



BURNING

STEEL

MOON LAKE PROTECTORS

KAT BAMMER

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Burning Steel- Moon Lake Protectors



My husband,

*Every goal, every dream, every crazy idea I come up with, you
support me, believe in me, and cheer me on.*

I couldn't have found a better man.

Love you.



GET YOUR FREE PREQUEL

Before you dive in, I want to give you the chance to read the prequel first. Look, this is a second-chance romance. So shit happened in the past that got Peter and Lisa together and tore them apart.

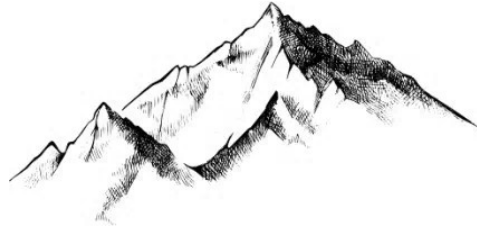
You can totally go on and read this book without having read the prequel, but if you're interested, you can get the story of Lisa's and Peter's first meeting. (Well, it wasn't their first meeting, but...it was his sister's funeral...and they had sex...and it went downhill from there—fast... and had quite an impact on both their lives.)

So, if you want to get that short story first and read how it all went down, you can get it [**here**](#).

Or visit [**https://links.katbammer.com/mlprequel-ml1**](https://links.katbammer.com/mlprequel-ml1)



PROLOGUE



The man looked through the passenger window at the empty highway.

The near darkness made it perfect.

“This place is just right.” He looked at himself in the rearview mirror.

“Is it? I don’t know.”

“Yes, look. Down there under the bushes. Just not too far. The lake is down there.” He yawned.

His adrenaline high had dropped on the drive here.

He hated this part.

He sighed when he opened the trunk and touched her cheek—cold, like the person she’d been. He slipped his hands under her arms and dragged her out of the car. He didn’t want to do it but it had to be done.

He shook his head.

He’d watched her in the club.

She’d been alone.

But not for long.

Her dancing and laughing and flirting—only sluts did that. He’d thought she was a good woman, one he could bring home to his momma.

But she'd deceived him. Hadn't honored the special relationship they'd had. Their meet had been perfect—all the joking they'd done on their first drive.

He'd even felt an electrical jolt where she touched him.

A sign.

She loved the flowers.

But she turned out to be just another one of those shallow girls, who pretended to be nice but wasn't. She wasn't a woman his momma would've approved of.

Get rid of the bad girls. That's what Momma always said. Don't you ever dare bring home one of those sluts. She would beat it into him. And it stuck.

He looked down at the body and gave a decisive nod. Now that he'd gotten rid of another one, his momma would be proud of him, for sure.

He heard a noise.

His heart jumped, and he cowered down. Was there a car approaching?

In his crouched position behind his car, he waited and listened and watched out for the telltale headlights.

Nothing.

Just the wind and the lapping of the waves on the shore.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Tiredness impeded his progress. He lugged the body to the end of the parking area.

“Ugh.” He couldn't remember the last one being this heavy.

But it's been a long time.

With one last shove, he rolled the body into the bushes.

“Careful, don't get in contact with the branches.”

“Maybe I should've thrown her into the lake. What happens with a dead body in the water? Do they sink? Or do they float around?”

He shivered.

A body floating around in the water disgusted him. “Time to go home.”

He would eat a little snack for dinner.

Start fresh tomorrow.

Since her immediate future resembled the dark, looming waters below.

Only one question remained...

was it better to jump or white-knuckle her way through it?

Lisa Reynolds' fingers tightened around the railing while she looked down—way down into the black water and took a whiff of the salty air. Even though her present life sucked, she knew three things to be reasonably accurate.

#1 Losing her virginity at a funeral had probably doomed her love life forever.

#2 Bad habits and poor decisions kept her unerringly stuck in the same old patterns and outcomes as sure as adhesive tape always ended up sticking to the soles of her socks.

And finally, #3... as much as she longed for it... the forever-kind-of-love of her dreams was likely not going to happen for her.

She couldn't change #1, except curse Peter Fisher—but what about #2 and #3... she could accept the one and change the other or vice versa... or both... but only after a good cry and at least a pint of ice cream.

“Don't jump. We can always talk about it.”

Lisa blinked away the heat before she turned to her best friend, Claire Gunterson, and rolled her eyes. “Might be more

comfortable in the water than in there. Wanna jump together?” The wind blew Lisa’s hair across her face, and she pushed it behind her ear.

Claire settled next to her at the railing and stared down the hull of the cruise ship they were on and into the dark water of the Caribbean Sea. “Tempting, but no way in hell.”

Lisa looked down again. Honestly, she wouldn’t jump even if her life depended on it. She loved the water, just not so much in the dark, and she wasn’t a massive fan of heights; the combination of the two looked like an endless black hole.

Kind of like her life right now.

“But how about we go in there”—Claire pointed at the bar where the farewell party took place—“and tell your ex-dick what’s what?”

Lisa shrugged; maybe she should jump, just to avoid the party.

Claire tapped her foot. “Why’re we even here if you dread it so much?”

“Courtesy, I guess?”

“Ha, courtesy, my ass. The guy dumped you for a job. You don’t have to play nice.”

“I’m not playing nice.”

“Oh, I see, and why are you hiding out here? It’s freezing.”

“I needed fresh air for a moment. Let’s head back inside.”

Lisa loosened her clasp on the railing, and her eyes met Claire’s.

“Are you shaking already? It’s been like two seconds. God, you’re such a wuss.”

“Am not.” Claire crossed her arms, but her face turned somber. “You sure you’re okay? Maybe we should burn his favorite T-shirt or something?”

“And where would we do this on board?”

“We’ve got a gas stove in the galley.”

Lisa chuckled. “I can see the headline already. Infamous sous-chef Claire Gunterson started the fire that led to the tragic shipwreck on the coast of Tahiti.”

Claire crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Then tell me how I can make it better.”

Lisa embraced a reluctant Claire. “I’m fine. It’s not like this relationship was going anywhere. This is a big opportunity for Kirk, and he’d be dumb not to take it. His own gig was always his dream.”

Hers too, and in her mind, she had envisioned them opening a diving center together—well, he hadn’t.

He hadn’t even asked her to go with him—he’d just ended their relationship.

“But, you could make it work.” Claire’s voice took on an exasperated tone. “We’re in Tahiti once a week, anyway. So, you could see each other.”

Lisa shrugged and pushed down the sick feeling in her stomach. “I think it’s for the best. He wants to be free. And I can respect that.”

Claire raised her brows. “You’ve been together for a year, and he realizes that just now? What a worthless piece of shit.”

Lisa choked.

Yep. That he was.

Another man in her life who stepped out of the future-husband-line and into the dick-line, right behind the first in line—Peter Fisher—who dumped her at the sweet age of eighteen and still had the audacity to outshine every man who’d followed.

But this whole mess said something about her too.

Maybe she was self-delusional about the men in her life. Or perhaps she was just inept in the whole concept of love and relationships—whatever. She got used to the gut punch when realization hit that her dreams and reality weren’t even in the same ballpark. First, it left her stunned, then hurt, then pissed off.

Argh.

Lisa grimaced and rubbed at her chest. She didn't need this shit. She wasn't so weak she needed a man to love her.

Hell no.

She was good on her own.

Better off.

Stupid feelings only got in the way of what mattered in life.

They entered the wind-sheltered lounge area where the farewell party for Kirk took place. He would leave the ship tomorrow. Thank God.

Lisa's cell phone went off in the pocket of her shorts, and she took it out and glimpsed at the display, then sighed.

Her mother. How did her mother know the exact moment Lisa was already down on her knees?

She hadn't talked to her mother in months, and she would gladly put it off another few if she could. She wasn't in the right state of mind to take on her mother's criticism.

Not today.

Not that she ever was.

Lisa silenced the call and slipped the phone back into her pocket, and met Claire's raised eyebrows after she made a beeline to the bar—she needed a drink and fast. "My mother."

Claire grimaced and nodded. They had talked enough about Lisa's dysfunctional relationship with her mother, so Claire understood. "Let's get something to drink and take it down to our cabin," Claire said as if she could read Lisa's mind.

Lisa yawned and stretched while they waited for the barkeeper. Yep, their cabin would be heaven. It had been mere chance that she and Claire had started their jobs on the ship on the same day at the same time. Both had never worked on a cruise ship before, so after they got assigned a shared cabin, they clung together. Luckily they hit it off at once and had

been best friends ever since, even though, with two women in such tight quarters—what were the chances? But somehow, they made it work.

“Hey, Lisa.”

Lisa stopped. *Shit nearly made it.* She turned around and fake-smiled at Marcy, a fellow diving instructor on the cruise ship. (And a bitch of epic proportions.)

“So, rumor on the street is you and Kirk have broken up?”

And...right for the kill. That’s what Lisa hated about this ship. Everybody was always in your business. How was it possible? She had tried to escape this very thing when she left her small hometown, Moon Lake, just to land thousands and thousands of miles away, but smack dab in the middle of the same thing on a ship? Maybe she was haunted? Or just stupid. “Yep, no big deal.”

“So, you are not heartbroken about it?”

Lisa could see right through Marcy’s pitiful smile and stiffened her spine, and shook her head. “No. It just didn’t work.”

What a pile of bull crap.

Even to her own ears, her words rang somehow lame, like a quote out of a fortune cookie.

She filed away the sudden sting in her chest, which didn’t exactly match her words either, and plastered a smile on her face. This would pass. She would make it pass. So she needed a deflection tactic.

“I’m okay. Great, actually.” Lisa’s mind fumbled a little. “The test run for the new program went off without a hitch. So, I’ll have enough work on my hands these coming months.” When she’d pitched the program to cruise administration—a program that offered therapeutic scuba diving to people with disabilities, Lisa had been shaking with nerves. But they’d not only picked up her idea, they’d also put her in charge. Lisa wasn’t naïve enough to think they did it out of the goodness of their hearts and not for the publicity, but at least she could help people.

Claire came back with two bottles of beer and pointed to the door.

“Ah, the first run, how did the client do? I was with the beginners this week, so we didn’t leave the pool much,” Marcy said.

“Yeah, how was the first week?” Claire handed Lisa a bottle of beer and settled into their conversation.

Wasn’t their plan to escape ASAP? Lisa sighed. Brian Glenn had been her first candidate for the program. Brian had lost both legs and the use of his right hand, but it had turned out he could fin perfectly with his prosthetics. Then again, holding his position underwater and not flipping over had been a challenge for them.

“I talked to his wife, Steph, yesterday. According to her, she hasn’t seen him smile and interact with people as much since it all happened. So, it’s a success, in my book.” Lisa smiled when she remembered how good it felt to receive the feedback. “The diving was a little rough at first, but we got into a groove real quick.” Brian Glenn and his wife, Steph, were the kind of couple Lisa always envied. Her stomach hardened again when her gaze wandered over to Kirk, the man of the night.

“Do you know what happened to him, you know, with his legs?” Claire asked.

Lisa shook her head to clear the thoughts off her mind. “Roadside bomb. They had it rough. He battles with PTSD on top of his injuries, which, I guess, is tough. But his wife sticks with him.”

Claire and Marcy nodded, and they fell silent. Soon they said goodbye, and Lisa and Claire set out for their cabin. On their way, Lisa could already see the lights at the port of Tahiti, and her phone rang again. She pulled it out, glanced at the display, grimaced, and slipped it back inside. Twice in a row—strange. She would call her mother once they were back in their cabin.

“Lisa!”

Lisa looked back and saw her boss Chad rushing after them and groaned. “Yes?”

Chad stopped before her and shuffled his feet. “Cruise administration informed me they will not fill Kirk’s position. So, we have to drop the new program. Not enough resources. I’m sorry”—he hesitated—“for everything.” Then he gave a decisive nod and turned on his heels back to the party as if he hadn’t just single-handedly destroyed Lisa’s dream.

Lisa stared at his retreating back and shivered with the sudden coldness that hit her core. The urge to cry was so overwhelming she squeezed her eyes shut. She’d lost her program and her boyfriend within forty-eight hours. All the feelings she’d tried so hard to suppress threatened to overwhelm her. But she wouldn’t break down. Not here. Not now.

“I’m sorry, Lizzy.” Claire wrapped her hand around Lisa’s arm and squeezed gently.

Lisa forced down the threatening tears and gave her best friend a wobbly smile. She shrugged but remained silent all the way to their cabin. Thoughts jumbled in her mind; somehow, it all seemed surreal. Lisa couldn’t remember the rest of their walk back to the cabin. But she must’ve somehow gone through the mechanics because she was sitting on her bunk, her phone in hand. Ready to call back her mother.

When the shower started, she pushed the button. All she wanted was to crawl into her bed, put her covers over her head, and have this day just end. “Hey, Mom—”

“Finally...nice of you to find the time to call back.”

Lisa massaged her temples and ignored the sarcasm in her mother’s voice. Conflicting feelings of defiance and inferiority bubbled up within her. Astounding how her mother could put her on edge in mere seconds with just a few well-placed words and her very own brand of sarcasm. That’s why Lisa limited contact with her mother. She counted to ten under her breath and slowly exhaled.

There was rumbling on the other side of the phone, and after a mumbled conversation, Lisa's sister Karen came on.

“Hey, girl, it's about Dad. He's been in an accident. We're in the hospital. It doesn't look good.” Karen sniffled. “The doctors don't think he'll make it. So, come home as fast as possible.”

Her mother said something in the background, but Lisa couldn't understand anything over the rush of blood in her ears and the sudden fear that twisted her gut.

Lisa ended the call and grabbed her bag from above her small closet. Tears pooled in her eyes and were streaming down her face when Claire exited the small bathroom.

Their cabin was small, so the door caught Lisa in the back, but she didn't even feel it through her numbness.

“What the hell happened? Did you call your mother? What did she say to you?” Claire took Lisa gently by the shoulders and made her sit down on the bed. She fetched a box of tissues and sat beside her.

“It's my dad...” The wracking sobs made talking difficult. “...He's in the hospital.” Lisa sniffed.

Claire handed her a tissue.

“I need to get on the next flight home. The doctors... Karen...she doesn't think he'll make it.”

The words, spoken out loud, catapulted Lisa out of her shock and plunged her into activity. She jumped up, threw her bag next to Claire on the bed, grabbed random clothes, underwear, and toiletries out of her closet, and stuffed them into the bag. She stopped for a moment and handed Claire her passport. Claire had already fired up her laptop and secured Lisa an unexpectantly cheap seat out to LA. Lisa would have to change planes in LA anyway and, from there, arrange the rest of her journey home to the small town of Moon Lake.

Within the hour, Lisa was on her way home for the first time in years.



Peter Fisher stopped his truck at the Moon Lake Inn. Cars filled the parking area. Actually, it was packed, and it sounded like a party too. His mind raced. Shouldn't his mom be the only one here? She had said new guests would arrive tomorrow, but only a few guests were currently staying at the Inn.

He shut the door to his truck, crossed the parking lot, and entered the Inn through the back door, which led into the kitchen.

What the hell was going on? He was here to pick up his mother, as promised. Not because he wanted to, but because she made him promise to drive her to the airport, to pick up Lisa Reynolds, of all people, and drive her to the hospital.

"Hey, Peter, glad you're here. Look at all these people." Peter's mother, Mary, swiped at her forehead.

Peter furrowed his brows. "Come on, Mom. Did you forget? We're supposed to go to the airport."

His mother's face fell. "I know, it's taken Lisa, like three days, to get home. She'll be exhausted, for sure. I want her to feel welcome back home, and if nobody picks her up at the airport—but what about all these people?"

Peter frowned. "Yeah, what is it with all these people?" He didn't like surprises, didn't like to be blindsided. Probably never had, but his years as a Navy SEAL operator had cemented that home more than anything.

Surprises could endanger your teammates.

Surprises could endanger the mission.

Surprises could get you killed.

He'd learned about that the hardest way possible. Careful contingency planning, anticipating then adapting, had been his MO.

Only he wasn't ready or willing to adapt.

Not today.

"They haven't forgotten what day it is today," Mary replied with sad eyes, and Peter flinched back an inch.

He hadn't forgotten either, but life went on; at least, that's how he'd spent this day for the last thirteen years, and he'd assumed today wouldn't be different...

Apparently, not in Moon Lake.

Peter stepped to the side to make room for Mrs. Brooks, who arrived with a dish full of some concoction, then he bowed his head and looked back at his mom.

He knew exactly what day it was, knew it even before he'd woken up today. He allowed himself the feelings of loss and guilt when they haunted him in his sleep.

But not after he woke up.

Then life went on as usual. Maybe the feelings simmered a little higher in his subconscious on this day, but he didn't act on it, he didn't think about it, and he'd erringly thought no one else did either.

"You know"—his mother's eyes softened, and she grasped Peter's arm—"I didn't want to do anything today because of Carl being in the hospital and everything, but it seems our neighbors thought otherwise. They came here without notice, and they brought food and everything. I can't leave now. But you are good to go. Grab something to eat first, and then go get Lisa from the airport and bring her to the hospital."

Peter didn't think this was a good idea for one second, but instead of arguing with his mom, he sighed and kissed her on

the forehead.

His mother then turned and busied herself in the kitchen.

Peter stepped through the adjoining door into the breakfast room of the Inn, the center of this impromptu memorial service. The number of people, who stood, talking in small groups around the room, surprised him.

“Peter”—Mrs. Brooks stepped out of one group and came toward him—“your mother is so happy to have you back home. Have you settled in already?”

He nodded his head. “I’m happy to be back, Mrs. Brooks. Thanks for asking. How’s Paul doing?”

Her son Paul was the same age as Peter. They’d even played hockey together during high school. While Peter had gotten a hockey scholarship—which he didn’t take after his sister’s death—Paul had been drafted into the NHL right out of high school.

“Oh, you know, he’s getting old, at least in terms of the NHL. I would like to see him retire soon. His father and I we’re not getting any younger, and we would love to have grandkids before we die. What about you? You’re married, aren’t you? Are there some grandkids on the horizon for Mary?”

Peter suppressed a groan, but his stomach hardened. He didn’t want to go into the details of his failed marriage with Mrs. Brooks. His mind raced for a change of topic that wasn’t too obvious, but he drew a blank. He decided to just go with the truth: How on earth could it be the town didn’t know already? It had been months since Theresa had moved out.

“Mom, stop the interrogation.” Julie Brooks stepped next to her mother and winked at him. “In fact, Peter and his wife have separated and are about to get a divorce, and I’m thinking about consoling him.”

Peter smirked at Julie’s grin, and the sharp inhale from Mrs. Brooks.

“Julie.” The rest of whatever Mrs. Brooks was about to say got interrupted by his mom tapping a spoon against a glass.

“Hello, everyone. I would like to thank you for coming and mourning with us. It was a long time ago, but I appreciate you for all the support and love I have received from all of you throughout the years. Sophie would have been thirty-two this year.” Peter’s mother struggled with the overwhelm of emotions.

He stepped toward her, but her friends were faster. They took her into their middle, leaving no way to reach her. Today was hard for her. His mom was coping with the death of his sister most of the time. But not today. The anniversary of her murder always amplified her feelings.

Peter moved to the side of the room, selected something that looked like a croissant from the buffet, and stepped out on the patio. Too many people crammed in one place always made him antsy, and too many questions did too.

His wife’s betrayal, and the downhill slide their marriage took afterward, were still failures he avoided talking about.

Peter hated to fail.

There just wasn’t enough left for them to go on. No love, not even friendship, at this point, and no shared priorities or dreams.

Maybe they shouldn’t have gotten married.

In hindsight, only his frequent absence and her need for status from his former job made them last for as long as they did. Why she even agreed to come to Moon Lake when she disliked small-town life so much was beyond him. She’d been ready to move on as soon as he’d quit. Maybe he’d been delusional. At the very least, he’d been ignorant and convinced everything would work out without talking things out. Now he was alone again.

Alone and avoiding questions.

Peter took his phone out of his pocket. He still had time before he had to leave. He went inside again and took two stairs at a time to the Inn’s guest rooms. He passed the room of the female guest who went missing, and his chest tightened. But that room wasn’t his target. He took another flight of stairs

until he arrived at the only room on the top floor. Next to it was the entrance to the attic; at least, that's what Lisa had told him when he came up here with her all those years ago. He hesitated for a moment. He should've taken the key from the key hooks downstairs. But Peter tried the handle anyway, and the door swung wide open.

His stomach plummeted.

The room had been transformed into just another guest room. Wiped clean of Lisa's personality.

But it was ingrained in his mind.

The room and what happened that day had burned itself into his memory. The service after Sophie's funeral had nearly killed him. All the people, the noises, and the pain.

Lisa had somehow recognized his state and offered him an escape.

No...more than an escape.

It had been a safe haven, a cocoon where the outside world couldn't come in, and the inside was a calm, beautiful place where he could be raw and open.

They hadn't talked...she'd just sat right there on her desk. And he was staring out the window. Lisa had put on some music—metal, that corresponded perfectly with his mood: a mixture of self-loathing, guilt, and pain.

It had swallowed him like an endless dark hole. But somehow, Lisa had shed a beam of light inside this all-consuming darkness.

At least for a little while.

At least for a few hours.

They'd known each other, gone to high school together, and even had run with the same crowd even though she was a little younger than him. She'd been in the bleachers cheering his team on.

Cheering him on.

She hadn't known it, but seeing her up there had given him a serious boost on the ice.

Every time.

He'd been attracted to her.

Attracted, but he'd had a reputation to maintain.

Captain of the Hockey team.

So he never let on about it. Until that day. But the level of connectedness, of understanding, and closeness when they came together had scared the shit out of him.

So his reaction afterward had been bad. He'd acted as if nothing had happened between them when in reality, they had shared such a profound connection he hadn't been able to find anything close with another person since.

He remembered their last encounter. It had been on the day he left for boot camp.

Their eyes had connected through the window of the small grocery store, only for a second, before she had looked away, which had been her usual behavior after his aloofness.

The hurt and the sorrow had darkened the caramel in her eyes into the color of rich, dark chocolate.

Someone must've told her he was leaving because she had known.

He could remember the punch in his gut—the feeling that he might've messed up the single best thing that had happened to him in months.

Well, too late.

He was positive Lisa still hated his guts or at least had a strong dislike of how he'd treated her thirteen years ago.

At least, that's how he would feel were the tables reversed.

She wouldn't be happy with him as a welcome-home committee. And he would rather not face her right now. Or anytime. When the call from his mother came, and she'd forced her plans on him, Peter had tried to get out of it, even

questioning why the Reynolds couldn't pick her up themselves.

But his mother had had an answer for everything until he'd relented to drive her there.

And now, he was going there alone. Without his mother as a buffer.

His mother's one sentence echoed in his mind.

"We are being neighborly, Peter. Remember your manners. You are back home now, and that's how we do things in Moon Lake. We care about each other here."

Peter exhaled deeply, turned around, and exited the room.

It all had been years ago.

A lifetime.

He didn't know why Lisa had left Moon Lake back when she did, but he couldn't assume she would even remember him. Plus, she had other problems with her father in the hospital. He'd been on site after the accident. As a deputy sheriff, he'd inevitably see stuff like that. And after seeing the condition of Carl's car, his injuries had to be serious.

Peter shut the door with a definitive click.

The past was in the past.

No sense in fretting about what he couldn't change.

He went downstairs, said goodbye to his mother, and went on his way to Whitebrook airport.

Easy day.



Lisa waited for her bag, along with the other passengers on her flight. Her plane had arrived at Whitebrook airport only minutes ago, and the whole thing was a breeze.

No other flights were due to arrive, so security was down to two officers and one dog.

Even the dog looked bored.

Lisa checked the boards. The next arriving flight would be in three hours and would leave again forty minutes later. It would get busier in winter when the ski resorts would attract more tourists and flights would arrive from all over the country. But at this time of year—Lisa shook her head.

Unbelievable.

She really was back in the middle of nowhere.

Thirteen years ago, when she'd started her journey right here at Whitebrook airport, the lack of traffic and people had been normal for her. Of course, her mind had been occupied with other things back then. It'd been her first time flying on her way to her very first job at a diving base in Turkey, where she knew neither the culture nor the language or any one of her future coworkers—absolutely no one.

The sick feeling in her stomach wasn't unlike what she was feeling now. But somehow, the need to escape the tense situation at home had balanced out the fear of the unknown.

Now nothing balanced out the dread she was feeling.

The luggage belt stuttered and moved with a screech, and an eerily similar screech of a toddler matched the sound immediately afterward.

Lisa stepped closer to the belt right between a distinguished old man and the young mother, who tried to calm the crying baby. The man on the other side of the mother frowned and murmured something which intensified her rocking and hushing efforts.

Lisa glanced at the mother with a small smile and was met with a distressed half-smile and weariness in her eyes.

What an ass.

Lisa shot an evil look at the annoyed man. It was a baby, for God's sake. Babies cry, everybody knew that, and nobody should feel bad about it or should dare to say anything about it.

Lisa's attention shifted when the first pieces of clothing between bags and suitcases came into sight on the conveyor belt. Wasn't broken luggage the worst? The same damn thing had happened to her once in Hurghada, Egypt. The bag with her diving equipment had cracked open, and she had lost a fin in the process.

Lisa looked around to see who the poor guy or girl was. The plane had been minuscule, so there weren't a lot of fellow passengers around.

Not one of those people waiting in front of the luggage belt looked overly interested in the clothing or even remotely distraught. They all stood there and watched out for their bags, eager to leave this place as soon as possible. Something blue caught her gaze, and Lisa's stomach tightened. The same dismay she had just searched for in someone else's face now overshadowed her numbness, which had started a few hours before.

It was her favorite bra. Her I'm-sexy-underneath bra she'd bought in a little boutique in Paris floated along the belt for everyone to see.

Adrenaline rushed through her body, and a red haze clouded her vision as her hands clenched and unclenched.

These were her things, her broken bag.

Lisa picked up all the clothes that came floating along as fast as she could. She jostled the mean man from earlier and worked her way to the start of the conveyor belt, constantly apologizing. There she stood, with her arm full of clothes and nowhere to put them.

Tears gathered behind her eyelids. She'd had enough! She'd been on the road for days. One stressful turnover after the other. Fear as her constant companion every time she turned her phone back on.

She needed a break, just one little break.

Damn.

She took a deep breath, then another, straightened her spine, and wiped her face on the clothes in her arm.

What the hell should she do with all her stuff?

She looked around. All the people had left, got their luggage, and probably got out as fast as they could. Nobody wanted to be witness to someone having a breakdown, right?

One of her jeans appeared on the belt, and Lisa looked down at the gathered clothes in her arms.

No chance she could pick up one more item.

Fuck this.

She threw her clothes on the floor and leaned into the opening. She climbed up the belt when she couldn't reach the straps that concealed the opening. With her sneakers precariously positioned on both sides of the belt, she crouched down and pushed aside the straps.

And gasped when she saw two men dressed in neon-colored uniforms. They were laughing like loons when one of them held up one of her T-shirts. Her broken bag lay next to them on the ground, and it looked like someone had driven a truck over it.

Unbelievable!

“Hey, you two clowns, stop this right now and give me my bag. And don’t you dare touch another thing. I’ll come back there and hurt you if you do.”

The men looked up, surprised and a little unsure of the truth of her claims. But her rage and her barely controlled emotions must have shown because they stopped picking her clothes and talked to each other in hushed tones.

“Ma’am, get down.” Someone behind Lisa tapped her on the back, barely missing her behind.

“Just leave me alone. When I’m done here, I will get down.” Lisa tried to peek behind her, which jeopardized her balance, but all she saw were men’s trousers with sharp creases from the knees down. Great, now she’d caught the attention of airport security... but she was too angry to even care.

She looked back through the opening at the exact moment that the two men stuffed the rest of her clothes back into her torn bag and the bag onto the belt. She tried to catch the bag as it moved through her legs, and she promptly lost her balance.

She slipped with her left foot onto the moving belt, tried to stabilize herself against the wall, but instead, her hands slipped right through the straps, and she fell toward face-planting onto the belt.

Immediately two powerful hands snatched her in midair and hauled her—like a doll—backward off the belt.

She yelped, then—when her back touched a man’s hard body—she froze, his powerful hands around her waist and her feet barely touching the ground.

Her mouth gaped open.

Holy shit, this guy was strong.

And built.

And hot.

And smelled—vaguely familiar. Like a cold, crisp winter morning in the woods.

Still facing the luggage belt, she could feel his breath on her right ear, and the hair on her arms stood up.

With a soft thud, her feet fully connected to the floor, almost in slow motion, and still, she could feel the heat from his hands emanating through her clothes.

She took a shallow breath and another. Fought to get back her equilibrium and control her breath.

Maybe she'd had a concussion?

Even though she was relatively sure she didn't hit her head on the belt.

She bent her neck, her eyes half-closed, but then her gaze fell on the luggage belt, and she scrambled to get out of his embrace and to her bag, which passed them again.

It was a struggle because it took considerable strength to escape his grip.

Adrenalin rushed through her body, and her nostrils flared while she tackled her bag, grabbed it, then dropped it on the floor next to her clothes before she clenched her jaw, plastered a tight smile on her face, and turned to the man to thank him or shout at him—she wasn't sure which.

Her brain recognized the face a millisecond before her mouth moved, and what came out of her mouth wasn't what she had planned. "How dare you?"

An older version of the guy who'd starred in so many of her sleepless nights stood in front of her.

In uniform, no less, with crossed, bulging arms over his chest and a smirk on his face. "Well, hell. Lisa Reynolds. Should've known it was you. Who else would put on a show like that?"

Her body turned rigid, and her hands curled into fists.

"Excuse me, what the hell does that mean?" She looked him up and down.

He looked smug, standing there in his sheriff's uniform. Too smug for her taste.

He held up his hands and bent down at her—way down—until their noses nearly touched. “Lizzy, you were an unlit firecracker at eighteen; you sure look about to explode now. Can we please start over?”

She huffed. “Oh, don’t pretend you know me. But I see you finally grew into your over-inflated ego.”

And growing, he did.

A lot.

He wasn’t exactly lean back then. As she recalled all too well, he had muscles all over.

But now?

Whole other ballpark.

Well, she shook her head. Who cared? He was still an asshole.

He grinned, which didn’t bode well. “You wanna know what else grew?”

Oh, come on, seriously? Peter Fisher was making sexual innuendos?

Not that she would let him win this one.

Lisa looked down at his crotch pointedly—yep, there was a bulge there—then back up, but his smile just turned more smug when her face turned hot.

“Okay, now that we’ve established this.” He rubbed his neck with his hand.

Now he looked slightly uncomfortable. “What was your brilliant plan up there on the luggage belt? Wanted to take a look backstage?”

He grinned again.

This was bad.

He had perfected his signature half-grin with just the hint of a dimple showing.

Her knees weakened.

His grin had always done that to her, but it wouldn't work this time. She crossed her arms. "Yes, I wanted to see if I could glimpse into the magic world where the luggage was alive."

"Guess yours either had a death wish and jumped from the plane, or it busted at the seam."

"Excuse me?" Was he insinuating that this was somehow her fault? "My luggage was perfectly fine."

"Oh, trust me, I can see that."

Lisa followed his eyes to her clothes, turned, scraped them off the floor, and threw everything into the bag in front of her.

Everything except for her favorite blue bra.

Which tangled next to her face from Peter's finger.

"Nice," he said.

Lisa's body tensed when she looked up, and their eyes clashed.

His glittered with appreciation, and lust ignited in her body before she drenched it with a wave of indignation.

No way was she falling for Peter Fisher's charm ever again.

She snatched the bra out of his hand and stuffed it into the bag. "None of your goddamn business. Why don't you just turn around, pretend I'm invisible, and leave? It's what you do best, as I recall."

Oh, oh. Why would she say something stupid like that? Something that showed him she was still pissed.

Peter's face darkened like the clouds did when a storm was brewing, and Lisa stopped and stared.

Would she see him explode?

Had she ever seen him lose his cool?

She remembered the hundreds of times she'd watched him play hockey in high school.

There'd been some hotshots on the ice, but not Peter.

Peter and Paul Brooks had been part of her small clique, so it was natural she and her friends hung out at the rink during practice.

Nobody ever knew she was ogling Peter while participating in the newest chat about lipstick or nail color with the other girls.

Well.

Would've been much healthier to fill her head with nail color instead of pictures of a certain sexy, sweating someone.

She stood up and tried to keep her bag close by wrapping her arms around it and pressing it against her upper body. It formed an effective armor between her and Peter, who had to take a step back.

His brows were still drawn, but he must've decided to let her comment slide because he pointed to the exit with an almost gallant bow. "Ma'am, your carriage awaits."

Lisa looked at the exit, then back at Peter.

She could feel a headache starting in her neck. "No way, I'm not driving with you. Just leave me the fuck alone. I don't need your help, or your sympathy, or anything."

She hobbled awkwardly towards the exit.

Damn bag.

Why couldn't at least her exit be a little more elegant and sophisticated?

Peter chuckled while he kept in stride with her. "Let me take that."

Lisa turned away when he offered to take her bag. "No, thanks."

"You know, I'm just doing this for my mom. I promised her to get you to the hospital. No strings attached."

Lisa stopped and stared at him.

He still had the warmest brown eyes she'd ever come across in a man.

Soft and open, and inviting, with golden flecks to add a spark and a bit of mischief.

The deep laugh lines next to his eyes were new, evidence of the years that had passed.

As was the stubble.

It made him look rugged when in her mind, he still was the clean-shaven young boy she knew back then.

There was a sadness in his eyes she didn't remember.

What had he seen?

What stories could he tell?

But no. Lisa shook her head slightly. She remembered the self-doubt. The hollowness she felt when he pretended afterward as if nothing had happened.

Their time together had been a terrible mistake. One she refused to remember, even thirteen years later.

Lisa looked away and, without a word, passed him through the door.

Outside the airport, a gust of wind made her shiver. It was early May, and the temperature was in the lower sixties. But coming from the tropical climate of Tahiti, the crisp, dry wind was a shock to her system.

The long, long hours she'd been awake didn't help either.

She looked down at her bag, which she still clung to, close to her body.

Somewhere in there would be her jacket.

If she couldn't still feel Peter watching her through the glass doors, she might stop and get it out.

But instead, she sucked in a deep breath, clenched her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering, and hurried to the row of cabs parked there.

Opening the door of the first cab in line was a juggling act, with her bag still in her clutches, but finally, she managed and threw herself into the back seat.

“Where to, lady?” The driver turned around and looked at her.

She encountered dull, gray, but strangely piercing eyes that looked at her expectantly.

“The hospital, please,” Lisa replied, shoved her bag to the side, and opened it to search for her jacket.

As the cab rolled away from the curb, she looked up.

Peter stood right next to the cab. His face pinched, and his posture stiff, oozing disapproval.

Lisa wanted to look away, just wanted to leave this situation behind.

Have time to recoup before seeing him again.

Their eyes met through the windowpane, and the frown on Peter’s face deepened while he drew up his shoulders and put his hands in his pockets.

He looked defeated and pissed and somehow incredulous.

Mirroring just her feelings.

Take this, Mr. Asshole.

She forced herself to look away from the gorgeous man and sank deeper into the back seat. She rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes for a second, but the encounter replayed in her mind.

Must be jet lag and stress stealing her ability to stay cool and distanced.

No way was she thinking about their time together, even though the memories had returned in technicolor since the first whiff of his scent.

He looked older, harder, and a lot bulkier than at nineteen.

Laugh lines lined his face, but there was also something dark in his eyes.

Oh, she remembered his eyes so well. She remembered them when they were dull with pain and later like burning embers.

Lisa swallowed around the painful lump in her throat. She felt as defeated as he had looked. Ambushed by the cacophony of hurt and longing, embarrassment and lust that flooded her.

Would she see him again in the short time she would visit Moon Lake?

Not if she could help it.

She would avoid him, and Lisa had no intentions of a run-in with law enforcement while back home.

Thinking about home led to thinking about her last visit.

Five long years ago.

That's when she'd last seen her dad in person.

They'd established weekly Skype calls, but whenever she urged him to come visit her, he had excuses.

The Inn being the main one. Guests year round. In summer, families, hikers, and mountain bikers enjoyed their stay in the small town of Moon Lake. In winter, there was downhill skiing, cross-country ski trails all over the place, and hockey and ice skating when the lake froze. Spring and fall were the hunting seasons, and fishing was a sport year-round.

But those were excuses. She wasn't sure, but she suspected her father's been afraid of flying.

At least, he never once went anywhere where he couldn't drive.

She pulled out her phone and reread Karen's text.

No news wasn't bad news, right?

But she would soon see for herself.

"Where are you from?" the cab driver asked her. He studied her through the rearview mirror, which made Lisa oddly uncomfortable.

She shuffled her feet. She didn't have the energy for small talk. But neither had she the energy to be uncivil, so she answered his question. "Tahiti."

She looked out the window to avoid the cab driver's eyes in the rearview mirror.

The scenery of Whitebrook rushed by.

The town had changed a lot in the last few years. New buildings and shops had popped up all over the place.

It didn't resemble home at all.

"What did you do in Tahiti? I've never been anywhere but here. How is it? Hot? How's the beach and the ocean? You sure would look great in a bikini."

Lisa's right foot, which had been tapping, went suddenly still.

This man creeped her out.

Obviously, the guy in front didn't understand subtlety or boundaries.

She ignored the questions and turned from the window to her bag, where she immersed herself in getting her clothes sorted. Finally, she strapped the belt, which came as part of her jacket, around the bag to hold it all together.

"Who're you visiting in the hospital?"

Lisa glared at the driver. "Look, I'm not in the mood for small talk," she snapped. "Can you please just drive and not talk or stare at me?"

There was a moment of stunned silence in the car.

The cab driver's eyes changed, and his face distorted into a sneer.

Her ears grew hot, and heat crept up over her neck, too, while she frantically searched for words.

"Look, I'm sorry," she said after a heavy sigh. "I'm just a little anxious. It's my father, who's in the hospital; he had an accident, and I came home as fast as I could.

I'm just exhausted, and my head is killing me...and...I'm sorry."

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

The cab driver in front didn't react to her apology at all.

He didn't look in the rearview mirror again and announced her fare very businesslike when they arrived at the hospital.

Lisa paid and gave a hefty tip before she scrambled to get her bag sorted and didn't look back on her hasty way from the cab to the hospital entry.



Lisa stood still after entering the hospital through the revolving door and put down her bag.

The antiseptic smell made her dizzy, and the bright, harsh electrical light made sparkly dots flit across her already itchy eyes.

On their last call, Karen had told her they were in the waiting room on the third floor, just next to the ICU.

She looked at the colored stripes on the floor that started right before her in the lobby and led in various directions.

She would just need to follow one of these stripes.

But somehow, she couldn't.

She rocked slightly back and forth, but her feet didn't move.

Her throat tightened, and she rubbed it, forcing a breath in.

Whatever was waiting for her up there, she couldn't even fathom.

Two nurses passed her and looked her up and down before they resumed their chat.

She swiped at the sheen of sweat that formed on her forehead, and her breathing became labored.

She wasn't ready.

Her gaze darted around the lobby until it landed on a restroom sign, and she rushed there, nearly taking a dive when

her bag impeded her feet.

What if he was already dead?

What if she was too late?

How would her mother be?

Would she hold up okay, or would she be in tears?

Affectionate or as distanced and in control as she had been when Lisa left? Surely this time, with her dad's life on the line and after all those years and distance, her mother would at least be a little happy to see her.

Lisa washed her hands and looked at herself in the mirror.

She looked awful, with dark circles under her eyes, and somehow gaunt. She shrugged her shoulders.

She looked precisely the way she felt. Not that that would be a valid excuse in her mother's eyes.

After putting on some perfume and lip gloss, not because she wanted to look anything better than awful, but maybe Mom would appreciate the effort. She remembered the day she left at eighteen.

They'd barely said goodbye. Her mom didn't "do" emotions. Hadn't even taken the time to see her off at the airport.

Lisa fixed her ponytail, straightened her spine, and put away her lip gloss.

She was ready.

Well, as ready as she would ever be.

With a stern nod at herself in the mirror, she left the bathroom, followed the red line, and entered the elevator. She exited on the third floor, turned down the hallway, and marched towards the ICU just to encounter another corridor.

Just keep walking.

She focused on the repetitive pattern of the floor, even though the beige walls kept closing in on her, and she swallowed down the sour taste in her mouth.

At the end of the corridor, she stopped, turned, and peeked into the waiting room.

Her mom and sister sat next to each other on uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs.

Her mother was looking out the window, and her sister was reading in some magazine.

Lisa smiled when she discovered her little niece, who was playing with some building blocks in one corner. As if Mathilda could sense her presence, she looked up.

“Aunt Lizzy,” Mathilda screamed, toys forgotten and surged toward her.

Lisa put down her bag, caught Mattie in midair, and picked her up.

She pressed the little angel to her chest and inhaled deeply.

Wow, how much Mattie had grown in the last two years.

She sighed.

Wishing once more she wouldn't live so far away.

She'd missed so many significant events in her niece's life.

Skype just wasn't the same.

Two years ago, Mattie, Karen, Julius—Karen's husband—and Lisa had taken a vacation together in Tahiti—two weeks of really getting to know her niece, falling in love with the little angel, and reconnecting and mending the strained relationship with her sister.

The stress of a mother, who always criticized one or the other, who compared them and played favorite, had left their relationship strained.

So they'd lost contact after Lisa left.

But now they were both grown up.

Her sister's life was flourishing with a fantastic job, a good man, and an adorable little girl.

And after reconnecting, they became friends again.

“You finally made it,” Lisa’s mother said. “Took you long enough. Your father could be dead by now, but it would be all the same to you, wouldn’t it?”

Lisa gasped, and her muscles turned rigid.

Holy fuck.

A searing pain speared through her chest, and the harsh words from her mother left her speechless.

Did her own mother really think so little of her?

Nausea climbed from the depth of her body into her throat, and her eyes stung.

Every single confrontation with her mother during her teenage years had triggered the same emotional and physical reaction. Those words and those fights had always created the same sick feeling in her stomach she felt right now.

Lisa swallowed and fought hard not to defend herself.

This wasn’t about her.

All of this must have her mother reeling with frustration and fear.

And she was getting the brunt of it.

“Hi, Mom, hi, Karen. I took the first flight out, but it took forever...”

One look into her mother’s face made Lisa stop.

Her mother had never been interested in what she once referred to as some ‘lame excuse.’

Logical explanations didn’t change her mother’s mind, never had, never would.

So she stopped trying.

And she would so now.

She lifted her chin, leaned forward, and gave her mother a small, impersonal peck on the cheek before she turned toward Karen.

Karen mirrored Lisa’s smile, stood up, and hugged her.

“Hi, Lizzy. I’m glad you’re here. Did you get here okay?”

Lisa and Karen exchanged a short look full of indignation and a dramatic eye roll over their mother.

“Yes, took a cab,” she answered, “ran into a little trouble at the airport, but nothing serious.”

The picture of Peter Fisher flashed before her inner eyes. She could still feel the heat of his body against her back.

He’d called her Lizzy.

