goal. They were the good cop and the bad cop. The more abusive and vile she became toward me, the closer I moved toward Derek. He promised me he could keep me safe from my mother. That she'd never get what my father had left me. He was an attorney and all I had to do was trust him to handle the details."

Hattie took another drink of water and looked at Duncan. His face had gone pale, but he waited for her to finish.

"After the reading of the will he took me out of the country to rest and so we could honeymoon properly." She had difficulty choosing the words she'd say next. "You see, we'd never been together in that way before. He'd always been a gentleman and respected my decision to wait until marriage.

"On our wedding night he held a knife to my throat and told me he'd bleed me of every cent my father left me. He told me about his relationship with my mother in detail. And he told me how my mother had sold him her shares of the company and that some of the papers he'd had me sign had given him access to different accounts. He drained those accounts to pay my mother for her shares. He told me it was only a matter of time before he had my shares too, and if he had to kill me to get them then so be it."

"God, Hattie," Duncan said.

"Harriet is my real name," she told him. "Harriet Ashbury-Bancroft. My friends call me Hattie."

Her throat was dry as dust, but she pushed on. "It took me three days to be able to move after our wedding night because he beat me so badly. But I managed to escape and call Atticus from a phone at a restaurant. He happened to have agents not too far away and they were able to abstract me and get me back to the States."

"I'd already started doing a deep check on her mother and Derek as beneficiaries during the will reading," Atticus said. "And I figured I would probably end up a target too since I'm the other equal shareholder.

“I’d already had my attorneys at Dynamis gather all the information on the trusts and anything the board had implemented during Harry’s illness. Harry was no dummy in how he’d set up his succession plan. Even with us having equal shares, Hattie would remain the president of the company in Harry’s stead and not even the board could remove her. She had full control of the trusts, accounts, and property under the umbrella of the company, and as president, Hattie would be allowed to claim dividends at the end of every year. Names could be added and the dividends split up in different ways if she chose, but they could never be transferred outright. If anything ever happened to Hattie the funds would be frozen and then given to the beneficiaries listed in her will.

“Derek would have known about that clause, which was why he changed tactics and decided to terrorize her instead of kill her. Derek is a very powerful attorney. No judge or law enforcement agency in New York would cross him, and he has so many judges in his pocket the idea of forging documents and signatures isn’t out of the question. Which is why I had Hattie file her will and estate papers in Connecticut.”

“They were trying to kill you?” Duncan asked. “Your own mother?”

“It was only partly about the money for her,” Hattie said. “But it was the power and control she’d have over my life and death that really appealed to her. When my mother and Derek found out that my death wouldn’t give them what they wanted, they changed tactics. Derek found a judge who agreed that as my husband, he had the legal right to take over as conservator of my shares and position in the company if I was incapacitated or mentally unstable. That’s when the torture started.

“He started spreading rumors about my deep depression and all the medication I was taking. He drugged me once with sleeping pills and then staged it to look like I’d tried to commit suicide. He called 911 and left the pill bottle on the floor beside me. There wasn’t an overdose amount in my system—he didn’t want to take the chance of killing me—but it didn’t matter. The press got hold of the story and that’s pretty much

how the system works now. If the media says it, it must be true. Guilty until proven innocent.

“When the suicide attempt story didn’t accomplish his goal he started hiring men to watch me. I’d see them everywhere. Standing behind my car when I was leaving work. Or looking through the window of my house. I started jumping every time I turned a corner. I thought I was going crazy.”

“Anyone would,” Duncan said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“The only way I could keep her safe and get her away was to fake her death,” Atticus said. “So that’s what I did. Hattie Ashbury-Bancroft died in a car crash, and her will is tied up in a probate court in Connecticut for a year, despite Derek’s attempts to get it moved to New York. As an equal shareholder, I’ve been able to block the board from putting Derek at the helm until the year has passed and my investigation is complete. We have enough on him and Hattie’s mother to put them away for a long time.”

There was silence for several minutes as the information sunk in.

“That’s good,” Duncan said, looking at Atticus and getting to his feet. “I can see why you brought her here. And it’s good that she’s had a sanctuary all this time. There’s only one problem that I can see.”