Said they knew each other.

What a load of bullshit.

“How’s Dad?” She asked and shook her head to get the thoughts about Peter out of her head.

Focus, Lisa. There are much more important tasks on hand.

Karen winced. “We know nothing new since we talked on the phone; he’s still in a bad state with no improvement. They had to do some kind of surgery during the night. Something to do with the pressure in his head after the accident. Mom was allowed in there with him for a few minutes, but he wasn’t conscious.”

“There will be a doctor in soon; he will tell us everything about your father,” her mother added in a strange stilted voice.

Karen pinched her lips together before she spoke through her clenched teeth. “We’ve been waiting for said doctor for over two hours now.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at Mattie, who was back in the corner, playing with some colored wooden toy blocks now.

Lisa’s mother’s calm demeanor contrasted with her frustration.

The only thing that didn’t fit the picture was the raised eyebrow and the scrutinizing look when her mother’s eyes focused on Lisa.

“Maybe you should freshen up a little. You wouldn’t want to let the doctor think you’re sloppy, do you?”

Lisa stopped breathing but didn't take her eyes off Mattie or react in any way.

Her mother was a pro at hidden insults.

Perfected the art a long time ago.

Nothing had changed, even in times like these.

Lisa watched her mother from the corner of her eyes. Her mother's outfit was as pristine as ever. She wore designer jeans and a fancy off-white blouse. Nobody would ever see Josephine Reynold disheveled, not even when her husband had had an accident and she was sitting in a waiting room for hours on end.

"She looks okay, Mom, just tired." Karen put a loose strand of Lisa's hair behind her ear and smiled.

Deflection was what Karen excelled at. She wasn't much for fighting. Even back then, she'd always tried to keep the peace. Not an easy feat.

Scenes of shouting matches echoed in Lisa's mind.

But she straightened her spine. She wouldn't let the old feelings creep up again.

She wasn't a child anymore.

She'd lived her life the past thirteen years on her own terms as a responsible adult.

But the old feelings of desperation crept up anyway, and overwhelming helplessness surrounded her.

She didn't know how to please her mother or even just make her be okay with who she was. The urge to just turn around and leave was strong, and Lisa looked longingly toward the exit. Then her eyes connected with the pleading eyes of Karen, who, with only a look, gave her the strength to ignore their mother's comment and stay.

She sighed and sat down on the chair next to Karen.

She would just ignore everything her mother said. She wasn't here for her, anyway. It was for her dad, and she would stay until she knew he was out of the woods.

But the minute he was better, she would hightail it out of there.

No looking back.



With a click, another minute passed on the ancient digital clock that hung on the wall of the waiting room just outside the ICU.

Lisa shifted in her chair to ease the tingly sensation from her butt downward.

Thanks to her mother's snide remark about her tapping feet, now she couldn't feel them at all.

Just great.

She watched her sister and niece. They sat huddled together in the kid's corner. Mattie's eyes were half-closed, absorbed in some fairy-tale land until Karen came to an end, then Mattie snapped open her eyes and shut the book.

A noise that jarred Lisa's mother out of her doze.

Lisa stood up and shook her feet before stomping to the kid's corner. "Hey, Mattie, wanna play something?"

"Yes, yes, let's play Uno. Mommy, in your purse, Mommy, please."

Lisa chuckled. With this kind of enthusiasm for a simple game of cards, the little kid was likely bored out of her mind.

No wonder... Lisa was too.

She glanced up at the wall clock—an hour and still no sign of a doctor.

They settled onto the floor, and soon Karen dealt the cards.

Mattie was a fierce player, sneaky and surprisingly fast for her age, and she kept Karen and Lisa on their toes.

Their mother didn't take part and not once moved off her uncomfortable chair. Until her phone rang, and she took the call and complained—to whoever was misfortunate to be on the other end of the line—about the lack of information they'd gotten.

Karen and Lisa exchanged a surprised look.

So not typical for their mother.

Other than that, nothing changed.

After they finished their third round of Uno, Lisa sat back down next to her mother.

Ten minutes later, she got antsy and moved around but stopped after a dirty look from her mother.

The muscles in her body had tensed up, and the headache from earlier came back in full force.

Then she catapulted herself out of her chair. "I'm going for a walk."

There must be someone in this crappy hospital ready to talk to them. How long had they already waited?

Hours.

She would find someone to give them some info.

With renewed determination, she turned toward the ICU.

The entrance was closed up and cave-like. She peeked through the darkened glass pane—nothing.

Were they even at the right place?

It looked abandoned.

A ping farther down the corridor caught Lisa's attention. The elevator doors slid open, and two nurses wheeled out a patient on a bed.

The patient was a young woman whose scalp was wrapped in gauze.

A tube sprouted out of her head, and transparent surgical tape covered her eyes. A brace encased her neck, and her bandaged left arm and foot peeked out from the green blanket covering her body.

Holy shit.

The nurses marched to the door of the ICU, their lips clamped together and their focus solely fixed on their patient.

Lisa's lungs constricted, and her hand flew to her chest.

She looked away, but somehow the image of the poor woman burned itself into her brain.

Coldness washed over her.

Did this happen with her father? Was he like this when they wheeled him into the ICU nearly three days ago?

The automatic doors of the ICU closed behind the nurses, but Lisa was rooted to the spot.

Apparently, the staff had more important tasks than to bother about them waiting.

A while later, Lisa turned and trotted back to the waiting room, her thoughts revolving around the poor woman, hoping she would make it.

She turned into the waiting room and trudged toward her seat until she looked up into mesmerizing golden eyes.

Her step faltered.

The man in the chair next to her mother stopped mid-sentence and looked at her.

Lisa's mother smoothly looked up for a second before she turned her attention back to the man next to her. "Alan, you haven't met Lisa, my second daughter."

The man stood up and stepped forward with his hand reaching out. His serious face changed, and a little smile showed his perfect white teeth.

Lisa stumbled forward and nearly missed his hand.

Could she be any more awkward?

He looked quite handsome and was probably around Karen's age.

His trimmed dark hair, crisp white button-down shirt, and jeans enhanced his clear-cut looks. Only his five o'clock shadow dented his otherwise impeccable appearance.

Something her mother would approve of.

"Hello, Lisa," he said and shook her hand.

She swallowed. His deep voice, combined with his golden eyes, reminded her of rich, golden caramel syrup.

Eyes that had her so caught up, she held his hand a lot longer than necessary.

Actually, she shook it until he raised one eyebrow.

He must think she was some kind of crazy person.

Her mother gave her an odd look that felt like a cold shower, and Lisa withdrew her hand abruptly.

Damn.

"This is Alan Radley. He's our primary care physician in Moon Lake and a good friend of your father."

Lisa nodded and tucked her hands in her pockets.

Dr. Radley didn't look like a doctor, but now that she knew, Lisa could easily picture him in his white lab coat, treating his patients with professionalism and kindness.

Plus, the heavy dose of hero worship in her mother's demeanor should have clued her in on his profession.

How did this man in his thirties become friends with her father?

"Hello, Dr. Radley," she said with a small smile and turned toward her mother. "What have I missed?"

Her mother leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temple. She looked gaunt and old. "Alan was just about to tell us about Carl."

"So, you work here?" Lisa asked and looked back at Dr. Radley.

“No. But I was with the first responders at the site of the accident, and after our earlier phone call”—he took the seat next to her mother again and offered the one on the other side to Lisa—“decided to get the lay of the land on Carl.”

“So, you were in ICU? You know what’s happening with Dad?”

Had he passed her in the hallway?

She hadn’t seen the doors of the ICU open again. Or anything really, except for the replaying vivid images of the young woman.

Dr. Radley nodded. “I spoke with the doctor in charge just a minute ago. He’s sorry to keep you waiting, but it’s all hands on deck today. He’s okay with me talking to you.”

Lisa’s mother inhaled. “So? Tell us.”

The waver in her mother’s voice tightened her chest.

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t any good news to tell you. Carl was admitted with a GCS score of five, and there has been no improvement in the last thirty-six hours.”

Lisa’s chest tightened as she peeked over her mother’s head into her sister’s eyes.

“Glasgow coma scale,” Karen mouthed.

As if this would clear up anything.

“They performed surgery on his brain to release the pressure caused by an acute right-side hematoma. But he has no pupillary reactions and a low EEG. Both not good signs.”

Lisa’s mother slumped back into her chair, and Dr. Radley took her hand. “There’s always hope, especially with TBIs, but it doesn’t look good. I’m sorry, Josephine.”

Lisa’s stomach roiled.

This didn’t sound good.

She understood none of the medical terms, but her mother and sister were unsettled and frightened, and so was she.

She had never felt frightened with her dad around. He'd always been her safe haven.

Solid and full of life.

Lisa must've completely spaced out because when Dr. Radley got up, bowed slightly, and said goodbye, she couldn't recall the rest of the conversation.

Or her increasing heartbeat and labored breath had drowned out everything else.

What if her father didn't make it?

Panic clawed at her throat.

She couldn't breathe.

She mumbled something unintelligent before she sprinted out of the waiting room. She turned to the stairs, her footsteps matching her heart's frantic rhythm. The floors whizzed by until she was on ground level.

Air, she needed fresh air.

She headed for the main entrance.

Outside.

Maybe there she could catch a breath again.

The wind instantly cooled her sweaty face, and she gulped down air, leaned forward, and supported her hands on her knees.

Was she having a heart attack?

Her racing pulse and asthmatic wheeze surely weren't normal.

"Are you all right?"

Lisa suppressed a moan.

She had to get a grip.

She turned her head around, her body still tilted forward, and looked up at Dr. Radley.

"I'm okay." She panted. "I just need a minute, or I'm dying of a heart attack." She gasped again. "One or the other."

Dr. Radley pressed his lips together. “Maybe we should walk a few steps. See if you can gather your breath.”

She nodded.

With his hand on the small of her back, she straightened.

He was a doctor—surely he could perform CPR if her heart stopped beating.

Dr. Radley steered them right through the hospital and out the back into a beautiful park. “It’s hard to receive bad news.”

They followed the gravel paths for a while.

Side by side.

He didn’t say more, and Lisa didn’t either.

Soon her breathing pattern normalized, and her heartbeat settled somewhere into the vicinity of normal again.

“Would you explain what you, Mom, and Karen talked about up there?” she asked.

“Of course. What didn’t you understand?” Dr. Radley said. “And please call me Alan. I’m a friend. Your father talked about you constantly, so I feel like I already know you.”

The image of her father and Dr. Radley being friends and talking made her heart ache again.

She wanted to talk to her dad.

So badly.

“What does TBI mean, and what exactly is a GCS?”

“TBI is short for the traumatic brain injury your father suffered from the accident, and GCS is the Glasgow Coma Score. This is used to describe his fixed pupils, unconsciousness, and lack of reaction to anything, even pain.”

Lisa nodded once and looked down at her feet.

Her father didn’t react to anything.

Not good.

Dr. Radley, Alan sighed. “The initial GCS is not really the problem. But the lack of improvement isn’t good.”

“Will he die?” Lisa asked and held her breath, unsure if she was ready for the truth. She felt horrible even contemplating this possibility.

Dr. Radley looked at her with a pained expression. “We don’t know, but his age and the development of the last days don’t give us a lot of hope. He’s still on ventilation and has a device attached to him to measure the pressure inside his brain.”

The gravel path they walked on turned toward the hospital again.

Lisa looked up at the glass front.

Her eyes stung, which was only partly caused by the stiff breeze.

“Look.” Alan stopped and turned to her.

“The brain is complicated, and we don’t know. But yes, there’s a possibility we could lose him, or he could stay in a coma. But there’s still hope. There’s always hope. He’s in good care here, and they will do everything possible to get him through.”

Her body released some of the tension, and she clasped his forearm, effectively stopping him. “Thank you.”

He didn’t treat her with kid gloves, and even though the mere thought of her dad not pulling through gutted Lisa, she was thankful for Alan’s honesty.

A gust of wind blew through the park, and Lisa shivered.

She’d forgotten to bring her jacket in her haste to get out. And the wind chilled her to the bones.

Alan scrubbed a hand over his face before he extended his arms. “I don’t have a jacket with me; all I can offer you is a hug.”

Lisa hesitated.

She wasn’t the type to get up close and personal with people she didn’t know. But somehow, it was exactly what she needed. So she stepped into his embrace.

They stood like this for a while.

Lisa closed her eyes, soaked up his heat, and breathed in his clean smell.

Alan's hold was loose, and he released her instantly when she shifted in his arms.

She stepped back and wrapped her own arms around her torso.

Maybe she should have stayed in his arms a little longer.

There she felt safe.

She remembered another set of arms around her.

Much stronger arms.

Dangerous arms.

Arms that ignited all kinds of feelings in her.

Feelings she shouldn't have.

Feelings she had buried a long time ago. At least, that's what she'd thought.

After Alan said goodbye, Lisa climbed back up the stairs and bumped into her sister when she entered the waiting room.

"I have to get Mattie home, and you should go home to the Inn too. Mom wants to stay here, but Cookie is home alone, and someone has to take care of her."

Lisa slumped down in the chair next to her mother and yawned.

She envisioned the Inn, a warm bed, and their dog Cookie.

Mattie ran toward her and kissed her on the cheek before she and Karen left hand in hand.

After a while of silence, Lisa jolted up and looked at her mother. "What?"

"Go."

"But you're here alone."

"I've been here alone a lot."

Go home.

Take care of Cookie. She's in the cottage."

"Really? We could call someone, so I could stay with you..."

She would stay if her mother needed her here with her.

"Please go home." Her mother rummaged in her purse and handed Lisa the car keys and the keys to her parents' cottage behind the Inn.

"There's nothing you can do here. My car is in the lot. Take it. And get a shower and something decent to wear before you come back tomorrow."

Lisa clenched her teeth then stood up.

No point in picking a fight at times like this.



The street in front of Lisa appeared endless, even though it was just the last stretch of highway toward Moon Lake.

Dense forest flanked the road to the right, thick enough to appear like a wall, and the unchanging surface of the lake to her left created a lull that dulled her vision and made her eyelids droop.

She blinked repeatedly and fiddled with the volume of the car radio.

A slow song lulled her even more, and the fading light made it even harder to concentrate.

Soon it would be dark.

When a forceful yawn made her eyes water and clouded her vision, she rolled down the window.

Maybe the blast of cool air in her face would keep her awake.

This tactic worked, but soon uncontrollable shivers wracked her body, and she closed the window again.

She forced herself to go another mile and another. Until she just couldn't keep her eyes open anymore, and the frequency of her yawning was getting ridiculous.

Driving in this condition meant she risked having an accident like her father, and the prospect of either hitting a tree or landing in the lake scared the shit out of her.

She needed to stop the car.

Now.

Luckily a sign announcing a scenic lookout flew by.

She exhaled, straightened, put on her left indicator, and slowed down the car.

Ridiculous using the indicator.

It must have been at least ten minutes since she'd last encountered another car.

She pulled to the left into the small lot, parked the car, then looked around. She remembered this scenic overlook from back when she was a teen.

It wasn't a huge lot—just enough space for three or four cars. During the day, it was a popular place for travelers to stop and take pictures of the lake and the beautiful mountains surrounding it. The overflowing trash can was proof of that.

But at this time of day, it was abandoned.

Well, everything around here was remote.

She yawned again.

Her hands lay limp in her lap, and her eyelids hurt every time she blinked.

Her brain was too muddy to do the math of how long she'd been awake since that dreadful phone call.

It sure felt like a whole lifetime.

She must've dozed off because her head banged against the wheel, and she woke up with a startle.

“Ouch.” She scrubbed her forehead and sat up straight. Then shifted around, trying to find a more comfortable position behind the wheel before she realized what she was doing.

“Oh no, Elisabeth Alexandra Reynolds. Get your act together. You are not stupid enough to fall asleep in the car in the middle of nowhere.”

She nodded once and opened her door.

A little walk and fresh air would wake her up again. Then she would tackle the ten minutes drive home and fall headfirst into her bed.

After she'd straightened, she walked up and down the vacant lot. She stretched herself and even did some jumping jacks before she felt too stupid about it and stepped up to the railing to enjoy the breathtaking view in the fast-fading light.

The surface of Moon Lake was already deep in the shadow of the mountains that loomed around it.

In minutes, the last of the natural light would be gone completely, and only the reflected lights from the houses scattered around the shore would penetrate the dark.

Darkness came fast and impenetrable here in the mountains.

She breathed in through her nose.

Home.

The water's fishy undertones, the mossy smell of the forest, and wet grass.

It wasn't quite the smell of summer yet, as the heat had not yet penetrated the dampness of the forest.

Then a gust of wind from another direction hit Lisa, and she gagged.

Decomposition.

Lisa covered her mouth and nose with her hand to lessen the foul scent.

Could this be the trash can?

The picture of a dead deer sprung to Lisa's mind. Nearly unrecognizable under the moving hill of fleas and maggots, she'd encountered one of those when she accompanied her dad hunting one day.

The smell had been just awful.

Like now.

Maybe the deer had an accident. Sometimes if they didn't die on the spot, they ran back into the forest and died there later.

She pulled her jacket over her mouth and nose and walked to the edge of the asphalted lot. She passed the trash can, but the smell got worse the farther she got past it.

She stopped and shook her head at her own silliness.

She needed to get home.

She needed sleep.

Not investigate a foul smell on the side of a lonely road. She turned around when, from the corner of her eye, she saw something sticking out under the shrubbery.

A hand.

She froze mid-turn and stared at it.

Maybe the fading light had played a trick on her.

She gasped when the painful feeling of lack of oxygen got too intense, and the horrible smell assaulted her again when she took her next breath.

Were hallucinations a side effect of sleep deprivation?

And did hallucinations include smell?

The nightfall enclosed Lisa in darkness, and her heartbeat thrashed in her ears as she ran back toward her car and fumbled to open the door. Once inside, she locked the doors.

Hell.

She took a deep breath, then another, until her mind stopped spinning.

After a minute of breathing, she leaned over and rummaged in the glove compartment. "Where's the flashlight, Dad? You wouldn't let Mom drive without a damn flashlight."

Then her hand touched it, and she grabbed her phone as well before leaving the car again and walking toward the edge, the cone of light directed toward the bushes.

There it was again.

When the ray of light hit the hand sticking out of the ground, she jumped.

This was real.

This wasn't a figment of her mind.

She looked around, but there was nobody there but her. She needed to call the police.

She fumbled with her phone, her hands jittery trying to unlock her screen, once, twice.

“Shit, come on, you stupid thing.”

After the third wrong try, Lisa laid the flashlight down on the ground next to her left foot, illuminating the bushes just above the hand.

She unlocked the phone, dialed 911, and waited for the connection.

“Nine-one-one—what is your emergency?”

She told the operator what she was looking at, her location, and her phone number.

“Is the person still alive?”

Her pulse spiked, and the tremors in her hands got worse again.

“I don't know.”

“Can you check?”

She clenched her jaw and inched forward. Then she leaned down toward the hand.

Her phone glided through her sweaty fingers and, with a bump on the asphalt, landed right next to the hand under the bushes.

Her hand shot to her mouth, and she yelped.

Fuuck.

The flashlight on the ground still illuminated the bushes, but her phone display cast an eerie glow on the pale hand next to it.

Dizziness clouded Lisa's vision before her knees gave up, and she collapsed to the ground.

She could still hear the voice of the operator from the still-established call.

Willed herself to climb in there and get the phone back.
Check the person lying there.

But she didn't find the energy to get up.

Tears clouded her vision, and the small cone of light blurred while Lisa curled her arms around her legs and rocked back and forth.

Minutes ticked by, but she could not move other than the rocking motion.

She let out a sharp scream when somebody put his hand on her shoulder and shone a flashlight into her face.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" The uniformed officer directed his cone of light a little to the side, and Lisa could see his face.

He waited politely for her answer, but she just got out a soundless "No," before her throat closed again. She pointed toward the bushes and hoped he would somehow get what she could not tell him.

The officer directed his flashlight there, and after he kneeled at the edge of the concrete, he shone directly onto the hand and the appended arm she hadn't seen before.

And wished she had never seen.

"Ma'am, can you please step back? You can wait in the car."

A second officer helped her back up, took her by her shoulders, and guided her to the patrol car.

She sat down and stared at the front seat. She didn't dare look up at what was happening around her.

The cracking voices on the radio and the increasing movements outside the car windows were just noise that didn't penetrate her shell.

Her eyelids were heavy, her thoughts muddled.

A loud knock on the car window penetrated her stupor, and she straightened.

Another uniformed officer opened the door.

His hat cast a shadow over his face, but the parking lot was lit like a Christmas tree behind him.

When did this happen?

Lisa looked through the windshield at the multitude of vehicles and people populating the small lot.

The level of noise astounding.

How long had she been sitting here? She cast a glance toward the bushes on the side of the concrete where the light was densest but couldn't see a thing.

What did they find?

Was there a body?



Peter had seen a lot of deceased people in his time with the teams, but this was the first one since he'd returned home.

And they all had a bad feeling about who it might be. For the better part of last week, there had been search parties for the missing woman.

With zero results.

His service dog had lost her trace outside the bar. Nobody had seen her leave that night. She'd just vanished.

Well, only DNA would give them certainty.

He looked down into the car. Lisa hid in darkness, but her face was white as a ghost, virtually glowing in the dark.

He hesitated, then frowned. The professional in him battled with the protective feelings that surged to the surface.

“Rough day?”

He hunkered down, so he could have a better look at her.

She looked back at him with unseeing eyes, and her breathing was choppy.

He wasn't sure if she even recognized him.

“Lisa?” He touched her hand.

Her skin was cold and clammy. Maybe she needed to see a doctor.

“Are you okay?”

His protective instincts skyrocketed when her eyes lost the forlorn look that had concerned him just a moment ago and filled with tears.

Her chin trembled, and when she tried to speak, but no words came out of her mouth, he couldn't keep his distance any longer.

Long-buried feelings for her surfaced as he straightened and picked her up from the car seat.

She couldn't weigh more than a feather, and he witnessed uncontrollable sobs wracking her body when she pressed her face into his uniform.

“Shh, I'm here. Everything will be okay. I promise.”

Her skin was cold to the touch, and he pressed her tighter against his body to warm her up.

He looked around, then carried her over to his cruiser and squeezed behind the wheel with her in his lap.

It was a tight fit, but she was pressed against him anyway.

They sat there for quite some time. Peter absently caressed her hair while he watched the procedures outside.

His eyes connected with his chief, Sheriff Richard Travers, who just nodded at him before returning to the crime scene again.

They'd driven here together, so his boss knew about his connections to the Reynolds family.

The mobile crime lab had arrived a little earlier, and he saw the flashes of their cameras processing and documenting everything.

Peter tapped his foot.

He should get Lisa to a doctor.

Or back to the sheriff's office to get her statement and then take her home.

But when he looked down at her, leaning against him, staring into the distance, tears still silently running down her

cheeks, he sighed and tightened his embrace.

The statement could wait.

This was more important.

In the back of his mind, a little voice told him he wasn't behaving professionally.

But he wasn't ready to let her go.

And, by the way, he felt her hand press against his side and her body snuggling deeper into him. Neither was she.

An hour later, he stopped the cruiser in front of the sheriff's office and looked at the passenger seat. Lisa hadn't said a word on the drive here.

She looked small, fragile, and introverted.

He sighed.

She was still processing. Your first dead body stayed with you.

The images of his still haunted him in his dreams and sometimes in pure daylight.

Peter closed his eyes and leaned his head against the headrest.

His first.

A raid in Afghanistan.

They were on a mission to flush out a high Taliban Officer, but when they entered one house, they found a whole family.

Slaughtered.

Every single one.

He would never forget the young boy whose life was cut short by those assholes.

It was one of many raids like that. Never pretty, and it didn't get any easier.

He brushed her forearm.

"I'm sorry, tiger, but we're here."

She blinked as if she'd just woken up from sleep.

“Where are we?”

Peter cleared his aching throat. “We’re at the office. We need your statement now when everything is still fresh on your mind.”

She looked first at his hand, which still stroked her forearm, then back into his eyes. “Now?”

He nodded, and his heart flew out to her when she straightened her spine, took a deep breath, and opened her door.

She was a fighter.

Had claws like a tiger. As she'd shown him earlier.

She would be okay.

He escorted her to the interrogation room. It wasn't his favorite room, and he contemplated just asking her to a desk. But if this became a murder investigation, he'd better play it safe and on record.

She looked small and lost in the room. The neon light deepened the dark circles under her eyes.

He could read all her feelings in her eyes. Pain, confusion, and utter exhaustion.

Out of fight.

“I'll be back in a minute. I need to check some things first.”

She nodded, and he left her alone in the room.

He had a job to do.

He checked in with Sheriff Travers and then listened to her 911 call again. He was on top of the situation—information-wise, before he reentered the interrogation room, two cups of coffee in hand and a file tucked under his left arm.

“Lisa.”

She was slow to look up. But when he placed the coffee in front of her, both her hands wrapped around it immediately.

She didn't take a sip, though, just used it to warm her hands.

"Can you walk me through your evening?" Peter took a seat on the opposite side of the table. Battling the urge to get her back on his lap and into his arms.

She had looked so small, helpless, and vulnerable when he found her sitting in the patrol car.

Not at all like the sassy woman he'd met at the airport earlier, ready to claw his eyes out.

And not at all like the girl he remembered.

"I was on my way home." Lisa's voice was a little hoarse.

"Home from where?"

"From the hospital. Mom wanted to stay there, but Cookie is home alone, and someone needs to let her out."

Peter made a mental note to call Julie Brooks to take care of the dog.

"Okay, when did you leave the hospital?"

"I don't know. Late afternoon, early evening, maybe?" She looked unsure and twisted the rim of the paper cup.

"What happened next?"

"I was so tired. I hadn't slept since I got the call about my dad."

"Not even on the plane?"

Lisa shook her head.

"So, you haven't slept in what? Two, three days?"

No wonder she looked like death warmed over.

"Yes, something like that, I don't know. The time difference. The airports. I had a lot on my mind."

He knew what sleep deprivation did to your body and found a new respect for her.

She'd had a little breakdown.

But she was stronger than she looked.

The girl had grit.

And the nickname fit.

“So, you were on the way home...”

“I got tired, opened the window first, but it didn’t help.
Then I made a short stop.

To get moving.

I wasn’t that far from Moon Lake. All I wanted was to
make it home and sleep. When I got out at the lookout, I
smelled it.”

“What did you smell?”

“Like dead deer, left to rot in the sun.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Nobody there and nobody on
the road either.”

“What did you do after discovering the smell?”

Peter knew what smell she referred to. Another thing that
haunted him in his dreams. His team once passed a mass grave
on deployment in Iraq.

The smell had been unbearable.

As had been the sights.

“I went to look, but it was getting too dark to see. Then I
thought I saw a hand.”

Her voice became monotonous, and she had shown no
emotion in the last five minutes. She was distancing herself
from the incident.

Good for her.

“What did you do after you saw the hand?”

“I went to get my cell phone and a flashlight.”

“Were you afraid?” It was more of a rhetorical question.
He knew she was—she’d shown signs of severe stress when

he found her in the car an hour later. White as a blanket and shaking all over.

“Scared shitless.”

“Did you see more than the hand?”

Lisa’s hands were shaking again, and she turned and kneaded the cup in her hands. “No, I didn’t dare look too close.”

“I called 911 and talked to the operator, but I fumbled with the cell phone, and it fell right next to it into the bushes.”

“So, your cell phone is on scene?” Peter made a note on his file to check where the cell phone was.

“Yes, well. I don’t know if there was another cell phone. Mine was still connected to the 911 operator. I could hear her talk.”

“What did you do then?” Peter took a sip from his coffee, and she mirrored his move.

“I don’t know. I think I wanted to pick it up, help, but I was too scared.”

“Did you go back to your car?” Peter looked in his file to see who the first officer on scene had been.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to add anything?”

Her breath caught in her chest. And she swayed on her chair. “No, I don’t think so.”

He nodded once and closed the file.

“Can I go home now?”

“Yes, I’ll get someone to drive you home.” Peter wanted to be that someone. But he needed to finish this.

“Can I get my phone back? What if there’s something with Dad?”

“I will look into it.”

“Thanks.”

He thought she wanted to say more than that. He wanted to say more than that. But these weren't the right circumstances for them to talk. Plus, she needed to get some sleep; everything else had to wait until tomorrow.

Everything case-related, and everything personal between them, as well.

Peter helped Lisa up and led her through the office, then to his cruiser.

To hell with work.

He would drive her home himself.

He didn't trust anyone to take care of her, and he could always pull an all-nighter.

The drive home was like the drive to the sheriff's office.

Either Lisa was too tired to talk or too caught up in her head.

They passed the crime scene, but she just looked out her window into the dark wood.

The reunion with Cookie caused his breath to bottle up in his chest.

So much time lost.

On the way back to the office, the pictures of Lisa squatting down, and petting her dog, stayed with him. He thought back to the crime scene, and the images shifted to how he'd held her and how she'd finally relaxed in his arms.

His reaction had been instinctive.

He'd seen her hurting, and everything inside him demanded to hold her.

Soothe her.

This was personal, and he wanted there to be something personal in their future. He'd lost her when they were still kids.

Not lost.

Discarded.

He'd had something beautiful in his hands and had fucked it up.

Royally.

Maybe this was his second chance. Seeing her today. Seeing her at her worst made all the old feelings reappear.

Longing and a deep sense of connection.

During the last thirteen years, he'd chased this connection with women. Had even married one.

But the connection he'd had with his ex-wife had never even come close to his connection with Lisa.

Their only night together, Peter had experienced magic.

A whole other level of connectedness.

No wonder his marriage was doomed to fail. But now he had a new chance.

A chance to make things right.

The only problem—how would he get Lisa on board with his plans?

Would she dare open up again and give him a chance?

Tonight didn't count. Tonight she hadn't been her usual self.

But he had to try.

This time he would do better.

He wasn't the cocky nineteen-year-old boy anymore who'd dismissed their connection so easily.

This time he would make an effort to open up and to really get to know her.

This time he would find out if there was more than his insane attraction.

And he would not quit!



The next morning Lisa woke up to blinding sunshine.

Life was strange. A few days ago, her only worry was being dumped. But since then, so much had happened.

She looked around. The room and the bed weren't hers anymore—just another guest room. But the night before, she'd dived headfirst into the bed. Not that she'd gotten much sleep... more like disturbing pictures and panic attacks interspersed with rough sleep.

She groaned.

Back to the hospital. That was the plan.

But instead of getting up, she threw the blanket over her head and curled her body into a fetal position. Even this tiny movement exhausted her.

This day would be a bitch.

After another five minutes, she knocked her blanket back and got up—First Cookie, then a cup of coffee, or better yet, a whole pot.

She passed the squeaky step between the first floor and the ground floor when she heard noises from the kitchen.

Someone was down there.

Her heart leaped, and she rummaged around in her purse for her cell phone. She wracked her brain, but she couldn't remember her mother mentioning whether guests were staying at the Inn or not...and where the hell was her damn phone?

The mental image of her phone casting a glow on the hand next to it caused realization to hit, and a cold shiver ran down her spine.

Couldn't she catch a break?

She really needed a break.

She turned on the stairs and took a few steps up. She could go back up and hide inside her room, could just turn the key and pretend she wasn't there.

But what if they had guests and nobody took care of them?

Lisa listened again until she could distinguish a female and a male voice. The clatter of a pan on the old gas stove was deeply ingrained in her memory. She turned back down and mentally prepared herself for hostess mode.

Suddenly the timbre of the male voice infused her limbs with a tingling warmth. His soft voice, whispering in her ear while playing with her hair, which had soothed her anxiety between her fitful sleep episodes, replayed back to her.

She crossed the lobby toward the door to the kitchen and stopped there.

"No, Mom, I told you, there's nothing I have to say to him. Just tell him to leave us the fuck alone and stay away."

"Peter!"

Lisa could hear the conversation clearer now that the voices had gotten heated. It didn't feel right to stand there and eavesdrop any longer.

The heavenly aroma of bacon mixed with the scent of fresh-baked bread assaulted her when she opened the door.

And her stomach growled, interrupting the sudden silence.

Maybe she shouldn't have skipped dinner the night before. Then again, eating had been out of the question.

"Hello," she said.

The older woman turned from the stove and faced her. Lisa recognized the rounded face immediately. Mrs. Fisher's hair

hadn't been gray thirteen years ago, and there had been fewer wrinkles around her eyes, but other than that, she looked unchanged.

Peter's mother came toward her with her arms open, grinning from ear to ear. "Lisa, my dear, how good to have you finally back."

Lisa took a deep breath and stiffened in the embrace but relaxed as the well-known perfume engulfed her and brought back fond memories.

"Oh, how we missed you, young lady.

How heartbreaking the circumstances. But we're so happy to have you back."

As long as Lisa could remember, Mary Fisher had always been like this—affectionate. The polar opposite to her best friend, her own mother.

Even after the death of Peter's sister, his mother never lost her innate kindness to the surrounding people. Kindness mixed with sadness.

So much sadness.

"I didn't expect anyone to be around." She mumbled, still smothered by Mary's embrace-

"I took over cooking for the guests after your dad had his accident," Mary said and pushed Lisa at arm's length.

"How many guests?" Lisa held her breath.

"There's a family in the cottage by the small forest. An older gentleman in Room 2 and, of course, the woman who'd booked Room 4—" Mary paused, released Lisa, and turned back to the stove. "I talked to your mom already this morning—no change so far."

She took the pan from the stove and turned around. "Come sit. I'll prepare you some breakfast."

"Mom."

Lisa's head snapped to Peter, who sat in the small breakfast nook. With her focus on Mary, she'd completely

blocked out his presence.

She really needed coffee to jumpstart her sluggish mind.

“Yes, my dear.” Mary raised her left eyebrow before returning to the stove and cooking.

“Don’t overwhelm her. She looks flustered.” Peter smirked before he dug into his huge serving of bacon and eggs.

“She isn’t flustered—just not fully awake yet, and understandably a little stressed.” Mary turned toward Lisa and patted her forearm. “But who wouldn’t be? At least you’re home now.”

Lisa took a step back. She wasn’t used to people getting so close up and personal anymore.

“She looks confused about you, Mom, standing in her kitchen and acting like it was your place,” Peter said.

Mary’s face fell, and Lisa felt terrible about her standoffishness. “No, really. It’s okay. Mrs. Fisher. I just expected no one to be here.”

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him, and he grinned before he dove back into his breakfast. “Thanks a lot for the breakfast offer, Mrs. Fisher, but I’ll just grab some coffee, walk Cookie, and then go back to the hospital, anyway.” No way was she having breakfast with Peter Fisher in front of his mother.

Not after what happened yesterday at the airport. Or later that night, with him witnessing her total breakdown.

“I already took Cookie for a walk; we can leave right now if you want.” Peter finished his coffee and the last of his bacon. He stood up, shrugged into his coat, and grabbed his dishes. On the way to the dishwasher, he kissed his mom on the head. “Thanks for breakfast, Mom.”

Mrs. Fisher smiled before she turned back to the stove.

Peter put his dishes away and stopped at the back door. “You coming?”

Lisa’s mind raced, but her feet didn’t move. “Well, no.”

What made him think she wanted to ride with him to the hospital? “I mean, thanks for the offer, but I think I can get there on my own.”

Peter lowered his eyebrows, but she turned and left the kitchen through the door she entered. Felt his eyes following her.

The same eyes that had followed her into her dreams.

Eyes that made her want to forget their messy past.

Lisa shook her head at her own silliness. She was still too raw after yesterday to go another round with him.

Too uncomfortable with him having witnessed her weakness.

Being confined in a car with Peter Fisher wasn't a good idea.

She fetched her shoes and purse at the Inn's main entrance. When she passed the giant mirror that had hung there for as long as she could remember, she glanced at herself and came to a standstill.

She didn't look flustered or not yet awake.

She somehow looked worse than yesterday, with an extraordinary case of bed hair—memo to self.

Never a good idea to skip sleep for three nights in a row and then go to bed with wet hair.

She groaned. And just who would be there to witness?

Perfect.

Lisa stepped out the door and leaned down to pet Cookie, who basked in the first rays of the sun. Cookie was a Chinook mix. Huge but sweet-natured and almost shy. Now, she was an ancient lady, but when Lisa left, she was only a few months old and had followed her dad everywhere.

Her dad. She sighed and rubbed her chest where her heart ached.

Please, dad, pull through.

She straightened and shook her body out to relax. There's always hope. That's what Alan said yesterday.

So she would cling to that.

She walked toward the parking lot, but what little relaxation she felt evaporated when she turned the corner.

Peter waited for her, leaning against his truck, his muscular body perfectly outlined in jeans and a white T-shirt.

Damn.

“Hey, tiger, I don't want to burst your bubble, but if you don't want to take the bus to Whitebrook, you're stuck with me.”

Lisa pressed her lips together.

Tiger... God, the nerves this man had. Then the words sank in, and she stumbled.

Her mother's car!

She'd left it there.

They took Peter's truck to the sheriff's station and home, as well.

"Oh God, where's Mom's car?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know, but I'll find out while you visit with your father."

A twitchy feeling settled in her throat, and she clenched her teeth. Then she marched to the passenger side of his truck.

"Can we at least not talk on the way?" Lisa settled into her seat and looked at him from the corner of her eye.

He shook his head. "No can do, tiger." The low pitch of his voice rolled hot over her.

"I want to apologize, and we should talk about yesterday." He put the car in reverse and glanced over his shoulder. When his eyes skimmed over her body, her skin pebbled.

Fuck.

"Why?"

"I can only guess, but there's a chance yesterday's pictures are bouncing around in your beautiful head. You may have questions too. Better to get it all out in the open."

They left the parking lot and drove along the one-lane street that ended at the Inn.

He was right—many questions about yesterday swirled around in her head.

But that wasn't what caught her attention.

"No, I mean, yes, I have questions, but why would you want to apologize?"

"You know why." Peter looked sideways at her for a second but immediately turned his eyes back to the road.

Did she, though?

Why would he feel the need to apologize? “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your animosity toward me at the airport yesterday tells a different story.”

Lisa’s cheeks tingled, and she crossed and uncrossed her arms when realization hit her.

He wanted to talk about their past.

Apologize for it.

About their night together and his shitty behavior afterward. He thought she was still hung up on it.

On him.

No way would she show him that he was right. “It’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

Peter scratched his neck. “Doesn’t matter. I still owe you an apology.”

Lisa blew out a noisy breath and turned toward Peter. “Look, we were kids. We made love, you ignored me and then left, end of story.”

“That’s not right—”

“Okay, had sex then—”

“Would you shut up for a second!”

She snapped her mouth shut.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—” Peter took a deep breath. “Look, it was the right thing at the wrong time. I wasn’t in a good place back then, but I should’ve treated you better than I did.”

“I felt pretty...”

“Pissed off? Angry?”

Her lips tightened in a quick smile.

All of those.

But then, as the pain had dulled, as realization had settled in that he wouldn’t acknowledge what had happened between them, loneliness had been the one thing she had battled most.

But that was silly.

How could she feel lonely after one night with a boy? An intense night, she could give herself that, but their encounter had been too brief to evoke those intense feelings.

Which her strategy was to deny she'd ever had. "I think you made this bigger than it was. At least for me."

She yawned and looked at her nails.

Take that.

He could witness her complete boredom discussing the topic.

"Well, it was..." Peter hesitated while he searched for the right word. "Profound—at least for me."

Her chest tightened.

Damn. "Okay."

Maybe profound was a good description. But it was half a lifetime too late for this chat. "Why do you want to talk about this now? I thought guys don't like to talk about their feelings."

She sure didn't.

"I don't." He clutched the wheel until his knuckles turned white.

She rolled her eyes. "Could've fooled me."

There was a deafening silence in the car after that. And not a comfortable one. Lisa replayed the conversation in her head.

Multiple times.

Was she being petty? Yes, it had been a shitty move on his side. But shouldn't she be over it? Also, he'd been a teenager in what must have been the shittiest moment of his life so far.

And he apologized.

And he looked sincere doing it.

Now she was the petty one.

“Look”—Peter didn’t move his head or eyes off the street in front of him—“this is just an apology, but I see, it isn’t wanted. Obviously, it meant more to me than it did to you. So, I’m sorry I bothered you.”

Heat flushed through her body, and her head jerked toward him.

Fuck pretend to be cool and all over it.

He wanted to talk, well he might not like to hear what she had to say. “It meant a lot to me, and you blew it—but now? Thirteen years later? It’s like waaayyy too late for this shit.”

Why her eyes stung with tears, if it really was way too late for this shit, was a complete mystery to her. And annoying as hell.

So much for playing it cool.

He watched her briefly before his eyes turned back to the road. After a while, he raised his hand as if he wanted to touch her but put it back on the wheel. Minutes passed, and she watched the countryside of her youth fly by.

Now he knew.

He knew just how much his actions had affected her.

After a while, he cleared his throat. His voice came out soft and deliciously low.

How was she still attracted to him when he’d hurt her so much?

“Can I just apologize for what I did? And can you maybe just accept my apology, please? I know I behaved like an ass. I knew right away. And I regretted it. A lot.”

She exhaled deeply. Why was she so riled up about this? They’d been young, there had been other men in her life, and it had been just one stupid night—time to get over herself. “Okay, apology accepted. Can we move on now?”

“Move on to being friends again?” Peter’s signature grin showed a dimple on his right cheek.

Her heart flipped, and she looked away. The effect he still had on her body was astounding...and annoying. "God, you are needy."

A gleam entered Peter's eyes. "No, just interested."

"In what?"

"You."

Lisa stiffened. Okaaay. Totally not what she'd expected. "No."

Peter kept up his grin but didn't look over at her anymore. "No to being friends or being interested in me?"

Lisa squeezed her hands together. God, was he delirious?

She wanted to get out of this car

ASAP.

"I think I'm getting claustrophobic with you and your over-inflated ego in such a small space."

She crossed her arms and relaxed.

But her sarcastic comment just made him chuckle, which rolled over her like a silky wave.

Not taking himself too serious had been one of his best traits as a teenager.

Apparently, he hadn't lost that.

She turned and stared at his mouth, the same mouth that, murmuring against her ear, had soothed her yesterday and entered her dreams last night. Then again, dreaming about his mouth had been way better than the more disturbing pictures that loomed in the outskirts of her mind.

Yep.

She'd thought about him just as an avoidance tactic.

Definitely not because of the almost electrical feelings that wrecked her body upon being near Peter Fisher.

Not that he could ever know the effect he had on her body.

“How long to the hospital?” They had entered Whitebrook a few minutes ago, so it couldn’t be long.

“Just around the corner.”

The grin on his face annoyed her. Did he have these gorgeous dimples when he was younger? “Thank God.”

“Well, sure, nice to have you back—great company, polite too.”

Lisa rolled her eyes.

He sure as hell wouldn’t get a reaction out of her.

He parked his car right next to the hospital entrance, and she waved and exited the vehicle as fast as possible.

Well, that had been strange.

The fact that he regretted his actions, that their encounter had also impacted his life, made her almost giddy.

She needed to talk to Claire about this.