“Yeah,” Atticus said, sympathy in his tone.

And then Duncan looked at her and she saw the hurt and anger in his eyes. “You’re married to someone else.”

“I know,” she told him. “And I don’t know how to fix this. Because if things had been different, I would have said yes to you that day at the diner when you told me I’d be your wife. I love you. That hasn’t changed.”

Duncan stared at her for a few seconds, and then he turned around and walked out of the room.

Chapter Thirteen



HATTIE HAD TO GIVE THE O'HARAS CREDIT. WHAT WAS talked about in the network, stayed in the network. She'd never felt more like an outsider than in the three weeks following Duncan's proposal.

She'd wanted to be angry or feel sorry for herself. If he'd only waited to propose until after she and Atticus had a chance to talk to him. But it was her fault and she could blame no one but herself for the way things played out. Even though she wouldn't have done things any differently.

She'd had no choice but to escape New York and Derek. But what she should have done was keep Duncan and his family at arm's length. But *should haves* did no one any good. Her desire for family had ultimately outweighed her common sense.

It had definitely been a birthday to remember. Duncan had saved an embarrassing situation for both of them by telling his family to keep celebrating, but that it was best he take Hattie home since she wasn't feeling well.

And that's exactly what he'd done. He'd driven her to the lake house on Tribulation Pass, walked her to the door to make sure she got inside okay, and then he'd turned around and left. That was when the dam had finally broken and the tears came.

Why did she let things go on like they had? She'd known it would come to this. She'd known there was nothing that could be done without alerting Derek that she was still alive. And she'd been too terrified to think of that as an option.

Hattie wasn't sure what to expect the following day, but Atticus had shown up at her door and told he was flying to New York and that everything was in place. By the end of the week Derek would be indicted on everything from fraud and money laundering to racketeering and attempted murder.

Atticus had the foresight to call her just before the news broke of Derek's arrest and the fact that she was still alive. And despite the fact Laurel Valley was in high ski season and the resorts were crammed with tourists, several industrious reporters showed up to get the scoop, hunting her down at the sporting goods store and trying to camp out on O'Hara land, which didn't turn out well for them.

Laurel Valley took care of their own, and they'd protected her, despite the hurt she'd caused. She'd taken a couple of weeks off from the store to lie low, but she still had to buy groceries and other necessities. The reporters were always waiting for her, and she'd gotten pretty good at keeping her foot on the pedal when they intentionally stepped in front of her car.

She'd have to go back to New York and testify. She'd have to face Derek and her mother. But that was for another day and time. It could be months before Derek was brought to trial. Atticus had been able to untangle her death in ways that she'd never understand, but for now, she and Atticus were majority shareholders of her father's company, and all of the assets she'd been left from his estate were back in the trust where they belonged until she turned thirty-five. Derek's third of the company would revert to her mother since he obtained the shares illegally, and her mother's third would be frozen until a judge could determine the best course of action moving forward. She couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

Hattie was free and safe, once and for all. No hiding. No secrets.

And no Duncan.

She'd not heard a word from him in the three weeks since her birthday. She'd spoken with his parents, aunt and uncle, and his siblings. But no one had heard from Duncan. She

could only assume he was locked away in his studio. She hadn't had the courage to drive over and knock on his door.

The two weeks she'd taken off from work to hide from reporters had almost driven her crazy. Fortunately, the O'Hara women had come to her rescue. Simone had brought over a box of her famous recipes and Hattie had learned how to make piecrust and meat loaf. She'd felt very accomplished considering she'd grown up with a personal chef and had never learned to cook anything other than takeout.

Raven had also stopped by, bringing by several new things that had just come into her boutique, and Anne and Dylan had come by soon after for an impromptu fashion show and a sampling of Simone's desserts.

But once her two weeks was up, and she still hadn't heard from Duncan, she decided the best course of action was to throw herself into her work at the store. She'd stay until late in the evening and go home exhausted, falling into bed only to wake up and do it again the next day. It almost kept her from thinking about Duncan.

Her office was on the second floor of the store, and she could look down through the wall of windows onto the lower level. It was closing time, but there were still a lot of customers browsing the shelves, making last-minute purchases for whatever adventure they had planned the following day.