Claire would help her make sense of all of this.

“Hey, Tiger, call me when you’re ready; your mom has my number.” Peter had exited his truck and stood in the bright sunlight.

Illuminated and grinning.

Like an ancient northern god, ready for everything.



Karen met up with Lisa right in front of the waiting room for the ICU. “Mom’s in there right now, and it’s our turn right after,” she said.

Lisa grabbed her sister’s forearm. “Did something happen? Did he wake up?”

She shook her head, but her sad expression turned into a strange little smile. She pulled Lisa into a hug and, after a deep breath, released the hug and squeezed her face with both her hands. “It’s good to have you back, little sister. I missed you so much.”

They made their way over and settled on chairs right next to the glass doors of the ICU.

“How was the night? Did you enjoy being home? Your last visit was some time ago.”

“About five years since I’ve been home.”

“Wow, that’s a long time. I’ve always wanted to ask you this. Why did you leave in the first place?”

Lisa looked down at the folded hands in her lap.

Wasn’t that the question.

“You know why.” She hesitated. “Mom and I never got along, and it became worse after you left for college. It was just time, you know. To get out. I always wanted to see the world.”

“Bullshit,” Karen scoffed, “you loved it back home. You always wanted to take over the Inn, didn’t you? Something happened after the funeral. You changed.”

“Well,”—Lisa shrugged—“plans change. Especially when something like this happens. I just had the urge to forge my own path, make my own decisions. You know you can do anything over there when you are eighteen. Drink, drive, live your life.” She may have jumped on the chance, as well, because it was as far away from her mother as humanly possible.

“Did you do all those things?”

“Yep,” Lisa said.

“But why Turkey? It’s the other side of the world and dangerous.” Karen looked at her with a total lack of understanding.

“I got a job there; Marty got me an internship at a friend’s diving base in Turkey. I got to work and finish my dive master there. It was a great crew too. Lots of folks from Europe and the UK. I made friends there. And don’t get me started on dangerous—” Lisa stopped. Was she even allowed to talk about yesterday evening?

She had to ask Peter.

“And that Fisher boy?” Karen leaned closer to Lisa, and her voice dropped to a whisper. “You had a crush on him, didn’t you?” She stared at Lisa and bumped shoulders.

“No.” It hadn’t been a crush per se—maybe a little infatuation with the star hockey player of her high school that was crushed by said asshole’s actions. “Peter left Moon Lake right after graduation.”

The glass doors slid open, and their mother, accompanied by a nurse, came out of the ICU. Lisa and Karen stood up and led their mom to the waiting room. She looked frail, with clear signs of tears visible on her cheeks.

“Who’s next?” the nurse said while their mother slumped down on a chair with a heavy thump and took a shaky breath.

“You go first,” Karen said to Lisa and sat down next to their mother.

Lisa turned to the nurse who was waiting at the entrance of the waiting room.

“There are a few steps before you can go in.” The nurse, whose name according to her name tag was Rosa, accompanied her to a small room and gave her a pack of clothes. “Dress up.”

Lisa was lightheaded, and sweat gathered on her forehead when she finished dressing in a gown, gloves, a face mask, and a surgical cap.

Then she stepped into the room, greeted by the cacophony of beeping from the machines positioned around the bed. The pump of the ventilation machine drew Lisa’s attention first before she glanced at all the other devices and finally looked at her father in bed.

She didn’t recognize the man in the bed.

Maybe it was a mistake, and she was in the wrong room.

Lisa nibbled on her lips and glanced at the nurse still with her.

“People can look very different when in a coma.”

Rosa obviously had encountered her reaction before. “You can go to him, touch him, and talk to him. Just be careful around the tubes.”

Three stumbling steps took her to a chair on the side of the bed, where she plunked down just in time before her knees gave out.

Her heartbeat raced, ready to explode.

She took a closer look and saw the familiarities: his bushy eyebrows, the thin lines of his lips that usually turned into a grin so wide you couldn’t help yourself but grin back.

But they weren’t grinning.

And everything else looked nothing like her father.

He'd always been a bear of a man.

Not frail, white as a sheet, old, and haggard.

The nurse checked on some things on the other side of the bed.

“How's his score today?” She remembered her conversation with Alan the day before.

The nurse looked back at her, sorrow visible in her eyes. “You have to talk to a doctor about his score. All I can tell you is that his overall condition hasn't really changed.”

Lisa swallowed—the pain in the back of her throat made it difficult to do so.

Tears pooled in her eyes when she turned back to her dad, and her vision blurred. Once again, she saw the great man he'd been—a great father.

Her hero.

The antidote to her mother's critical nature. Full of support and a deep trust that she was perfect just the way she was and that she would forge her path in life.

Lisa took his hand into hers.

It was cold, his skin soft even though it looked like parchment paper.

A heavy weight settled in her chest, and silent tears streamed down her face. Then she started talking; she told all kinds of stories of the last few years. Things she'd seen underwater, people she'd met.

But inside, she mourned the wasted time.

Time they hadn't seen each other, because she wasn't home.

Sometime later, Rosa gently guided her out of the room. Her time was up, and she needed to swap places with Karen.

Back in the waiting room, she sat beside her mother, both lost in their thoughts.

After a while of sitting in silence, Lisa's mom spoke. "We had plans, you know. We wanted to see the world. Travel to all the places you've been to. Your father was so proud of you. I was too and a little jealous. I always wanted to get out of Moon Lake. He'd promised..."

Lisa's eyebrows nearly touched her hairline. Her mother opening up like this wasn't something she could ever remember.

"We also talked about what we'll do with the Inn if something happens to one of us health-wise."

Her mother looked up at her expectantly.

A slight chill made Lisa stiffen. "What?" Why was her mother looking at her this way? Nobody had ever talked to her about any of this.

"If we can't do it together anymore, we either sell it, or you or Karen take over."

Lisa nodded. Sure, it was reasonable for them to have plans like that.

"I talked to Karen already—she doesn't want it. She doesn't want to take over the Inn. I can't blame her; she's made her life in Whitebrook. And you?"

Lisa's muscles tensed as she pressed her hands together. "Mom, you talk like Dad is dead. He could wake up any minute, and everything could be the same again."

Her mother looked at her with so much compassion.

Tears sprang into Lisa's eyes.

"Baby, I talked to the doctors. There hasn't been a change in Carl's medical condition. It hasn't gotten any better. They think there's a strong possibility that he'll never wake up again. And if he does wake up, he'll most likely not be his old self. His brain just didn't recover in the last few days." Her mother's voice hitched, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

A sob wedged in Lisa's throat.

It just couldn't be true.

Why the hell would this happen?

Her dad was so good to everyone, always. Helped when he was needed. Minded his own business when you needed him to leave you alone.

But she needed him right now.

She wanted him to walk her down the aisle one day. Show her children how to build a wooden boat, sword, or anything else in his small workshop. Pictures of them together: fishing with their small boat, sitting on the high seat in the woods watching the deer.

Lisa couldn't bear the thought of never again having a chance to talk to her dad. Ask him one of the hundreds of questions that always popped into her head at the strangest moments.

Her mother embraced her and made calming unintelligent noises.

"I know we had our problems in the past, but if you want to take over the Inn, now's the time to step up."

Her throat closed off.

Losing the Inn.

Not having this last connection with her dad. All of her memories were at that place. It was her childhood dream. "Can't we wait until there is certainty? I'm not ready; I don't know how. I have a completely different life waiting for me. Why do we need to make this decision now, Mom? We can wait a few weeks, see how Dad is doing by then."

"It's okay. I know this is too sudden. But we don't have the luxury of time. We have guests booked. It's summer. We can't just not decide. I want to be with your dad, and Mary has her own life. She can't pitch in for weeks. We need someone to take over immediately. Business was slow this past winter. A new hotel opened right at the slopes of Sheep's Mountain. They took a lot of the usual business. We barely made enough to keep going, but we have bookings all through summer. We can't afford to lose this business. I'm sorry, but we have to make a decision either way."

They released their embrace, and her mother flattened her clothes before her hands fell into her lap while Lisa pressed two fingers to the sides of her forehead and closed her eyes. She could feel a headache coming on. Again.

“There’s someone who’s been interested in acquiring the Inn; I’ll just give him a call.”

She wanted to cover her ears and sing la la la, like a child, to make this all go away.

She and Claire had talked about opening their own little hotel. But they’d had a small diver’s camp in mind—somewhere warm and beautiful, not an Inn, on a lake, in the middle of the mountains.

But maybe they should try.

Maybe this was their opportunity. Could she stay here in Moon Lake?

Come home for good?

Her brain started spinning. Now that her diving program got shut down, nothing really fired her up about her old job anymore.

She had to make a decision.

She never wanted to return, mostly because of her mother and what had happened with Peter. But maybe, maybe, it would all work out. She was an adult now. She could do it. Her mother was obviously ready to let go of the Inn, so maybe she wouldn’t meddle too much. Even though, with her living in such close proximity, Lisa wouldn’t bet on it.

And Peter—she still felt this insane attraction to him, but the years had changed them both.

Maybe they could be civilized and become friends.

“I will do it,” Lisa said, and her eyes fell on her sister, who entered the room right that exact moment she spoke out loud. “I will come back and take over the Inn.”

Karen smiled a sad little smile, and her mother’s posture changed like a huge weight was taken off her chest.

“I want to ask a friend if she would partner with me, though. We already had plans to open our own hotel someday. She cooks like a goddess, which I don’t.”

“It’s your decision, and I will not interfere with your decisions,” Lisa’s mother said.

Lisa chewed on her lower lip.

That she would believe when she saw it.

Her mother was a meddler and a critic—always had been.

But she would cope somehow.

She was an adult now.

She would make the Inn hers and come back home for good.

Holy moly.



Lisa sat on a bench in the small park by the hospital. She held her mother's phone in her hand while she sipped a huge cup of coffee and tapped her foot.

Why the hell did she tell her mother she would take over the Inn?

That was an impulsive decision.

Sure, the concept of losing the Inn didn't sit well with her, but if she doubted her decision already half an hour later, maybe it was the wrong one. Now she had to ask Claire, who might think Lisa had lost her mind. And she would be frank about it too.

Lisa watched a sparrow picking on the gravel right in front of her.

She should get going before the birds mistook her for a statue.

Lisa gulped down a deep breath and dialed what was quite possibly the only number she knew by heart. "Hey, Claire."

"Lisa, I was sick with worry. Why did you wait so long to call? I tried your phone but couldn't get through. What the hell is going on? How's your dad?"

Tears pooled in Lisa's eyes.

How she had missed her best friend these last few days.

In the background, she could hear clanging and shouting.

Claire must be in the ship's kitchen. She was one hell of a cook and quickly advanced to the position of sous-chef on the cruise ship.

She wiped at her eyes furiously and contained the sob she felt lodged in her chest.

"It's bad, really, really bad."

"Your dad?"

"Yes, he hasn't regained consciousness yet, and the longer it takes, the less chance there is he ever will."

"Oh, Lisa, I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

"Actually, I have to ask you something." She hesitated. Her friend hated surprises, and she was not a very spontaneous person. Maybe she shouldn't say anything just yet.

"What is it? Do you need me to come there? I have a few vacation days left. I can make it happen if you need me."

"Yes, I definitely need you here, but there is more."

"Come on, bestie, just spit it out—you're scaring me."

Claire's voice had turned impatient, so Lisa took a deep breath. "I will not come back."

"Back here, to the ship? What? Why?"

"I..." She hesitated; saying it out loud made it real, and she wasn't sure she could stomach that. But it was too late for that now. "I kind of agreed to take over the Inn."

"The Inn. Your family's Inn? Gabriel's Inn? Back in Moon Lake?"

"Yep."

Nobody called it Gabriel's Inn anymore. It was just the Moon Lake Inn. And running it was her responsibility now.

There was silence on the other side of the phone.

Which added to the nervousness Lisa was already feeling. "Claire?"

"What about your mom? What about your fights?"

“It’s complicated.” She had sworn she wouldn’t ever put herself in a position again where her mother could criticize her.

And now look at her.

Family obligations, a hefty dose of guilt, and emotional instability.

Those were the only reasons she could come up with for saying yes.

“Hell, yes, I’d say so. I hope you know what you’re doing. And I hope you really thought that through.”

Lisa remained silent.

No, she really hadn’t thought that decision through.

She was afraid if she thought about it too much, she would see what a terrible mistake she’d made.

“So, do you need me to pack up your stuff? Have you called Chad already?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. She hadn’t talked to her boss yet and wasn’t eager to do so. But there was something that was a hell of a lot more important to ask Claire, and she didn’t know how her best friend would react to this next ambush. “I want you to move here and become my partner.”

Silence on the other end of the line.

Lisa prayed for her best friend to say yes. “Claire? I know it’s not exactly what we envisioned for our own hotel. But we always wanted to have our own gig. Can it be this? Can it be here?”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“Lisa.”

Oh, God.

Her mind raced.

Claire would say no.

She should have thought about this first. It was a big step, especially for Claire, who valued security so much.

Too late now.

“What if it blows up in our faces? What if the situation with your mom gets out of hand again? What if you want to leave again?”

Lisa swallowed, desperation clawing at her throat. She wanted Claire on board. She needed her on board. “We don’t have to make huge investments or anything like that. My sister doesn’t want the Inn, and it’s either me taking over or my mother selling it. If it doesn’t pan out, we can always get a job somewhere else. Please.”

“Hell, I hate your spontaneity. We need to really think this through. We need a business plan. I have to make a pros and cons list.”

Lisa’s face split into a grin.

Not a no. It wasn’t a no.

“Okay, you are right. You could just come visit for a few days. You would have enough time on the plane to make all your lists. And then, once you’re here, you can check everything out and then make your decision. There’s more...”

“More? What? Wait a minute. You’re gone five minutes—what more could have happened?”

“Well,”—Lisa looked down at the sparrow still picking in front of her—“I found a body, and I met Peter.”

“A body? Are you kidding me? That is not funny at all.”

“No, it wasn’t. It kind of freaked me out.”

“And who’s this, Peter?”

“Peter, my Peter. He is back home.”

“Your Peter? One-night-stand-Peter? I thought he left—that’s why you left too.” Claire sounded confused and a little overwhelmed by her mental leaps.

“Yeah, he’s obviously back. Deputy sheriff. He kind of apologized.”

“That was quick.”

Lisa heard caution in the voice of her best friend.

“We met at the airport, he came to pick me up, and then, we met again. After I found the body.”

“Are you shitting me? You haven’t been gone that long; how could all of this happen in a matter of a week?”

“It actually happened yesterday—all of it. I’m still confused about all the details. I haven’t dealt with it all. The jet lag isn’t helping, and my brain is still a little fuzzy.”

“Are you sure you should make life-changing decisions based on a fuzzy brain?” The reprimands in Claire’s voice were hard to miss.

Lisa felt vulnerable, and whenever she felt vulnerable, she either got snarky or sarcastic.

“No, I’m not sure at all, Claire. But my father is in a coma. I found a dead body at the side of the road, and the one boy I hated for the better part of my life, stood by my side and apologized.”

Lisa fought down the tears that threatened to bubble up again. “I don’t know what to do, how to react to all of this.

So, I go with what feels right, and beneath the queasiness, fear, and doubt, taking over my family’s livelihood feels right. Okay?” Lisa successfully fought her tears, but her breath hitched.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you. I know this must be tough on you. But you’re always so reckless and, at the same time, audacious.

You always are—and I am not.

I feel much more comfortable playing it safe. Holy hell, most of the time, I feel like your babysitter or your lame old aunt.”

She immediately felt bad for her outburst. Claire was not like her. She needed safety and control. No wonder when you took her past into account. But their differences made them a hell of a team. “And what a good job you are doing as my babysitter. You are certainly up for a bonus. How about a little Inn, settled on the shore of a beautiful lake, surrounded by beautiful snow-capped mountains?”

They both snorted with laughter, and for the first time, Lisa felt a resemblance of normal again.

This was their thing.

Hers and Claire’s.

They didn’t always see eye to eye on things, but even if they had opposite opinions, sometimes even fights, they never stayed pissed at each other for long. They cleared the air with banter. So they could go from fighting to laughing their heads off in under a minute.

Claire really was a gift.

“You’re such a smart ass. This is serious shit.”

“Only if you let it be. No, it is. So, will you come down here? Protect me from the bad wolves? Please, please, I’m begging you.”

“There are wolves there? Then absolutely not. I hate wildlife of any kind.”

They both giggled as they recalled the one time Lisa took Claire diving.

When Claire saw a small black-tip shark, she nearly fainted and tore through her air supply so fast they had to cut the dive short.

As soon as they’d been back on the ship, Claire had sworn she would never ever put her head back underwater again.

“Please?” Lisa wasn’t beyond begging. Whatever it took to get her best friend down to Moon Lake, she would do it.

“Of course, I’ll come.

We’re a team.

I can't just leave you there all alone. You're right. It was always our dream to have our own little hotel.

So why not in Moon Lake?"

"Oh, perfect. Hey, will you marry me, please?" Sometimes Lisa really thought it would be a lot easier if she could fall in love with her best friend.

"Ha, you're such a goofball. So, let me check flights; I have to make arrangements and pack up our stuff. But you give your notice to Chad yourself. I really don't need his anger or attention on me."

Lisa smiled, a weight lifted from her shoulders.

She wouldn't lose her best friend. They would take over the Inn together. Work as a team. "You really make me happy, Claire."

"So, what about Peter?"

A queasy feeling replaced the happiness she'd felt just moments ago. "I don't know. He kinda took care of me. And he wants to be friends."

"And you? Do you care about him?"

"I don't know. The first time I saw him, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me."

"Why? He was the one who ran and left you high and dry. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I had a little run-in with some baggage boys who had fun with my underwear. And he was there. Even commented on the underwear. But he's really trying, you know. So, I have to think about it."

"A run-in with baggage, boys? Get real. Are they even called that?"

Lisa shrugged; heat climbed up her throat when she thought about Peter's arms around her waist and his body pressing against hers.

Claire snickered. "I thought your life was as boring as mine. Looks like coming home did shake things up quite a

bit.”

A lightness spread through her chest. “You just come here, and I’m sure your life will get shaken up a bit too.”

Claire stopped snickering. “I like boring. It’s safe. I’ll call you as soon as I know my flight details. You hang in there, girl. And I hope your dad gets better.”

Her chest tightened again—just thinking about her dad made everything else going on so insignificant in comparison. “I hope so too.”

She had to get back to her mother.

Maybe there was news.



Lisa stood under the shower and groaned. Jet lag was a beast.

She turned the water to cold but jumped out as soon as the water hit her.

Not gonna happen today.

She put on jeans and grabbed a random T-shirt. She loved her T-shirts. This one she'd gotten from Claire for her last birthday, with the text *I'm in shape. Round is a shape.* written on it. A friendly reminder for them both to not be ashamed of their womanly figures.

Lisa knew intellectually she was in good shape now. All the fresh air and diving took care of that, but sometimes, her mother's voice in her head, telling her that her thighs were getting too big, still haunted her.

Oh God, why didn't she think of this yesterday?

She'd committed to stay and take over the Inn.

What a nightmare.

But wait, with Claire at her side, she could do it. Plus, she'd developed self-esteem and a thick skin.

Two things she hadn't had as a teenager.

As Lisa went down the stairs, she heard clanging pots and pans in the kitchen again. Mary must be back again. With a shake of her head, she banished the image of a grinning Peter from her mind.

Warmth pooled in her belly. Followed by a quick flash of annoyance, she quenched immediately.

The Fishers were so good to them. Besides helping out at the Inn, Peter had even gone to the airport to fetch her.

Lisa had forgotten this was the way in Moon Lake: everybody was in everyone's business all the time but also eager to help each other.

She'd missed this.

Maybe staying would turn out to be the right decision.

At the bottom of the staircase, her dog Cookie waited for her, tail wagging.

She petted her. "Hey, girl, you need to be taken out?" So, no Peter in the house today. Something dulled inside of her.

Was she really disappointed because he wasn't there?

God, she was pathetic.

"I'll just grab a cup of coffee, then we can go for a walk," She said to her dog on her way to the kitchen.

Heavenly smells instantly surrounded her, the evidence—freshly baked muffins on the table, next to a beautiful bouquet of red roses.

Mary turned, and a smile spread over her face. "Morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Fine, thank you." Lisa hadn't slept well—again.

She'd hardly slept at all.

The combination of jet lag and pictures in her head of the hand under the bushes didn't do too much for her sleep, yet again.

She needed to ask Peter about it.

Maybe he could tell her more, and perhaps knowledge would cure the pictures that prevented her sleep and the crushing terror that came on the heel of those pictures.

She crossed the room, went to the breakfast nook, and picked up the card attached to the bouquet.

Lovely meeting you.

Welcome home.

A.

She smelled the roses and smiled. How nice of Alan to send them.

She put the card back. And walked up to Mary.

“I’ll go walk Cookie,” she said, “and, Mary, thanks for helping out around here; we really, really appreciate it, you know.”

Tears welled up in Mary’s eyes, and Lisa hugged her.

“Thank you, my dear. You know. Your parents became real good friends to me. They helped me through the tough times after losing Sophie; now it’s my turn. I’m glad I can give back in times of need.”

Sophie—with all the shit happening in the last few days, she hadn’t thought much of her.

Peter’s sister.

Killed at age nineteen.

Her death had a significant impact on everyone in Moon Lake. After their night at Sophie’s funeral, Peter withdrew a lot; he got moody and private. But that was after he completely ignored her the following days in school, so Lisa had been hell-bent on ignoring all that.

The marriage of his parents went to shit in the months after too.

She always thought that might have triggered Peter to join the military so suddenly, even though, before Sophie’s death, he’d always declared he wanted to go to college, even got a hockey scholarship.

“You know what.” She pulled off her apron. “I’ll come with you. The weather is perfect for a little walk,” Mary said.

Lisa got her cup of coffee, and out they went. She looked to the left, over the meadow that separated the Inn and the lake.

What a beautiful patch of land.

White deck chairs gleamed in the sun at the water's edge, and all kinds of games would be played on that meadow. In fact, she had to check the shed for the outdoor play stuff. The shed had been a small cottage, but it hadn't been used for guests in a long time, so more and more outdoor equipment had ended up in it.

Was that still the case?

They turned their backs to the lake, rounded the corner, crossed the parking lot, and walked past the beautiful vegetable garden, fenced with an ancient ornate fence and dozens of beautiful roses.

Her mother's heart and soul.

Beauty with thorns.

Soon they would bloom, and their sweet smell and beautiful blossoms would carry on throughout summer.

They veered right and passed the small cottage behind the Inn. When Lisa's parents took over the Inn, her grandmother still lived there, but she died when Lisa had still been very young. Now her parents lived there. Her dad had renovated the cottage himself, had sent her pictures, and even done a virtual tour for her.

It was too small for a family, he'd always said. But perfect for her mother and him once Karen and her were out of the house.

He'd finished the renovations three or four years ago, and it'd been his pride and joy.

Mary and Lisa entered the small forest, which separated their property from their neighbor's and had a looped path through it. Perfect for a little walk for their guests and a perfect playground when Lisa and Karen were kids.

They'd built forts and played cops and robbers with their friends.

Often the whole day.

It'd been a good childhood. Fresh air and a lot of freedom—advantages of living in such a rural area.

“How're you holding up?” Mary asked.

Lisa was so caught up in her memories that she jumped when Mary talked.

“You know, I sent Peter to the airport to pick you up, but you seemed a little tense around each other yesterday.”

Oh great, just what she needed, a heart-to-heart with Peter's mom. “Everything's fine. It was just an awkward situation yesterday.”

“I know something happened between the two of you back when you were young. Your mom and I were sorry you and Peter had a fallout.”

Heat flashed through Lisa's body.

They'd noticed?

Fuck.

So this was where Karen got her info from?

Her mind raced.

Think of something else to say, deflect, redirect. Think. Think. Think. “We were just kids.” Great, the line of the century.

“Maybe you're right. Feelings are all over the place when you're young. Argh, not to say they aren't all over the place all the time. You just have to look at Peter's marriage or mine.”

What?

Lisa stumbled across a stone and only just caught herself from falling.

Wait? Peter was married?

How could he be married, and this was the first time she'd ever heard about it? When did he get married anyhow, and did they have children?

“You all right?” Mary grabbed her arm to steady her.

Lisa smiled and nodded. “Just clumsy as usual.”

Mary let go of her with a smile, and they took a few steps in silence.

“I’m sorry to hear; I mean, it sounds like their marriage isn’t going so well.” Lisa kept her voice neutral but itched to know more about it.

“Oh, they were married for about three years.”

Was she freaking kidding her? Three years? But wait.

Were.

As in past tense.

As in, not anymore, correct?

“They got married while he was still on active duty as a Navy SEAL. I didn’t get to know her back then—wasn’t invited to their wedding either, and they never visited until they decided to move back here.”

She inhaled sharply.

Peter and his wife lived here, in Moon Lake? Why hadn’t anybody told her?

“I was thrilled at first—a daughter-in-law.” Mary looked at her like she would understand, and she nodded. “But she wasn’t the person I hoped her to be. I don’t think she was up to small-town living either, and their marriage was rocky.”

Okay.

Her breathing was slightly too fast for the leisurely pace they wandered through the wood.

Peter had been married, and he’d been a Navy SEAL. Did her mother and father know about all this?

All she had known was that he’d signed up for the military, but nobody had ever conveyed any further details.

Not even the friends she had infrequent contact with.

No wonder his body was hard as steel.

She just had to close her eyes to recall it in vivid colors, pressed against her back.

“Well, I think, from what I’ve read, making it work under this kind of stress and being separated a lot could be hard on a marriage.”

Her only research was comprised of Navy SEAL Romance novels which she and Claire had devoured a while back, so she wasn’t entirely sure if her knowledge was all that accurate.

“Do they have kids?” She asked after a non-committal hum from Mary, praying for the answer to be no.

“No, they don’t. Thank God for small favors. They were a beautiful couple, at least on the outside, but you can never look inside a marriage,” Mary said.

Lisa released a slow breath.

No kids.

Just a wife or ex-wife. “Does she still live here, after... They are separated, aren’t they?” She prayed she wasn’t coming across as too interested.

“She moved to Whitebrook after they separated. She works at the hospital, you know.”

Huh, maybe she’d already met her there.

“And Peter, where does he live now?” She glanced sideways at Mary. Was she too curious?

No.

They hadn’t seen each other for years, and she was just being polite.

Interested.

Maybe a little disappointed.

But she could sell it as being polite.

Most of the time, Lisa had been waiting for her life to happen; at least, her love life had not been going anywhere meaningful.

But Peter.

He had a history.

He'd lived his life to the fullest.

Marriage and all.

“He bought the small house in the woods up Creeks’s mountain—the old Sheridan place. Remote, but he says he likes the privacy. It would scare me to death living there.”

Lisa remembered the old house. It had been empty for years after old Mr. Sheridan died.

Lisa and Mary stepped out of the wood again, where Cookie waited for them.

They rounded the Inn with its lovely wooden ornaments, and Cookie flopped down at the bottom of the steps to the kitchen door, completely spent after the short walk.

Lisa felt drained, as well. All this information about Peter. There was so much she didn't know about him.

And besides the chemistry when he touched her or laid his eyes on her, there really was nothing between them anymore.

When he said he was interested in her, it made her think he wanted something more between them. But he was probably just that.

Interested.

How foolish of her.

More likely, the feelings and the chemistry she'd been feeling were just nostalgia and nothing else.

The man kept his distance. He'd watched them through the window, followed them on their walk through the woods.

Kept his distance. Sadly out of earshot. But his eyes never left her.

She was the one.

Finally.



The heavy wooden door closed behind Peter with a smooth click.

Inside, the honey-colored wooden planks on the floor, as well as on the sloping walls, gave the Fisherman Bar & Grill a rustic atmosphere.

Intimate, like the inside of an oversized barrel.

The place was empty except for Mr. Patterson, the owner of the little store in town, and Mr. Brown, the most senior fisherman, sitting on the far end of the long wooden bar.

They were talking and nursing a beer after a hard day out on the lake.

Since the bar had its own pier, it was the go-to place for them.

They looked up and greeted Peter before staring at the sports announcer commentating on a fishing tournament on TV.

The table area he and his buddy and former teammate, Sebastian “Blaze” Blake, had built together from the same old wooden planks as the bar, was empty.

Peter spotted a couple of youngsters all the way at the back, by the pool table.

But afternoons at the bar were always pretty slow.

After Blake took over the bar, he tried to keep it closed until later, but the old fishermen, as well as the youngsters,

soon persuaded him otherwise.

The number of customers would change soon enough. Then the bar would fill up to the brim.

And not just with the usual dinner crowd, which were almost entirely locals, but also with a flock of women who crowded the bar ever since they had taken one look at Blake.

His buddy would have his hands full by then.

Peter took a seat on the old bar stool by the bar, the leather surface smooth and worn but still comfy. His old buddy mumbled some explicit curse words, and he chuckled before he grabbed the opposite edge of the bar, hauled himself up, and peered over it.

“Problems?”

Blake knelt on the floor, about to hook up a new keg.

“No, not at all—perfect timing as always—fresh beer coming up in a minute.”

Blake glanced up at him, his eyebrows raised and his piercing, blue eyes focused on him. “Your step’s awfully heavy. Anything up?”

His hand tightened around the bar’s edge; he shook his head and grinned.

“Geez, you still listening to how people walk? You’re weird.” Peter was still, to this day, surprised by the superhuman hearing of his best friend even though he should know better.

“On missions, you always appreciated my abilities.”

Peter’s face split into an even wider grin.

“At least we let you think that.” He couldn’t ignore the chance to rib his buddy a little.

But Blake was right.

More than once, he’d heard something or someone coming way before anyone else on the team. He could sometimes tell them specifics they would’ve never known otherwise.

Just with his extraordinary hearing.

“Fuck you,” Blake said while rubbing the back of his neck.

Peter got serious again. “So, what about that beer?” He sat back on his bar stool. “You about ready, or do you need help?”

Blake righted himself to his full height of six-six and cracked his head left and right.

With his height, muscular frame, and red beard, he’d earned the nickname Blaze which he got on one of their first missions after surviving BUD/S together.

“I’m okay. Stop deflecting.” Blake tilted his head up and scowled at Peter. “And tell me what’s wrong?”

Peter gave a half-hearted shrug. “Can I get a beer first, wifey?”

“Of course, you can, after taking out the garbage, my dear,” Blake replied immediately with a high-pitched, saccharine voice.

They both grinned at each other, and Peter relaxed for the first time in what felt like forever.

It had been the right decision to come here after his shift. Blake’s company always made him feel better. And he really could use a timeout after the ups and downs of the last few days.

“We found the missing woman.”

His memories of Lisa at the crime scene caused his stomach to clench. There had been multiple search parties for three days prior without any findings.

The woman went missing after a visit to the bar in Stone Valley.

Nobody had seen her leave, and she never returned to her hotel room at the Moon Lake Inn.

Thinking of her room at the Inn made him think of Lisa.

He hadn’t talked to her since yesterday when he dropped off the keys and her car at the hospital.

But he would see her tomorrow.

“Shit—dead, I assume, with you dragging your ass in here like that.”

He nodded and stared down at his hands on the bar.

“Violent and ugly. Died days ago. Hopefully, forensics will find concrete evidence this time.”

“This time?” Blake arched his left brow. “So, there’s been others?”

Peter sighed and rubbed his neck; he could feel a headache starting.

“Yeah, throughout the years, in the county, there’ve been several unsolved homicides with a similar MO.”

“Fuck.” Blake looked up from pouring the beer.

Peter nodded again and played with his keys on the bar in front of him.

“Yep, Fuck, pretty much sums it up.” Peter hesitated. “Lisa found her.”

“Who?”

“Lisa.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. She from around here? Should I know her?” Blake looked up and cursed when beer started to spill over the glass.

“My Lisa.” It sounded awkward to Peter’s own ears. He didn’t earn the right to call her that, but nevertheless, it resonated deep within him.

Blake placed the beer in front of him and poured another one for himself. “Nope. Still nothing. Care to elaborate?”

Peter tilted his head up at the ceiling and sighed.

“Well, the girl I left hanging? Before I left town. She’s back.”

Blake’s eyebrows nearly hit his hairline.

“Now, I remember. Ha, I still remember the night you told us the story. Never again seen you that wasted. You puked your guts out the next morning too.”

He laughed a deep belly laugh before getting a grip again. “When did she come back? I haven’t heard about her yet, so it can’t be long. Mrs. Brooks always tries to find me a nice little wife to settle down with; she would’ve told me of any new, potential candidates.”

Peter tapped his food and fidgeted.

He had no inclination to go down that route. Plus, Mrs. Brooks liked to play cupid for all the younger people in town.

Blake interpreted his silence correctly and changed the topic.

“So, she found the body?”

Peter nodded. “Yep, took it really hard. Shitty timing for her too—her dad’s in the hospital. Had an accident a few days back.”

Blake stopped his glass midway to his mouth. “So, she’s Reynold’s little daughter? You never told me that.”

His muscles tensed as he crossed his arms. “It’s not like I have nothing else on my mind, you know.”

Blake took a sip of his beer, but his eyes never left him, and silence stretched between them.

“So, how’d the reunion go?” he asked with a grin.

Peter’s face scrunched up. “Met her at the airport. Mom thought she needed someone to welcome her and give her a ride to the hospital.”

“Oh, aren’t you a good momma’s boy.” Blake’s grin widened. “I guess that didn’t go over so well.”

Peter’s mouth relaxed into a grin. “She was in the middle of ripping a couple of baggage handlers a new one—through the opening in the wall of the baggage belt.” He shook his head. He’d never seen anything like it. “Hilarious to watch.” He chuckled at the memories. “Apparently, her bag opened,

and they threw her undies onto the belt, one at a time. She wasn't in a very good mood."

"No, shit." Blake chuckled. "What did you do? Saved the damsel in distress, didn't you?"

"Got her down, deflected her venom. I was the perfect gentleman; she wasn't as well-behaved. I remember kicking and name-calling."

"Not happy to see you then."

"The name-calling came before she even recognized me, but no, she wasn't too happy, but she was radiating." Peter's grin softened.

Lisa was still the irresistible spitfire he remembered from back then. Only...more. More attractive, a lot sexier—just more.

"Are you serious? Do you even hear yourself? You sound like a fucking patsy—radiating..." Blake mimicked. "How are things going with Theresa?"

His mood crashed at the mentioning of his ex-wife. "Now that the divorce is finally settled, she thinks we should stay friends or something like that. She texts and calls and stuff."

"You sure it's friendship she's after?"

Peter absently scratched his jaw. "I don't know what she's after, and she doesn't either.

I guess her doctor might've ditched her or something. But I don't care. Over and done with, thank God—took us long enough to make that final step. Now I need her to get the hell out of my life."

Blake's eyebrows rose. "So..."

Peter cocked his head. "So..."

"Lisa, then."

He narrowed his eyes then immediately relaxed them again. "There's a lot of history between us. A lot of baggage. I guess she's still pissed." He shrugged his shoulders. "And she's a lot on her plate right now."

Blake lifted his chin. “You were a dick back then, Steel.”

Peter stiffened at the mentioning of his old nickname and sneered. “Yes, I was. Thanks for reminding me.”

He remembered the day he left town like it was yesterday.

How their eyes met inside the grocery store.

He’d destroyed something good, and the hurt in her eyes had haunted him for weeks after.

But he’d been hurting so much inside. His own guilt and shame had been all-consuming.

He should’ve protected his sister.

Should’ve taken care of her, talked some sense into her... just done something.

Maybe it would’ve made a difference.

Or maybe not.

But back then, it left no space for the feelings of others. “Maybe it’s time to make things right.”

“Maybe you had your chance.” Blake leaned against the back of the bar. “Carl always wanted me to meet her. Said a fine man like me would be good for her.”

Peter stared into his buddy’s eyes.

Hard.

His left hand clenched around his keys until it hurt, then he chugged down his beer before he leaped off the bar stool.

“Thanks for the beer, Blaze. I have to go. And you”—he pointed his finger at Blake—“stay away from her. She has enough on her plate right now.”

His buddy’s face split into a wide grin, and he lifted his hands in the air. “That was a little excessive, Steel. Don’t lose your cool over that chick.”

Peter felt a flash of heat and cleared his throat. “Just a little stressed out, that’s all.”

Lisa really brought forth all of his primal instincts.

He'd felt so protective of her at the crime scene.

And just the thought of another man in her life made his insides clench.

“Don't bullshit me, Steel. You've never lost your cool. At least not under pressure or over a girl. She might be special.” Blake looked at him expectantly.

And he was right.

He never lost his cool—nerves of steel; they had called him Steel for short. Was a second chance for Lisa and him even possible? They were both older now.

Maybe they could leave the past behind and start fresh.

“I don't think it's the right time with her father in the hospital. She's just decided to stay and take over the Inn. And she seemed pretty stressed about it when she told me yesterday.”

Blake wiped down the bar and put their glasses into the sink.

“So, wait a little, give her space, but if she's the one...”

Peter scoffed. “Look who's talking.”

Blake laughed out loud. “I'm just good with women, that's all.”

Peter shook his head and tapped on the bar twice. He turned when the door opened, and a rush of female voices flooded the bar.

“That you are, my man and your harem's here to prove it.” He looked back at Blake and nodded toward a group of young women.

They both looked at each other and chuckled.

“See you around. Thanks for the beer, man.” Peter scooped his keys up from the bar and jiggled them.

“Hey, you heard something from the boys? We still on?” Blake said.

“Yep, everything good. Have to check at the Inn for rooms for them. But they’re all coming. It’s only two weeks.”

“Will be good to see them again,” Blake said, his brows lowered.

“Sure will.”

Peter turned, thinking about their teammates who would come visit. He had to talk to Lisa about the rooms he would need for them.

Maybe he should step back a little, let her deal with the problems at hand, and just forge a friendship with her.

They’d been friends before that one dreaded night. Well, kind of, if you could call hanging out together in high school and stealing glances when she wasn’t looking, being friends.

Maybe they could become friends again—get to know each other as adults.

He went past the table of young women without even acknowledging the longing looks they cast in his direction.

He was done with easy hookups.



“Where are those damn keys?” Lisa shut another drawer. She looked at her watch.

Ten minutes.

She’d been searching for ten minutes, and she still had no clue where the keys to the basement of the Inn could be. Maybe this was an omen.

She wasn’t very keen to go down there, anyway—stupid idea to reacquaint herself with the Inn before Claire arrived. There was enough time for them to do this together.

She took a deep breath. Maybe in her parents’ cottage—maybe they kept the keys there. She made her way toward the cottage and stopped cold in the middle of the lawn that separated the small cottage from the Inn.

She shuffled her feet and looked down at the grass. She really should’ve visited her parents more often. She hadn’t ever been in there.

Didn’t know what to expect.

Finally, she straightened her spine and took a deep breath before she climbed the stairs and entered the cottage through the old wooden door.

It was unlocked, but that didn’t surprise her.

Moon Lake was a small town. She couldn’t remember a single locked door back when she was a kid, neither at home

nor at any of her friends' houses. Now that she thought of it, it made the locked basement all the more unusual.

There was nothing even remotely familiar inside the cottage except the smell. She inhaled deeply.

Home.

Her father's aftershave mixed with her mother's signature perfume still permeated the air conjuring up memories that settled heavily on her chest.

She steeled herself, then entered, and her throat tightened when she turned the corner from the entry to the living room. There were personal touches of her father all around. He always had a particular ability to blend old things into a modern environment.

Lisa touched the cool, gray stone mantle of the massive hearth, which sat smack dab in the middle of the small living room. They must've gotten rid of some walls because she remembered the hearth, but she was pretty sure there had been walls, not the open floor plan, that made the cottage appear bigger.

On the left-hand side sat a very modern, beige kitchen, only separated from the living room through a bar.

Even though the cottage was small, the bright colors gave the place a modern and roomy feeling.

She could see her mother and father after a long day.

Her mother would stand in the kitchen with a glass of white wine while her father sat on the bar nursing a beer.

Lisa turned toward the living room and sat down on the leather couch, which, surprisingly, was much more comfortable than it appeared.

She studied the beautiful pictures on the wall: scenic images of Moon Lake, the lake, the woods, and the mountains surrounding them. Her father had always loved this place. Her vision blurred, and she hugged herself, wishing it was her father who could hug her. She sniffed, wiped at her tears, then bit her lip and stood up abruptly.

The keys.

Lisa turned toward the kitchen and twisted around. Where would they store the keys? She hadn't seen a key rack in the entry, so maybe they had a small office or something.

She opened every door and drawer in the small cottage, but there weren't too many possibilities, and soon she gave up.

She dialed her mom's phone from the landline.

Her mother still refused to leave the hospital. She went to Karen's to shower, change and sleep on the sofa for a few hours, but she wouldn't leave Whitebrook in case there was a sudden change in her father's condition. Yesterday, Lisa had taken fresh clothes with her to the hospital when she visited her father.

There had been no change at all.

The doctors told them they wanted to wean him off ventilation soon, so they could see if he could breathe on his own. They hadn't said anything about what would happen if he couldn't.

Lisa's stomach tightened every time she thought of this, so she avoided it as much as possible. Though that strategy really didn't work when she was sitting in the hospital, so she threw herself into setting up and running the Inn. Including the damn basement.

The phone call wasn't successful.

Her mother didn't believe the basement was locked up but told her to look in the small woodshed her father had built on the back side of the cottage.

Thankfully it was unlocked, and after a little struggle and a lot of cursing, she opened the heavy door with a squeak.

Sawdust, machine oil, and a smell so uniquely her father's bombarded her, the intensity of it making her eyes sting.

"Hi, Dad." Her voice shook, and she was greeted with silence.

She stayed perfectly still until the pain lessened a bit.

She knew it was stupid, but she needed her dad; she needed him to wake up again. There was so much she wanted to ask him. The urge to talk to him was overwhelming. And she needed a hug, just one more hug.

He gave the best hugs.

Strong, encompassing, and protective.

She'd always felt safe in his big arms. Lisa sniffed and searched for the light switch.

The keys she was here for the keys. Not for a mental breakdown.

The place looked like her dad had just left: a broken chair waiting in the corner to be fixed; a repaired ornate picture frame held together by a screw clamp on the workbench. Lisa smiled and touched the frame.

Her dad always loved to fix things. He once told her that it made him the hero with her mother. And every man likes to be a hero for his wife.

A huge sob lodged in her throat, and another wave of desperation washed over her.

Today sucked.

“Stop with the sentimental crap, Lisa. Concentrate!” She opened one tool cabinet after the other, going through the mechanics, but the moment she'd forgotten what she was actually searching for, her left hand touched a large key ring. She pulled it out and was about to close the cabinet again when her brain recognized that there were no tools in there. Not a single one.

But there were papers.

Lots and lots of papers neatly sorted into various folders.

Lisa squinted, but the light didn't penetrate the inside of the cabinet enough to see clearly, so she took out the top three folders to take a look at them in the light.

She blinked rapidly and shook her head.

What she saw didn't make sense.

Maps, newspaper cutouts.

Pictures of women.

Lisa spread the papers all over the workbench. One newspaper article, with the photo of a young woman, caught her eyes immediately.

There, photographed with a smile, was Sophie Fisher, Peter's sister. It was an article about how she went missing after attending a party and was later found dead in a small meadow in the woods between Moon Lake and Stone Valley.

Her killer had never been found.

Lisa shuffled through the other articles.

There were other incidents of dead women in the county—four different women, all killed, but not all unsolved. One woman was obviously killed by her ex-boyfriend, who went to prison for it, but always protested his innocence.

Lisa was completely flummoxed, and her mind raced.

Why would her dad keep articles of those dead women in his workshop?

Why would he have a map where the locations of their bodies were marked?

Some newspaper articles were really old too. He must have had them for a long time.

What the hell?

“Lisa, you out there?”

She gasped and jumped back.

Peter was outside.

She looked at the papers in front of her. What if her dad had something to do with their deaths?

What should she do?

Show him?

He was law enforcement, after all. He would undoubtedly know what to do.

But what if?

She paused for a minute. She knew her dad. No way he'd hurt someone.

No fucking way.

Lisa scraped all the stuff together and threw it back into the tool cabinet.

She sprinted toward the door, switched off the light, and closed the door firmly behind her.

Right at that moment, Peter turned the corner, and they nearly ran into each other.

"Hey, found you."

He looked at her and drew his eyebrows together. "You good? What happened?" He looked behind her, then focused his stare back at her.

She took a deep breath and smoothed down her clothes. She must look as agitated as she felt.

"Yes, I'm good."

He cocked his head. "Why don't I believe you?"

His voice was unusually soft.

Why couldn't he be just the asshole she'd thought him to be for the last couple of years?

He touched her upper arm. "Let me help."

She nibbled on her lip. Could he even help? And did she trust him enough to confide in him?

He'd been there for her. Held her when she needed it. But he'd also broken her heart and discarded her without a second thought.

Trusting him.

Nope.

She wasn't there yet.

Lust... yes, trust... definitely not. "Did you need anything?"

He stayed still, his eyes bored into hers. Could he read her? Maybe she should tell him. Come clean now.

Maybe he could make sense of it.

Because it certainly didn't make sense to her. And it would be the right thing to do.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

Maybe later.

After she had more time to study the papers herself.

Made sense of them herself.

"What's that?" Peter pointed at the keys in her palm and the ring around her middle finger, apparently letting it go for now.

"Keys. I was searching for the keys to the basement. It's locked." Lisa laughed then bit her lip.

Now she was even less thrilled to go down there.

"Are you sure? More likely, the door's just stuck. But anyway, I need entry to a room. Officially."

She crossed her arms, then realized Peter was obviously on duty, decked out in full uniform, including his service weapon.

"Which room? Why?"

Peter fidgeted. "Room 5."

"Why?" Lisa didn't know if Room 5 was occupied or not, but either way, why would he need entry to the room? And didn't he need some kind of search warrant?

"The body you found?"

"Yes."

He tilted his head up and let out a heavy sigh. "It was a woman who went missing five days ago."

She cocked her head. Still no idea what he was getting at. "Okay."

"She was a guest?"

A chill ran down her spine. Another dead woman? Here, at the Inn? “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

The hairs on her forearms lifted. A guest? The dead woman was a guest.

What the hell was happening here?

“Okay.” She didn’t move; just stood there rooted to the spot, her legs too weak to walk.

“You coming?” Peter looked at her, his head tilted. “Is something wrong?” He touched her arm gently. “I know it was hard finding her and all, but I need you to hold it together and open that room for me or at least give me the key. Can you do that?”

Lisa’s vision blurred, but she nodded and started walking again.

Her mind racing.

Something was very, very wrong, and somehow it involved the Inn and her father.

She needed more information.

“So, this woman, who was she?”

“Name’s Grace Ketley—stayed at the Inn for a few days. Went out one evening and hasn’t been seen since. We searched the woods around the club she went to. But Odin couldn’t find a trace of her.”

“Odin?” They had just passed the rose garden on their way to the side door by the kitchen when Peter whistled.

A huge, black lab ran toward them at full speed.

Behind him, at a more leisurely pace, Cookie followed the lab.

“Meet Odin. He’s my K9 Partner.” The lab sat before Peter and looked up at him with reverence.

When Lisa leaned down, he sniffed at her hand, and when she started to pat him, he immediately went down and offered

his belly.

Peter chuckled. “He’s still young but a good boy.”

She looked up at Peter. “He’s adorable.”

She straightened again, and Odin got up and jumped around them the rest of the way.

He even tried to engage Cookie into playing with him. But the old lady wasn’t interested and flopped down on her usual spot at the kitchen entry.

Half an hour later, Peter came down into the kitchen from Mrs. Ketley’s room.

“We already notified her next of kin; her husband will come to get her belongings in the next few days.”

“Peter?” Lisa said, not knowing if she really wanted to know the answer to the question she was about to ask.

“Yes,” he answered.

“How did she die?” She held her breath.

“She was killed, Lisa—stabbed. Investigation is underway, so I can’t tell you more. But we don’t know who did it yet.”

He laid his hand on her cheek and stroked her with his thumb. “I want you to be careful, okay? Don’t go out alone, especially not at night. It’s not safe. Promise me.”

The worry and affection in his eyes made her lean toward him. She didn’t know who was the first to act, but a second later, she was pressed against his chest, inhaling his pleasant clean scent of soap and laundry detergent.

“Okay. I promise.”



Lisa was determined to sell the small-town charm to Claire. But sure enough, the people of Moon Lake didn't make it easy for her.

Claire'd arrived the day before, and they decided to take a walk through town for her first day. Get the lay of the land.

The weather was nice again, and it was unusually hot for early May this high up in the mountains.

They weren't even off the gravel parking lot of the Inn when the Reynolds' longtime neighbor, Mrs. Brooks, stopped them.

"Do you remember when your foot got stuck under a rootstock, Lisa?"

She grumbled.

Yes, she could remember the incident.

She must've been around seven, and her ankle had been hurting and swollen for weeks afterward.

Maybe she—and everybody else—remembered so well because her dad had taken a photograph of it. Which later took a prominent place at the first and, luckily, only article that featured her in the local newsletter the people of Moon Lake published every year around Christmas.

Small-town charm, all right.

It had taken some major operation, which included volunteer firefighters, to get her foot out of there.

It was the talk of the town for at least a week. And apparently, it was still talked about.

After they said goodbye to Mrs. Brooks, it took them only ten minutes to arrive at The Fairview, a nifty name for the town square and main gathering point of Moon Lake, where visitors could enjoy a beautiful view of the lake and the mountains.

“It sure is beautiful here,” Claire said.

Lisa nodded and breathed in the smells: a combination of fresh, crisp mountain air, the lake, and heavenly scents of baked goods that wafted toward them from the café right next to old Patterson’s Store.

The café was new.

The small store and its owner, Mr. Patterson, who sat in front of his store every sunny day, had been there for as long as Lisa could remember.

Only Mr. Patterson was a lot older, now skin and bones, his face wrinkled, and his blue eyes sagging like the eyes of a bloodhound.

He must’ve been in his nineties by now.

They greeted him, and after a terse nod of his head, he spoke with a barely audible gravelly voice. “Good to have you back, and good for you—you grew out of your awkward phase and grew some boobs.”

Lisa’s eyebrows shot up, and she gaped, at a loss for words. But she could feel heat fire up her face immediately.

Claire snorted, but after Mr. Patterson’s eyes cut over at her, she closed her mouth.

Lisa felt the tremors that shook Claire while she suppressed her own laughter.

Mr. Patterson had always been gruff, but Lisa hadn’t expected something outrageous like this from that little, old coot.

They promptly said goodbye to Mr. Patterson, and Lisa dragged Claire across the square to the water's edge.

She held it together, but when they were out of hearing distance, she joined Claire, who was having a full-blown laughing fit, and soon they both stood there, bent over, and laughed like loons.

Great first impressions in the middle of the main town square.

The weather had brought a lot of people out and about, and they received their fair share of stares.

Until one young woman squealed when she saw them and tackled Lisa.

“Uff.” Lisa found herself in a tight hug, and Claire cracked up again.

“You’re back. I’m so happy—don’t ever leave again, please, please, please. Oh, how’s your dad? I’m so sorry.”

Lisa’s gasp turned into a smile, and she slapped her friend lovingly.

Before she hugged her back once more. “Julie Brooks, I’ve missed you too.”

“Oh, don’t pretend. If you’d missed me, you would’ve come back much sooner.

All of you left, and I died of boredom back here.

No friends, no one to hang out with, and no one to go out with.” Julie pouted for a second, but her signature smile and the sparkle in her brown eyes soon reappeared.

Julie had always been the happy-go-lucky one in her group of friends.

Even her curly, dark hair was bouncy.

She had the ability to make everything better, brighter, and funnier. Nothing could ever dampen Julie Brooks’ mood, and mischief was written all over her face.

Mrs. Brooks had had her hands full with the young tomboy. Julie was two years younger than her but had always trailed along with her brother Paul Brooks, hockey legend, as her father had referred to him.

She'd gone to school with Paul.

And since they were neighbors, they grew up together, and spreading joy and filling every situation with laughter—that had been Julie.

She winked. “Oh, come on, you’ve got a ton of friends, and I’m pretty sure you were already a pro at flirting with the boys when I left.”

“So, how’s your dad?” Julie turned serious.

Lisa shrugged. “No change.”

“I’m so sorry.” She squeezed her one last time, then let go, and both turned to Claire.

“Claire, meet my friend Julie.”

After the introduction, the conversation flowed naturally, and Claire and Julie seemed to hit it off.

“My side hurts, and we already made a spectacle out of ourselves.” Claire pointed at the café. “Let’s get a coffee and some of whatever smells so good.”

Lisa and Julie couldn’t agree more, and all three turned to the Black Cat Café.

Upon entry, they were greeted by a giant black cat that resided on what looked like a flower pedestal. The cat opened one eye but dismissed them immediately and fell back asleep.

The owner of the café was a pleasantly rounded woman in her thirties who smiled when they entered. “Hi, Jules,” she said and to Lisa and Claire, “Welcome to the Black Cat.”

“Lisa, Claire, meet Holly. She owns the café and makes the best pastries ever,” Julie said.

They chatted for a little while.

Holly had moved to Moon Lake three years ago and opened the café in what had been a hardware store.

Julie and Lisa chose a table outside, at the side of the café, and enjoyed the sun on their faces. Claire got stuck inside at the cake display. And when she finally made her way outside, she was talking shop with Holly, who accompanied her.

“Hey, Holly. Can you take a break and hang out with us for a while?”

Julie was her usual happy self, and Holly promised to come chat with them as soon as she could take a break.

To catch up with Julie was a delight.

She still talked a mile a minute and told them animated stories about the various things that had happened in the last few years.

Julie had studied to become a physical therapist and now worked in Whitebrook. And lived at home again.

“So, you know Peter is back?” Julie looked at Lisa.

She’d been the only one who knew something had happened between Peter and Lisa to destroy the friendship.

But Lisa hadn’t told her any details.

Hadn’t told anyone.

“Yes, we’ve met,” Lisa said.

“Have you met his wife? Awful person, such a snob, thinks she’s better than us small-town folks.” Julie made air quotes around her last words.

Claire’s brow came up, and she looked at Lisa questioningly.

“No, haven’t met his wife and not thrilled to do so,” Lisa replied.

“You probably won’t; they broke up anyway, and she lives in Whitebrook now. Word on the street is they’re getting divorced.”

Lisa and Claire exchanged another look, and Lisa knew she had a little explaining to do once they got back to the Inn.

“Paul and some of his teammates will come to visit at the end of the month. I thought we could maybe have a barbecue at the Inn if you can fit it in,” Julie said.

Lisa’s heart made a jump. She now had a business to run. It was really time to take a closer look at the bookings and the business side of things.

“I have to check, but I’m pretty sure we can make that happen. Make a whole day of it for the guests, as Dad used to when we were young.

Remember those?

You just have to tell me when exactly, so we can plan accordingly. Is Paul still playing hockey?” Paul had been drafted into the NHL right out of high school, which had made him the golden boy of Moon Lake High and the entire small town.

“Yes, still playing for the Hamilton Mohawks; they didn’t make the playoffs this year, though.”

Lisa hadn’t followed hockey in a long time. She did during school because Peter and Paul were on the team. But living in all those warm places all over the world and with diving dominating her life, it just wasn’t a part of her anymore.

“Hey, Peter, hey, Blake.”

“Hello, Julie, Lisa.”

Lisa didn’t need to turn around. The timbre of his voice created goose bumps on her forearms, and a slow heat crept over her neck.

When she turned around, and her eyes met Peter’s, butterflies fluttered in her belly.

Damn.

Peter tilted his head, his grin not masking the heat in his eyes. “Blake, meet Lisa Reynolds.”

Peter's stare caught Lisa's focus, so it took some effort to force her eyes off him and look at the guy next to him.

Wow, this was a tank of a man.

Huge, muscular.

Dark sunglasses and an impressive red beard covered his face.

Just the freckles on his nose lessened the impact a little.

Just a little.

Because they both oozed male confidence in their jeans and Henley shirts.

The picture of both men standing there next to each other in the sunshine made all three women take a deep breath.

"Hello." Lisa stumbled over her tongue in her hurry to introduce Claire, who seemed equally shell-shocked upon looking at such perfect specimens of the other sex.

Luckily Julie took over the conversation, and Peter and Blake said goodbye a few minutes later.

But not before Peter's eyes caught hers one more time.

What was it with this man and his focus that knocked her off her cool and made her feel like doing all kinds of things?

Like kissing, or making out, or just staring into his eyes.

She could feel Claire's eyes on her like a laser beam the minute the guys were out of earshot.

"That was your Peter? Holy hell. You never told me he looks like a Greek god. And not the only one in this town too."

Julie laughed.

Unfortunately, she'd just had a sip of coffee that came back through her nose. They all cracked up and laughed so hard that the other customers looked at them.

Again.

But it released the tension she felt after the run-in with Peter.

“You got something going too. I was getting hot and steamy just looking at the both of you eye-fucking,” Julie said.

This caused another bout of laughter, especially from Claire and Julie.

And even though Lisa’s first impulse was to deny it, she was sure glad when her body temperature returned to normal, and the butterflies in her belly settled again.

Holy moly.

“I love it when my guests have a good time.” Holly, with a giant coffee mug in her hand that had MINE written on it, dropped down at the empty chair at their table, and her eyes danced. “What did I miss?”

“We just discussed why the Greek gods are roaming around Moon Lake,” Claire said.

“I always thought of them more like marauding Vikings, myself,” Holly replied, “but I see your point. They could get away as Greek gods too.”

“So, your Peter, hah? Already claiming your territory?” Julie looked at Lisa with an eyebrow waggle.

“You’re such a dork,” Lisa replied, and they all laughed again.

“So, what’s the story on the other one?” Claire asked.

“Sebastian Blake, Peter calls him Blaze sometimes. He’s a former Navy SEAL teammate of Peter’s,” Julie answered. “They got out around the same time, and he moved here.

Took over Fishermen’s Bar & Grill.

They’re both pretty private.

But Blake’s quite the lady’s man. At least in the bar, there’s always a flock of girls around, flirting with him. When he first arrived, I thought about having sex with him, but the waiting line got long pretty quickly.”

The girls giggled again.

Typical, outrageous Julie.

“I think they are too big; I’m intimidated just talking to them. I couldn’t fathom sleeping with one of them. They could crack you like a piece of straw,” Holly said, completely serious.

Julie and Lisa sighed simultaneously, which made all of them laugh.

Lisa’s and Peter’s night together had been raw.

He was her first and hadn’t been a sophisticated lover.

Most likely, that had changed by now.

She certainly had gained more experience in the last thirteen years, and the sex had gotten a lot better the more she knew what she liked and didn’t like in bed.

Would it be the same for him?

With him?

How would it be now?

He’d been intense and very physical but inexperienced. Now he seemed more caring. Lisa started daydreaming about Peter and zoomed out of the animated conversation of the other three women.

They all said their goodbyes a few minutes later and promised to meet again soon.

Lisa’s bubble burst when she and Claire went down the street back to the Inn.

“So, married?”

It was more a statement than a question, but Lisa knew precisely what Claire meant, and the good feelings evaporated immediately.

In their place of work, there had been lots of male guests who were on vacation, away from their wives, and looking for a holiday fling.

It was a hard line for both of them, which they both never crossed, unlike many of their coworkers who didn’t have the same problems about sex with married men.

She couldn't ever figure out the appeal. She'd had a few affairs, mostly with coworkers or men she knew well enough to know they were not married or otherwise hitched. She never wanted to be the other woman.

Especially not for one night of meaningless sex.

“Yes, his mother told me. Obviously, it didn't work out. I'm not sure if they are already divorced, but she lives in Whitebrook now.”

“You really like him, don't you?”

“Kind of. I mean, I'm attracted to him. And, I don't know, he was there for me when I needed him. But—”

“He broke your heart.”

She shrugged.

Did he? Break her heart?

He sure treated her like crap, and maybe it wasn't a good idea to open up to him again. She'd been so vulnerable, and he'd been so cold and pretended as if nothing had happened.

What if he did it again?

Could she go through something like that again?

Did she even want to risk it?



“There was nothing more they could do for him. That’s what the doctor said.” Lisa’s sister flitted through the different rooms in the cottage.

She fluffed a pillow on the couch and threw the bouquet of dead flowers into the trash.

Lisa stood, flummoxed, in the middle of the room. “So, what happens now?” She’d read a lot about the procedures and treatments for brain injuries in the long hours in the hospital, so she couldn’t understand why in the world her father would be brought home instead of being sent to a rehab facility.

They’d removed the ventilation a few days ago, and he’d started breathing on his own.

But he didn’t wake up.

This had been another devastating blow to their mother, who’d been convinced he would wake up.

Had willed him to wake up.

It was heartbreaking to watch. And heartbreaking to come to terms with.

Now, according to the doctors, chances of her dad gaining consciousness or ever being his old self again were nonexistent.

Vegetative State was the term they used.

Not in a coma anymore but not able to wake up either.

And he probably never would again.

“The doctors told Mom about rehab, but she decided to bring him home instead. She’s lined up all sorts of therapists who’ll come and work with Dad at home.”

“When did all of this happen?” She’d been in the hospital every single day; she knew about the Vegetative State, but not about her mother’s decision to bring him home.

“She decided yesterday. I tried to convince her otherwise, but she was dead set against a rehab center.”

Lisa scrubbed a hand over her face. “And you couldn’t have told me?”

Her sister straightened, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, sis.”

Lisa sighed. “When will they arrive? What can I do?” Her mother must have lost her mind. To make such a radical decision so fast and against the doctors’ advice. But she would just run with it for now.

Maybe they could talk some sense into their mother later.

“We’ve got to make space for the bed,” Karen said.

They both looked around the small cottage. It was functional, with space enough for two people but not enough room for a hospital bed.

“The bedroom is out—there is definitely not enough space next to their bed,” Karen said.

“Then the living room it is. But we’ve got to get rid of the couch first.”

An hour later, they both fell onto said couch. Sweating, out of breath, and more than tired.

“We should have asked somebody for help,” Karen said. “This thing is huge.”

“And heavy, but we did it on our own.”

Somehow they’d maneuvered the couch out the door and down the steps, but that was as far as it would go. How their

father had gotten the huge thing inside in the first place was a miracle because it hardly fit through the front door, and they had to try three different positions to get the thing out.

Now it sat smack dab in the middle of the lawn in front of the cottage.

“When are they due?” Lisa asked.

“Mom called twenty minutes ago when they left the hospital, so they should arrive in the next ten to twenty minutes.

“This is kind of crazy, don’t you think?” Lisa redid her hair and sagged down on the couch.

“Yes, she just wouldn’t hear any other option. I think she’s just tired of hospitals and wants to go home—so that’s where he goes.”

They looked at each other. Their mother had always been a strong person. When she made a decision, she stayed the course.

Their father had always gone along with her. ‘I just want her happy’ was something he’d said on numerous occasions.

“Okay, let’s get the room ready and cleaned up.” Lisa stood up, and on the way up the front steps, Karen laid her hand on her arm.

“Thank you,” she said.

Lisa smiled. She didn’t know what her sister was talking about. “What for?”

“For staying, for taking over the Inn. For uprooting your whole life to help our family. You’re brave, and you grew into an impressive woman. I’m proud of you, little sister.”

They teared up—another family trait they shared with their father. He was a bear of a man, tough as nails, and the strong foundation of their family, but he teared up whenever something was remotely emotional.

Lisa shrugged her shoulders. “Thanks, but everybody would have done the same. It’s home, family, you know.”

At that moment, the ambulance arrived and reversed across the lawn to get as near to the cottage as possible. A police cruiser came right behind the ambulance and parked in the parking lot.

“Oh, great, finally some muscle we would’ve needed half an hour ago,” Karen said.

Lisa looked up at her sister’s sarcastic statement and watched Peter march across the lawn, straight at them.

She felt the familiar heat rise in her body. How could this man create this reaction in her?

As Peter got closer, he raised his eyebrows. “Who moved the sofa out here—the two of you?” His tone was so skeptical, Lisa’s hackles rose. She didn’t need some bullshit machismo.

Not right now, and certainly not from him.

“No, it went flying out the front door on its own.”

Peter chuckled. “I’m impressed. This thing is a bitch to get through the door. At least it was so going in.”

He smiled, and Lisa’s ruffled feathers went down immediately.

He was there and had helped her dad with the furniture moving in? How come nobody ever mentioned things like that to her? It wasn’t like she had never talked to her dad. But he never mentioned Peter, at least not to her.

“The stairs will be a problem.”

Lisa and Karen turned in unison and stared at the stairs. How did they miss this? The gurney they could maybe carry in, but the hospital bed, which would arrive any minute, wouldn’t get up the stairs.

“I think Carl kept some planks in his workshop; maybe I can think of something.” Peter turned and dashed around the cottage so fast. When Lisa reached him, he was already halfway inside the small space.

She panicked. Had she put away the papers again after the last time she’d read them, or were they strewn all over the

place?

But Peter single-mindedly steered toward some wooden planks that leaned in the corner. “I hope they are long enough, but we gotta try,” he said, passing Lisa. “Can you close the door behind me?”

Lisa hurried to do so. She had to talk to Peter about the papers. It didn't feel right to keep this from him, and even though she'd gone through them multiple times, she didn't have a clue why her father had kept all of this and if they implicated him in any way.

Luckily the planks were long enough, and the rest of operation bring-home-dad went down without a problem. The hospital bed was clumsy to get in, but with a bit of twisting and turning, it fit, right where they intended it to be, by the window.

Lisa's father was carried in, and they all crammed into the kitchen. They couldn't do anything but watch, so Lisa, Karen, and Peter decided to give them some privacy and left the cottage.

While the professionals and her mother transition him into the new bed and environment.

When finally her father was settled in, and everybody had left, they went back in.

“Thank you for your help, Peter.” Her mother's voice sounded brittle, and Lisa looked at her.

Dark circles under her eyes marred her face.

“Mom, maybe you should rest a little.” Lisa turned to the bed.

Her heart hurt seeing her father back home like this, and tears clouded her vision.

He looked better now, without all the beeping machines around him.

But he looked nothing like his old self anymore.

Lisa kissed him on the cheek anyway and squeezed his leathery hand. “Hey, Dad, welcome home,” she whispered. His lack of reaction gutted her.

Nothing would ever be the same.

Karen and Peter sat on the couch out front, and Lisa dropped down next to them. She sniffled and wiped away the tears that stung in her eyes.

Karen squeezed her. “I’m sorry, but I have to go; I have to get Mattie.”

She waved goodbye to Peter, and they hugged one more time, before she got up.

Peter and Lisa watched in silence while Karen walked across the lawn, got into her car, and left the parking lot.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?” Lisa looked sideways at Peter.

“I have to leave too—work, you know.”

They both got up and walked across the lawn to his car. They passed the rose garden where the first rose blossoms had started to bloom. Soon their smell would be so intense it would fill the Inn.

“Thanks for your help. I feel like you’ve rescued me a lot, in the last weeks.”

Peter chuckled. “I like rescuing you a lot. Makes me the man, you know.” His voice took on a cowboy-ish tinge, and Lisa gave him a watery smile.

He raised his arm slowly and laid his hand gently on her cheek while wiping away the residual wetness beneath her eyes with his thumb.

“I’m here for you if you need me, you know. Always.”

He pulled her toward him, and she looked up into his eyes when their bodies touched.

A soothing embrace—that’s what Lisa anticipated. Maybe a little kiss on the forehead. But after they stared each other in the eyes, something much hotter sizzled between them. She

didn't know if it was him, or her own doing, but after some long agonizing seconds, their lips met.

It started out soothing. Unhurried and languid but soon changed into something deeper, something much more carnal.

All rational thoughts flew out of her head, and there was only heat and a deep, hot, coiling desire in her belly.

That matched his desire, which she could feel growing and hard against her belly.

She melted against him a little more, not sure her feet would even hold her up anymore.

But he did.

With his strong arms, he pressed her against his body, and Lisa lost track of everything around her.

Until they came up for air, then conscious thoughts returned. And all kinds of feelings welled up besides desire.

Fear, anger, desperation, but also hope and a longing she hadn't felt since their night together all these years ago.

Their kiss was that good.

He was that good.

She opened her eyes and looked around, avoiding his eyes.

And realized it was also the middle of the day.

In the parking lot.

Where everyone could see them.

He must've felt her stiffening but didn't release her.

So they just stood there, and finally, she looked into his eyes and drowned in the feelings she saw reflected there.

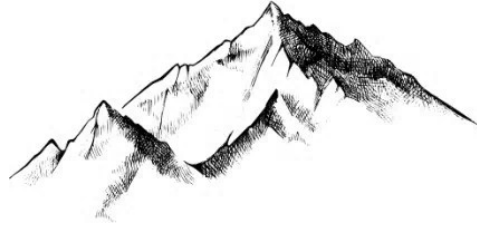
She didn't know what to say. She didn't want to say anything, didn't want to break that magical spell surrounding them.

But soon, Peter kissed her forehead, loosened his hold, set her back a few steps, and opened the door.

She still stood anchored in the same spot when Peter, before closing the door, devoured her with his eyes from head to toe.

A grin spread over his face. "I'll see you soon, Lizzy."

Then he closed the door, started the car, turned around, and got on with his life.



The barbecue at the Inn, in honor of Paul and his teammates visiting Moon Lake, was winding down as the sun set behind the mountains.

It had been a great day for their guests. The games and competitions they'd planned for the families and kids had lasted all afternoon, and many guests thanked them for the fun day before they retreated into their rooms and apartments, the children exhausted and the parents, as well.

Lisa and Claire were utterly exhausted, too, and happy that their first big barbecue was over.

“So, this day has been a complete success, partner.”

Claire grinned back at Lisa, and they both moved toward the shore.

Now they could join their old and new friends at the campfire that shone like a beacon.

Paul Brooks and some of his NHL teammates were down by that fire.

When they'd arrived earlier today, they had joined the activities on the meadow at once, which had made them the big heroes with the kids.

Julie had helped Lisa with the games, while Holly had assisted Claire with all the food-related stuff. Now they all were down by the campfire enjoying the beautiful summer evening.

Lisa took two beers out of a cooler, handed one to Claire, and dropped down on a tree log next to the campfire.

“Hey, beautiful, you did good today. Your guests were extremely happy.” Paul sat down next to her on the log and shoulder-bumped her.

When they’d met earlier, for the first time since high school, it had taken them precisely three seconds to reconnect. Obviously, being a sought-after NHL hockey star hadn’t changed him at all.

He still was a prankster and funny to boot. He had the young girls and boys in stitches in minutes.

“I have you to thank more than anyone. You really made their day, meeting a bunch of famous hockey players and all. Thanks for being such a good sport.”

“Julie promised me great rewards, you know.”

Lisa tilted her head. “Is that so? And what kind of rewards are we talking about?”

“Kisses and eternal worshiping from the new owner of the Inn. That’s what she said, if I remember correctly.”

Warmth radiated through Lisa’s body, and a big grin split her lips. She remembered a conversation she’d had with Julie a few days ago. She might even have said something about being eternally grateful.

“Gratefulness, I remember, worship not so much.

And kisses? Well, those I’m very stingy with.”

Lisa snorted at Paul’s waggling eyebrows, then shook her head.

She looked at the people around the fire and enjoyed the atmosphere of fun and laughter.

Today was a good day.

Almost good enough to forget all the not-so-happy things in her life.

Her thoughts moved to her dad.

He would've loved a day like today, mingling with the other dads, building a campfire, operating the barbecue.

Lisa could envision it perfectly.

He would be in his signature jeans and a plaid shirt. Sadness swept through her like a cold wave, and Paul must've noticed.

"What's wrong?"

Lisa shook her head, "it's just—Dad would have loved today."

He sighed. "I'm sorry for what happened with your dad." Of course, he would know all the details.

That's how things worked in Moon Lake.

Lisa shrugged and stared into the fire before dropping her gaze down to the beer bottle in her hands.

"So, how's life been so far?" Paul's voice sounded serious all of a sudden. "What did you do the last few years? And the most important question. Are you finally ready to marry me?"

The last question stirred a laugh in her. Paul was still the same goofy teenager. Except he'd always mock-asked for sex, not marriage.

While she chuckled, someone came up behind her. She didn't have to turn around because her body already knew.

"Still the same old moves—some guys do peak in high school." The timbre of Peter's voice made goose bumps rise on her arms.

She hadn't invited him today, but of course, he would know. Nothing stayed secret in Moon Lake.

Paul laughed, and they greeted each other with a bear hug. There was hollering and shouting from the locals around the fire, and Peter, and Paul's teammates had obviously met before. Behind Peter, his friend stepped into the circle of light.

Blake, his name was Blake.

Blake and Peter took a seat on the opposite side of the fire, and Lisa felt both disappointment and relief.

They hadn't talked since their kiss, and she didn't know what she would say to him.

“So, your life, marriage. What's your standpoint?” Paul brought her back into the present, and Lisa laughed.

“I'm good. Went on to become a diving instructor and lived all over the world. Mostly where it's sunny and warm. How about you? You play hockey for a living? Is it all you dreamed of when you were young?”

Paul's smile turned serious. “It is and, at the same time, isn't. I love the team. I love the game. The thrill it gives me, but it's hard on the body, and I'm old now. The end of my career is looming. That doesn't always feel very good.”

Lisa hesitated but then just went for it. Paul was a good sport, with a good sense of humor. “Yes, you really look old. I wasn't going to say anything, but in this light—” She couldn't finish the sentence because Paul swooped her up into his lap and tickled her mercilessly.

“Stop, stop. I'm sorry, you don't look old.” Lisa was laughing so hard that she had problems getting the words out. “I take it back; you look like you're in your prime, all sexy and...” Her eyes met with Peter's over the flames, and suddenly she lost her train of thought.

Peter's intense stare froze her, and she inherently knew he wasn't happy with their banter.

“Every excuse to touch a girl,” Peter said, his steely voice tinted with humor. But his eyes, laser-focused on her, conveyed a different message. It was a mix between longing and simmering possessiveness, and she suddenly felt scorching hot.

And marked as his.

“I can have any girl I like—even yours.” Paul was just riling him, had even removed his hands from her.

But Lisa felt uncomfortable and ready to diffuse the weird energy passing between those two and escape the feeling of being trapped by his gaze. “Well, how nice of you to ask, but I think I’ll pass,” she said, hopped from Paul’s lap, and ruffled his hair before she dropped back down on the log, leaving a gap between Paul and her.

She looked around.

Anywhere but at him.

Claire was in deep conversation with Peter’s friend Blake, and they’d created their own circle of energy, which was fascinating to watch.

Wow, wasn’t she feeling romantic today?

She sipped from her beer, and it didn’t take long before Peter took a seat beside her.

“Hey, beautiful, how’s your day?” he asked, his voice husky and low.

Deliciously intimate.

But also scarily intense.

She shrugged, and the side of her arm grazed along his arm. “I’m okay. Wish he could be here, you know.”

Peter’s expression turned thoughtful, and he took a moment to reply. “Yeah, Carl always loved a good barbecue.”

There was silence for a while, and Lisa stared into the flames.

It was strange that he knew what she was feeling. Knew her dad well enough to know how special their bond had been.

“I know it’s not the same, but I know how hard it is.”

She looked up at him; she could see the anguish in his eyes.

“Sophie?”

Peter shrugged and looked into the fire. “Do I owe you an apology?”

The change of topic took her aback. What was he apologizing for now? “What for?”

“Kissing you? Feeling the way I feel about you? Leaving you? Might as well pick one.”

She turned to him and looked him in the eyes. “Why would you need to apologize for a kiss?”

“I don’t know. I just.... The way I behaved back then. I feel I have no right to ask anything of you.”

“Like if you might kiss me?”

Peter shrugged his shoulders and took a sip from his bottle of beer.

His Adam’s apple bobbing up and down mesmerized her.

“It’s okay. I liked the kiss. And about what happened? It was a hard time for you.”

“You are making excuses for me—you shouldn’t do that. I messed up. Let me at least owe it.”

“You messed up. And don’t get me wrong, I’d cursed you and hated you for it. But somehow, now, I understand. After Sophie’s death—I could see how much you were hurting.”

“It was my fault.”

He said it so softly, Lisa nearly missed it. Did he mean Sophie’s death, or their falling out?

“Sophie?”

He nodded once.

“No, it wasn’t.”

“I knew she was drunk at that party. I decided to leave early and should have demanded she go home with me, but I didn’t.”

“That might be so, but that doesn’t make what happened to her your fault.”

“I could have prevented it.”

“So, you felt guilty? Is that why you changed all your plans, why you left Moon Lake? That’s why you signed up?” Lisa didn’t say, ‘that’s why you treated me like shit,’ but by how he looked at her, she might as well have.

“I got to do amazing things, help, rescue, and protect people who couldn’t fight for themselves.” Peter rubbed the back of his neck. “It gave my life meaning.”

“It wasn’t your fault—you know that now, don’t you?” She grabbed his hand and stared into his eyes.

“Rationally, yeah. But what you know and what you feel are two different things. It’s not always that easy.”

“At least you talk about it. I’d say you’re heading in the right direction.” Lisa scooted closer to him and squeezed his hand.

Peter squeezed back, then moved their intertwined hands to his mouth and kissed hers.

Lisa pressed closer against his side, and he put his arm around her shoulder as if it was the most natural thing to do.

“It’s amazing how I can still talk to you. How I still feel so safe with you.”

Her breath caught in her chest. “Why...” She hesitated; should she really go there? But he was so open and vulnerable that maybe she could be open and vulnerable too, just for a little while.

“Then why did you pretend like nothing happened?” This was the million-dollar question. One she had contemplated again and again over the years but never got the chance to know.

“Because I was a wuss.”

Lisa laughed. She hadn’t contemplated that answer in all the years.

“So, nothing I did or didn’t do?”

Peter was taken aback. “No, of course not. I’d made up this thing in my head, that I wasn’t good enough to be around you. That I’d somehow tainted you.

Also, I signed up before the funeral. And I knew you didn’t want to leave Moon Lake.

I was obviously wrong; I even came back a year or so after I left.

All ready to grovel and beg you to forgive me.

But by then, you'd had left.

And I... I wasn't worthy enough anyhow."

"God, you are a wuss."

They both grinned. A grin tinted with sadness, fully aware of the time they had lost.

Lisa sighed and snuggled against Peter. How many times had she felt torn and angry when she'd thought about their past?

But he even came back for her.

And now? All it did was make her sad.

All the time they had missed and their own stupidity and stubbornness—had kept them apart for so long.

"Night swim!" somebody yelled. Several people around the fire shed their clothes and jumped into the water. They'd done this many times when they were younger—skinny dipping, especially during the hot nights in summer, when you couldn't sleep because of the heat.

Sweet memories of an easier time.

Long gone.

"Are you game?" Peter's eyes glinted with mischief. It wasn't like one of those hot nights she remembered yet, but the fire, and Peter's body heat, had made it warm and cozy.

"I think I'll pass." Lisa and Peter got up and watched the others in the water.

Peter laughed. "Ah, you don't want your ass kicked on the way to the platform."

Another fond memory. Racing against each other.

"That, and I guess, it's freezing cold." She shivered while she watched the others splashing around.

“Come on, I dare you, Lizzy. And I promise to heat you up afterward.”

It was such an ambiguous statement that Lisa shivered.

The heating up she kind of, craved to experience.

Oh, the heck with it.

“Last at the second platform has to do anything the winner decides.” She slung her dress over her head and was on her way into the water when she uttered the dare to Peter, who was still standing on the shore, fully clothed.

She was a good swimmer; the float was about 100 feet from the shore, so this might give her a fighting chance. She passed the first floating platform—the destination of the others in the water. But not her destination.

She went as fast as she could and was surprised when Peter waited for her, treading water at the platform. “How the hell? Did you even swim? Why didn’t I see you pass me?” It came all out in bursts between hard breaths, and she grabbed onto the platform.

And Peter.

He looked like he’d just taken a relaxing shower. It was dark, but the moon reflected on his teeth. The little Lisa could make out of him was sexy as hell, and when he grabbed her and pressed her to the front of his naked body, her thoughts went into overdrive.

Should they really do this?

God, this man was sexy and huge.

He sure wanted this.

A lot.

But what about their past?

Maybe they should talk about this first.

Then he kissed her, and all rational thoughts flew right out of her head.

He was a great kisser, just the kind she liked—not too sloppy, but with firm lips and tongue. He put his hand on the back of her neck and pressed her to him.

She let go of the platform and wrapped herself around his slick body.

He was a lot more demanding than she remembered. Back then, he'd been more tentative. Always making sure she liked what he did to her. He wasn't like that anymore, but she sure liked how he did things, until they went underwater.

When they resurfaced, Lisa sputtered, and Peter hadn't loosened his grip at all. "Maybe we should relocate," he growled, but he didn't move and kissed her neck until shivers ran down her back and arms.

Lisa shifted her hips—she felt restless—and again came into solid contact with his erection through her underwear.

Her stomach clenched, and her core became hot. She wanted him to take her right then and there until his treading water to keep them both afloat made her realize the inconvenience of their chosen location. Yep, maybe something more—solid.

"Yeah, let's go back," she replied.

It took her a long time to disengage from him—he was so warm, the feeling of their wet skin touching luxurious. When she lost contact with him, the cold water immediately got to her. "Let's go. I'm freezing."

They swam back to shore at a more leisurely speed, the moon and the stars above casting a soft light.

"Do you remember us trying to stand on the surfboard as kids?" he asked.

She could remember—they often tried all afternoon, five or six kids trying to stand up simultaneously. They'd almost always failed, and all of them had fallen back into the water, laughing and sputtering.

At the end of those afternoons, they'd always been full of abrasions and bruises, but the fun had been worth the pain.

“God, life was easy back then.” Lisa chuckled.

When they reached the shore, they got dressed again, which, being all wet, was neither an easy feat nor a very gracious one. Lisa slipped on her dress and took off her panties which earned her a scorching look from Peter and an outstretched hand. Demanding, she handed them to him.

She hesitated but finally relented.

And when they took their place by the campfire, he pulled her onto his lap without even asking.

Somebody had thankfully piled more logs on the fire, so it was burning hotter than before and warmed Lisa right back up. Peter’s body under her, and his arms around her, helped too.

She was so immersed in him, his hands on her body, his mouth against her forehead, she hadn’t really focused on their environment.

Quite a few couples were making out, which really creeped her out.

Paul and his teammates were in an animated discussion about what, Lisa couldn’t make out.

But Julie was getting cozy with one of the players, which had Paul throw daggers in their direction.

Looking farther around the massive fireplace, she witnessed another couple getting cozy. It was dark now, but she was pretty sure it was Claire, and a small gasp escaped her lips.

“What?” Peter probably had felt more than heard the gasp and reacted to the sudden tension in her body.

“I think that’s Claire, on top of—”

“Blake.”

“Oh my God, really, I thought, never mind.

What are they doing?”

“I think that is pretty obvious, tiger. And we are in no position to comment on that.”

“But, she doesn’t know him at all.”

“I know him. He’s okay.”

“No, you don’t understand. Maybe—”

Peter smiled down at her and kissed her on the nose.

“Maybe they just got caught up in the romantic atmosphere. Maybe it was love at first sight.”

Lisa scoffed. “There’s no such thing as love at first sight.”

“Oh, I think there is.”

Lisa gasped when she looked into his deep eyes.

Did he mean *them*?

Then her mood plummeted.

Or his ex-wife?

Did he fall in love with her at first sight because it sure didn’t happen with her.

The thought of his ex-wife reminded her of their time apart, and she straightened her spine. They weren’t kids anymore, and there were a lot of things they didn’t know about each other. This train of thought sobered her instantly. What the hell was she doing here?

“Are you still married?”

Peter tensed up; the question took him visibly off guard.

“Where did this come from?” His eyes were burning hot but also guarded.

“Your mom told me about your marriage. She said she tries to stay out of it and said you’re divorced, but the way everybody else is talking about it... so, are you—still married?”

Peter looked into the distance, and Lisa got a feeling he tried to distance himself from her too.

“No, I’m not anymore. Divorce was final before I kissed you the first time. I can’t believe you think me that low.”

He turned his gaze to the fire.

Appeared to be genuinely hurt by her lack of trust in his character.

She sighed. “Look, I’m sorry. But I’ve met my share of married men who thought they deserved a little fun on the side. So. I’m sorry for asking or implying, but then again, you could’ve just told me.”

Had she truly hurt him with her implied accusations?

She grabbed his jaw and turned him to face her again, then soothingly followed his narrowed brows with her finger. He looked...distanced—maybe it wasn’t the best move to bring up his ex-wife, while she was sitting on his lap, without panties. But his reaction was relieving as well.

He cared.

He was honorable.

And now that she knew...

She kissed him slowly, and after a short while of him being stiff and unresponsive, Peter took over the kiss in his demanding and delicious way.

God, this man could kiss. Heat welled up in her, and she fidgeted in his lap. The urge to gain more satisfaction than was possible through their clothes, grew stronger and stronger.

“How about a change of location?” Peter asked between kisses.

He might’ve just read her mind. “Great idea—let’s go.”

They said goodbye to their friends, and Claire and Blake looked like kids caught stealing candy, which made Peter and Lisa look at each other and smile at each other knowingly.

He led her to his car and held the door open for her.

She hesitated, but she had to ask. “Are you fit to drive?”

“I had one beer, but good of you to ask.”

Lisa giggled. Only a cop could say something like that with a straight face.

They didn't drive long through the woods, before smack dab in the middle of a clearing, a small house, illuminated by the moon, came into view.

"This is it? Wow, looks different."

"Yes, I bought it when I came back. We used to hang out up here a lot when we were kids.

"I love the house." Not so much the house itself but the spot it was located. She always had this really romantic idea of living in a meadow in the woods.

Straight out of a fairy tale.

Now he'd made it a reality for himself.

"I know." Peter gave her a small peck, before he exited the car, came around, and held the door open for her.