She'd been staring out the window for a while, her brain full of reports and projections. She was already purchasing for fall, and it felt good to know that she would still be in Laurel Valley. She'd eventually have to leave her job at the sporting goods store, but there was no reason she couldn't move the headquarters of her father's company to Laurel Valley. This was her home now, whether Duncan ever spoke to her again or not.

Her assistant manager was set to close, so she put on her down coat, wrapped her scarf expertly around her neck, and pulled on her lambskin-lined gloves. She'd learned quickly that the cold in Laurel Valley was nothing like a New York

winter. She picked up her briefcase and headed down the stairs.

“Burning the midnight oil again,” Toby said, ringing up a customer.

“The next season will be here before we know it,” Hattie said.

“If it means we’ll get a break from this snow then I’m all for it,” he said.

Hattie laughed. “Bite your tongue. This snow is why we’ve had such a good quarter. Have a good night.”

She waved goodbye and stepped out into the cold, automatically searching the parking lot for any reporters or those who shouldn’t be hanging around. Downtown Laurel Valley was full of cars, and she looked across the street to see The Lampstand full of people. Live music played from the bar down the street and there were shrieks of laughter coming from the skating rink as people went round and round.

They were good sounds, and she smiled as she made her way to her SUV. About halfway home, it started to snow again. Big, fat flakes that fell softly on her windshield. The plows had already been out and were working overtime, keeping the streets clear, and once she drove onto O’Hara land she noticed that Mick had been out too, keeping each of the narrow roads that led to a different family member’s land clear.

When she got to the tree that sat between the fork in the road, she stopped the car. She should take the right fork in the road. That was the road that led to home and a warm bed. She chewed on her bottom lip and gripped the wheel. And then threw caution to the wind and veered left toward Duncan’s house.



Duncan had been sitting on her back porch for what seemed like hours. It didn’t matter. He’d wait there until she came

home.

He'd tried to stay away. Had needed to so he could get his thoughts in order. But he couldn't wait any longer. He *had* to see her. Had to talk to her.

He'd caught the news from time to time over the last weeks and had watched Hattie's story unfold. He knew his family was keeping a close watch over her, and Atticus had hired extra security for the area, keeping Hattie unaware of the added protection. In his opinion, prison was too good for Derek Bancroft. And from the looks of things, he was going to be in prison for a very, very long time.

His heart had broken for Hattie, hearing what she'd endured and the strength with which she'd carried such a burden. It reminded him even more of the warrior he'd painted. He could understand the choices she and Atticus both made. There was no one at fault except for the criminals behind it all. But that still didn't change the fact that she belonged to another man. And no matter how much he loved her and wanted to spend his life with her, that fact would always lie between them until it was settled. After the horrific experience of her first marriage, Hattie might not even want to get married again.

Those were realizations and emotions he had to deal with. And the only way he knew how to deal with the anger and grief inside of him was to paint. He painted for days without stopping for sleep or food. He painted as if his life depended on it. What he created on canvas was alive and raw, violent colors and motions that ebbed and flowed like the tide.

And when he'd gotten his anger out, he'd fallen into fitful sleeps for days. But he'd still dreamed—always of her. He thought he'd go mad with it, and he laughed to himself as he thought of how stereotypical he'd become as a creative personality. He didn't drink or chain-smoke as other artists did, but when he wasn't painting he'd thrown himself into backbreaking labor around his property—cutting firewood and keeping the roads plowed so Hattie could get to and from work easily.

But whether it was painting, sleeping, or working himself into exhaustion, the only thing that remained was his love for her. Nothing was going to change that. But that meant loving her enough to listen to her heart, even if that meant she didn't want marriage and a family. Only she'd have to accept that he couldn't do it any other way. In his family, marriage meant something. And it was meant to last through all the seasons of life—good and bad.

Once he'd come to that realization and peace settled over him, he went back up to his studio and started to paint again. This time from the sketches on his table. And he'd been right. It was the best work he'd ever done. And it all belonged to her.