He knew?

He led her to the front door, his hand on her lower back, the heat of his skin warming her through her dress.

When he opened the door, they were greeted by Odin, who jumped up and down like a rubber ball and made them both chuckle.

After Lisa gave him a good rub, she entered the house.

She fell in love with the interior immediately.

"I'm still renovating and redecorating. It's a work in progress."

As far as she could see, he'd done an excellent job too.

The old, wooden floors had been sanded and gleamed, and a few pieces of antique furniture were placed in the entrance. It was a perfect mixture between old charm and clean lines. Homey but not cluttered.

She couldn't wait to see the rest of the house. "Can I have a tour?"

A gleam entered his eyes. "Tours start in the morning," he said and swooped her into his arms. "Now, it's time for other things."

Lisa's stomach clenched, then exploded into thousands of butterflies.

He kissed her and carried her up the stairs and into his bedroom.

Oh, God, they were going to have sex.

Uncertainty, coupled with excitement, filled her.

Yes, please, yes, were her last conscious thoughts, when he let her glide down along the front of his body.

Slow, so slow.



They both didn't see the car that followed them and stopped at the edge of the forest.

Nor the man.

Who sat there for a long time.

Even after he'd observed their journey around the house, through the lighted windows.



“Am I too fast?” Peter looked her deep in the eyes. They stood in the middle of his bedroom, and somehow he’d lost his shirt but nothing else.

His unhurried, deep kisses wiped away all doubts.

“Are you?” Lisa didn’t think so.

The way he’d made her feel all evening made her heart soar.

The way his hands left her skin, all sensitive wherever he touched her, made her feverish. And the way his abs clenched under the caress of her hands made her core clench in return.

“Yes, I am. I’ve fantasized about this since I saw you again at the airport. Technically not you, but your butt, sticking out of the opening, looking sexy as hell.” Peter chuckled.

Heat gathered in her cheeks, and she swatted at him. “Thanks for reminding me about that.” She hid her face in the nape of his neck and bit him lightly. “Now that I think of it, I’m not so sure about this anymore.”

Take that!

Peter’s embrace tightened, and he groped her ass while he leaned back to look at her face.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You and that sweet ass of yours have been the stars of my dreams ever since.”

Warmth radiated through Lisa’s body, and her pulse sped up a notch. “Are you seriously obsessing over my ass?” She

looked into his dancing eyes and chuckled.

“Hey, don’t mock me. That’s a very serious obsession of mine.”

“I always wanted to be reduced to just one part of my body.”

He chuckled. “Tiger, if by reduced you mean adored, fantasized of, and worshipped. I truly apologize.”

”You’re such a goof.”

He looked at her—unsmiling, and his eyes smoldered with intensity. His voice turned into a growl. “I’ve been obsessed with you ever since I met you again.”

The atmosphere between them suddenly turned hot and heavy, crackling with sexual tension, until a half-grin split his lips. “And I’m whatever you want me to be.”

Lisa grinned and smacked a wet kiss on him, which turned into some awful sloppy kissing in return.

Their banter relaxed her and kept the butterflies in her belly at bay.

And he still caressed her butt.

She knew it wasn’t small, but it had enough muscle for her to be okay with her womanly shape.

Most of the time, anyway.

Flaunting her thirteen-years-older naked butt in front of the first boy she’d ever had sex with—not one of those times.

Peter continued to massage her butt with his left hand while his right hand wandered upward, along her spine, so slow the anticipation was killing her.

He first took her dress with him but let it fall back down when his hand reached its destination: Lisa’s neck.

She loved being touched, being held there. It had always been one of her most sensitive spots.

Did he remember?

Or was it a coincidence?

He squeezed lightly, leaned back, and waited until their eyes met. “Are you sure about this? This is the last time I’ll ask, so think about that answer.” His voice was stern again, his stare intense—gone was the goofy behavior.

He waited, watched her, held her eyes hostage as if he could see down to her soul. His focus and his firm hold on her neck made her shiver.

The intensity was back, stirring her to say yes to everything this man wanted to do to her.

Was she sure?

How would she feel tomorrow?

Well, she would see and deal with it then.

“Yes.” The word left her mouth softly but ignited Peter’s passion, and he really took over. Her mouth and her body. He kissed her until her skin was tingling with anticipation.

Sweet, innocent kisses alternated with deep, wet ones.

He nibbled on the side of her neck and kissed the inside of her ear, which made shivers run down her spine.

Then he went down on his knees and kissed every single spot of skin he slowly unveiled.

And she just held on for the ride, but there was no doubt who called the shots.

They undressed him together, Lisa fumbling with the button of his jeans until he placed his hands over hers and opened them swiftly. After he stepped out of them and lost his boxers, she froze for a moment.

They were still standing in the middle of his brightly lit bedroom. Should she go down on her knees now?

It was like he sensed her uncertainty and raised her chin with one finger until she had to look into his eyes.

He smiled and eliminated her tension.

This was Peter—he knew her, and she him.

No need to feel awkward with him.

Yes, their last time had been a long time ago. The sex had been clumsy.

But the connection had been real.

They'd laughed and cried together. It had been deep and intense and then lighthearted and funny again.

Easy.

Not porn-perfect, but unbelievably good.

“Get on the bed.”

Holy hell, that commanding voice was new but unbelievably arousing.

He'd definitely gained confidence, and the dominant vibe made her wet.

She got on the bed and observed Peter.

He went to the light switch and bathed the room into semi-darkness. The light from the corridor still came through the half-open door.

He took something out of a cabinet across the room. Then came back and dropped the things on the nightstand. Condoms.

“So, what are your feelings about toys?” He knelt down, spread her legs, and nestled himself between them.

Did he honestly just ask her that?

Embarrassment rose inside her. “Hmm, well, I like them, I guess.”

Peter's eyes were laser-focused on her. “You guess?”

God, she felt embarrassed; why did they have to talk about something like that now? And why did she suddenly feel seventeen again?

Couldn't they just, well, get it on and stop the talk?

“Yes, I like my toys,” she said with as much conviction as she could muster. “I just don't know if I'd like them in your hands.”

Peter's face turned softer instantly.

Then small wrinkles appeared next to his eyes as he grinned. "Oh, you will like it, I promise. But not this time. This time it's just you and me. Now let me make you feel good."

This was the strangest before-sex talk she'd ever had.

Until Peter kissed her again, slowly. Starting at her lips, then in a line down her body. He circled her nipples with his tongue, suckled first the right one, then the left.

Hard.

Hard enough that Lisa felt a corresponding pang deep in her core and opened her legs farther.

Her hands went into Peter's hair, and she held on while he went farther down and made good on his promise.

He had the perfect rhythm going on, alternating between licking and sucking, his fingers opening her up to his mouth, and all the while, he never forgot there was more to her than just her clitoris.

Lisa reached her peak in record speed.

Which didn't usually happen.

Peter chuckled against her, so in tune with her body he most likely could sense her emotions.

He followed the path back up equally slowly, caressing her whole body.

God, he really knew what he was doing.

Lisa couldn't suppress the thoughts about how much experience he'd gained in the last thirteen years. There had to have been tons of practice to get that good.

"Thinking again?" Peter looked down at her with a tender expression on his face.

He brushed aside some hair from her face before he took her mouth again.

He took his time until she was twitching inside.

She grabbed his butt and pressed herself against him.
“Come on.”

“In a hurry?”

“Yes.”

He snagged a condom and sheathed himself in record time, and when she pulled him toward her, she was hot and more than ready again.

He entered her in one long, powerful stroke that made her gasp when he bottomed out. That gasp turned into a moan when he moved inside her.

Deliciously slow!

Their hands intertwined, his pressing hers against the mattress, rendering her immobile.

Then he ground against all the right spots.

She purred and rubbed against him. “Faster.”

Peter stopped until she opened her eyes.

“Still in a hurry?”

His look alone froze her.

The intensity.

The focus.

But also the dominant undertones that told her he was in absolute control. And she better let go.

Or else...

She grinned. “Nope, take all the time you need. No rush.”

He kept his steady pace, let go of her hands, and focused on massaging her breast until her body once again strained for satisfaction, and she grabbed his buttocks. This time he followed her lead, increased his speed until he pushed her over, and followed her with a groan that reverberated against her skin.

They came together.

His heavy body covered her like a sheet. She felt his beating heart against her chest and his breaths against her ear.

“Am I too heavy?”

She opened her eyes and turned to face him. “No, I like it.”

They kissed leisurely while at the same time still connected.

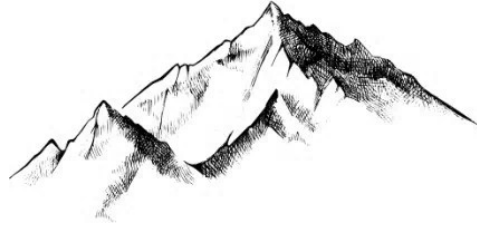
“Let’s get some sleep.”

“Hmmm.”

Peter got up with a one-handed push-up, and she couldn’t resist following the veins on his forearm with her finger.

He came back with a washcloth after getting rid of the condom and took care of her.

Soon Lisa snuggled into the crook of his arm, listening to his breaths while falling asleep.



Peter, propped on his elbow, stared at Lisa sleeping beside him.

They'd used his toys on round three, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd had that much fun and, at the same time, such an insatiable hunger for a woman.

Well, she wasn't any woman.

That was why.

They'd kissed for hours and talked about nothing and everything.

When dawn finally broke, she fell asleep in his arms.

It felt eerily natural to have her in his bed. Like she belonged in this house and his arms.

He already could see a future with her here. Maybe because he really wanted this to work out between them. This was his chance. He'd blown it the first time; he would do anything not to blow it this time.

Peter dozed a little but was instantly awake when the doorbell rang. Lisa didn't move at all until Odin barked. Then she slowly opened her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

He was already dressed in jeans and sat beside her on the bed to put on his socks.

Her face turned alarmed in a split second. “Do you want me gone?”

He looked at her like she was a little crazy. Then realization dawned on him. She hadn’t heard the doorbell.

He leaned over to her and kissed her nose. “No, absolutely not.” He got up and crossed the room. “But there’s somebody at the door; I’ll go and check. You”—he turned at the door and pointed at her with his finger— “don’t move. I got plans.”

Lisa fell back into bed. “If your plans involve breakfast in bed, I’m game.”

She closed her eyes again, and Peter grinned while he went downstairs.

Maybe he would eat his breakfast off her body.

As soon as he opened the door, he seethed.

His muscles flexed when he crossed his arms and took a wide stance. “I told Mom there is nothing to say.”

Upstairs, Lisa lay in his bed, all warm and sleepy. Just waiting to be cuddled and more. And he was down here. It was still cold out, the sun not yet high enough to reach his little meadow, but he was seething.

“I know you don’t want to, son, but your mom said I should try anyway.”

His father looked smaller. His hair was gray, and his body haggard. Why was he here—why now? He couldn’t think of one good reason, and on the other hand, of thousands, why he shouldn’t be here. He’d left his mother soon after Peter left town.

Well, at least physically.

The cracks in their marriage got visible right after Sophie’s murder. They all had felt responsible for her behavior before her death.

And Peter had witnessed many fights and mutual accusations between them. They tried to hide it from him. But he’d been seventeen.

Not a little kid anymore.

He saw the signs and the effects those fights had on them. They took everything good and turned it into something terrible.

Watching them not coping with the death but lashing out at each other was hard.

It had made their home a place he didn't want to spend any time in. And he hadn't.

This had made his life even more of a living hell, on top of Sophie's death.

"No, you don't get to call the shots. Now go." He could see on his father's measured reaction that he'd been prepared for an answer like that.

They hadn't talked in thirteen years.

Since Peter had severed all contact.

His mother had never understood. Thought he blamed his dad for what had happened to Sophie.

But he blamed him for not fighting for his marriage, for his wife, who was a good woman, and for his family.

"But, son..."

"I said you should go," Peter shouted. The similarities between his own actions and those of his father had grated on him ever since his divorce.

But his wife—she wasn't like his mom had been.

His wife had betrayed him.

Had broken her vows and his trust.

She'd been unfaithful, and theirs wasn't a marriage worth fighting for.

"Peter, what's going on." Lisa appeared behind him, and he groaned. He should've kept his voice down. She stepped next to him, and by her reaction, he could see she recognized his dad.

"Hello, Mr. Fisher. How are you?"

Peter looked down at her bare feet. She wasn't even fully dressed. All she had on her was a white button-down shirt of his. It was big on her, reaching her knees, but it was still only a shirt.

“Hello, Lisa, what a nice surprise. You look good. All grown up. It must have been ages since I last saw you. How are you?”

His father's appearance changed right in front of Peter's eyes. The haggardness disappeared, and a pleasant smile appeared on his face. He'd always had a soft spot for Lisa. Said she would grow into a fine young woman.

“I'm good, thank you, Mr. Fisher.” She turned toward Peter and looked at him expectantly.

She wanted him to invite his father in, but there was no chance in hell he would do anything like that.

When she took his hand into her own and squeezed it gently, it was like a clear, white light filled his body.

She was by his side.

A team.

Somehow these thoughts calmed him. Mellowed him out. He could do everything with his Lizzy by his side.

“Why don't you invite your father in, Peter?” She squeezed his hand again, conveying her empathy, which made him want to please her. He didn't want to talk to his father at all, and he sure as hell didn't want him in his house, but he really didn't want to disappoint her. Wow, when did he become such a sucker for this woman?

“Come on in, Dad. Let's grab a cup of coffee.” Peter stepped to the side, and his dad entered the house.

She squeezed his hand again, and when she leaned in and kissed his bare shoulder, he instantly wished he hadn't let his father in. He could grab her, throw her over his shoulder, and have her in bed, moaning in under a minute.

Well, no chance of that now.

He led his father and Lisa into the kitchen.

She plucked her hand out of Peter's when they passed the staircase. "I'll just go get dressed?" she whispered, but Peter didn't want to be alone with his father for one second, so he grabbed her hand, shook his head, and pulled her after him.

"So, Mr. Fisher, what're you up to these days?"

Peter entered the kitchen and prepared the coffee while Lisa and his father took a chair at his small breakfast nook.

"Please, call me Eugene. I'm a writer now. I wrote and published about twenty books in the last twelve years."

"Wow, that's awesome," Lisa said.

Peter stiffened; he didn't know any of this. Maybe he shouldn't shoot his mother down whenever she started talking about his dad.

"I wrote a book about Sophie's death."

Peter tensed, turned around, and crossed his arms in front of his chest before he leaned against the counter.

"I wanted to talk to you about it before it gets published."

His worst nightmare, written down for everybody to read—great, just fucking great.

Judging by the terrified look on Lisa's face, she expected him to lose his shit, and his dad's expression looked like he was prepared for a similar outcome.

Peter turned back to the coffee machine, swapped the cups, and pushed the button again. The noise of the coffee grinder masked the noise of his deep breathing.

When he was calm enough, he turned around. "Why?"

"Why, I've written the book?"

"Yep, why did you do it?"

His dad shrugged his shoulders. "To process, find closure. I needed to examine where I went wrong. There are thousands of different reasons. All very selfish and pretentious."

Peter smirked—he'd forgotten his dad's unique sort of humor. He always made fun of everybody, including himself.

“Your mother told me you would not like it.” He kept on talking without waiting for Peter's reaction. Like he wanted to get it over and done with as soon as possible. “I want you two to read it first so I can still make the edits you request.”

“Okay,” Peter said. He could see the little smile on Lisa's face, and her body visibly relaxed.

Interesting.

She wasn't big on conflict anymore. When she was in her teens, she was in a state of war with her mother all the time.

The past years must have mellowed her out.

When the following silence turned uncomfortable, Lisa guided the conversation away from the edge. “How's the life of an author?”

“It's okay—lots of solitude, but I like it.”

“Will you stay here for the time being?”

“Yes, I planned to get a room at your parents' Inn. How are they? I hope they've got room left.”

Lisa stared down at her limp hands on the table in front of her.

“Mr. Reynolds had an accident a few weeks back. He's been in a coma ever since. Lisa and a friend of hers have taken over the Inn recently,” Peter said, and his dad looked at him, helpless.

He brought two cups of coffee to the table. Then laid his right hand on her neck and kissed her head.

Her smile was rough around the edges, but she stiffened her spine and found her equilibrium again.

“I'm sorry to hear that, Lisa. I had no clue.”

“It's okay. It just punches me in the gut sometimes. But we do have room for you at the Inn.”

Peter smiled. She was tough.

His Lizzy.

And the perfect host, even half-dressed.

“So, you two are together now? Your mother didn’t mention that.”

Shit, caught.

Peter didn’t know what they were exactly. If it were on him, he would call them that. But he had no clue how Lizzy stood on all of this.

This could get really ugly real quick.

He raised one brow in question, but Lisa didn’t react, so he just went for it. “We’re seeing each other. But it’s pretty new.”

The question had caught her completely off guard, and he could see her brain working in overdrive.

“We’ll figure it out,” was all he said about it before he went back for his coffee and changed the subject. “Have you seen Mom?”

“No, not yet—she’s my next stop. Is there someone special in her life?”

The question took him by surprise.

His parents got divorced a long time ago, but his mother never remarried or even saw other men.

That he knew of.

The thought alone was outrageous.

“Nope.”

His dad looked at him like he’d always done, back when he was a cocky teenager—with patience.

But there was also something in his eyes, something that told him he didn’t know the half of it.



The next day, as Lisa sat at the breakfast nook of the Inn with Claire, she still didn't know what to make of this last development between her and Peter.

"Then we kissed and went skinny dipping, and one thing led to the next..."

"So, you did it?" Claire wagged her eyebrows.

Warmth radiated through her body, and she grinned when she thought about Peter, naked and sexy in bed.

"Yes, doofus, but I wasn't the only one, was I?" Lisa wagged her eyebrows in return, and both girls snorted with laughter.

"We just made out a little; you, on the other hand, went home with him. Not the same."

Lisa pressed her hand against her stomach.

Not that she was completely surprised and hadn't expected something to happen, because she had.

Their chemistry and kiss in the parking lot had been off-the-charts hot, and her heart fluttered every time he was near.

At least she wasn't alone in this. It looked like Peter had some feelings for her, as well.

They were seeing each other.

Those were his exact words. So why was she still so unsure about it?

Maybe because they'd acted too fast.

Maybe she should have taken more time, gotten to know him better first.

Not fall head over heels into bed with him.

Again.

That had been a recipe for disaster the first time.

Moon Lake was a small town.

Everyone would know about them in two seconds flat. And everyone in Moon Lake would have an opinion of their own—and would let them know about it.

Complications and expectations, en masse.

It was good to have Claire around because, without her, she would churn and churn on this for weeks without ever getting anywhere.

“So? What now?” Claire, as ever, got straight to the point.

She didn't like to talk about her feelings much, but she was prime at picking apart Lisa's and was a kick-ass pros-and-cons list maker.

Everything you could wish for in your best friend.

Claire stood up for another cup of coffee for herself and took Lisa's cup for a refill. “You like him, like him, don't you?” She waited for an answer.

And she was hesitant to give one.

“So, you want to get together? Is that why you're so bent out of shape after spending the night?”

There's this whole marriage thing you have to sort out as well. See what's the status on that. You trust him?”

Lisa jiggled her feet nervously.

Could she?

Trust him again?

Maybe it was just muscle memory that made everything between them as good and...sexy.

“He’s divorced—we talked about that.” At least they had talked about it.

One thing down. A million other things to go.

And there was so much she didn’t know about him. They sure as hell acted too fast. Maybe she should think about this a little more. Take a step back and cool it off.

He’d crushed her heart once, and she would definitely not let that happen a second time.

A knock on the kitchen window, and Claire putting the steaming cup in front of her, threw her out of her musings.

Both women looked out the window.

“What the hell. How can it be that all the hot guys live down here, and nobody knows about it?” Claire’s offhand murmur brought a grin to Lisa’s face.

“This is Alan, Dr. Radley.” She waved at him through the window and pointed toward the back door. “He’s Dad’s doctor—we met at the hospital.”

“Hello.” He entered, and after introductions, Lisa and Alan—as he urged them to call him—sat down at the table again while Claire brought another cup of coffee for Alan.

“Heard your dad came home yesterday; I’m just here to check on him.”

“You’re always welcome, Alan.” And he was—he’d helped her a lot at the hospital.

So she owed him.

“Are you working at the hospital?” Claire asked.

“No, I’m the primary care physician here in Moon Lake. But even Whitebrook isn’t big-city medicine. So, I help out at the hospital when needed,” he said.

“And, I, kind of, had a meltdown right in front of him, and he picked me up again,” Lisa said, cringing when she thought about her panic attack outside the hospital.

“Normal human behavior—you were under a lot of stress. You look better now—well rested and beautiful.”

Claire’s eyebrows shot up, and the look she gave Lisa made her squirm in her seat. “Thank you, I was pretty down that day. You really helped me through.” She felt heat rising to her cheeks.

She wasn’t used to compliments.

What was it with all the men being so easy with that? It was new to her.

“Will you check on Dad regularly?”

“Yes, I will. There are also multiple options for respite care for your mother. But, yes. Your father told me you’re a diving instructor.” Alan took a sip of coffee then his caramel eyes focused on Claire. “Are you also?”

“No, I’m a chef, but I was working on the same cruise ship as Lisa; we became good friends there—”

“We’ve taken over the Inn together,” Lisa dropped in—maybe this was a potential man for her best friend.

Not that Claire needed her help or that she herself wasn’t anything but hopeless in the love department.

But, no harm in a little push.

Claire was always careful and practically timid in relationships with men, which made it hard.

Maybe she could help her out a little. Just to get things started. The picture of Claire and Blake kissing entered Lisa’s mind.

Or maybe Claire wasn’t so careful anymore. Lisa didn’t know anything about Blake, so from her perspective, Alan seemed the better choice.

He was a doctor, after all, and he was acquainted with her dad, which meant he was a good man.

Maybe Claire would find happiness here in Moon Lake.

Alan stood. “Congratulations.” He looked at his watch. “I should get going. Would you accompany me, Lisa?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied. Her matchmaking ambitions obviously had to wait for another opportunity.

Alan said goodbye to Claire with an easy smile and a handshake and followed Lisa out the back door.

“So, would you go diving with me sometime?” he asked her when they were halfway to her parent’s cottage.

It took Lisa a few seconds to make the connection to their previous topic of conversation.

“I learned to dive on vacation in the Caribbean a few years back but didn’t further pursue it here. But I’d like to take it up again, especially with you as my teacher.”

Lisa’s ears got hot.

Again?

Was he trying to flirt with her?

Or maybe she was delusional, and he was just a charmer and really only wanted to pick up diving again.

“Of course, it’d be a pleasure. My diving equipment should arrive sometime in the next few days with the rest of our stuff. I need to get reacquainted with the local environment. But after that, we can totally do it.”

Diving in the lake was so different from the warm sea, and she would have to reconnect with her old diving instructor again. She made a mental note to look him up as soon as her equipment arrived.

They entered the cottage, and her mom was furiously swiping the floor in the kitchen.

“Mom, Alan is here to check on Dad.”

Her mother hid her face and wiped it to remove the tears from her face, but she couldn’t fool Lisa.

“You need us for this, Alan?” Lisa asked, and when he shook his head, she took her mother by the shoulders and

moved her out through the front door, gloves, cleaning rag, and all.

“What’re you doing? I have to be there. I need to know what Alan has to say. I have to care for your father. It all falls apart. That can’t happen. I have to fix it. Why did you pull me away? You always act on impulse and never think anything through. You’re still as irresponsible as you were as a teenager. Just avoid life’s challenges and leave as soon as the going gets tough.”

It all came out in one fell swoop between sobs.

A sudden coldness hit her core.

What the hell had she done now to incur her mother’s wrath? She’d just tried to help, for God’s sake.

She had upped her whole life to take some burden off her mother’s shoulders. And what did she get?

Another critical tearing down from her oh-so-loving mother.

Lisa breathed hard and ground her teeth.

She wouldn’t react.

This was just her mother, who’d always criticized her for who she was. Same old.

But as she looked at her, there was more.

Something Lisa hadn’t realized before.

Her mother always needed to be in control of herself and her environment.

Type A personality, perfectionistic, who had systems for everything. And when her plans didn’t work, she crumbled and lashed out.

Of course, the situation with her dad lying there would be hard for anyone to cope with.

But that outburst—it had nothing to do with Lisa’s behavior and everything to do with her mother’s inner turmoil, overwhelm, and pain.

Maybe all of her mother's criticism had never been so much about Lisa's inefficiencies but more about her own issues.

She ignored her mom's outburst and dragged her to the rose garden. "Tell me about Gabriel, Mom; I can't remember the story."

"Now?" Her mother asked, exasperated, but at least no more tears. She turned to a stone, with a brass cross, set amongst the roses.

"He was your aunt's child. She took over the Inn from their parents and lived here with her husband and her son Gabriel. When Gabriel was about five years old, he played on some wood logs stacked right here, waiting for someone to chop them down. The logs somehow got loose and rolled over him.

Gabe was killed.

They changed the name of the Inn after that, but she couldn't get over it.

Their marriage collapsed, and after her husband left, she killed herself. It's a sad story."

It was a sad story.

"Then you and Dad took over?" Lisa knew, but somehow the roses and memories calmed her mother.

"I didn't want to, but your father was so happy to come back here. Even with all the misery that happened here with his sister, he just wouldn't let go of the Inn.

And I-I would have followed him everywhere. Even here."

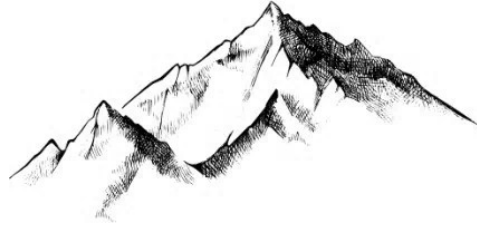
The impact of that last sentence stayed with Lisa.

She wasn't that different from her mother.

She would have done the same thing had Peter not hurt her the way he did.

If he'd been kind, maybe they would have fallen in love.

And quite possibly, she would have followed him everywhere, even if it had been his dream and not hers.



“Do you have the shopping list?” Lisa asked Claire over their new reception desk right at the Inn’s front entrance.

Lisa stroked the freshly oiled surface.

The lemony scent that lingered in the air made her smile.

Getting the colossal desk down from the attic was quite an achievement. Both of them were basking in all the old furniture they’d found up there, but when their eyes fell on the desk, they just knew.

Every day was like stepping into an adventure.

A little scary but a lot more exciting.

This was their future, their business.

So they were thrilled when they found the long-forgotten treasure sheltered by a thick dusk layer.

They had looked at each other and said “reception” in unison, and stubborn as they both were, they didn’t relent until they had hauled it down by themselves.

Not without minor injuries like stubbed toes, scratches, and big bruises here and there.

But also with a lot of easy banter and laughing sprees that sapped their energy.

The little green library lamp on top of the desk rounded out the picture—sophisticated, with old-time charm.

They should also put a small bookshelf in here, with books and magazines for the guests to choose from.

“Yes, I have the list. I know the way. I know how to shop for groceries. It won’t take me long,” Claire answered.

She opened the front door, and Lisa heard a familiar car pull into their parking lot.

“You got a visitor. Remember you are working. No fooling around while on duty.” Claire winked and slipped out right before the paper clip Lisa threw at her made contact with the doorframe.

“Very funny,” she grumbled but instantly felt heat climbing up her neck, just like every single time she remembered having sex with Peter just days ago.

They hadn’t talked since then.

The door opened, and when he stepped in, looking impeccable and incredibly sexy in his uniform, the heat intensified.

“Hey there, beautiful. Has he arrived yet?” Peter propped his hands on the desk and kissed her lightly.

She never thought men in uniform would turn her on, but Peter in uniform—pew.

She shook herself out of her daydreaming and glanced around. “Who?” She hadn’t the first idea who he was talking about.

“The husband of Mrs. Ketley, Room 5? Is he already here?”

Lisa tried hard not to think of Grace Ketley or her hand.

Days were easier; they had so much going on, she hadn’t had much time to think of her.

But nights were shit.

That was when the pictures came back to haunt her.

“No, I don’t think so, and Claire didn’t say anything either. A little heads-up he’s coming today would’ve been nice,

though.”

Peter put his fists into the front pockets of his trousers and shifted back on his heels. “Sorry, wasn’t my call. I shouldn’t even be here, but there’s been a car accident near Whitebrook, so here I am.”

Lisa shrugged her shoulders and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Do you know anything more about Mrs. Ketley’s death? Do you know what happened?”

Giving a name and giving back life to the pale, white hand that haunted her dreams somehow kept the horrifying visions about Zombies in check.

“She was killed. I told you that.”

“And...”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, come on. I found her—she lived here. I dream about her every damn night. You need to give me more than that.”

“No, I don’t. The investigation is still going on, but we have some promising leads. This time we’ll get him.”

He stepped back and looked around.

As if Mr. Ketley would come out of the breakfast room any minute.

“Him? This time? WTF, Peter?” Lisa dropped down onto the chair behind the desk, her legs too weak to hold her up.

Peter scrambled around the desk, squatted down, and squeezed her upper arms. “Don’t freak out. Nothing’s concrete yet. Just some unsolved murder cases of young women in the county. They have never been able to find a connection, but we think they are.”

There was something he didn’t say. She was sure of it. “How many? How long? Why didn’t I know anything about this?”

“You weren’t here. Maybe you should’ve talked to your parents or come home more often,” Peter replied matter-of-factly.

This was a low blow, but maybe he was right.

She could have spent more time with her dad if she had visited more often.

Sadness swamped her. “How long has this been going on?”

“It’s been years. The potential first victim was over fourteen years ago.”

Fourteen years ago? Are you serious? “But we were still back here in Moon Lake then.”

“Yes, we were.”

His tone made Lisa suspicious.

What exactly wasn’t he saying? She eyed him up and down.

He looked exhausted and sad, deep lines around his downturned mouth.

Nowhere near his usual easy smile, or at least sexy half-smile.

That’s when she realized. He was talking about his sister. “Sophie?”

“What about her?” He played dumb, but the sharp pain was visible in his eyes.

“She was the first, wasn’t she?”

“Maybe.” A deep sigh followed this ‘maybe’ while Peter’s shoulders drew up, and he tucked his elbows into his sides.

His sister’s death had hit him hard back then, and it obviously still did.

Lisa could see the pain in the light sheen of his eyes.

“There was nothing you could’ve done, Peter.”

This was the second time Lisa could feel his guilt as if a tangible black cloud was hanging over him.

She vaguely remembered the night.

The party.

He'd told her he had urged Sophie to come home with him.

But she would have none of it.

Sophie had been the life and center of many parties back then. She was running wild and enjoying her life when she got home from college.

Her death had changed the whole town.

But it destroyed Peter's family.

And it still haunted him.

"I need you to take precautions. No walks alone at night, no taking risks. Maybe we'll start some self-defense classes for you and Claire."

The intensity of his words made Lisa nod slowly.

He was trying to protect her.

She thought about the papers in her father's workshop. She didn't want to think about what it all meant. Was certain her father had nothing to do with the deaths of these women.

But she had to show Peter.

"I have to show you something."

"What is it?" he asked but got up and turned around a second later. He'd reacted to movement by the front door before Lisa even realized what was happening.

A man entered.

His hair was muddy brown and disheveled, and his skin was waxy. His clothes were wrinkled as if he'd slept in them, but his face looked like he hadn't slept in days, with deep lines scarring it.

"Hello, my name is Ketley, Brian Ketley. I'm here for—" he petered out, unable to voice the difficult task that he was forced to do.

Peter took a few steps toward the man and shook his hand. "I'm Deputy Sheriff Fisher." He turned and pointed at Lisa.

“This is Elisabeth Reynolds, the owner of the Inn. We can go straight up to the room if you like.”

Peter walked back to Lisa with his hand reaching out. “Keys!”

Lisa scrambled for the keys to Room 5, nervous and happy to have something to do besides staying there and staring at Mr. Ketley.

When she handed Peter the keys, he murmured, “We’ll talk later,” and headed toward the stairs.

Later.

Mr. Ketley hadn’t moved an inch since stepping through the door. As if there was an invisible wall he couldn’t pass. He hesitated and looked up at Peter, who was already halfway up the stairs.

“That would be okay, I guess,” he said and nodded at Lisa, who gave him an encouraging half-smile back.

She busied herself in her office while they were up in the room. Nervousness about what Peter would say when she showed him her father’s documents in the shed and thoughts about Mrs. Ketley and Sophie Fisher stifled her abilities to concentrate on anything worthwhile.

She ended up alternating between looking out the window into the rose garden and marching up and down in their small office.

It took a long time until Peter and Mr. Ketley were finished up there. She exited her office when she heard the familiar squeak of the stairs.

Mr. Ketley carried a single suitcase. He looked forlorn, and his eyes were puffy and red. “What do I owe you for the room?”

Tears pooled in Lisa’s eyes. “Nothing. You owe me nothing.” She gulped air and gave him a quivering smile. “I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Ketley.”

“Thank you.” Mr. Ketley nodded and left.

“Is he okay?”

Peter, who stood silently at the end of the staircase, gave a half-hearted shrug. “He just lost his wife. So—no. I’ll meet him at the sheriff’s office—I gotta get going.” He walked to Lisa, kissed her, and placed the keys in her hand. “I’ll see you later.”

She watched him leave.

She would’ve felt better if she could’ve shown him the stuff, but there would be another opportunity.

At least according to his parting words.



“Can we go? Cookie really needs to go.”

Lisa stepped into the kitchen of the Inn but stopped dead in her tracks. “What the hell?” She did a one-eighty. Every surface of the kitchen was covered with pots, pans, flour, or dough. Even the floor was full of flour. The heavenly smell was the only positive thing.

“I’m in the middle of something. Sorry, but I can’t go.” Claire looked a mess too. Flour was splattered all over her, dyeing her hair a fascinating shade of white.

“In the middle of what? A kitchen-related freak-out? War of the dough?”

This was very unusual for Claire.

She’d always run a tight ship as a sous-chef on the cruise ship.

Everything looked perfect, always.

The food, the kitchen, the cooks, no mess allowed—usually.

Claire rolled her eyes. “I just tried this new recipe, and then, I got unsure if this is something our guests would enjoy, so I decided to make some backup.” Claire shrugged. “It all got away from me then. I got stressed, and...you know baking isn’t my strong suit.”

Lisa snorted and shook her head. “Everything you ever baked tasted delicious. I really don’t know where this is

coming from. And what about the flour? Why is everything covered with the stuff, including you and the floor?”

Lisa grinned at the obvious distress of her friend. Claire was always so in-control in the kitchen, whereas she was a complete klutz.

It was nice the roles were reversed for a change.

Cooking was a nightmare for her. She didn't have any instincts ingredient-wise, and following a recipe bored the hell out of her.

Also, with a chef as her best friend, their roles were pretty much set in stone.

Claire was in her element when she was cooking—artistic—in a very systematic, meticulous way.

It didn't often happen that she improvised or let her inner creative get away this far from her.

There was the sound of a truck leaving outside, which made Lisa curious. Did Claire have a secret visitor who helped her create this mess?

“It was just a mishap. Somehow the seal broke. I'll have it all cleaned up in an instant.”

When her voice got a panicky edge, Lisa's face softened. She stepped forward, carefully avoiding the messy spots, and brushed the flour off Claire's cheek.

“You're such a dork. Don't look so scared. This is your kitchen now. Your kitchen, your mess, your business.”

And whatever else had happened here was really none of her business.

“You know what the kitchen looks like when I try to cook something. So, this”—Lisa made a sweeping motion—“this is nothing.”

Both girls giggled. “Remember when you made a pudding?”

Lisa groaned—somehow, she'd managed to make it explode. They had to scrape the stuff off of half the kitchen.

To add injury to insult, it had tasted like crap, too, because she apparently had mixed up salt and sugar.

“It wasn’t my fault. Who keeps sugar and salt right next to each other?”

“Well, me, apparently.”

They smiled at each other.

They were in charge of their life now.

No boss riding their asses or forcing some system upon them.

“Isn’t it great to be your own boss?”

Claire nodded, her eyes misty.

“So, boss, do your worst; I’ll go walk Cookie, but afterward, I’ll help with the cleanup.” Lisa backed out of the kitchen and walked through the lobby to the front door.

She got dressed in her jacket and dashed back into their office to get a flashlight and her trusty Spyderco knife that had arrived this afternoon with the rest of their shipped boxes.

They did a happy dance when their stuff arrived. Now, there was only one way forward.

The only thing Lisa missed from her former life was diving, but she would soon visit her old diving instructor Marty to get back into that.

Maybe she could even include diving in the recreational activities they could offer their guests.

This was an area of improvement for the Inn. To gain guests and give them more bang for their buck.

Lisa hesitated when she opened the door.

The promise she gave Peter not to go out alone rang in her ears, but she had Cookie with her, so technically, she wasn’t alone, and it was just on the cusp of nightfall.

Technically it wasn’t yet dark.

When she turned the corner of the Inn, the wind chilled her through her jacket.

Maybe she shouldn't go to the small wood behind their property. Perhaps she should just walk along the street.

But Cookie obviously liked her routine, and before she could make the decision, the dog had already entered the line of trees. She passed the cottage and saw her mother moving around behind closed curtains.

It must be hard for her to be the sole caregiver to her dad. Lisa tried to help as much as her mother let her.

And somehow, their intense focus on her dad had gotten them into an easy rhythm of Lisa visiting daily and them having coffee together.

Surprisingly their conversations were...friendly.

Maybe her mother was so relieved she'd taken over the Inn she refrained from criticism.

At least for now.

She looked up at the sky. Thick clouds blocked out the remaining light, and she switched on her flashlight as she entered the trees.

It wasn't a big forest.

The trees stretched from their property to the highway a few hundred yards away. Thank goodness for that—the trees absorbed all the noise from the cars speeding by.

There was a small path, that circled right through it. Perfect for walking the dog or a short morning walk for their guests.

Another strong gust of wind made the trees sway forcefully, and Lisa's stomach rolled. She didn't want to die just because one of those damn trees fell down on her.

She divided her attention between the path in front of her and the trees.

When another forceful gust howled, the swaying trees grew louder, her breath quickened, and her pulse spiked.

This was wrong—she had to get out of the wood.

She called Cookie, but the dog was somewhere up ahead. The noises grew more and more eerie.

Perfect horror-movie soundtrack.

She tried not to go into a full-blown panic. Her imagination could run really wild if she let it, so she avoided watching horror movies altogether.

Those she watched with her sister Karen stayed with her, and she could freak herself out just by thinking of one of them. This train of thought quickly made her think about the serial killer and Peter's warning.

She still didn't understand how something like this could happen in Moon Lake.

This was her home, the safe haven of her childhood.

Not somewhere a serial killer should be on the loose for almost a decade.

Okay, that did it.

Now she was really freaking out.

She was jogging now, carefully stepping over roots and branches.

She tried to think of Claire and the kitchen mess, but every cracking noise made her choke with panic.

She was nearly at the edge of the small wood.

Could already see the lights of the Inn through the trees—just a few more steps.

She broke out into a run, her imaginative mind playing tricks on her, until she reached Cookie, who'd stopped dead in her tracks.

“Hello.”

Lisa froze.

A man stepped out behind a tree directly in front of her. He had a huge, dangerous-looking dog on a leash beside him.

“You walking your dog?” the man asked.

Lisa couldn't really see his face and features, and she didn't dare direct the cone of light from her flashlight into his face.

But she knew one thing.

She didn't know this stranger.

And he shouldn't be here.

Could she outrun him?

What if he trained the dog to chase people? She couldn't make up her mind, so she just froze.

"You gonna talk to me? Or just stand there and freak out?" He laughed, and Lisa gripped her throat.

Well, that ship has sailed; she was already beyond freaked out.

"Hi..." Lisa cleared her throat. "Hello, do I know you?" She fumbled with her knife, which was stuck in the pocket of her jeans.

"Hm, you're Reynolds' little girl."

He stepped forward, and the sound of her heartbeat thrashed in her ears.

She moved her flashlight up and into his face, which blinded and stopped him.

"I drove you from the airport to the hospital, do you remember? It's Anton Smirnov?" He advanced farther, and she took a step back.

"You were very unfriendly that day. But I understand. I hear your dad came home from the hospital. How's he doing?"

Oh God, Lisa didn't know what to do, but running was at the forefront of her mind.

His dog growled, as if he had read her intentions, and Cookie took the opportunity to run off.

Now she really was alone.

"Are you afraid? You don't have to be. I was a good friend of your father." Somehow that fact didn't reassure Lisa at all.

“Well, I don’t know you. I have to get back to the Inn. My friend is waiting for me.” Lisa held back her breath.

“Is that so?” He moved forward again and directly blocked her route out of the wood.

What the hell?

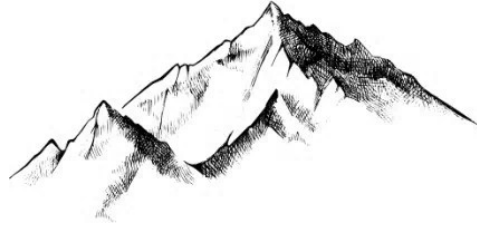
Why did everything this man said make alarm bells ring in her head?

“Yes, it is, so if you’ll excuse me.”

Now was the time to run.

Lisa took a deep breath, ready to make a mad dash to the right side.

“Is there a problem?”



Lisa and the man with the dog were so fixated on each other, they both hadn't heard or seen him coming.

"Peter." Her exhale was more like a sob.

All the tension of the last few minutes fell away, and her hand, with the flashlight, shivered uncontrollably.

No way to hide this.

"And who are you?" Peter said and stopped next to Lisa.

"Hello, Peter, Anton, Anton Smirnov," the stranger answered, and after mere seconds, they both shook hands.

"Met her here in the woods, didn't think it was a good idea for her to go about it alone, but I think Rufus and I frightened her to death," Anton said, pointing at Lisa.

She looked down at the dog, which now lay there next to its owner. It looked bored, not a bit terrifying like before.

"Thank you, but I'll take over now. You should hurry on home; it's about to get wet," Peter said.

Anton looked at Lisa one more time. "Miss Reynolds." He bowed, then turned around and was swallowed up by darkness in a matter of seconds.

"What the hell?" Peter turned to Lisa, bristling with anger. "I specifically asked you not to go out alone. This is no fairy-tale land."

She remained silent.

“Are you just irresponsible, or do you have a death wish I should know about?” Peter’s voice turned into a deep, angry growl.

Barely contained, anger wafted in waves of heat from him.

And when he got into her face and frowned at her, a blush crept across her face, and she looked down.

What could she say?

He was right.

She’d been so frightened when Anton showed up. Too scared to get her knife out of her pocket. If he’d been the killer, she could be dead by now.

Well, now that was a sobering thought.

So, she deserved the third-degree Peter was giving her. He was right.

He grasped her shoulders, and she thought he would shake her, but instead, he pulled her to his chest.

Tears pooled in her eyes when she pressed herself deeper against his body. “Are you okay?”

She nodded against his chest, and they stood like this for a long time.