He'd finished a watercolor of her—from the first time she'd sat for him on the porch swing—and he loved that it was such a contrast to the warrior portrait. The colors were soft and muted and the sunlight played behind her, accentuating the delicate curls that had slipped out of the knot at the base of her neck. Her head was tilted down, but her eyes were on him, sneaking a peek of him while she thought he was absorbed in his drawing. And in that gaze was her heart—full of love for him.

He wrapped up the painting, told Winston goodbye, and then drove over to her house. Where he'd been waiting ever since. He checked his watch again, starting to worry, and then he called the store and Toby told him she'd just left.

He let out a sigh of relief and settled back in the porch swing.

When Hattie found Duncan's house empty except for Winston, she wasn't deterred. His truck was gone and only the kitchen light was on. So he went out. No big deal. Maybe he was visiting his parents. Or maybe he was downtown. Though Duncan hated crowds and tourist season, so that option seemed unlikely.

Wherever he was, he'd had more than enough time to lick his wounds. She'd screwed up. She could own her mistakes. But for a man who claimed to love her, he owed her the courtesy of a civilized discussion, even if it meant he was going to end things between them.

"Time to play hardball," she said, turning the knob on the kitchen door. It was left unlocked as usual and she stepped into the warmth of his home.

She heard the clack of nails on the hardwood floor and Winston came around the corner to see who'd disturbed his sleep. He gave her a look of such accusation she had no choice but to apologize.

"I'm sorry, Winston," she said, kneeling down so he could get a quick rub. "I know I haven't been around the last couple of weeks, but there were reasons that your ears are too young to hear. But I'm here now, and I'm cordially inviting you to a sleepover at my house. I have extra snacks in the pantry."

Winston woofed softly and went to the hall closet where Duncan kept his jacket. Once she got him zipped up they left the house and she hefted him into the car.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, but maybe you need to lay off the snacks," she said.

She drove slowly, as she still wasn't the best driver when it was snowing, and she made the turn onto Tribulation Pass. She was about to pull in the driveway when it finally registered that Duncan's truck was in her driveway.

"Duncan," she said. And Winston gave a soft woof of confirmation.

She and Winston went inside, and she put her things on the table and took off Winston's jacket. He immediately made himself comfortable in the little bed she kept for him near the fireplace.

The house lights weren't on, but she could see the fire pit burning on the back porch through the glass.

"Wish me luck, Winston," she said, and opened the sliding glass door.

What she hadn't been expecting was to see Duncan stretched out on the porch swing, dead to the world.

She took a step toward him and his eyes popped open, and then he came to his feet and stood unsteadily in front of her.

"It's freezing out here," she said. "Why didn't you come inside?"

"It felt weird being here without you," he said. "But I wouldn't turn down the invite now. I guess I've been out here awhile."

He passed by to come inside and the scent of him almost brought her to her knees—fresh soap, paint, and the slightest hint of turpentine. She'd missed him desperately. She put on a pot of coffee while he started a fire.

"Why is Winston here?" he asked, eyeing the dog.

"I went to your house after work tonight," she finally said. "To talk to you. When you weren't there I invited Winston for a sleepover. He came of his own free will. And I figured you'd come here looking for him sooner or later. And then we could talk."

"You kidnapped my dog?"

Winston's head popped up and he stared at her accusingly.

"Of course not," she assured Winston. "Though I do owe you a snack."

"Blackmail," Duncan said. "That makes more sense."

She went into the kitchen and got a treat from the canister she kept on the counter and Winston padded softly behind her.

"You're a good boy," Hattie said, giving Winston the treat. He took it delicately and went back to his bed.

"Traitor," Duncan said.

Hattie wasn't sure what to do next. She couldn't stop staring at him. His cheekbones were more defined than the last time she'd seen him and he was in desperate need of a haircut.

"You've been working," she said.

“Almost nonstop.” And then he grinned. “I must look a sight.”

“I’m so sorry I hurt you,” she blurted out. “I knew when we met I should have walked away. I knew there couldn’t be anything between us, and I should’ve walked away. But I didn’t, and I take responsibility for that. If I’d followed Atticus’s instructions, I should’ve come here and lain low—go to work, pay bills, and live like a normal person. Maybe even make a friend or two. And then I met you... And I thought, if I could just have this for a little while, it would be enough.”