“Don’t do something like this again, promise me?” He caressed her hair and nibbled on her ear.

“I promise.” Lisa inhaled the clean scent of his T-shirt deeply.

“I can’t lose you again. So please be careful.”

Lisa’s eyebrows shot up.

Lose her?

Again?

He hadn’t lost her. He’d pushed her away by ignoring her and pretending nothing had happened.

But before Lisa could say anything about this, a wet drop landed on her head.

“Let’s get out of here.” Peter took her hand and the flashlight, and together they stepped out of the wood. After a few steps, the rain turned into hail.

“To the workshop.”

They both ran straight for her parent’s cottage.

Peter wedged the door open for her, and Lisa searched for the light switch in the darkness.

Finally, she found it and switched it on.

They were both drenched.

Peter shook off the water like a dog and looked gorgeous, all ruffled up and his soaking-wet T-shirt sticking to his abs.

“Thank you for saving me. I was petrified back there,” she said.

Peter interrupted her by touching her lips with a single finger. “Don’t get me started again.”

He looked serious and intense. “You know I would burn down the world to keep you safe.”

He sighed. “But I can’t do it alone. I need you to help me protect you.”

Her knees weakened. And even though some part of her bristled about the protector part. Who was she? Chopped liver? She didn’t need a big bad man to protect her. Another part of her dissolved into a gooey mess.

The man had a way with words.

“But going out in the dark was stupid. Don’t do it again. End of story.”

He kissed her, then took her in his arms.

Sighed against her hair.

They stayed like this until the tension left his body, and hers. After a while, he playfully bit her neck, then leaned back with waggling eyebrows. “Are you wet?”

She snorted with laughter. He really was a dork. And she was thankful he brought them back onto easier ground. “Yes,

I'm soaking wet."

He smiled.

Then his eyes turned sultry when their lips neared. "I like it when you're wet for me."

Lisa's humor subsided, replaced by a sizzling radiating through her body and a fluttering in her stomach.

Whoa, this never turned old.

Then finally, their lips met. The kiss turned hotter and deeper, and soon just kissing wasn't enough for her. She scrambled to get Peter's T-shirt off him, and he peeled hers up and over her head before their lips met again.

Then he moved down, down her throat, and chest, sucking her left bud through her soaking-wet bra and then moving on to the right one.

He went down on his knees, and she held onto his head, sure her knees would give out any moment.

The path of kisses started again at her belly button, and while his mouth, on its way south, left goose bumps in its wake, his hands popped open the buttons of her jeans.

One delicious pop after the other.

Lisa groaned when Peter peeled down her wet jeans. His mouth pressed against her mound the whole time, and her core clenched when she felt his tongue through her panties.

"Lisa?"

"Hmm..."

"You gotta help, I don't..."

Lisa opened her eyes, looked down, and blinked once, twice, then laughter bubbled up inside of her. Peter was on his knees in front of her. His sexy pecs shiny and wet, his hair standing up because of her fingers, unable to get her wet jeans off.

"Oh, never mind." He stood up, swept her in his arms, and carried her to the old, wooden workbench where he sat her

down. From there, he made short work of her jeans and panties, and when he covered her core with his mouth as if he was a starving man, every thought she had went out the window.

Peter's perfect rhythm of sucking and caressing brought her to the brink of orgasm in mere seconds. Then his tongue found just the right spot, and he pushed her over the edge.

Lisa opened her eyes again and admired the flex of Peter's muscles while he got up, pushed down his jeans, and pulled a condom out of his wallet, which he threw on top of her jeans.

Her eyebrows shot up. "So sure of yourself, hah?"

He chuckled. "Just prepared is all."

He then pulled it on while he nibbled along her left earlobe. He pulled her against him, his hands gripping her bottom. Her core spasmed when he slowly made his way inside.

"Mine." He growled. The intensity of his words in contrast with the deliciously long time he spent invading her, stretching her.

But then, there was no holding back.

He hauled her against him. Deep thrusts galvanized her and stoked her desire.

She groaned when he skillfully pushed her to another orgasm and then followed her over the brink with a shudder and a growl.

When Lisa came down again a couple of minutes later, her eyes fell on his jeans.

Still around his ankles.

She chuckled.

He leaned slightly back and lifted his head from the nape of her neck.

"Am I amusing you?"

She gave him a swift kiss on the lips.

“No, it’s just...” She shook her head to clear the last cobwebs out of her mind. “You still got your shoes and jeans on, is all.”

Peter raised his right eyebrow. “So, now you’re mocking me?”

Somehow he looked almost menacing, except for his state of undress. But Lisa couldn’t pass up the chance.

“Yes, I am mocking you. You have a problem with that?”

“You just wait.”

This sounded promising and a bit thrilling at the same time. But then he handed Lisa her panties and jeans. As soon as she reached for it, he started a tickle attack until she was out of breath and begging for mercy.

With one last affectionate peck on her nose, he smiled, grabbed his wallet, took a step back, and severed their connection.

She jumped down from the workbench and grabbed her panties while Peter pulled his jeans up to his thighs.

He’d already buttoned up his jeans and gotten rid of the condom while Lisa was still struggling. It was a pain to get back into her damp jeans.

He kissed her on the cheek, handed Lisa her T-shirt, and then turned back to the exit.

“The rain eased up a little. At least no more hail.”

Her eyes fell on the tool cabinet. Right next to where they’d made love just a few moments ago.

She thought of the serial killer again.

“I have to show you something.” She didn’t think there would ever be a good moment to show him, but maybe the afterglow would mellow him out a little.

“What? Now?”

“Yes, now.”

She went to the tool cabinet and took out the papers. She laid them on the workbench, like the first time she'd discovered them, and, full of expectation, looked at Peter.

“What?” He hadn't moved an inch and was still standing by the door.

“Would you please look at these papers?” She placed her hands on her hips.

Peter crossed the small space and stopped right next to her. “What is this?” He shuffled through the papers, looking at them and then at her.

“I'm not sure. I found these and couldn't make sense of them at first.”

He looked at the papers again, digging in this time; he unfolded the maps and flicked through the old newspaper clippings.

“When did you find this?” He looked at her with cold, hard eyes.

“A while ago,” she replied reluctantly.

“And you didn't think you should show these to the police?” His voice turned gravely, distant, and Lisa shivered.

Yep, he was definitely angry.

“I'm sorry, Peter, I wanted to show them to you right away, but the right time didn't come.”

“The right time? The right time? Oh, there is a right time for stuff like this—it is the minute you find evidence like this,” he growled, the vein in his neck standing out and his whole face flushed red.

A painful lump formed in her throat, and she shrugged. She knew she should've told him as soon as she found those.

“Is there more?” His voice dropped low, and his whole face had changed into a hard mask. He stared at her without an ounce of playfulness, kindness, or emotion.

Her mouth dried out. “I don't know,” she whispered. Then her gaze dropped down to her feet.

She didn't want to stare into his cold, judging eyes anymore.

This was not the man she had fallen in love with and had sex with just minutes ago. Who made her giggle after satiating her.

This was a whole other person she'd never met before. Hard. In control.

Ruthless.

Or maybe she had.

Maybe he was that way when she discovered the body.

But all Lisa could remember was his strong arms around her and the soothing words he'd whispered against her hair.

Peter took out his phone and made a call.

She didn't listen.

She turned to the fixed picture frame and touched it.

This was her father.

Always mellow, always helpful, a fixer. He had nothing to do with the deaths of these women.

Absolutely nothing.

An hour later, the workshop and the whole Inn was swarming with police, and Peter didn't pay any attention to her.

It was as if the Peter she knew had disappeared.

Lisa shivered and huddled in the corner, and he went past her as if she was invisible. Was this his professional demeanor, or was it his way of punishing her?

Asshole!

"You need to come with us." Another deputy sheriff took her by her arm and led her across the meadow to a police cruiser.

Lisa saw her mother arguing with Peter, obviously furious. "Come with you? Where?" she asked.

They passed Claire, who stood at the kitchen door, her eyes like saucers, and Lisa could hear her gasp when they passed her.

Lisa just shrugged at her questioning look. She didn't know what was happening now.

“To the station.”

“Why?” What had happened in the last hour?

Peter had changed right before her eyes. One minute he was furious at her for going out alone. The next, he turned playful and sexy, and dominant, and then a wall appeared. He got quiet and professional. His joyfulness was replaced by steel.

“There's just a few questions for you to answer,” he said while he waited for her to climb into the backseat of the police cruiser. Then with a deafening click, he closed the door and got into the front seat.

“But, I don't know anything; I just found the stuff. I can't tell you anything about it.”

“It shouldn't take too long then.”

With that, it got quiet as the car rolled on. They passed the man from the woods earlier, walking with his German Shepherd, at the side of the road, despite the rain.

Why was he still out?

His eyes were huge while he observed the action.

She groaned.

Word about this would travel fast.

Then she closed her eyes and tried to quiet her mind.

Think of something else, anything else.

The deputy in front kept glancing in the rearview mirror. She could feel it even through her closed eyes.

How could this have gone south that fast?

What was it she'd missed?

What had Peter seen that prompted this overreaction? The things her father gathered were just newspaper articles. And some photos.

Nothing that screamed killer.

Pressure built like the bubbles of a geyser.

Fuck Peter.

She had to see this through. Her dad was a good man. A good citizen. She would demand some answers and an apology from him.

More than an apology—maybe she could file a complaint or something like that.

Treating her like a criminal.



It got worse once Lisa arrived at the sheriff's office.

A friendly female deputy—Belinda Graves, gave her some dry clothes, but wearing some stranger's leftover yoga pants, and changing in front of someone she didn't know, wasn't Lisa's idea of fun.

It went further south when Lisa took out her knife, which was still lodged in her pocket.

How had it stayed in her back pocket during her and Peter's sexcapades earlier?

She looked up into the alarmed face of Deputy Graves.

"This is just a diving knife." Lisa could see that her calming words didn't impact the cautious stance Deputy Graves positioned herself in.

"I need you to give this to me." Deputy Graves held an evidence bag open.

Lisa's eyebrows shot up—was she being serious? This wasn't a murder weapon or anything like it. "Seriously?"

Deputy Graves nodded, and Lisa scoffed. This was really getting ridiculous.

The deputy led Lisa to the same room where they had taken her after she had discovered the body.

Once again, she felt and looked like crap, and the mirrors confirmed that her feelings were written all over her face.

Great.

This was really getting old.

She sat down, but the surroundings made her antsy. What was taking them so fucking long?

After an eternity had passed and Lisa had counted to one hundred in three different languages—which was all she knew in two of those—the door opened.

Peter looked ragged. He was still in his damp clothes, and his eyes looked tired.

Warmth spread through her, and her first instinct was to console him.

She immediately squashed this feeling, and white-hot rage bubbled up.

He was an ass.

Had her treated like a criminal.

Fuck him.

“Tell me when and where you found the evidence?”

Lisa foot-tapped incessantly. “What evidence?”

“The papers and mementos of the killed women you showed me in the workshop?”

Lisa’s stomach roiled, and she crossed her arms in front of it. “Mementos? Really? These were just newspaper articles and photos. What the fuck, Peter?”

Was he insinuating her father had anything to do with the murders?

“Look.” Peter laid both his hands on the table between them. “I know this is difficult, so just make it easier on both of us, please.”

“I was searching for some keys and went into the workshop. Mom and Dad were still at the hospital at the time. That’s when I found them. But it’s just newspaper articles about the dead women and some photos.

Maybe Dad was just curious, or searching for a connection or something. He always liked a good murder mystery.”

“Did you talk to someone about the evidence?”

“Yes, I talked to you, and you treated me like a criminal.”
God, this man was just infuriating.

“I am truly sorry for your inconvenience—”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“Why were you armed? Do you always carry a knife?
What the hell, Lisa?”

“Excuse me.” Lisa was at the end of her rope. She pointed at Peter. “You told me, not to go out alone, so when Claire couldn’t come, I took my diving knife. I had pepper spray too, but I lost it after that guy scared me to death.”

“You lost it?” Peter’s head shook while he abruptly stood.

His pulsing vein was back.

“How does someone lose her pepper spray as soon as she feels threatened?”

He threw his hands up in an ‘I give up’ gesture. “God, you really are something else.”

Something else? Something else?

She just about had had enough of his high-horse behavior. “Hey, not fair.”

She stood up and leaned over the table. “I—”

Peter mirrored her move, and their noses nearly touched. “You act recklessly irresponsible. You’re withholding information in a murder case.

You’ve only been back for what? Two months? And already been in here twice.

You’re a disaster magnet. And a pain in the ass.” Peter sat back down and sighed. “I can’t protect and keep you safe if you behave like that.”

A surge of energy shot through her. This was the second time he’d called her reckless.

How dare he judge her like that. She wasn't reckless at all. Just extremely unlucky.

“Well, then, why don't you just stop? I never asked you to protect me.”

“Oh, but I do. It's my job—which you make impossible for me to do.” He sighed again and slumped in his chair as if she was just too much to handle.

Enough was enough. “I'm not some silly girlie not able to protect myself. I survived the last thirteen years without you. I traveled the world. I lived in dangerous places. I don't need to be taken care of, protected, or saved. Especially not by you, so what the fuck is your problem?”

“My problem? My problem?” He stared at her as if she really wasn't getting it.

“You are my problem. Look what you've gotten yourself into since you came back.”

Peter started counting. “You got into a fight over your baggage.” He raised the next finger, and Lisa wanted to rip it off. “You found a body.” He continued counting, and Lisa's anger surged with each raise of his fingers. “You went alone into the woods at night when I specifically asked you not to, and to top it all off, you withheld evidence in a murder case.

Do you need more?

You easily could've gotten yourself hurt or killed. So, you tell me.”

Lisa's body tensed, and she braced her hands on the table. “That all wasn't my fault. And you know it. The last few weeks were shit, and I'm struggling through them the best I can.

But I'm not a disaster magnet.”

She made air quotes around the phrase he used earlier. “Or a pain in the ass.”

She scoffed. How dare he even think that.

“And to make one thing perfectly clear. I’m not some irresponsible, reckless party girl. So, don’t you dare treat me like one.”

Peter crossed his arms in front of his chest, not giving an inch but remaining silent.

Which pissed her the fuck off.

Where was all of this coming from? Yes, she’d had some serious bad luck, some situations she could’ve handled better. And maybe she should’ve been upfront about her father’s documents.

But what the hell?

She stared at Peter, the tension emanating from him in waves, and suddenly she knew.

“I am not your sister, okay? That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? She was irresponsible. A party girl. A risk taker. Completely out of control.”

Peter shot up and was in her face so fast, her breath hitched.

“This has nothing to do with Sophie, or me.”

“Oh, but I think it does. You couldn’t protect her back then; you couldn’t save her. Now you project all that stuff on me. But, hey, newsflash—I AM NOT SOPHIE.”

Her voice cracked, and she took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry what happened to her—to you.”

“But you have to let go of the guilt. And you can’t treat me like I’m anything like her.” Lisa wanted to stop, just shut her mouth and leave it at that, but the urge to get it all out was too strong, and she kept talking.

“You don’t know me at all. Lost that chance when you walked away.

“Remember? You behaved as if nothing had happened.

You ran. Not me.

So, don't make me the irresponsible one. Because that's not who I am."

Peter remained quiet even though his rigid muscles and corded neck spoke volumes.

Nothing to say to that? This man was so frustrating.

She threw her hands up. "I'm sick of this. I'm done talking to you. I want to talk to Sheriff Travers." She crossed her arms and looked sideways at the mirrors.

She wasn't irresponsible.

At the airport, maybe she could have handled the situation a little bit better, but for Christ's sake, her dad was in the hospital, and she had been under a lot of stress.

The body—total coincidence. Anybody who'd stopped there could've found it.

The papers?

He had a point there.

She should've told him the day she'd found them.

That was indeed a bad call on her side.

One out of three.

Maybe, she shouldn't have gone off the rails like this. But then again, he shouldn't have either.

Peter sighed heavily. "You done?" He hesitated a moment when she didn't acknowledge him, but then he took a deep breath to calm himself.

"I'm sorry. I'm just...worried."

He turned, and the door behind him closed with a click that echoed in the room.

Lisa sat frozen in her chair and stared at the mirror.

The sincerity and the finality in his voice hit her deep.

The place deep within her that had been wounded ever since the realization hit her that he wouldn't acknowledge their night together was somehow torn wide open again.

Bleeding.

How could he think so little of her? After everything.

Lisa really thought this time they would make it. But somehow, they ended up right where they started.

He left, and her... her heart hurt, and her pride took a beating. But this was so much worse.

Last time he left, he didn't give her a chance to do anything to change his mind. This time it had been things under her control.

Back then, she'd been a naïve teenager. Contemplating a relationship after one shared night.

Chances were, even if things had gone differently, they would never have worked out.

This time around, they had a chance. Getting back together had felt good.

Really good.

But now? She'd deceived him. All the other things she could dismiss, but she should've shown him the documents when she found them. Not now, weeks later. That was on her.

And lashing out like that?

She owed him an apology for sure. The things she'd said about him and Sophie had been out of line.

Lisa groaned.

Why couldn't they turn back time? Maybe scratch the whole day altogether. Then she remembered their lovemaking and groaned again.

She'd fucked up.

Now she had to own it. *So get this over with first.*

Apology later.



Peter was filling out a report when his boss Richard Travers called him into his office. It was a small space, barely big enough for a desk, a visitor's chair, some bookshelves, and a small sofa. His boss was a workaholic, and Peter knew he sometimes slept right there in his office.

“Hey, Rich, you wanted to see me?”

Sheriff Travers was only a few years older than Peter, and the general organizational behavior in the sheriff's department was collegial and not very autocratic. Just like it had been in the teams. Sometimes Peter missed his old job, the camaraderie, the mission focus. But at least he found a working environment that suited him.

Rich just got promoted to sheriff right before Peter applied for the job. They'd both been outsiders and, as Peter never had much patience with hierarchy and Richard felt the same, a friendship soon developed between the two men.

“Heard you picked up some troubles? Old girlfriend, or something?”

Peter's stomach hardened, and he stood straight and didn't flinch. “What did you hear?”

Richard pointed at the chair in front of his desk.

This wasn't good. But he consciously forced his body to relax and sat down.

He knew he'd lost his shit in there with Lisa.

What he didn't know exactly was why.

This woman somehow pushed all his buttons without even trying.

And the pure thought about her being in danger, or not trusting him enough...it just made him see red.

But she was right.

She'd lived her whole life without him.

Had protected herself all her life. She wasn't the flighty, irresponsible person his sister had been.

He'd been completely out of line with his accusations.

And he knew it.

The documents—well, they would see what exactly those were, but at least she'd shown him. Sure, she could've done it sooner, but whatever.

Peter cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I handled the situation poorly. I lost my cool. I know that's unacceptable." It sure was a low point in his professional career.

The sheriff grinned. "Okay, those would've been my exact words, but I see your self-reflection skills works just fine.

And it's nice to see you're only human."

Only human? Was he kidding? Richard had served as a Marine. Was a Marine. And Peter had the highest respect for Marines.

"So, the documents in question? A lead on the murder investigation?" Richard leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, and Peter mirrored his action.

"Carl Reynolds—known him forever. Kept some information—newspaper clippings, maps, things like that in his workshop." Peter didn't feel right talking about Carl that way, but evidence was evidence.

"He doesn't really fit the profile, but we have to look into it. I know him, have known him since I was a kid. Personally, I

don't really think he has anything to do with it. But—" Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"Was he brought in for questioning? Did you take this to the FBI?"

"He had an accident a few weeks back—hasn't woken up since. So, we can't question him."

"Shit."

"Yep. And yes, I called and sent them over."

"So, about the daughter?" Richard looked at Peter with the sternest of looks. "What's the story?"

"She found the evidence, didn't tell anyone. I was a little pissed at her for that." Peter's neck started to itch.

He wasn't proud of his behavior.

"She was armed." Richard looked at the file that lay open on the desk.

Peter took a closer look and saw a picture of Lisa right there in the file.

"She had a diving knife with her. She's a diving instructor—well was. Worked abroad for the last couple years—just came back now, after her father's accident and took over the family Inn."

"So, your relationship is old news, not a current thing?" Richard looked at Peter.

"Well..." Peter's neck heated up even more as he remembered their lovemaking in the shed. The chemistry they had all those years ago was still there, for sure.

And he was far from ready to call it quits.

Despite their blowout.

"So, you are emotionally invested?"

Peter frowned. "I can separate my private life from the job."

"I'm sure you do." Richard raised his left eyebrow and didn't look convinced. "At least you know how important it is

to do that. Hell, I don't have to tell you that. You were trained, and you've been operating in a job where unprofessional behavior gets you and your team killed. But we are human. So —”

“I understand.” Peter got up from the chair. “So, we about ready? I have some reports to finish.” He just wanted to leave. He didn't like being the one in the spotlight.

“So—if you know all that—why did you lose it like that in the interrogation?”

Peter felt blindsided.

“Did I?”

“Yes, I would say. I mean, it was fun to watch and all.”

Peter rubbed the back of his neck. He'd seen the video?

Shit. Fuck.

Richard grinned again. “It's all right. We're all only human. Even you. Everybody is allowed one mistake.”

Peter nodded and was about to leave, but Rich's next question made him lower his hand and turn back again.

“So, about your sister.”

“What about her?”

Peter leaned back against the door, projecting the perfect picture of calm and in control while his stomach tightened. What the hell? Why was everybody bringing up his sister?

Richard raised both hands. “Nothing, it's just...” He hesitated for a moment and waited silently for him to finish whatever he came up with.

“She's another emotional tie to the case. This case”—he pointed at the file in front of him—“if it is indeed all connected. If it's a serial homicide. It's as personal as it gets for you. Your sister, your girlfriend, her father... See where I'm going with this?”

Yep, Peter saw exactly where Richard was going with this.

And he did not like it.

He would ask Peter to step back. Not that he was overly involved anyhow since the FBI had taken over.

At least not officially.

That he had a copy of every file, report, and photo regarding this and all the older cases in his spare bedroom was maybe not a hundred percent “by the rules,” but...

“You want me to step back, don’t you?”

“Yes, I need you to take a big step back from the case. Disentangle yourself. Maybe even consider some professional distance with the parties involved.”

Peter’s eyebrow shot up. “Again. I can separate my private life from my professional life, no problem. Did it all my life.”

He wouldn’t give up, Lisa. Not again.

“I know you can, Peter. It just feels off. I want you disentangled, and I want your focus on your job. This is not a dress-down. You are good at your job, and I appreciate that a lot. I just need you to get some perspective. A little distance.”

“She was my sister, Rich.”

“I know, and the FBI will not forget this. But you are out. As of right now. You take a wide berth around everything related.”

Peter’s first impulse was to argue this decision, but deep down, he knew Richard was right.

Professionally, at least.

He was emotionally invested in the death of his sister and in Lisa. He would step back, officially. But nobody could tell him what to do in his free time, and nobody could order him to stay away from Lisa.

“I want you to talk to someone.”

The hair on Peter’s neck stood up. Was he suggesting a shrink? Honestly? This was a little over the top. Even for Richard.

“Thanks, but I’m fine. I don’t need to talk to someone.”

Richard smirked. Obviously, he knew where Peter's train of thought was going.

"I want you to talk to Agent Holt. She's the one who takes the lead on the investigation."

An interesting-looking woman entered the office a minute later. Petite.

Strawberry blonde.

A pointy nose and mesmerizing clear, blue eyes. Peter had seen her before but couldn't place her immediately—maybe at a crime scene. It would come to him.

"Agent Holt, meet Deputy Sheriff Fisher. He will get you up to speed on the investigation and all the current developments regarding that case."

Peter's eyebrows shot up. He should get her up to speed? Didn't he just tell him to step back, and now he promoted him to liaise with the FBI?

This didn't make sense.

At all.

"Deputy Sheriff Fisher."

"Agent Holt." Peter bowed and shook the hand of the FBI agent.

They both eyed each other until the telephone rang, and Richard took the call but covered the speaker with his hand. "Take this outside, would you? Get her up to speed. Then stay back and play nice." He shooed them out of his office, and Peter and Agent Holt closed the door behind them.

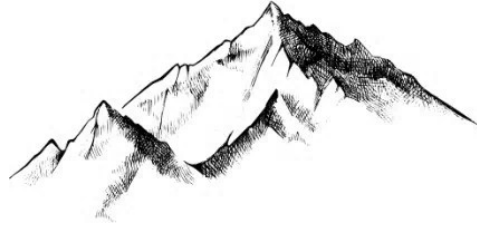
"You don't remember me, do you?"

Peter's eyebrows shot up. Shit. Who was this woman? "You look familiar, but it doesn't come to mind."

"Leanne Cutter—" She offered him her hand again. "We went to kindergarten together. My family lived right next door. But we moved away!"

Now it dawned on him. She hadn't changed much. She still looked like the little girl who had a rabbit soft toy in her hand and who sucked on her thumb whenever she got nervous.

It was a small world, after all.



It has been exactly one month and seven days since the party at the Inn. One month of happiness. Of butterflies. Of good sex and good communication.

But all that had come to a screeching halt with Peter throwing Lisa in jail two days ago.

He didn't really throw her in jail, and everybody at the sheriff's office had been super friendly.

But anyway.

Her bruised ego was enough.

She hadn't talked to Peter since.

Not once.

And every time she replayed the condescending things he'd said about her, she was pretty sure she didn't want to talk to him ever again.

Luckily she found other things to keep her occupied.

The best kind of escape.

Even though she was a tad cold. Now that they were out of the water.

"Hey, Marty, this was great. Thanks for taking me. I missed this."

"You're welcome. It's a good start for the day, huh?"

Lisa nodded her head and watched her old diving instructor refill their tanks.

Initially, she'd called Marty about offering their guests diving tours, but that never came up. Instead, he invited her down here for an early morning dive.

Their meeting was as if she'd never been away like old times. Hopefully, he was interested in collaborating with them at the Inn.

“Hey, Marty?”

“Yeah,”

“My partner Claire and I were considering offering diving lessons to our guests—maybe even beginner courses, down at the Inn. Would you be game?”

Marty scrubbed his clean-shaven chin. “I guess so, as long as it doesn't collide with my own clients. But then again, you would do the instructor part, wouldn't you?”

“Yes, or we could share. And we would rent the equipment from you—the tanks, stuff like that. I don't want to take business away from you.”

“Oh, that's fine. There's enough business for the both of us.” Marty chuckled, and before they went out front to the patio, they moved the refilled tanks to a storage rack behind the small building.

“Coffee?”

Lisa nodded and watched a gull land on the lake's calm surface. Marty really was a great guy.

Marty's Diving had always been Lisa's escape and probably would still be. Underwater and on Marty's patio, she didn't think about anything that stressed her out in her life.

Well, at least that had held true during her last summer at home, before she started her journey. But somehow, now, that same strategy didn't seem to work so well.

How could it be that Peter got under her skin so fast? And what he said the other day hurt so much. She should've known

better than to get involved.

To fall for him again.

Somehow, he always found a way to hurt her feelings.

Marty handed her a cup of steaming coffee and gave her a half-smile that nearly hid the concern in his eyes. He probably realized she was a bit under the weather. Or, far more likely, the rumor mill of Moon Lake was in full swing, and he'd heard about what had happened.

Lucky for her, Marty was such a genuine, kind man he didn't ask too many questions.

A wise man. Even though he probably was only in his late forties by now.

She watched him take a sip of his coffee, the skin on his hand leathery from being out in the water and sun all day, every day.

“Hey, Marty?”

“Hmm.”

“What do you do in winter?”

“Sleep.”

Lisa snorted, then drew her eyebrows together. How could Marty afford to keep all this afloat if he wasn't working in winter?

Marty chuckled when he saw her pinched face. “Oh, Lisa, lighten up. I usually work somewhere else. Somewhere warm. And in spring, I come back here.”

Lisa nodded. That made sense, but why was he coming back? “Why?”

“Why do I work elsewhere?”

“Why come back?”

Marty's face turned from carefree and relaxed to dark. Like he remembered something from the past. Then he shrugged. “This is my home. My roots. Same as you, I guess.”

Lisa inhaled, but before she could contradict him, a keen sense of calm washed through her.

He was right.

This was her home.

This was where she would stay.

So she had to talk to Peter. Get things out in the open. And set things right again.

Lisa got up and grabbed her bag.

“Thanks for the coffee, and the dive. But I gotta bounce. I’ll stop by so we can talk some more soon, okay.”

Marty nodded, and Lisa rushed to her mother’s old pickup.

First, she needed to stop by the Inn. Then she needed to talk to Peter.

When Lisa turned into their road, Peter was in his car right in front of her. Maybe he’d had the same thought.

Or maybe not.

Lisa watched members of the FBI enter and exit the Inn, and her chest tightened. Would this nightmare never end?

She parked right next to him, and fury bubbled inside her when she exited the car.

“What now?”

Before he could say anything, the back door flew open, and a disheveled Claire, followed by Blake, came running toward her.

“They arrived half an hour ago. They’ve got a search warrant.” Claire’s voice broke, and Blake pressed her to his side and kissed her head.

Okay—there was definitely something going on there.

But the thought just flashed through Lisa’s mind, before she focused back on the people at the Inn. She stormed toward the Inn, but Peter’s strong hand held her back.

“Stay in the kitchen. Let me check things out first, okay?”

Lisa wanted to scream at him. Tell him it was all his fault, but that wouldn't help one bit. Maybe it would be wise not to unleash her rage just now.

She nodded, and they entered the kitchen together with Claire and Blake.

Peter turned left and exited the kitchen through the other door into the hallway.

Should she really wait? This was her home. Her family. She was the one in charge now.

Not Peter.

She peeked out the door through the hallway to the lobby, where Peter talked to a young woman.

She heard Blake's chuckle behind her.

"She doesn't take orders that well, hmm?"

"No, she's an independent woman, who doesn't need a man to fix things for her," Claire answered, which made Blake chuckle even more.

Lisa looked back and saw Claire pressed against Blake's body.

Their eyes met, and Claire immediately stepped out of the embrace and cleared her throat. "Can I get you a coffee?"

For a moment, Blake looked like he would kiss Claire right then and there, but he obviously changed his mind in a split-second decision.

Lisa could see the change in his body posture, even from behind. One second he was relaxed, and approachable. The next second he got all steely, closed up, and alert.

Eerily similar to Peter.

"Yes, please, a coffee would be just the thing."

Lisa turned around, about to step into the hallway when she bumped into Peter.

"Couldn't wait, huh?" He passed Lisa and sagged onto a chair.

“Coffee, Peter?” Claire said.

He looked up and nodded.

Lisa shifted from foot to foot, unsure if she should hear what Peter had to say or talk to the lady in her lobby herself.

“So, what’s going on?” Blake thankfully asked the same question she would have asked if she knew how.

“They got a search warrant for the Inn and the cottage,” Peter answered. He didn’t elaborate, and he avoided looking at her.

“Why? They don’t get a search warrant out of thin air,” Blake said while Lisa stopped breathing. There was something in those documents that had led them to believe her father was somehow involved.

“The documents Carl had in his workshop. He’s a potential suspect now,” Peter replied.

Enough was enough. Lisa marched through the hallway. How dare the FBI accuse her father of doing such awful things.

“Excuse me, Mrs.—”

The woman turned around. She was tiny. Not that Lisa was particularly tall, but next to this woman, she felt like a giant.

“I’m Lisa Reynolds. Can you tell me—”

“Hi, I’m Agent Holt. Nice to meet you. I’m really sorry, but we need to search the Inn and the cottage.”

The agent was friendly, almost apologetical, and Lisa’s anger somehow evaporated. The tightness in her chest turned into numbness, and moisture gathered behind her eyes. What the hell went wrong with her life? “But why?”

The friendly agent took a wad of paper and pushed it toward Lisa. “I’m really sorry.”

Lisa looked down at the court document. Couldn’t they catch a break? Now she had to tell her mother, and Lisa knew how bad that would go.

“I have to go, tell Mom.” Agent Holt nodded, and Lisa turned around and trotted back down the hallway, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

“Hey, where’re you going?” Claire grabbed Lisa’s shoulder and stopped her on the stairs.

Lisa blinked away the heat behind her eyelids. She looked up at Peter and Blake, who stood in the doorway, and then back to Claire. “I gotta go prepare, Mom. Tell her they’re coming.”

Then she turned back around, her feet getting heavier with every step she took. Tears dripped off her chin which she furiously wiped away.

She could feel Peter’s presence beside her, but avoided directly looking at him, or thinking about him.

If she did that, she was pretty sure her heart would crack.

“Would you please leave?” Didn’t he realize that he made everything worse?

“I’m just backup. In case you need me.”

His words were soft. Disarming. But somehow, they needed her.

Was that what he thought of her?

That she needed him?

Hell. He was the one who brought this on. Without him overreacting as he did, none of this would’ve happened.

Lisa just walked, her eyes fixed on the shaky image of the cottage door.

She didn’t have enough energy for another fight with Peter. Or with her mother, for that matter. But her feelings obviously didn’t count.

When her mother opened the door, still in her bathrobe, Lisa physically felt the waves of disdain. But she didn’t waver. This wasn’t about her. This wasn’t something she’d done wrong. Even though her mother’s wrath was directed solely at

her. Lisa steeled herself, so her mother's words couldn't hurt her.

“Mom—enough. Get dressed, get prepared. This is happening, so there's really nothing more to say.”

Her mother looked like she had plenty more to say but turned on her heel and stormed inside the cottage.

At least this was getting easier.

Lisa turned around to face the Inn and nearly bumped into Peter, who was still at her side.

“Let's head back to the kitchen,” he said.

She pressed her eyes closed. Couldn't he just go? Her whole body hurt, and his presence made everything worse. Why didn't he see that?

Peter took Lisa by the elbow, but Lisa shook him off. “Don't touch me.”

“Lizzy...”

There was something off with his voice. But it could've been the dull thud of her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

She raised her hands. “Look...I just can't right now, okay.”

The look on his face clearly stated it wasn't okay. But that was something he had to deal with on his own.

Back in the kitchen, they settled around the breakfast nook, and Claire scurried around until everybody had a coffee in hand.

“Why do they search the whole place?” Claire said.

Peter drew a breath and released it slowly. “They have to make sure there isn't more evidence...or something that points to Carl. Which I'm sure there isn't.” He ran his hands through his hair and made it stand up.

Lisa slammed down her mug on the table, forceful enough for the coffee to spill and burn her hand.

“Why didn't you at least give us a little warning?”

Claire got up, and when she returned, Lisa snatched the cleaning rag from her hands and wiped furiously at the mess.

“Look, I’m really sorry.” Peter’s voice was quiet. “But Travers took me out of the equation. Too much personal involvement.” He hesitated. “I hoped he would keep me in the loop, but clearly, I was wrong.”

He sounded miffed about this but shrugged it off. “But either way, I couldn’t have said something. That’s the job.”

Oh, right, she was talking with Mr. Ethical over there.

“So, there was nothing you could do,” Claire clarified and looked expectantly at Lisa.

What did she want from her?

To say it’s okay?

Well, it wasn’t.

“Or, maybe he shouldn’t have overreacted in the first place, then my father wouldn’t be a suspect, and all of this wouldn’t have happened.”

Peters’s eyebrows pinched together. Then he folded his arms across his chest, and Lisa mimicked his movement and glared at him across the table.

Peter held eye contact, but after a few seconds, he shook his head and sighed.

“Look, that’s my job—that’s who I am.” His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. “I’d handle it the same way again. This isn’t about what I want, or what you want. This is about what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“My father’s a good man. And now, thanks to you, he’s a suspect. Good to know how much more important it is for you to do the right thing, than to have my back.”

Peter narrowed his eyes. “I have your back, all right. But this”—he made a sweeping gesture through the room—“this has nothing to do with the two of us. If he’s innocent, they will find out. I believe in the law.”

“If.” Lisa stood up and leaned over the table with her nostrils flaring. “Did you really just say if? Out.” She swallowed against the sour taste in her mouth and jabbed her finger first at Peter and then the door. “I want you out of my house.”

“Lisa—”

“Now.” She might have screamed. Hard to say with the pounding in her ears. She was so done with all of this. She just wanted to go hide in her room.

Pretend like none of this had ever happened.

Her hands clenched and unclenched. “My dad is not a serial killer. How dare you doubt that for a minute.”

Peter grumbled something unintelligible but left the table. At the door, he turned back. “I’m on your side. I have known your father since childhood. Carl isn’t a killer, so let them find that out and rule him out as a suspect. It’s their job. And mine.” He turned around and left.

When the door closed behind him, Lisa plonked back down and laid her head on the table as tears gathered in her eyes. This was fucked-up. Just an hour ago, she’d thought things between them would be okay, but now...now she didn’t know.

He was so cold.

So matter-of-fact.

And even though she knew and appreciated him doing his job, somehow she turned into a crazy bitch around him.

This wasn’t going to work.

They wouldn’t work.

Then Blake stood up, and Lisa was immediately embarrassed.

“I’m going to head out too.”

She raised her eyebrows when he kissed Claire on the lips, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, then he squeezed Lisa’s shoulder.

“He’s a good guy. A good cop. Don’t blame him for being a straight shooter; there’ll always be bumps on the road, but at least you’ll always know he’s honest.”

With that, he left, and Lisa went up to her room to wait for the day to end.



“You did good.” Lisa wrapped her towel around her body and pressed water out of her hair before she turned to Alan, who grinned back at her.

He looked cute, with his hair all wet.

Surprisingly, the doctor had some muscles on him too, which was hard to ignore, with his wet suit only covering the lower half of his body and rivulets of water running across his chest.

“I guess I haven’t forgotten everything.” Alan gave her a half-shrug and a grin, that completed his sexy-boy-next-door look. Maybe she should have taken a good look at the doctor before she threw herself into Peter’s arms.

Peter.

She sighed while she stored her wet suit in the shed.

Last week had been tough, but she finally went through with her promise this morning.

Diving really made everything better. Nothing calmed her more than being underwater, and she’d been in dire need of escaping her life, even only for a bit of time.

She hadn’t talked to Peter.

Not because he wasn’t trying.

He called her at least once a day. But she deliberately left her cell phone up in her room. It was a little cowardly avoiding him like that, but she wasn’t sure of her next move.

Maybe they'd moved too fast. The sex had been great, and all the feelings had been there.

At least for her.

But they fought like cats and dogs. And he made her crazy.

Maybe she was delusional.

Again.

Maybe it was just like when she was eighteen. Peter Fisher gave her a bit of his special attention, and she fell head over heels.

Despite reality.

"It's different in the lake. Pretty dark down there." Alan's voice was muffled under the towel he used to rub his hair dry.

Lisa closed the door to the shed. "Yeah, it sure is different. But it has its own charm."

"Marty, down at the school, has an underwater obstacle course. That's a lot of fun too."

Alan nodded, with his towel around his neck.

Goosebumps appeared on her arms. Even though it was the middle of summer, a slight breeze from the lake chilled her.

"Meet you on the patio in ten?"

Alan nodded, and they split up. Lisa showered and dressed in her room in record time while Alan did the same in the bathroom on the ground floor.

When she came down again, she could still hear the shower going, so she made a quick detour through the kitchen.

"Hey, girl, everything good?" Lisa asked.

Claire was working on another concoction of hers. They still hadn't talked about whatever was going on between her and Blake. But since Blake showed up a lot, and their flirting was sickeningly obvious, it was pretty clear.

Claire swept a strand of hair off her forehead. "Yep, all good. How was it?"

“Good, nice to get my head underwater. Alan wasn’t half bad. Got back into it very fast. Kept the dangling hands to a minimum.”

Lisa prepared two, tall glasses and filled them with delicious iced tea, one of Claire’s specialties.

“Care to join us for an iced tea on the patio?”

Claire nodded. “Take some cake with you. There’s some left in the fridge. I’ll be right out—just have to finish these first.”

Lisa loaded a tray and carried it out through the breakfast room and onto the patio. She chose the table on the far left, where the sun already shone.

It would be another beautiful day.

She took a seat, angled it, so the sun hit her right in the face, and closed her eyes.

“You look like a cat rolled up in the sun. Very cozy and cuddly.”

Alan said things like that all the time. But somehow, she knew he didn’t mean it. He was just a giant teddy bear who liked to flirt and throw compliments around.

And flirting with him was easy...and fun.

“Yep, but cats are really not all that cuddly all the time, at least not when you want them to—only when they want to.”

He moved his chair right next to Lisa’s. Trying to catch a little bit of sun.

“So, do they want to?” He grabbed her hand. “Or should I be afraid of your claws?” With that, he winked, leaned over, and kissed her hand.

Lisa laughed.

It felt good.

Flirting with him was easy. He made her feel better. Forget everything else.

She leaned forward to give him a friendly peck on the cheek, but he turned at the wrong moment, and instead, they kissed.

On the lips.

Just for a second.

And she felt absolutely nothing. Not even a little twinge of lust.

Alan moved back and looked her in the eyes. “That was surprisingly anticlimactic.”

She nodded.

“And a little strange, like kissing a sister.”

She nodded again, her lips pressed together, suppressing a smile.

“Well,”—Alan shrugged—“now we know.” He shrugged, smiled, grabbed his glass, and took a huge sip.

Lisa chuckled.

Some guys just made everything easy.

Even lack of sexual chemistry.

“So, is there someone else in your life?” Alan wagged his brows. “Now that I know that it will never be me?”

Lisa turned to her glass and busted out laughing. Alan diffused what could’ve been awkward between them.

“Kind of. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

He took a deep breath and leaned back a bit. “Oh, it always is. At least, now that we’re friends, you can tell all your girlfriends what a catch I am, and maybe some other woman will take pity on me.”

Lisa laughed again. This man had her kind of humor. “You are that desperate, hey?”

Alan yelped like a little puppy, but his eyes squinted, lit with an inner glow of mischief.

Lisa snorted and jabbed at his shoulder. Maybe she shouldn't take things so seriously all the time. Life was much more fun that way.

"See, I'm funny, and I help people as a job. I'm a catch. No doubt about it," Alan said, cocky as a peacock, and Lisa gasped for air between giggles.

"Is this seat taken?"

She had been so focused on Alan, she hadn't seen or heard Peter coming, until he stood right next to her chair, blocking out the sun.

"No, of course not. Take a seat. How's everything going, Peter?" Alan asked. Alan either ignored Peter's pinched expression or didn't sense the angry waves radiating from him.

"So, you two taking a swim?" Peter asked. His voice was dull and matter-of-fact. But his eyes were hot and angry when they met hers.

Male rivalry.

"Lisa took me diving for the first time in ages. It was great. How about you? You still dive?" Alan asked.

Did he know of Peter's past as a Navy SEAL?

"Depends," Peter answered.

His look never wavered from her while he drew a chair from the table next to theirs and positioned it right next to her.

His eyes were focused and intense.

Pretty much the complete opposite of Alan's fun and lightheartedness.

Probably because he wasn't there for small talk.

They talked about diving for a few minutes, with Alan telling funny little stories of how he learned to dive, which made Lisa crack up, and Peter sitting there politely nodding but not contributing anything of his own experience.