“But it wasn’t enough,” he said.

“No,” she agreed. “It just made me want more. It made me want forever. And then I met your family, and I wanted them to be my family too. And the longer things went on the easier it was to pretend that my past wouldn’t catch up with me. But it did. And I’m sorry.”

“I wish you would’ve trusted me to tell me the truth,” he said.

She nodded. “I was afraid.” She’d forgotten the coffee completely and she walked over to where he stood by the fireplace. “That’s my only excuse. Not of Derek. Not any longer. I knew Atticus would take care of him and my mother. But the only family I’ve ever had was my father—real family—” she clarified. “Then he was gone and I had no one. And then I met you, and I knew in my soul you were supposed to be my family.”

“I love you,” Duncan said. “That won’t ever change. But I’m not meant to love you from afar, and I can’t love you the way I should while you belong to another man.”

Hattie felt the anguish in his voice as if it were her own. He still loved her. And as long as he did there was hope.

“I’ve already filed for divorce along with everything else,” she said. “Atticus said we have a sympathetic judge and things will move quickly, especially considering Derek is looking at lengthy prison time. Besides, we did have a prenup. The board insisted on it.”

“So what are you saying?” Duncan asked.

“I’m saying I love you. And if I’d been free to marry you the first time you told me we’d spend the rest of our lives together, I would’ve said yes and never looked back. But I wasn’t free. I’m still not free, and I have no idea how long it’ll take before I’m truly free. I can commit myself to you, Duncan O’Hara. And when I’m able, I’ll marry you. That’s all I can give you for now.”

“Then that’s enough,” he said. “I’ll wait for you as long as it takes.”

Her head dropped on his shoulder, and she couldn’t hold back the tears. His arms came around her and he held her close.

“I love you,” he said, his voice raspy with emotion. “And I’ll stand by you through everything. Everything you’re going through isn’t meant for you to go through alone. I’m here. And you don’t have to pretend like any of this is easy. It’s not. It’s complicated and real and emotional and painful. But I’ll be with you every step of the way. O’Haras mate for life. But until then, I’ll just love you the best I can.”

She kissed him gently. “I love you too.”

“I brought you a gift,” he said, looking around. And then he remembered he left it on the back porch and went out to get it.

He came in with a large rectangle wrapped in brown butcher paper. He unwrapped it before she could take it from him to do it herself.

And then she gasped as she saw the drawing from the table alive in front of her eyes. Every detail was so exact. She looked so real she was afraid to touch it in case she felt the touch on her own skin.

“You made me beautiful,” she said in awe.

“You are beautiful. This is how I see you. How I’ll always see you. Look at me and know the truth.”

“I believe you,” she said. It was written all over his face. She’d never felt so alive, and so lucky to be loved.

“And look at it this way,” he said. “You’ll have plenty of time to plan a wedding. O’Hara weddings are no small affair.”

She laughed. “I can only imagine.”

“I can’t believe you stole my dog,” he said, eyeing Winston.

“He said he wanted to come with me. Who am I to deny him?” she asked.

“Winston is a smart dog,” Duncan said. “I’d go with you to the ends of the earth. Without a snack.”

Hattie laughed and they sat together on the couch, talking and watching the fire dance. It felt good to be home.

Excerpt

Excerpt from *Midnight Clear*, the next book in the Laurel Valley Series. Coming Soon!

Hank O'Hara stared out of the window in his father's office, fascinated by the bony branches of the sycamore trees that surrounded his parent's ranch. Twin Peaks jutted from behind the trees—snow covered and majestic—and pregnant gray clouds frothed low and ominous, seeping into the valleys. More snow would come before morning.

It had been a wicked winter, the temperatures below freezing and the wind whipping from down the mountain and into Laurel Valley. Even the die hard skiers were giving the mountains a hard pass this winter. The weather man kept using the word *treacherous*.

He took a drink of the hot tea he'd made as he passed through the kitchen, and winced when he found it cold. He had no idea how long he'd been standing at the window, thinking of the projects he had piling up or how he'd rather be outdoors than cooped up inside—even with a snowstorm coming.

"You can't hide in here forever, you know," his father said.

Hank turned from the window to see his father grinning at him from behind his massive walnut desk. His feet were propped on the edge as he leaned back in his chair, very much lord of the castle. He was a handsome man—an older version of the five sons he'd sired—with silver hair that had once been black as coal and the blue eyes of the Irish gypsies he was descended from. His body was disciplined and in excellent

shape for a man in his early sixties. Ranch life wasn't for the weak.

Mick O'Hara was a man's man and had managed to raise five rambunctious—and sometimes mischievous—sons to adulthood, with only a handful of trips to the ER over the years. A success in Hank's opinion.

"You're doing a pretty good job of it," Hank said, tipping his cup to his father. "In fact, if I recall, you usually disappear around this time every year."

"Well, can you blame me?" Mick asked. "I built this house with my own hands. And then I added on more rooms as each of you boys came into the world. And *then* I added more rooms as your brothers started marrying and adding to the family. I've grown out of my own house. Where else am I supposed to go? Even the animals are tired of me sneaking out to the barn."

Hank chuckled.

"I've got all I need right here." Mick opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle of expensive Irish whiskey and a box of cigars. "What do you say, my boy? Can I pour you two fingers?"

"I wouldn't say no," Hank said, accepting the short crystal glass. "But if mom smells that cigar smoke I'm not taking the wrap for you."

"Traitor," his father said. But Mick just grinned as he took out a portable fan from his desk and flipped it on before lighting his cigar.

Hank took a seat in the burgundy leather chair across from the desk and stretched out his long legs.

"You've got work on the mind," Mick said.

"How do you know?" Hank asked.

"Because if you had a woman on the mind your expression would've been different." Mick waggled his eyebrows as he took another puff from the cigar. "I've learned a thing or two in my sixty years."

Hank's mouth quirked in a half-smile, identical to his father's. "I told mom I'd take the week off and spend it with the family since everyone is here."

"A noble thing, family," Mick said. "Nothing fills your heart with pride and makes you want to take up the bottle at the same time. Next time just tell your mother no."

Hank scoffed. "You try telling mom no."

"Did that once," Mick said, remembering fondly. "Still have the scar to prove it. Quite a woman your mother."

"There you go," Hank said, nodding. "It's not that I don't want to be here. It's nice that everyone is under one roof. It's been too long. And it's been a while since I took a vacation."

"That's an understatement," Mick said. "I didn't realize you even knew the word."

"I like staying busy," Hank defended. "And busy is better than the alternative. I've got the new city hall project ready to go, and residential building has increased, even in the off-season. It's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I really like the money. But on the other..."

"You don't want a population boom in Laurel Valley," his dad finished.

"Yeah," Hank said.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," Mick said. "People like to build their ski chalets and bunny bungalows. Fortunately, it's short lived. Take their money, son. You know they'll only use their fancy houses a few weeks out of the year. That thin blood does no good up here."

"Good advice," Hank said.

"And maybe while you're home for the holidays you could take a look at the boiler. It's making a weird sound again."

"At least I'm useful for something," Hank said, putting his empty glass down on the desk.

"That's the spirit," Mick said, his laugh big and booming. "You know what you need?"

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“A wife,” Mick said. “Maybe a baby or two. What you’re feeling is restless. Work isn’t enough to fulfill you anymore. You’re almost thirty-five years old.”

“And with that,” Hank said, coming to his feet. “I’ll go look at the boiler. And I won’t mention to mom about the cigar.”

Mick narrowed his eyes and clamped the cigar between his teeth. “That’s just downright nasty. You’d blackmail your own father.”

“I think it’s extortion,” Hank said, laughing at the indignant look on his father’s face as he left the office. He wouldn’t rat the old man out. But a little fear served him right for trying to meddle in his love life.

About the Author



Liliana Hart is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publisher's Weekly* bestselling author of more than eighty titles. After starting her first novel her freshman year of college, she immediately became addicted to writing and knew she'd found what she was meant to do with her life. She has no idea why she majored in music.

Since publishing in June 2011, Liliana has sold more than ten-million books. All three of her series have made multiple appearances on the *New York Times* list.

Liliana can almost always be found at her computer writing, hauling five kids to various activities, or spending time with her husband. She calls Texas home.

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