The tension between Lisa and Peter was almost palpable.

Lisa tried hard to stay calm and relaxed, as if she had no care in the world, but it became more difficult by the second.

But Alan was no fool; soon, his gaze ping-ponged from Lisa to Peter, and his eyebrows rose.

The men exchanged a long look, and obviously, some nonverbal male thing passed between them, because Alan abruptly stood up.

“I need to get showered and changed before office hours,” he said, and his chair scraped over the stone surface of the patio.

Lisa stood too.

“Thanks for a beautiful morning. I really enjoyed our time together,” Alan said and kissed her on the cheek.

The noise of Peter grinding his teeth made Lisa’s pulse speed up.

“Thanks, Alan, it was a great morning. Let’s keep up with the diving and do this again sometime.”

They hugged, which turned Peter’s face into a stony mask.

Lisa’s body tensed while she watched Alan leave the patio. By the time he turned the corner toward the parking lot, her hands were shaking.

“What is wrong with you?” She turned to Peter, who drew his eyebrows up.

“You had no reason to be so rude.”

“Why?”

“Because you behaved like a—I don’t know, just rude.” Lisa shook her head.

“Maybe I just didn’t like how he looked at you, or how you behaved with him.”

“Really? Like two friends having a good time?” Lisa narrowed her eyes. “Am I now not even allowed to have a good time? Oh, right, you’re out to make my life miserable.”

That seemed to sober Peter up, and he cupped Lisa's hand with both of his. "I'm sorry. That's not what I... You're right. It's just...something about you two sitting here all friendly and cozy rubbed me the wrong way."

"Well, I have friends—deal with it."

"Is he just that? Your friend? Looked like more to me."

Lisa threw her hands up and stomped back to her chair. Unbelievable. She was really tired of dealing with shit.

"So why are you ghosting me?" Peter asked.

"I'm not ghosting you."

"Why?" Peter tapped his foot and waited.

He likely wouldn't leave before she gave him a good enough reason. "Don't play dumb." Lisa rolled her eyes. "You know exactly why."

How could he come here, sitting on his high horse, and act as if nothing had happened?

"So, the thing with your dad?" Peter leaned closer to Lisa. "I told you there was nothing I could do about it. I'm not part of the investigation anymore."

"Yes, so you said." Lisa turned away from him and looked at the lake. The breaking waves licked at the shore. A little at a time, the stones there would be ground into sand.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked.

"Nothing." She rubbed at her aching chest. "Just say nothing. I know you don't mean to, but you bring out the worst in me. And I don't like that."

"Lizzy."

"No. It's okay. Just you doing your job. I don't appreciate it. But I understand. But this is not working for me."

There was nothing more to say.

She didn't like the whole situation. His behavior, her behavior. And if he believed there was even a possibility her father was guilty, there really was nothing left to say.

Silence stretched between them. And Lisa continued to stare at the waves.

“Do you still believe Dad should be a suspect?”

Peter groaned. “Look. It doesn’t matter what I believe. The only thing that counts is facts. What I believe is irrelevant.”

Lisa’s breath hitched. She could feel the craziness bubble up inside her.

Wow.

Could he really be so cold?

He sighed. “So, can we please stop with the games? Stop punishing me for the investigation.”

Games? He thought she was playing games?

It sure didn’t feel like a game. It felt like her life was slowly unraveling.

And he was right there pushing her buttons.

Was she punishing him for the investigation? Maybe. She sure wasn’t happy about it.

Could she separate her feelings for Peter from her disappointment about him not standing up for her father?

Maybe.

Could she handle it all right now?

“No.”

The word was out as soon as it came to her mind and left her with a hollowness deep in her chest.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t think this”—Lisa waved her hand between them—“will work.

I don’t have the time and energy right now to deal with this. There’s too much on my plate right now. I think we should take a step back. Take a good, hard look at our lives and what we want out of it.”

Clearly, Peter still didn’t get where she was coming from.

His eyes widened, and the vein on his neck stood out. “I know exactly what I want out of my life...” He hesitated, as if he wanted to say more but didn’t. “I know you have a lot on your plate right now, but—”

“Yes, I need some time and space. I need to clear my dad’s name. Focus on the Inn. And this...this thing between us...it just doesn’t work for me.”

He shook his head. “Come on. You don’t mean that.”

He cupped her hand again, but Lisa shook him off, and her voice cracked. “But I do.” She swiped at her eyes, trying to hide the tears from him, and stood up.

Peter’s face tightened. “Don’t run. We can work this out.”

But Lisa shook her head, turned, and walked toward the Inn. “Lisa...” he called after her, his voice rough and demanding.

But Lisa didn’t care; she had to get away from him.

Now.

How did it happen that her life had turned from okay into a total shit show in a matter of weeks?



“Finally, girls, I thought this would never happen.” Julie plopped down at their table and giggled at Lisa’s and Claire’s guilty faces.

Lisa folded her arms across her chest and leaned back. “We made it, didn’t we.” There had been so much going on—they had postponed this get-together at the Black Cat Café twice already.

Julie just smiled and waved her off. “I completely understand. I just couldn’t resist the job. Taking over the Inn in mid-season, with no time for preparation or planning, must’ve been hard, on top of everything else that happened.”

“It is, but we also absolutely love it. Being our own boss, making all the decisions. It’s exactly what we always wanted,” Claire answered.

The tightness in Lisa’s chest, which seemed to be a constant companion these days, released slightly.

At least this part of her life was running smoothly.

The partnership with Claire had been easy. Sometime in the last months, they had established a routine.

Claire handled the kitchen, and Lisa operated the front desk and handled all the bookkeeping. Luckily, her parents had hired old Mrs. Connor, who had cleaned the guest rooms, and she’d agreed to stay on. She was a widow, and a bit chatty, but her work ethic made up for it.

Some guests had left them early when the FBI showed up, but despite this, there was a steady stream of guests over the summer.

So business was good. Claire, and she had faced all obstacles together, and Lisa was still excited when she woke up every day.

Holly served the table next to them before she hugged and kissed Julie and took their order.

“I’ll be with you as soon as possible, but today is kind of crazy.” With that, Holly flitted across the room to serve another group of people who’d just entered. The summer rain brought the people in.

“I’m thinking of quitting my job,” Julie said.

Lisa stopped her coffee midair. As far as she knew, Julie worked as a physical therapist in Whitebrook.

“Quit being a physical therapist? What do you want to do instead?” Lisa asked.

“No, not exactly quit being a therapist. I never intended to stay at my job in Whitebrook long-term. I wanted to go on, maybe work for a professional sports team, something like that.

But now.

I like it here.

I have friends here.

I don’t want to leave Moon Lake, and I would have to leave, to get that kind of job. So, as an alternative, I thought about opening my own physical therapy center. Right here in Moon Lake.”

Lisa hesitated. Moon Lake was small—tiny. It would be tough making it work. She looked at Julie, who picked at the cuticle of her left thumb and bit her lip.

It was a rare moment to see Julie unsure of anything.

Usually, she was a force of nature, even as a kid. Sweet and likable but relentless.

If anyone could make it work, it was her.

So Lisa broke out in a grin, stood up, and hugged Julie, while Claire did something resembling a motivational squeal that ended in an awkward squeak.

“You go, girl.” Lisa slumped back into her own seat. “If this is your dream, you should totally go for it. Look at us. Successful businesswomen rule the world.”

They chuckled.

“What did I miss?” Holly hurried to their table and put their order, her mug, and a tray of goodies on their table. “I always miss the good stuff, don’t I? I planned to have the afternoon off, I swear, but she’s new and easily frightened”—she pointed with her thumb at the new waitress behind the counter—“and I tried not to scare her away in her second week.”

“I didn’t know you got help.” Lisa looked at the little elf with huge, fearful eyes. Maybe being a barista wasn’t the right choice for her. She looked more like a librarian, maybe a kindergarten teacher.

“Yep. I really hope it works out. I like Wendi. So, the good stuff?” Holly raised her left eyebrow and looked at Julie.

“I’m thinking about opening my own physical therapy center in Moon Lake,” Julie answered, with her voice still wavering.

Holly’s eyes sparkled, and her mouth split into a wide grin. “That’s great—more power to Moon Lake. Look at us, bringing business to town.”

They all chuckled again.

“And, the news about Peter and Lisa?” Holly looked at Lisa expectantly, who clenched her jaw. “What? Please share.” Holly made a puppy face. “I need a little adventure in my life, and you two are the talk of the town. Well, you and Peter...and the other stuff.”

Her chest tightened back up. There was just no escaping it.

“What? Did I say something wrong?” Holly’s eyes moved from Lisa to Claire to Julie and back to Lisa. “Of course, the other stuff isn’t true. I met your father. He’s one of the nicest people I’ve ever met, and the FBI will soon realize their mistake.”

Lisa squeezed Holly’s hand on the table.

It was true.

Why did she always expect people to think the worst? Oh yeah, right. Because someone she needed on her side more than anything declared it was up to the law to decide.

Fuck him.

“So-o, the two of you?” Holly waggled her eyebrows. “The whole town is happy for the two of you.”

Argh.

So now the whole town was talking about them? Lisa wished they would stay out of it and mind their own business.

God, she had forgotten how bad living in a small town was.

No anonymity and no escape.

And nothing remained private.

Lisa’s breath caught in her lungs, and she deliberately stared at her hands in her lap. She still wasn’t sure about her feelings. The only thing she was sure of was that she was confused, lonely, hurting, and pissed.

She hadn’t slept a minute since the moment she sent Peter away. And he hadn’t called. “We’re not in a good place right now.”

“What!” The simultaneous answer of Holly, Claire, and Julie, and their outraged faces nearly made Lisa chuckle, but at the same time, tears gathered behind her eyelids.

“What did he do?”

“What an ass.”

“What a jerk.”

“Men are assholes.”

Lisa shrugged her shoulder. “I think I broke up with him yesterday,” she clarified. Yes, he was all that, but he wasn’t the only one to blame. She’d had a lot of time to think about their last conversation during her sleepless night.

Yes, he made her crazy.

Yes, she wanted a man loyal to her, who would protect and love her. But did she really want someone who didn’t take a stand for the things he believed in? Even if the things he believed in weren’t what she wanted to hear?

“It’s just a hard time right now, and we don’t see eye to eye on some things in life. So...”

There was silence around the table, and Lisa looked into the concerned faces of her friends. “Can we now please change the subject to something more fun?”

Lisa wracked her brain for a new topic to fill the silence when the door of the café opened, and a group of women entered. Immediately their chatting and laughing overpowered every other noise in the café, and Lisa turned to get a better look at who had just entered.

“Theresa Fisher,” Julie hissed under her breath, and Lisa turned back instantly.

She didn’t want to meet Peter’s ex-wife. Yes, she was curious about her and even contemplated asking Peter about her, but in reality...she didn’t need the comparison and following self-doubt.

“Julie,” one of the women cried out in a disgusting childlike voice and came directly their way.

Too late to run now.

Lisa straightened her back and steeled herself for impact.

“Theresa.” Julie kissed the woman on both cheeks in an over-the-top manner. “How are you doing? You look great.”

The responding laugh grated on her nerves.

“I’m good. Out and about with a couple of friends. Who are your friends?” she asked, but when Lisa’s eyes met hers, the cold, calculating expression made her shiver.

Whoa.

There was some serious animosity going on. They’d never met before, so even if she’d heard about her and Peter, she wouldn’t know how Lisa looked.

“These are my friends Holly, Claire, and Lisa. Holly is the owner of this café, and Claire and Lisa run The Moon Lake Inn.”

“Oh, the famous Lisa.”

Famous?

What! Wait a minute, did she say famous?

Lisa turned to face Theresa fully. “Hello.” She paused a second. “Theresa, isn’t it? What exactly makes me famous?” She waited for an answer, but her face soon hurt with the forced smile she put on.

Theresa laughed again, a fake, high-pitched laugh. “Well, Pete told me some things about you.”

Lisa’s face, neck, and ears felt impossibly hot.

Oh, God.

“I hear you’re his newest side project now.”

Lisa tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips.

Side project?

What the hell?

“You look surprised.” Theresa’s syrupy voice didn’t match the malicious glee in her eyes.

“Look. Peter is my husband. We’ve been married for five years. He gets distracted easily. I know that.”

Lisa rubbed her temple.

She really didn’t need more drama in her life.

She just wanted to sit here, talk to her friends, and eat a big piece of blueberry pie or maybe two.

Why couldn't people just mind their own business? She should walk away from this. But did this woman really believe Peter was still her husband?

Was she delusional?

Lisa squished her eyebrows together. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I got the impression your divorce was through, so technically, Peter is your ex-husband, and you were married for five years."

Theresa's saccharine smile got a little rough around the edges, but before she could say something nasty, Lisa continued, "But either way, he's all yours."

It hurt.

The second it was out, Lisa knew she didn't mean it.

Or maybe she meant it, but her body just hadn't caught on. She really didn't know anymore.

One day and she already missed their easy banter, the off-the-charts sex, the way he made her feel desired and precious and safe.

She really thought this time they had a fighting chance.

A future.

She just needed to deal with the accusations against her father first because they were clearly not on the same page on this.

Theresa's smug face was firmly back in place now. "We're talking reconciliation, maybe even starting a family."

She straightened and stabbed a finger into Lisa's face. "So don't interfere."

Then she turned and stormed out of the café; her friends, who had placed themselves on a table halfway on the other side of the café, immediately followed her and left Wendi, with bulging eyes, in the dust.

“What a bitch.” Julie said.

“Well, I didn’t like them as customers, anyway.” Holly shrugged, and Julie snorted.

Any tension left evaporated, and they started talking again as if nothing had happened.

Lisa tried to participate in the conversations; she even agreed to a night out with the girls in the coming week.

But her mind was in turmoil.

Was Peter really keeping her as a side project, while reconciling with his ex-wife?

He’d accused her of playing games. So was it all just a game to him?

And why the hell was Lisa jealous even though she told him she needed some time off?

She rubbed her forehead.

It was all too much.

But one thing just became crystal clear. This Theresa, she wasn’t a nice person. And Peter deserved someone much better than that snake. Someone who could accept who he was, not manipulate him and guilt him into someone he was not.

He had firm rules in place.

A code of conduct.

Black and white.

No gray area, where things got wobbly.

That’s what he’d told her.

That’s where he took a stand.

That’s the kind of man he was.

And maybe, just maybe, she could deal with a bit of controversy. Could deal with him making her crazy.

At least she knew he wouldn’t bend just because she wanted him to.

Or just because his ex-wife tried to manipulate him.

He would stand for the things he thought were right, and she could appreciate that.

The next time she saw him, she would talk to him.

Really talk to him and see where he stood on all this.

“I gotta go.” Lisa got up, grabbed her things, ran out of the café, and ignored the stunned faces of her friends.



“What is this?” Peter tilted his head to the side before closing his car door and walking toward Blake. Several times on their way up here, he’d thought Blake got lost in the woods, but Blake navigated the gravel roads as if he’d memorized them. Most likely, he had.

“I bought it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, gonna live up here.”

“In this?” Peter raised his eyebrows and kicked at a pile of planks that might have been a wooden fence at one time. He’d been surprised when Blake mentioned that he was looking at houses some time ago.

“Well, yes, not yet. But once I’m finished, it will be the perfect home.” Blake crossed his arms and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“This is straight out of a horror movie.” Peter’s gaze ping-ponged between what had once been a hunting cabin and Blake.

Blake broadened his stance. “No, it’s not.”

Peter chuckled. “It sure is. Some young, dumb blonde being abducted into a cabin in the woods—oh wait. Maybe it’s a horror or porn flick.”

Blake shoved Peter with his left hand. “You’re an ass. Your house is in the middle of nowhere, as well.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Peter chuckled. “First of all, my house is a house; second...yes, it’s surrounded by trees, but it’s in the middle of a meadow; third...it’s got water, it’s got electricity. It is nothing like this.” He pointed at the cabin in front of them.

What was his best friend thinking? This was a dump. It might have been a hunting cabin twenty years ago, but it had been left to rot years ago.

“I got water. Got my own well, and you might be surprised, but I got electricity. The former owner apparently was some top dog of an electrical company. So, he got the place on the grid.”

“That is hilarious. So apart from the nonexistent roof, the tree, that comes out of...a window...and everything else, you’re in great shape.”

“I’m rebuilding it.”

“You are?”

“Yes. Don’t look so surprised.”

“Oh, I am. Didn’t you tell me you’re not the type to settle down? I just never thought I’d see the day. You staying here for as long as you have, was already a surprise. Owning the bar was a big step, and now you bought an actual house or cabin, or whatever this is.”

“Well, I’m full of surprises. You gonna help me or what?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You know I’ll help you no matter what. We’re a team... family. That’s what we do.”

“Yes, we are. And as part of your team—what the hell crawled up your ass and died?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, don’t nothing me. Still trouble in paradise?”

“It’s just her.”

“No shit?” Blake snickered until Peter shoved him. “You two still fighting?”

Peter sighed. “We’re not fighting. She’s just being unreasonable.”

“Oh, and you’re the poster boy for reasonable.”

“Hey.” Peter’s eyes tightened.

“I’m just saying—there are always two sides to the coin.”

“Well, my side is a valid one.”

Blake leaned sideways with his hand in his pockets until their shoulders touched briefly. “Yeah, might get lonely on your side, though.”

Peter nodded but otherwise turned quiet. Blake was right. He was lonely already. After a few short weeks, he already missed having Lisa in his bed when he woke up. Or when he went to bed, or when they met in the middle of the day, and he could steal a kiss or two.

He missed their easy banter and deep conversations even more than the physical stuff. He could talk to her, and she just got him.

On a level that astonished him sometimes.

They still had that magical connection. Like so many years ago, at his sister’s funeral. He was a black-and-white guy.

Always was.

Even though he operated in the grey enough times to know that it had to be done sometimes, clear lines made a lot of things easier, especially if you faced your enemy.

But personal relationships were a whole other beast.

Hence, his poor performance in this area of his life.

“So, you think I overreacted?”

“This is not about what I think. But no. You did exactly what you did your whole life. You got all the facts. Evaluated each outcome. Then made a decision and went for it.

Remember that one peer review, when the team dressed you down because you were on an ego trip?”

He nodded. It was his one bad review.

The team straightened him out.

End of story.

“Relationships are like a team of two. You can’t make decisions alone. You can’t decide what’s right and wrong and demand her to support it, without asking questions. You’re a team now. And there is no *I* in team.”

“Really? Corny much?”

“If the shoe fits. As I see it, you got two options: be right and alone, or try at least to understand her side, and maybe you can save your relationship.”

“So, what do I do?”

“Really? You’re asking me for relationship advice?” Blake stared at him incredulously. “I got no fucking clue. Buy her flowers, grovel. Do whatever it takes. Talk to her. If this is the woman you love, you can’t let anything come between you. Not your values. Not your ex. Not your pride. Not your attitude.”

“My ex? What would Theresa have to do with anything?”

“Apparently, you two are talking reconciliation—that’s what she told Lisa.”

“Are you shitting me? Where’d you even get that from?”

“I got my sources.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re banging Lisa’s friend, aren’t you?”

“Hey, she’s a great lady. Don’t talk like that.”

“Oh, sorry. So, you’re having relations with Claire?”

Blake shrugged but grinned.

“Just don’t fuck it up. She’s Lisa’s best friend. I don’t want to be forced to quit our friendship because my girl told me so.”

“Already doing what your lady tells you. That’s the kind of attitude; that keeps you in a relationship. Now you just need to get her back.”

They both chuckled, but Peter's stomach hardened. It wouldn't be easy to get her back. But nothing worth fighting for ever was.

“So, about this house of yours? When do we start?”

“I got the plans in the truck. Teardown's tomorrow.”

“Wow, no time like the present.”

Peter watched Blake get the plans from his truck.

Nothing ever stayed the same.

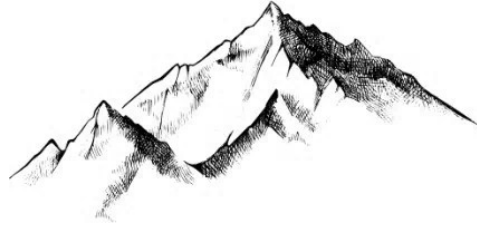
Blake was right.

Sticking to his old ways would mean he'd lose Lisa.

Again.

He wasn't willing to let that happen.

Not again.



Lisa's plan didn't go as she'd hoped.

When she arrived at the Inn, her breath hitched when she saw Alan's car and the funeral car in the parking lot.

She jumped off her bike, threw it to the side at the back entrance, and ran to the cottage.

And froze in the middle of the meadow.

Two men drove a gurney to the cottage.

Why on earth was there a gurney?

"Mom?" Lisa passed the two men and barged into the cottage.

Her mother stood in the kitchen. Her face was ashen, and her shoulders sagged.

Lisa only needed one look. A heaviness settled in her chest, and she felt icy cold.

Alan sat at the bar and put down his cup of tea. His face softened when he held her gaze.

No.

No.

She ran toward her father.

She'd seen her dad just yesterday. Now he looked completely altered. He still looked like he'd done the last few weeks, but he looked different too.

Lifeless.

Like an empty shell—still and foreign.

Her vision blurred, and an emptiness spread inside of her.

She hesitated. “Mom?”

Her mother stepped next to her and stretched out her arms.

Lisa flew into them. Tears clogged her scratchy throat.

“Your father died, honey.”

Lisa could hear the tears in her mother’s voice. The pain mirroring her own. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

“Did you say goodbye?”

“He died sometime during the night. I was asleep.”

Lisa squeezed her eyes shut.

He died alone.

All alone.

“He loved you very much, honey. We both do.”

They stood like that for a long time—both crying.

“Have you called Karen?” Lisa wiped her eyes.

“No, not yet.” Her mother sniffled, and Alan handed them both a hanky.

He squeezed Lisa’s shoulder and handed her a cup of tea. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded. —She had no words.

The following days passed in a flurry. There were people in and out of the cottage, but Lisa mostly sat on the couch next to her mother and stared at her father’s hospital bed until it was gone.

Sometimes her mother told stories about her dad, but they just mourned in silence most of the time.

Lisa's sister had her way of coping—hyperactivity mode. She organized the funeral and made all the other necessary arrangements.

Lisa just stayed at her mother's side.

Listened when her mother wanted to talk. Comforted when her mother cried.

And just sat with her through the long nights and the even longer days.

Numerous times during those days and nights, she took her phone, ready to call Peter, longing for his voice, but she didn't.

Today was the day of the funeral, and the urgency, the need to have Peter near—his calming influence, his strength—was even more prevalent.

Would she ever be able to mend their break?

How silly it all seemed now.

There was a knock on the cottage door, and Lisa got up from the sofa, brushed the wrinkles out of her black dress, and walked to the door.

When she opened the door, Lisa blinked rapidly. Lots of people were around the Inn making preparations, but she hadn't expected Special Agent Holt from the FBI here.

"Special Agent Holt." Lisa nodded once but otherwise blocked the entry.

Her mother didn't need any more bad news.

"Ms. Reynolds. Can I come in for a second?"

She had a genuine smile on her face.

Compassion.

Lisa hesitated but then stepped aside and let Special Agent Holt enter.

When they arrived in the living room, her mother's lips trembled, and she sat rigidly on the sofa.

"Mrs. Reynolds, my deepest condolences."

Lisa's mother nodded but otherwise didn't say anything. Lisa offered the detective a seat and took her place next to her mother.

"What brought you here?" Lisa didn't intend to be harsh, but she could feel the full-body tremors of her mother next to her, and this pissed her off.

Her mother had had enough. She didn't need this, today.

"The evidence found in Carl Reynolds' shed is not incriminating."

Lisa's eyebrows shot up.

"Apparently, Mr. Reynolds was good friends with a guy from the Whitebrook Gazette who worked the police blotter. He made copies of things he shouldn't have even seen and gave them to Mr. Reynolds."

Lisa's mom nodded. "Sam Connors worked at the Gazette but died a few years ago. Even left Carl something in his will —ah."

Lisa's breathing turned shallow.

She'd missed all of this. She'd missed all those years with her dad just to avoid potential conflicts with her mom and to avoid the memories of Peter.

Maybe Peter had been right.

She took the easy way out whenever things got tough or didn't go to plan.

Past Tense.

Not anymore.

Special Agent Holt nodded once, then stood up. "So those photos were crime-scene photos taken by the sheriff's department. They shouldn't have gotten into the hands of civilians. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. And I'm sorry for your loss."

She turned and let herself out. The door closed silently, and Lisa waited for her mother's reaction.

“Okay, that’s that. Now let’s get this funeral behind us. ”
She stood up, smoothed her dress, and left the cottage as if the time for grieving was over.

Lisa’s chest expanded.

Then she swallowed hard against the pit in her stomach and the bitter taste lingering in her mouth about her mother’s matter-of-fact reaction.

Her father was in the clear.

At least they had that.

But she still hurt. She missed her dad. She didn’t want to attend the funeral. She didn’t want to put on a mask and pretend everything was okay.

She stood up and went to the bathroom. Her mother’s attitude had thrown her. But maybe it was just another coping strategy?

Before her dad’s passing and even the days after, Lisa had felt a connection between them. Somehow, something had changed. The only question was how long it would last until her mother would push her away again. Because with her mom, Lisa never knew.

She splattered her face with cold water and looked at herself in the mirror.

Whatever.

Her mother would act however she wanted.

And Lisa had to work on not letting her mother’s mood swings hurt her or rule her life.

She was her own person.

It was time to start behaving like it and not like a child seeking her mother’s love and respect.

And not fall into the same pattern of pushing people away, like her mother.

The image of an angry Peter floated through her mind, and Lisa shook her head and pressed her hand against her chest.

Now it was time to mourn her father.

Everything else had to wait.



When Lisa entered the Inn, after the funeral, she could still smell a whiff of lemon when she passed the old sideboard, in the breakfast room, on her way to the patio.

Lisa and Claire had been polishing up the old furniture before Lisa's dad died.

Everything had smelled lemony then, and a little bit of that normalcy was still left.

She sat down on the stoop and waited. People would arrive soon. And she'd have to go in and play hostess. But not now. She would hide out a little longer.

The funeral had whizzed by.

Lisa had cried at times, but now she was just numb and empty.

She had always hoped. They all had. Now, there was no hope left—nothing to do.

No chance to ever talk to her father again, to hear her father's voice, feel the deep vibrations of his laugh. Tears gathered in her eyes. She heard the first cars arrive. Car doors opened and closed, but she didn't move. Tears silently dripped down her cheeks, too many to just wipe them away, so Lisa just didn't bother.

Peter sat down next to her. He didn't say a word, but just his calm presence, the fact that he was the first and only person Lisa actually wanted near her, made the tears flow even more. When the tears and sobs became more violent, Lisa didn't know and didn't care who made the first step.

She crawled into Peter's lap, and he held her in a tight embrace.

And she let go.

She cried about her dad. About the missed opportunities because she had been absent for so long, she cried, until no

tears were left.

“I’m sorry, Lizzy,” Peter said and nuzzled her hair.

Simple words, sincere words.

Lisa let them bounce around inside her head. With her cheek pressed against his chest, she looked over the premises to the mountains that stretched behind the town and the lake.

An eagle soared up in the air, and she could hear his cry. This was her father—the town, the people, the lake, the mountains—he loved it all.

He gave all of his love so freely.

Without inhibitions.

Without holding anything back.

“I am too,” she answered at last and looked up into Peter’s deep eyes. Then she snuggled back into his chest, and they turned silent again.

More people gathered on the patio, and listening to the noises soothed her.

Then Alan appeared on the bottom of the stoop. He nodded at Peter and sat right next to them. “How you holdin’ up, friend?” He didn’t comment, or bat an eye at her sitting on Peter’s lap.

Lisa shrugged her shoulder.

“My favorite memory of Carl was the summer I arrived in Moon Lake. Since I left my hometown, I have always lived in big cities, worked in big hospitals.

Had a hard time adjusting.

Carl just came by the office one day. He told me to put on some jeans and meet him out front. Then he took me out on the lake. Said we were going fishing, but he didn’t even bring any gear.

We just drank beer, and he asked a lot of questions.

I think I told him my whole life story that afternoon. The next time he told me about the people in town. Who had a

serious medical condition, and who was lonely, and needed someone to chat with. Who I'd better listen to and who not to take too seriously.

It was his very own welcoming gift, and I'm still thankful for it.

He turned me from an outsider into a townie. And I suspect he did talk me up to the people, as well.

It's hard to trust an outsider.

So, your dad went out of his way to make it work. Carl was the reason for me finding a new home in this town, and I'll forever be grateful for it."

For a long time, it was silent after Alan's story. Lisa swallowed down the threatening new tears. Her dad had been exactly the kind of man he'd described.

She took Alan's hand and pressed it briefly.

"Thank you, Alan. For the memory, and for the care, you took of him, and for your friendship."

Alan squeezed her hand before he let go. He squeezed Peter's shoulder, stood up, and walked up the stairs. Lisa was glad their awkward moment hadn't changed anything. They were friends, and Alan would make some other woman very happy. That she knew with the same certainty, she knew that her heart and her feelings were entirely captivated by the one man in her life, who'd first captured her feelings as a teen.

"He wanted more, didn't he?" Peter asked. Lisa shrugged her shoulders but decided to just go with the truth. Much less complicated that way. "Maybe. But the chemistry just wasn't there."

He didn't say anything. Just as she got nervous, he went on. "So now it's a friendship thing?"

It didn't feel like a question, but Lisa answered anyway. "Yep."

After another long pause, Peter leaned back so he could look into her face. "Good."

Then he bent down and kissed her.

A sweet little peck.

Nothing more. People came up to them. Talked to them. Alone, this would've been unbearable to get through. But Peter's soothing presence made it all better. They sat rooted in the same spot the whole time; not once did he leave her. Not once did Lisa feel the tightness in her chest and the confusion about her feelings and their relationship.

It just felt right.

He was the one for her.

The one who protected her.

The one who made her feel safe.

The one who made the most unbearable situation, bearable.



Lisa looked up from combing one of Mattie’s Barbies when she heard a car door close in the parking lot.

She couldn’t see who’d arrived from her spot on their picnic blanket in the middle of the meadow, but Claire should be somewhere in the house to deal with any arriving guests.

Other than their guests, it had been quiet since the funeral.

“Aunt Lizzy, can you help me?”

Lisa helped her niece pull impossibly tight trousers on the toy when a shadow fell over them, and she looked up.

She squeezed the doll until Mattie snatched it from her fingers. She hadn’t seen or heard anything from Peter since the funeral.

He’d tucked her in that night. Hadn’t left her side. But they hadn’t talked about them, and the fear that his ex had been telling the truth always lingered in her mind.

“Peter.”

“Lisa.”

He leaned down, and for a short, delicious moment, she thought he was about to kiss her. But he just flopped down on the blanket and squished some dolls under him.

This left Lisa in a strange outstretched position, and heat immediately gathered in her cheeks.

“Hey,” Mattie protested, but calmed immediately, after Peter saved the dolls from under him.

“Mattie, meet Peter—he’s an expert in playing with dolls.”

Peter’s eyebrows shot up, and he stared at her for a short, intense moment.

A pleasurable shiver ran down her spine.

He had the most luscious eyes she’d ever seen in a man. And being the sole focus of these eyes—it made her fingers itch to touch him.

“You can play with Aunt Lizzy.” Mattie shoved a doll in Peter’s hands and broke the magical spell.

When her niece’s words sank in, Lisa snorted with laughter, while Peter alternated his stare between the doll in his hand and her.

“That’s the doll’s name. You can play with Aunt Lizzy, the doll.” Or, he could play with her, if he wanted to. Somehow, her feelings had mellowed out since her father’s death, the visit from Special Agent Holt, and Peter being there for her at the funeral.

She could understand where Peter was coming from.

Yes, she still wanted him to be on her side, always. But most things in life didn’t work that way. There were two sides to every story, and Lisa realized that the only thing she could control was her reaction to things.

“So…” Lisa pointed at the doll.

She thought Peter would be at least be a little uncomfortable, but far from it. He commandeered the male doll and played with Mattie as if he was used to it.

Warmth flooded her body, and a slow smile built on her face while she leaned closer to him.

Then Karen came down the patio stairs and sat down on the blanket, as well.

“So, what’re you up to?” Karen asked, and Mattie immediately told her the scenario they were about to play out.

Karen declined an invitation to join in and just watched.

“So, how is Mom? Did she talk?”

Karen looked at Lisa and rolled her eyes. “Yes, she’s good, or at least will be. She’s a little overly angry, maybe. She was ranting about some old pair of shorts, Dad had kept, even though they’d been ruddy and torn. So, why aren’t you two talking?”

Lisa shrugged her shoulders. “I actually really don’t know. I think, I got too close; now she’s pushing me away again.”

“Hmm.” Karen shook her head and looked at Mattie and Peter, who were still playing.

She didn’t really understand what was going on with her mother. She’d isolated herself completely. No more talking. No mother-daughter moments.

It was as if she crawled into a shell and didn’t want to deal with her.

But whatever the reason. This was not about her, and she wouldn’t let her mother’s behavior hurt her anymore.

“So, he’s back in your good graces?” Karen mumbled and looked Lisa in the eyes.

She could feel Peter’s body tense beside her.

Lisa narrowed her eyes, but Karen just shrugged. Maybe she was right. This was as good a time as any to stop being a coward.

“Yes,” Lisa said.

“Good,” Karen replied, and Peter’s body relaxed.

Lisa wouldn’t have noticed the subtle movement, but now, somehow, their legs were touching.

Karen stood up and dusted off her jeans. “Time to go, Mattie.” She picked up the bag and handed it to Mattie. Lisa got up, too, and hugged her sister goodbye.

Mattie moaned a little, but when Peter and Lisa helped her put the dolls into the bag, everything was fine again.

Lisa cuddled Mattie a little, and she even hugged Peter. “You can play Barbie next time, okay.”

Peter grinned, nodded, and pinched her nose. “Thanks, sweetie.”

They watched the two of them cross the lawn, while Mattie gave her mother a play-by-play of her doll’s latest adventure.

“Come sit.” Peter was still on the blanket and tapped next to him with his left hand.

Lisa sat down, but there was an awkward silence between them, so she smoothed the legs of her jeans to give her hands something to do.

“So...” Peter bent down and forced her eyes to meet his. “I’m back in your good graces, I hear.”

“You did? Where’d you hear that?”

Peter smiled. “Oh, I got my sources.”

Lisa smiled back at him.

“I know you had a tough time and everything. And I’m sorry. I really, truly am. I should have been more supportive, a little less rigid. I acted like an insensitive ass.”

“Yep—I mean...”

Peter chuckled and touched Lisa’s upper thigh. “You had every right to cool things off. I did everything like I used to. I made a decision. I decided what was right and wrong, and I went through with it. Didn’t even talk to you. Or explain myself. We made each other crazy.”

Lisa nodded. “You had your reasons. I understand that. I just needed you to believe in Dad’s innocence.”

“Oh, but I did.”

“You didn’t act like it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Peter softly took her chin and guided her lips to his.

When he ended the kiss, he pulled her onto his lap. “So, we’re good?”

Lisa nodded, and they cuddled and kissed some more.

“What’s the deal with your mom?”

Lisa shrugged. “She’s pushing me away for whatever reason, but I’ll just wait till she comes around.”

“Hmm.” Peter nodded. “Hey, did you know my old teammates will arrive tomorrow?”

Lisa nodded. “Claire told me—we prepared the rooms already.”

“Good.”

Since they hadn’t been on speaking terms, Blake and Claire had handled the reservations.

“I…”

Peter hesitated, and Lisa’s chest tightened. “What?”

“Nothing, just, those guys…” He fizzled out again, which made Lisa suspicious.

“Are they good friends of yours?” Maybe if she got him talking about them, he would say whatever he needed to.

“Yep, we were in the teams together. Great guys. Know me better than anyone. Could I ask you a favor, without you going off the deep end?”

Lisa narrowed her eyes. That sounded ominous. “I guess, it depends. What is it?”

“Could you not tell them we are together until I get here?”

His apologetic voice tightened the knot in Lisa’s belly. “Why?” Was he ashamed? Did he want to keep their relationship a secret?

“Actually, as soon as they know, they will tell you every piece of dirty laundry they know about me, and I want to be there to defend myself when they do.”

Her tension released with a shaky laugh. He wasn’t concerned about what they thought.

He was concerned about what she would think. “So, there’s a lot of dirty laundry. Is that what you’re saying?” Lisa wagged her eyebrows and smiled when Peter combed through his hair and rocked his head.

“No, of course not, I’m a good guy. Plus, I was married most of the time.”

Lisa’s smile faded. She’d nearly forgotten about the lovely meeting with his ex-wife. “I actually met your ex-wife.”

His face tightened, and his lips pressed into a white slash. “Blake told me. What did she say?”

Lisa’s stomach roiled, and she bit her lip. Was his reaction indignation over his ex, or was he angry they’d met? “I was with the girls in the Black Cat Café. Holly, the owner, Claire, Julie, and I have a standing appointment once a month there. Last time she came in. Knew exactly who I was and told me you two reconciled and are talking about starting a family. She even called you her husband and me your side project.” It all rushed out of Lisa in an attempt to just get over it, and she lowered her chin in expectation of whatever would come her way.

Did his ex tell the truth?

Was he playing her?

Was she his side project?

She didn’t actually believe it. But what if?

Peter laid his index finger under Lisa’s chin and raised her face until their eyes met.

By the stormy look on his face, he was pissed as hell, but there was a softness in his eyes. “I didn’t know she came to Moon Lake. But I sure know the divorce is through, and we have no contact whatsoever.”

Peter scoffed and shook his head slowly. “She called a few times, but I never returned any calls.” He leaned forward until their noses nearly touched. “And you are no side-anything, Lisa, at least not for me.”

He gently placed his hand on her neck and looked her deep in the eyes before he kissed her again.

His kisses really were the best.

Unhurried, deep, soothing, and exhilarating, all at the same time, and Lisa snuggled deeper into his body.

“So.” She decided to address the one little tidbit that had sparked her interest during the talk with Peter’s ex. “Did you ever talk about starting a family during your marriage?”

Peter looked at the lake and shrugged. “We did some. But we both decided it wasn’t the right time.”

Lisa rubbed her hands down the leg of her jeans. “So, you do want kids sometime?” She held her breath in anticipation of his answer.

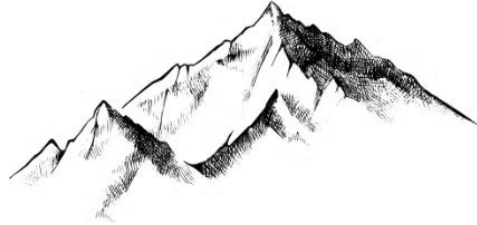
Peter turned his eyes back to her. “Yes, I do want kids. What about you?”

Lisa exhaled. “Yep, I want kids—maybe not right this moment, but yes, definitely in the foreseeable future.”

With you.

They looked each other deep in the eyes.

A promise of a future together, a secret pledge—not spoken out loud, but they both knew without words.



“Here you go.” Lisa handed the receipt to Mr. Griggs.
“Thank you for your stay; we hope you’ll visit us again.”

“Thank you. We had a great time. In fact, let’s make a reservation right now.” He turned to his family. “Same time, next year. What do you say, kids? Wouldn’t that be great?”

A grin split Lisa’s lips from the chorus of “yeah” and “awesome” coming from the three kids and the wife, who had been great guests this last week.

Things were really looking up for the Inn, and Claire and Lisa had so many ideas they’d already started a dedicated Inn-Idea notebook.

Life was good.

Business was picking up.

Claire and her had gotten into the groove, and Peter and her had spent a fantastic night together.

Last night.

She hung the old-fashioned key back, and for a moment, her eyes lingered on the one to Room No 5.

Mrs. Ketley and her killer, who was still somewhere out there, were never far from her mind. But at least her sleep wasn’t haunted anymore, and even though she missed her dad like crazy, life in Moon Lake was somewhat back to normal.

Mostly normal.

Her mother still wasn't talking to her, which soon became the new normal, and Claire and Lisa were still not going anywhere alone, especially not at night.

The FBI investigation was still going on, but Lisa hadn't heard a thing since the day of her father's funeral.

Maybe Peter knew more, but the topic hadn't come up last night.

Blake squeezed himself through the main entrance past the Griggs family. "Hey, they aren't here yet?"

"Nope, not yet."

He nodded and made a beeline to the kitchen. Quite possibly to flirt with Claire, or get a coffee, or both.

They resembled teenagers, the way they were all coy about what was going on between them. Not that Lisa knew exactly what their status was. Somehow Claire became awfully monosyllabic whenever Lisa inquired about their relationship.

Car wheels on the gravel of the parking lot caught her attention, and when she looked outside, a bunch of mean-looking guys exited a ginormous truck.

That must be them.

She hurried to the kitchen to fetch Blake and Claire.

When she entered, Claire was on the counter, halfway undressed, her hair tangled and her blouse undone, while Blake stood between her legs and nibbled on her.

Lisa covered her eyes immediately. "Ugh, gross. I didn't need to see this, not ever."

She turned back to the door, her eyes still covered. "I hope you're decent again, because they're here."

She left the kitchen, accompanied by Blake's rumbling, belly laugh, happy to escape the awkward situation.

This was the second time Lisa saw them kissing, so maybe there was more to it than "just being friends" which was Claire's answer whenever she'd asked about it.

Well, no, maybe about it.

Definitely more than friends, and maybe even love?

Lisa really hoped this was true for Claire.

She hadn't had it easy.

She didn't know a lot about Claire's life before they'd met. But she knew enough to sometimes wonder how Claire had survived and kept her kindness and willingness to love and support the people around her.

It took a very strong person to come out the other end stronger after what had happened to her.

But Claire was a survivor. Maybe she should talk to Peter and make sure Blake was an okay guy.

The guys stepped through the front door at the same time as Lisa, followed by Blake and Claire entering the reception hall. There was hooting and hollering, lots of manly hugs, with plenty of mutual back-patting.

Maybe Peter had thought they could keep their relationship secret for now, but within a minute of the group's arrival, one thing became as clear as day.

They already knew.

And she didn't even have to guess.

"This is Lisa Reynolds, Peter's Lisa, and this is Claire."
Blake laid his arm around Claire, marking his territory.

The boys just sized them up for a second, then Lisa and Claire were immediately brought into the fold, including bear hugs and kisses.

The boys, as Blake and Peter called them, were actually grizzly bears in a uniform of jeans and black T-shirts, who could break her in two seconds.

At least she got that feeling when each of them hugged her.

All three were heavily bearded and looked rough around the edges.

A barely veiled edginess.

Untamed and sexy.

“So, you’re Peter’s Lizzy, hah?” Lucas’s steel-blue eyes had a friendly twinkle in them.

He wore a beige baseball cap, which had seen better days, and his Oakley’s on top of it.

A flush of heat turned Lisa’s cheeks hot. “Yes.” Somehow it came out as a squeak.

Great, two seconds, and they all thought she was a squeaking idiot.

Damn.

Christopher shoved Lucas away and introduced himself with the same bear hug Lisa had observed prior.

His eyes were also blue—just more morning glory, less steel. He was the shortest of the bunch.

Still, he had to bend way down to hug her, and his longish, wavy hair fell onto his forehead.

He quickly repositioned his black sunglasses to push them back again and smiled.

Talk about a killer smile. One of those that made your knees weak.

Holy cannoli.

A shove. Then the third man stepped forward, and what started out as a handshake ended in a hug too. “Don’t let them bully you. I’m Rey.”

God, the guy smelled good.

Rey had a darker complexion than the other two, and his dark brown hair was even longer than Christopher’s. He wore a man bun and a beard.

But he was cover-model material, as well. “And don’t trust the pretty one.” He nodded his head towards Christopher. “He’s full of shit.”

Lisa nodded and smiled but stayed silent to avoid another squeak.

Rey acknowledged her slight discomfort and grinned at her.

A lethal womanizer.

And he knew it.

“Where’s Peter, anyway?” Their gazes ping-ponged from Lisa to Blake and back toward her.

“Very brave of him, to leave you alone with us,” Christopher said. “Funny thing, he did that again. Remember the one time in Thailand, when we met this small, Asian girl.” They all—including Blake—snickered.

Lisa leaned in.

Here came the juice.

This was her opportunity to fill at least some of the considerable gap in her knowledge of Peter’s life.

“Wait, let me call Peter first; tell him you’re here before you tell me all the gory details.” She turned, grabbed her phone off the reception desk, and called.

“Hey, the guys are here. Where are you?”

“I’m still at my mother’s. My dad’s here too.”

Lisa pinched her lips. She thought Peter and his dad had opened a new chapter in their life, but Peter’s voice was tense. “Okay, well, it’s only a five-minute ride, so get going, okay?”

“Did they already talk crap about me?”

“Oh, they’re just about to.”

“Get me Blake on the phone.”

Lisa handed Blake the phone, and after a terse “On it, Steel,” he handed it back to her.

“I’m on my way, won’t be long. Keep your chin up, and don’t believe anything they tell you.”

Lisa laughed at that and ended the call.

She turned around, but the boys were heading out to grab their stuff.

“Let’s show them their rooms and meet afterward on the patio,” Blake said.

Storytime was clearly over.

The boys came back, and Lisa showed them to their rooms while Claire and Blake went to prepare some welcome drinks and snacks.

They were all on the same floor, and Lisa opened first Rey’s, then Christopher’s door.

The third room was a little farther down the corridor.

Lucas walked beside her.

“Peter’s the best guy I know.” He stopped. Took a second as if he was contemplating if he should say anything. “And he waited a long time to get you back. The things we say, the stories we tell...we’re just a bunch of overgrown kids. Who get paid to do dope shit.

Don’t take any of it seriously. Or let it intimidate you.”

Lisa opened the door to his room and then turned to look him in the eyes.

His serious expression was in contrast with the slight twinkle in his eye.

He had mischief written all over him.

But his affection for the other guys shone through.

She smiled. “Don’t worry. I usually can hold my own. See you downstairs in a few.”

It was nice to know that they all knew about her. Approved of her.

It gave her a sense of belonging, as nothing else could. She wasn’t the other woman. Nobody had even mentioned his ex-wife.

She probably shouldn’t feel that way.

Nevertheless, being accepted by his best friends felt incredibly good.

He saluted and shut the door, and Lisa walked back to the stairs.

Downstairs she ran smack dab into Peter, leaning against the reception desk.

“Hey, beautiful. So, where are they?” He took Lisa by the hips and pulled her flush against his body.

She would never get used to the butterflies in her stomach. “Upstairs—we’re meeting on the patio in a few.”

“Great.” Peter pulled her to the sitting area next to the reception desk, where he sat down on an old leathery ottoman—another attic find—and dragged her onto his lap.

He cupped her cheek and looked her deep in the eyes. “I missed you.”

She chuckled and raised her left eyebrow. “I understand. I’m that irresistible.” She whipped her ponytail back. “And it’s been.” She looked at her watch. “Almost six whole hours.”

Peter shrugged and smiled. “Long enough without a fix.”

He kissed her and, between kisses, stood up and carried her to the stairs. “I think I need to go freshen up, as well.”

Lisa snickered, and he carried her up the stairs without even breathing hard. In her room, Peter locked the doors and had them out of their clothes and her on her back, moaning in record time.

It was a miracle the way this man used his fingers and tongue in a perfectly choreographed dance.

Somehow, he had the uncanny ability to combine just the right pressure, with perfect rhythm and pacing.

“Wait.” Lisa clutched Peter’s head until he looked up from between her legs.

He lifted his eyebrow, and lust coiled inside her from his look alone.

She grabbed him by the shoulder and urged him to crawl up. Then she pushed him on his back beside her.

“My turn.”

Her devilish grin elicited Peter’s groan, which she stifled with a kiss.

She caressed first his cheek, then his chest, and followed with her mouth on the path of her finger down his body. Lisa loved touching the ridges and valleys created by his muscles. She followed the visible veins with her tongue until she arrived at his impressive erection. When she kissed the velvety tip of his hard cock, Peter groaned.

She took as much of him into her mouth as she could and slowly released him while she looked him in the eyes and kissed his tip again.

“Okay, this is killing me.” Peter’s voice sounded strangled when he grabbed her at her armpits and hauled her up for a kiss.

“Why?”

“Because if you do this, I won’t last very long.” He sheathed himself in record time and lifted her until she straddled him.

“Well, a quickie then.” Lisa wiggled her eyebrows, which earned her a playful pinch.

It turned out a quickie, not because Peter didn’t last, but because Lisa’s quick orgasm surprised them both, and Peter followed, triggered by her spasms around him.

Afterward, they cuddled, and Lisa felt so at ease. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this way.

This was new.

It felt different.

Easy, more natural.

Completely right.

When they finally joined the raucous group on the patio, they earned their fair share of whistles and comments. Sometimes they talked all at once, laughing loudly, and telling funny stories about each other, but always affectionately. The

only silent moments were when their stories involved a team guy they lost or someone who got injured.

Lisa didn't know how they could deal with so much stress, pressure, and heartbreak and stay that funny and kind.

It had to take a lot of practice to compartmentalize your life like that.

They guys made plans for later that evening.

Dinner at Blake's Bar & Grill first, and after that, beers and a small campfire at the Inn.

A perfect ending to a perfect day.



Julie, Holly, Claire, and Lisa had arranged a girls' night out in a matter of a few phone calls.

The motivation and outlook of drinking in good company and watching a group of gorgeous men, made the decision to meet at the Bar & Grill that much easier.

And watching, they did.

The girls had settled in a booth a few tables down from the men's, all of them facing the men, except for Holly, who sat with her back to them.

"Could anyone say something?" Holly stared at the three other girls, as if they were brain dead—not far from the truth, the way they were staring more than holding up their conversation.

"I've never been so turned on by just looking at a man," Julie said matter-of-factly before taking a sip of her beer absently.

Claire and Lisa nodded while Holly pouted. "For real now?" She turned around and watched the men for a minute. Blake must've said something particularly funny, because their deep laughter rumbled through the bar.

Holly turned back around, crossed her arms, and pouted. "Not fair."

But Lisa felt good. Too good to really care.

Watching Peter reconnect with his friends made her happy. She felt more at home every day, living a life she could see herself living in ten, twenty, or thirty years.

Same place, same friends, same love.

She'd never had that deep sense of belonging, of being exactly where she wanted to be.

Not on the ship or any of the places she'd lived before.

There had always been this restlessness, an expectation of more, more to see, the world to discover.

Now she had arrived.

Or at least it felt like it at the moment.

Blake stood up and came over to their table. All of the girls, probably acutely aware they were staring more than talking to each other, simultaneously looked inconspicuously in another direction.

“Hey, Lisa, your phone is going off, a lot.” He handed over her purse, which she had left with Peter when they took a turn on the makeshift dancefloor.

“Thank you, Blake.” She took it and immediately rummaged through it.

Where was the damn phone?

She finally got hold of it, shoving the rest of the stuff back in. She really should clean this out at the next opportunity. Three missed calls from Karen.

Lisa got a sick feeling in her stomach; Karen never called that late. She grabbed her bag and decided to take this out the front door—the noise level in the bar too high to understand a thing.

Two minutes later, the sick feeling turned up a notch.

Karen couldn't reach their mom—she'd tried for an hour now, but their mother hadn't picked up her house phone, or cell phone, and Karen was past worried—frantic.

Lisa promised to check on her immediately—she was just a few miles from the Inn, but she came with Peter, so she didn't have her bike, or a car there.

She could ask him if he could drive her, but she would hate to disturb his evening with his boys. Julie and Holly, didn't come by car either.

Lisa was just on the way to return to the bar and catch a ride somehow, when a cab rolled into the parking lot. There weren't many of these out here, so she took it as a lucky strike and waited until the passengers got out. She could be at the Inn, check if her mom was okay, and be back here in less than thirty minutes.

“Hello, do you know the Moon Lake Inn?”

She couldn't see the cab driver because of the bad lighting in the parking lot, but he nodded and drove off.

“I need you to wait for me at the Inn and get me back to the bar afterward, okay?” His silence irritated her like hell. Couldn't he talk to her and not just look at her funny in the rearview mirror?

“You're Carl's little daughter, Lisa.”

Now it was Lisa's turn to nod. Maybe silence wasn't that bad after all.

They arrived at the Inn in a matter of minutes.

“Please wait; I'll be back in a few.”

“Okay.”

When Lisa opened the door, the interior light illuminated the driver's face, and she recognized him immediately.

Lisa shook her head.

Now was not the time to think about it.

She dashed alongside the Inn to the cottage where there was, thank God, still the light on in the living room.

Lisa pounded against the door and called for her mom at the same time.

After a few tense seconds, her mother appeared and opened the door. She refastened her bathrobe, and a towel was wrapped around her wet hair.

“Lisa, what’s going on; did something happen?”

Her confused look was nearly comical, but Lisa sighed heavily and grimaced. “Karen couldn’t reach you on your phones, so she got nervous and sent me to check in on you.”

Her mother’s eyes narrowed into a pinched expression, and her voice turned from worried to scolding. “I’m not a baby; I just took a bath. Before you ruined it, I had a very relaxing evening. I don’t need you babying me.” She turned on her heels and went back into the house, leaving the front door open.

Oh great, now she was the one who got blamed.

Again.

Lisa stepped into the door and yelled, “Mom, please just call Karen—tell her you’re okay.”

Her mother returned with her phone already at her ear, giving Karen a lecture, and Lisa waved goodbye and closed the door on her way out.

That had been a quick fix.

Karen had been overreacting as always.

She couldn’t fault her, though.

Her mom had had mood swings lately. Understandable, with losing her husband and blaming her daughter for God knows what.

But being alone and dealing with all of this couldn’t be easy for her. Well, Lisa shrugged and stepped up her pace. She had a cab waiting.

When she got there, the driver was standing beside the car in the dark parking lot.

“I’m sorry. Thanks for waiting. We can go back to the bar now.” Lisa waited for the driver to move, but instead, he

opened the door for her and stood entirely too close. Lisa leaned forward, ready to get in, and then—nothing.

The first thing Lisa was aware of was her tongue, which felt strangely swollen in her dry mouth. Her head hurt, and she couldn't move her hands.

What the hell happened?

Did she fall? Did she faint?

Why was she lying in the back of a driving car facing the rear? Lisa turned her head until she could make out her purse right there in the foot area. But her brain was too foggy to make sense of it.

Until the man in the front began talking. Not to her, but to himself.

At first, he mumbled some things Lisa couldn't understand, but after a while, her head became clearer, and his voice got more and more agitated.

"Find a nice girl. If you find a nice one, you can bring her home, otherwise, get rid of her. Okay, mother. I'll do that. You're right, maybe she has to go, too. But I need some information first."

He mumbled the same thing over and over again. Who was he talking to? Was he on the phone with his mother?

Lisa's first instinct was to get her phone, but her hands were squished between her body and the seat cushions.

She inched farther to the other side until she faced the front of the car, but her hands were bound together with something that felt like—a cable of some sort.

She remembered their encounter earlier in the woods, and a chill ran down her spine.

That day she and Peter had their big fight.

She'd been scared of Anton that day.

And now?

What the hell was going on?

And where was he going with her?

And how the hell would she get out of this situation? She tried to slow down her breathing.

Think, Lisa, think.

Nobody even knew she had left the bar. Why didn't she tell anyone, or at least send a text? Even if they were missing her by now, they wouldn't know what had happened.

The ramblings up front stopped for a moment, and then she heard static noise. Was he searching for a radio station? Lisa felt bogged down by the surrealism of the situation. There she was—unconscious and bound in the back of a car, while the man who kidnapped her, searched for his preferred music?

A wave of cold flushed through her body, and tears gathered behind her eyes.

She had to get out of this car.

Now.

But first, she needed her hands. Her knife was in her bag, as was her phone.

If she could only get her hands free.

The man in front began his ramblings again, but Lisa tuned him out.

She needed to come up with a plan.

Now.

Her life had just come together.

The Inn, Moon Lake, her friends, and Peter.

She loved everything about it.

Finally, she'd felt truly at home.

Her life had a purpose—meaning. And she wouldn't let this dick take it away.

She fumbled with her bonds. There had to be a knot somewhere. She twisted her hands until her joints hurt but hadn't even loosened them up a bit.

But she wouldn't give up.

She would fight.



Where was he taking her? Lisa shifted her focus from her bruised wrists to the surroundings outside the car. If she didn't know where she was, she wouldn't know where to go when she escaped, or be able to call for help.

It was dark outside—not a streetlight or any other source of light anywhere.

He was driving pretty fast and straight ahead, so they must have left town behind them.

There were clouds overhead, but they gave room to the moon every so often.

Lisa slowly rolled to the side and propped herself against the car door. It was a slow move upward until she could glimpse through the opposite window.

The lake.

They were on the highway to Whitebrook alongside the lake. They passed the parking lot, where Lisa had found the body, and she slowly exhaled—at least he wasn't taking her there.

Fuck.

The killer. Was he it?

But where the hell was he taking her? Her breath hitched when another wave of fear cut down her airways. Was this man about to kill her too? But why?

Suddenly the car slowed down, and she glimpsed the sign right before they turned right.

Dragon Cliff Wall.

The car accelerated again but didn't go as fast as before. The road to the cliff was narrow and restricted by trees. Plus, it wasn't going anywhere. This road ended at the cliff with a small parking lot. As teenagers, they went to the cliff a lot. The boys always dared each other to jump from a rock ledge at the lower end of the wall.

Lisa had never jumped.

Even the ledge, with its twenty feet, was too high for her comfort.

The cliff itself was about eighty feet, and the ground broke away into a breathtaking drop-off right down into the lake. Lisa got dizzy just thinking about it.

One wrong step in the dark, and she could fall down and die. Screaming for help wouldn't do a thing for her either.

There was nobody out here.

No houses or passers-by.

Nobody would find her. Or come to her rescue by accident.

It would be on her to escape.

Sweat poured down her face; she didn't know anything about escaping.

Or fighting.

She should've taken Peter up on his offer for self-defense lessons.

Now it was too late to learn.

Peter.

His smile appeared in her mind, and she could hear his deep belly laugh. He'd been so happy, so relaxed this evening—his boys in town, their relationship on the right track. He seemed content, and she loved watching him.

She also loved the longing looks he cast her way every now and then.

Secret promises of later.

And his badass friends? The ones she was so nervous about meeting? They were just like Peter and Blake.

Kind and caring.

Family.

The car stopped, and Lisa hadn't even realized it until the driver turned around and looked at her. He didn't leer or something—he just looked at her, in eerie silence, with slightly off eyes. Maybe he was on something?

“Did you get my flowers?” he said. “I really liked you right from the beginning. Even though you were a bit standoffish, you seemed nice. But then you had to go and show whatever your crazy father had collected to the cops. Didn't you?” He shook his head. “And you chose Peter over me. That is not nice. Good women don't behave like that.”

Lisa's chest tightened, and she grimaced. What the hell was he talking about?

Flowers?

She didn't get any flowers—just the ones after her father's death. But he couldn't mean those, could he? And why was he so interested in the documents in the shed?

“I didn't see your flowers. I'm sorry. There were so many after Dad died.”

“Oh, but you did. They were sitting on your kitchen table. Weeks before your dad died. You smelled at them.”

Lisa's eyes narrowed. Alarm bells rang in her head. How the hell would he know all that?

A vague recollection of a bouquet of red roses came to mind. “But they were from Alan; they were signed in his name —”

The man in front bared his teeth. “No, they weren't. They were signed with A...for Anton. How dumb are you?”

He spit out the words, and Lisa flinched back. There was stuff going on all along, and she had no clue.

How dumb was she, really?

“So, what exactly in your father’s shed had the FBI up in arms? It was him and his friend at the Gazette. I always knew they had their suspicions. They connected the dots. Didn’t they? But I’m smarter. A lot smarter.”

Lisa’s eyebrows shot up.

Oh shit.

“Do you remember when we first met?”

Lisa nodded. He’d told her, when they met in the woods, when he ambushed her in the woods.

“Small talk, just plain, polite, small talk would’ve sufficed, but you couldn’t care less on the way to the hospital and then again, in the woods.”

He shook his head. Sighed as if he was disappointed in her.

“You looked like you wanted to run from me until your hotshot boyfriend came along.” He laughed, but it was a sarcastic, deprecating laugh that made her stomach drop.

“You went all hero-worshiping on him and dismissed me immediately.”

What the hell was he talking about? Yes, she’d been preoccupied that day and in the woods—she’d been scared shitless of him and his dog.

Apparently, for a good reason.

He sighed. “I watched you together. In the shed.”

His face warped into an ugly mask.

“I really thought you were a nice girl. Even found excuses for your behavior.” He shook his head. “My mother was right. You’re a whore like the others.”

Others? The others?

W.T.F.

“And your father wasn’t nice either. He was always so suspicious. Not friendly, like he was with others.”

Her father?

What the hell had been going on there? Had her father known?

Had he had any suspicions?

Her intuition had been right all along.

Something wasn’t right with him.

The way he was talking—about her and her dad, and his mother.

He was mental.

And he’d been inside the Inn.

Had watched her.

Cold shivers ran down her spine.

Get rid of the ones that aren’t nice—that’s what he muttered in the car.

He would kill her.

Anton left the car and opened the back door; Lisa couldn’t react fast enough, before he dragged her out by her hair.

A fiery pain shot through her scalp and into her spine, and she cried out.

She struggled as soon as her feet hit the ground, but he chuckled while dragging her away from the car.

“Shit, forgot the bag,” he murmured before he forced her back to the car.

Bag, what bag? Lisa’s imagination ran wild—did he mean a body bag or her bag?

He thrust her against the car.

He pressed his nose against her temple, a knife against her throat, and his mouth against her ear. “Stay here, and don’t move an inch, or I’ll cut you.”

She froze.

Too scared to even breathe.

He took a step back and removed the blade from her throat. The knife wasn't huge, but the jagged blade reflected the moonlight, and black spots started dancing in her vision.

She stood frozen, but her eyes followed him, turning to the back of the car.

He had an accent. It wasn't very predominant, but the way he pronounced the "L" was—off.

When he opened the trunk, she could feel the handle of the driver's door on the small of her back. Maybe she could get in and lock the doors somehow. Better than standing here, waiting for whatever he pulled out of that trunk.

Lisa turned slowly until she could touch the handle with her bound hands.

If she could get in, maybe she could even drive away. Steering with her bound hands should be possible. Luckily he hadn't bound them at the back.

She cracked the door and waited for Anton to come running, but he was rummaging in the trunk and talking to himself again.

She opened the door just wide enough to slide inside.

Slow, fluid movements.

No noise.

The keys rattled when she bumped her knee against them. Lisa froze.

Keys.

She hadn't thought of them before. He'd left them in the ignition!

She frantically searched for the button to lock all the doors. This car must be modern enough to have something like that.

Fast, faster—he could be done any second.

Where the hell was the button?

Lisa frantically scanned the whole dashboard and finally found it on the driver's side door.

Then it all happened simultaneously.

Anton found what he was searching for and closed the trunk.

Lisa threw the driver's door closed and engaged the locks just a millisecond before Anton was at her door.

He violently rattled at the handle.

The whole car shook with his efforts, and he screamed.

Lisa stared out the window at Anton, paralyzed with terror and unable to move.

Tears gathered in her eyes.

Finally, Anton abandoned the handle and kicked at the driver-side window.

The bashing pulled Lisa out of her stupor and into high gear; she turned the key, started the car, and leaped forward.

“Shit, shit,” she screamed while putting the car in reverse and slowly moving backward.

She wasn't going fast, because she couldn't see a thing in the rearview mirror—it was too dark, and the tears filling her eyes clouded her vision.

But the car steadily inched backward. The pace was too slow to shake Anton, who still screamed and bashed against the window.

She had to go faster or turn the car around.

Anton smashed his elbow against the window again; it wouldn't take long until it broke.

She needed to turn the car around.

Now.

She needed the headlights—she wouldn't make it, driving in reverse along the cliff.



Peter smiled when his gaze met Blake's. It was good to see all his buddies together again.

That was the hardest part for him.

Leaving his team, his boys behind.

He'd gotten lucky when Blake decided to relocate to his area, but the others...

All three of them were still on active duty.

Their lives filled with constant training, constant stress, and mostly unhealthy relationships with both women and adrenaline.

"Hey, where did your lovey go?" Christopher sat down next to him.

"Don't call her that, Phantom—she has a name, you know."

He purposely used his nickname. Christopher's immaculate skills to vanish were legendary in the teams.

Christopher laughed. "Full-on protection mode, hah. So, this is real—you really, finally got back the one who got away. Do me a favor, don't fuck it up this time, will ya? We were all sick of you moping around all these years."

Peter laughed. He'd missed the constant ribbing of his guys. He really hadn't been moping constantly, but he had regretted how it all went down, and honestly, he'd missed her.

A lot.

Not that it had kept him from other women, but he'd compared a lot of these women to Lisa.

"So, where is Lisa?" Phantom asked again.

Peter looked around.

The last time he'd seen her, she said she had a call to make, but that was almost an hour ago.

Maybe she was with the girls?

He got up and found them chatting at the bar. "Hey, have you seen Lisa?"

They all shook their heads.

Shit, where the hell. Peter got out his phone and called her. The phone was ringing, but no answer.

Peter's heart sped up. He searched the whole bar, the parking lot, and even the restrooms. She was nowhere to be found.

He asked Claire again, but she didn't know anything and hadn't seen her for at least an hour.

"What's wrong?" Blake clasped Peter's shoulder and stared into his eyes.

"I can't find her anywhere. She won't answer her phone."

Blake narrowed his eyes. Then he placed his fingers into his mouth, and the piercing whistle brought the place to a standstill.

"Missing person. Lisa Reynolds. Search."

Everybody searched the whole place again, then the outside perimeter.

With the same result.

No, Lisa.

Peter asked random customers, holding up a picture of her on his phone, but nobody could remember seeing her.

Peter called the Inn, but no one answered there either.

He called the sheriff's department and told his boss.

Peter knew the MO.

He knew how Grace Ketley went missing.

Too similar.

She'd just vanished— and nobody ever saw her alive after that, and it had been a nightclub.

What if Lisa was the next victim?

What if he'd lost her already?

He started deep breathing, as he'd done numerous times on missions, and shut down his fear response.

He couldn't go down that route.

He needed to focus and think.

Not panic.

Maybe it was something else; maybe she was on her way home or something like that.

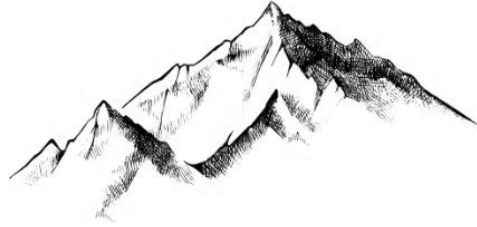
He almost convinced himself.

But deep down, he didn't believe it.

She wouldn't have left without telling anyone anything.

She wouldn't have left without telling him.

And that knowledge ripped him to shreds.



Her phone rang.

Peter.

He was already searching for her.

Why hadn't she just asked him to go with her?

She had to get that phone.

Lisa loosened the grip of her right hand on the steering wheel but didn't move her eyes from the rearview mirror while keeping a steady pace driving backward.

No way would she ever stop the car.

That was her #1 priority.

But maybe she could do both.

She pressed her thigh against the wheel, holding it steady.

Then turned in her seat.

She fumbled around until she grabbed her purse from behind the passenger seat. She had to stretch, and her foot slipped off the pedal.

The car slowed down.

Shit

She increased the speed.

The muscles in her thigh, stabilizing the wheel, screamed.

But she never took her eyes off the rearview mirror.

Lisa jerked at the bag.

It flung forward but got caught somewhere, so she jerked again.

Anton, still at her side, crashed his elbow against the window, and the pane rattled violently.

Lisa flinched away.

The slack must have loosened her purse because Lisa got hold of one handle and hauled it to the front. Her jolt was strong enough, so the handbag flew between the car seats in a high curve and landed upside down on the passenger seat. Sadly, all the contents spilled right over the middle and onto the foot area.

“Shit, shit, shit.” She would never find her phone, if it was wedged anywhere down there.

But she got lucky.

She took her eyes off the mirror for a second and looked sideways. Luck was with her. There it was. Smack dab on the passenger seat, the screen lit up with Peter’s call.

Lisa swiped furiously at the screen and grabbed it. Then the world stopped, and she was flung forward.

When her head connected with the steering wheel, everything turned black...

“You crashed my car, you stupid bitch. Why did you do that? Oh, I can’t believe it. How will I get home afterward? We are in the middle of fucking nowhere. You bitch, I knew you were no good, but you are fucking insane.”

Lisa opened her eyes and blinked. Anton’s face loomed right above her. A vein on his neck stood out, and he shouted at her. But the ringing in her ears drowned him out completely.

Then Anton grabbed her hair and pulled her out of the car.

Lisa whimpered.

Fiery pain singed her nerve endings, and her legs were like Jello when they hit the ground. She swayed for a second when Anton released her hair and grabbed her arm.

Why did the door open?

When Lisa turned her head to the car, coldness roared through her veins, and she locked her knees.

She'd crashed the car.

Had steered it right into a big tree.

Fuck.

She blew her only chance to escape just to get to that stupid phone.

Her phone?

Where was her phone?

She looked back inside the car.

Did she drop it?

Pain speared her chest, and she shook her head, which made her dizzy.

So close.

She'd had her phone in her hand—she could've told Peter—she would have had a chance of being rescued.

Now, it was all over.

She would die here, and who knows when someone would find her body.

“Move, right toward the cliff, enjoy the scenery.” Anton sneered and shoved her forward in the direction where the car's headlights were illuminating the ground.

Lisa took a step but cried out. A sharp pain seared through her left leg, as soon as she put weight on it. Lisa swiped at the sweat on her forehead. It was trickling down her face.

But her hand returned dark in the ambient light of the headlights. Blood.

She was bleeding.

But Anton didn't care.

He just dragged her forward.

Lisa whimpered and took stock. Her neck hurt with every movement, and she bled from the head. Her left knee was killing her, and she felt increasingly dizzy.

On the other hand, she would die here.

So none of that mattered.

Anton marched her toward the cliff; the moon had come up and illuminated the gravel road Lisa had just driven down backward. She really hadn't made much progress.

After a long walk, the trees thinned out, and the cliff came into view.

Lisa discovered the bag Anton had taken from the car's trunk lying on the ground.

What was in it?

More stuff to kill her?

Had Mrs. Ketley been raped before she was murdered?

What about Sophie?

Lisa's thoughts were scattered. She wouldn't survive this, but how much worse could it get?

Lisa longed for the car.

It had been her only real chance of escaping this lunatic, but she blew it.

Now what?

Could she fight him? She at least had to try.

Anton stopped their forward motion, to pick up the bag.

Lisa didn't consciously decide to fight him, but when he bent down, her knee connected with his nose.

His grip loosened, and she broke away from him.

A blinding pain hit her in her back, but it didn't stop her.

She ran into the trees.

Away from the cliff.

Away from Anton, as fast as she could.



Peter closed his eyes and let his head fall back when Lisa finally picked up the phone, only to tear them back open when he heard her crashing a car.

He could hear the impact.

Metal screeching and a bump, then the motor howling.

After that, a soft groan.

It took Peter a second to realize what he was hearing, what the hell was going on.

Then a man's voice screamed in a rage. "You crashed my car, you stupid bitch. Why did you do that? Oh, I can't believe it. How will I get home afterward? We are in the middle of fucking nowhere. You bitch, I knew you were no good, but you are fucking insane."

And a whimper from Lisa.

Peter's face must have shown his alarm, because his teammates, who'd just come out of the bar to where he stood outside, gathered around him immediately.

Every one of them on high alert.

What exactly was going on?

Adrenaline rushed through Peter's body, and he clenched his jaw.

Don't jump to conclusions. Wait until you know what's happening.

Listen.

He could say this mantra all day long, but his imagination was running wild, and the simmering panic that had settled into his stomach a half-hour ago rose exponentially.

Where was Lisa, and who was she with?

It was a male voice that had said: “In the middle of fucking nowhere.” But Peter didn’t recognize the voice and nowhere could be anywhere around here.

A five-minute drive out of town and into the woods, and you were in the middle of fucking nowhere.

There was some shuffling on the other side, another whimper. Then the voice again.

It was farther away from the phone now.

“Move, right toward the cliff, enjoy the scenery.”

Peter’s heart missed a beat, before it settled into a racing rhythm. Got you, asshole.

The cliff, Dragon Wall Cliff was the only cliff near Moon Lake.

He stayed on the phone, but there was only silence.

Peter made eye contact with Blake and covered the speaker.

“Weapons.”

Blake instantly hurried into the bar.

All the other boys got into motion too.

But Peter concentrated on the call.

The only connection left.

Blake came back to his side with a small arsenal of hunting rifles in his hands. “What now, buddy?”

“They’re at the cliff.” They both turned and looked across the lake—the cliff rose in the distance. Massive and white, bathed in moonlight.

“Shit.”

The other men circled back with a truck they'd all crammed themselves in. "Come on, let's go; what's the holdup?" Lucas asked from behind the steering wheel.

"Change of plan," Blake answered, before he sprinted toward the boat that lay moored on the small dock behind the bar.

The others exited the car and followed him. Lucas stopped right next to Peter. Squeezed Peter's shoulder before he hurried after the others.

But he just stood—mesmerized by the cliff, unable to move.

It had always been easy for him to flip the switch.

Get into mission focus.

Get into the mindset he needed to do what needed to be done.

This time was different.

Lisa was up there, facing God knows what, and he was helpless.

Never had he felt so helpless in his life.

They would never make it in time—it would take them forever to cross over the lake, and then, there was the wall.

He'd climbed it once. But he'd been a reckless teenager back then, and it happened in broad daylight.

And still, as he recalled, it wasn't easy.

"Peter." Blake put his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Breathe. Focus. Stop overanalyzing. One step at a time."

Peter took a deep breath. He and Blake could hear the sob that came out with it.

"She's my life, Blake. I can't lose her."

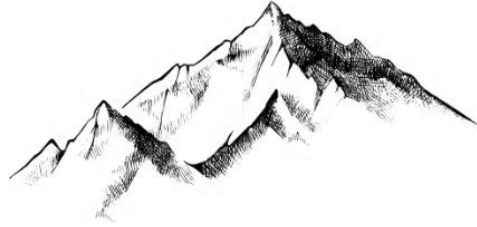
Blake squeezed his shoulder. "Then fight for her, as if your life depends on it."

Peter nodded.

They both ran toward the boat where the others were anxiously waiting for them.

Everybody had already taken position.

Lucas at the helm, ready to gun the motor.



Lisa stumbled through the wood.

The dense canopy of the trees filtered the moonlight, but it was enough to help her find her way.

She stumbled over a root and, with her hands still bound in front of her, face-dived onto the ground.

Lisa suppressed a groan and got up again. She wiped away the earth and leaves from her forehead and stumbled on. Luckily Anton didn't have a flashlight either.

At least, she hoped so.

But she could hear him behind her.

Lisa stopped behind a big tree trunk.

She just needed one second.

One second to catch her breath.

She jerked back when her back made contact with the bark. Something had happened to her back.

It hurt like hell, and the copper smell of her own blood was predominant in her nose.

Lisa tried to control her breathing, but it raced along with her pulse.

Somewhere behind her, Anton cried out. Maybe he'd stumbled over the same root as her. She rounded the tree and moved away at an angle.

Just keep moving.

Lisa made more of the zigzag movement, always around some big tree. At least, that was what she thought she did until she stepped into a clearing. She could hear the waves, and the ground fell away right in front of her.

Fuck.

She had circled back to the cliff, not deeper into the forest.

Lisa spun around.

She had to find cover.

Anton would find her here in broad moonlight.

She stumbled on, parallel to the edge, until she found some rocks big enough to hide between them.

Lisa sank against the rock and grimaced.

She couldn't go on.

Her breaths were short and shallow.

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, they fell on the lights of the town in the distance.

Home.

She would never get there again.

Never again would she see her mother, talk to Claire, or kiss Peter.

Lisa's breath shuddered, and she squeezed her eyes shut. That seemed to enhance her dizziness. She swayed, then slowly sank down to her knees and fell to the side.

The roaring in her head, which began some time ago, got louder and louder too.

She couldn't move anymore, not a single step farther.

She would die up here.

Here on that cliff with the view of home right in front of her.

Somewhere behind her, Anton approached.

His cursing got louder by the second.

Then the roaring in her head suddenly stopped.

There was utter silence.

Maybe right before you die, everything else falls away, and then, all that's left is silence.

That's when she heard her father's voice.

"You're strong, Lizzy. I'm so proud to be your dad. Always remember you can do anything you set your mind to. Anything!"

Her dad always believed in her.

Taught her to never give up.

A single tear ran down her temple.

She opened her eyes again but wasn't strong enough to move. At least she would meet her dad again.

She closed her eyes.

That's when she heard the voices deep down at the end of the cliff.

Was she hallucinating?

She heard the voices again but couldn't discern what they were saying.

But someone was down there.

Lisa pressed her lips together and stopped breathing.

The pain nearly made her pass out, and she saw starbursts behind her eyelids when she pulled herself up into a half-lying, half-sitting position, propped up against the rock.

If someone was down there, maybe she still had a chance.

But she needed to make her presence known to them.

If she did it right now, Anton might still be far away enough not to locate her. She flopped forward and somehow managed to reach the edge of the cliff.

The moon was hiding behind a cloud, and the water looked like a deep, dark hole.

She didn't see anything, but she still heard the voices.

Clearer this time.

Maybe it was just a hallucination, like her dad's voice.

"Help, I'm up here. Help me." Lisa's voice wasn't loud enough—more a rasp than an actual sound.

She tried again, and this time, the voices down there stopped.

"Help, I need help, up here. Help me."

Shouting ensued.

"Lisa."

Lisa's heart skipped a beat with Peter's voice.

He came to get her.

Thank God.

She let her head drop down to the ground. Maybe they could somehow come up here. Lisa relaxed, too tired to crawl back to the rock.

Then there was this fiery pain on her skull again.

She suddenly went airborne and gasped.

"There you are. Found you, bitch."

Anton shook her like a puppet, and she cried out.

Close, so close.

But she had no fight left in her.

She looked back down the cliff into the dark abyss, closed her eyes, and threw all her weight forward.

"Wha—"

Anton didn't release his grip, but the forward motion took him with her.

A lightning bolt of pain shot through her body before she sank into unconsciousness.



Peter had Blake's hunting rifle in position and looked through the scope up the cliff.

"Moon's out in a sec."

He exhaled then held his breath.

Ready to take the shot.

Lisa was right next to the guy, so he had to make it count.

The moon came out from behind the cloud and illuminated the cliff.

Peter adjusted his aim slightly to the left and pulled the trigger.

But Lisa pulled them over the cliff.

He jerked back. "Shit."

For a second, they all watched, paralyzed with horror.

There was a crack, as if a coconut had hit the ground, then the two bodies reached the lake's surface.

"Go, go, go," Blake shouted, and everybody except Lucas got into the water and swam toward the point, where Lisa had hit the surface.

Peter shut down his emotions and let his training take over.

He embraced the cold, black water until the pain in his chest kicked him into gear.

Lisa.

He broke through the surface and gasped for air before he adjusted his route to Lisa's point of impact and dove back down.

Peter stayed down in the dark as long as he could.

Reduce the drag.

Reduce the drag.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears while his hands plowed through the water.

Almost there.

He needed to find her.

His life, his happiness, it all depended on it.

He came to the surface once more.

At the location where they hit the surface.

He dove back down.

Again and again.

Gasping for air and diving down.

Searching.

He couldn't stop.

And then, finally, he touched someone.

Lisa.

Please let it be Lisa.

Peter dragged her to the surface. The others were with him in an instant, and Lucas maneuvered the boat slowly toward them.

Blake was the first one in, and he and Lucas grabbed Lisa and pulled her up.

Peter's heartbeat raced.

She was unconscious.

Lifeless like a puppet.

He pulled himself into the boat.

“Lisa, come on, can you hear me? Open your eyes, sweetie.” Blake grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her.

No reaction.

Then searched for her pulse.

Blake looked up at him and shook his head.

Peter scrambled to reach her head, tilted it, and lifted her chin. “Come on, tiger, breathe for me.”

But she wasn’t breathing.

Peter gave five deep breaths, filling her lungs with as much air as he could, willing her back to life.

Blake took up the compressions after that.

Christopher held up a flashlight, and Rey kneeled next to them, ready to relieve them, while Lucas steered the boat back to shore.

Tears were running down Peter’s cheeks, and the saltiness mixed in with the wetness on Lisa’s lips.

Flashing blue lights cast over her body.

Somebody must have called them, but Peter didn’t care.

His eyes never left her pale face.

Come on, baby. Come back to me.

Suddenly she shook, then vomited, and Peter and Blake turned her in unison.

Peter cleared her airway, and his breath hitched when he watched her first shallow breath.

Rey grabbed Peter under his arms and dragged him away from Lisa.

“Hey.” He struggled but relaxed immediately when the EMT crew took over.

He watched them load Lisa on a stretcher, and the boys helped to get her off the boat.

His knees gave up, when he saw the pool of blood on the deck, and Rey reinforced his hold on him.

“It’s gotta be okay. You got her back to breathing. She’s going to make it,” Rey said with a low voice.

“Hey, Peter’s going with you,” Blake told one of the EMTs, who nodded.

Peter bowed his head, nodded once, inhaled sharply, and locked his knees.

No time to break down and cry.

Even though that’s precisely what he felt like.

He patted Rey on the shoulder, climbed off the boat, and walked to the ambulance.

The boys huddled around him.

Peter was lucky to have his friends with him.

“We’ll get there as soon as we can,” Blake said.

Peter nodded before the EMT shut the door.



Peter paced, then sat back down.

He was the only one in the waiting room.

Earlier, there'd been a young couple with him, but a nurse had come and fetched them.

Time stretched on, but none of the others had arrived yet, so it could be minutes, or hours.

“Mr.—” A doctor entered and looked down at her clipboard.

“Fisher.”

The doctor looked back up, grabbed her green cap, and exposed her lush, black hair. “Oh, hey, Peter. Are you here for ___”

“Lisa Reynolds. I'm her fiancée. How is she?”

Dr. Niki Michaels nodded and took a seat next to Peter. The ER of Whitebrook hospital wasn't a big affair, so there were only three doctors on staff, who covered the night shift. Dr. Niki Michaels was only a few years younger than Peter.

She was kind and friendly, with a spine of steel and a soft spot for law enforcement officers.

“Okay, here's the deal. We don't know yet. She's got a bleeding wound on her back and a broken foot. We're prepping Ms. Reynolds for surgery right now.”

Peter's stomach hardened, and he scrubbed his hand over his face. "What about the drowning?"

Dr. Michaels shrugged her shoulder. "She's good right now, but we'll keep a close look on that too. Complications can occur until forty-eight hours after the incident. But we're more concerned about the amount of blood she's losing, so we must concentrate on that first."

Peter nodded.

Niki Michaels stood up and walked to the door but turned back at the doorframe. "You okay?"

Peter rubbed the back of his neck. He wasn't okay. He wouldn't be, until he could hold Lisa in his arms again. "I'm fine, just...Niki?"

"Yes?"

"She's my life."

Niki Michaels nodded and left the waiting room, and Peter was once again alone.

He stared into space.

He still didn't understand what had happened.

Why her?

How did he grab her, and who the fuck was this asshole?

His mind played a slow-motion recap of Lisa's fall, followed by the gut-wrenching pain that seared his body.

Again and again, the pictures played out in his head.

Over and over in a loop.

She could've hit the rock. Did the doctors check her head? What if they'd missed something serious? His breath hitched.

"Pete."

A hand landed on Peter's shoulders and jerked him out of his negative thought pattern.

He sighed. "Hey, boss."

Sheriff Richard Travers took the seat next to Peter and looked at him. “You look like crap, so I guess no good news yet?”

Peter shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “She’s in surgery right now.”

“I hope she’ll pull through.”

Peter gave a nod.

He wasn’t sure if he could even stomach the alternative.

“We’re on his heels. Got his car, and got his name. FBI’s on the way to his house as we speak.”

Peter nodded again.

“I’ll come by in the morning. Keep you updated, ’kay?”

“Thanks, Richard.”

“No problem.”

Sheriff Travers left, and Peter’s thoughts went back to Lisa.

He groaned and rubbed his eyes.

She’d been white as a ghost when they got her out of the water. The blood loss from her wound, on top of the drowning, must have made everything worse.

What if she didn’t make it?

What if the short time they had together was everything he’d ever get?

Why didn’t they arrive a few minutes earlier?

Could he have taken the shot earlier?

Maybe it would have made a difference.

“Don’t go there.”

Peter looked up at Blake, who stood right in front of him. He really must be off his game because he hadn’t even heard him coming in. “What do you mean?”

Blake sat next to Peter and handed him a steaming cup of coffee. “Don’t play the when, then game. You did what you could. You found the place he was holding her. You found her in the water. All the rest? You can’t beat yourself up about that. Nothing you could do about that.”

“I was too late.”

“Your woman’s a fighter. She made a decision; she acted on it. And she had enough faith in you to jump off a cliff and into the water.”

They fell silent for a moment.

Just sat and sipped their coffee.

Blake was right. Lisa trusted him enough to jump. She must’ve known she was injured, probably knew she wouldn’t make it on her own in the water.

So she put her life in his hands.

Trusted him.

“Did you tell Claire and Lisa’s mom?” Peter asked, and Blake nodded in response.

“The boys are bringing them. Her sister too.”

They fell silent again until Lisa’s mother and the rest of the boys arrived.

Claire, Holly, and Julie arrived just minutes later with Lisa’s sister Karen in tow.

Peter told them everything he knew, and after everyone settled down, the room fell silent again.

Finally, an hour later, Dr. Michaels appeared at the door.

She was still dressed in her surgery clothes and did a surprised double take when she saw the room full of people.

Her eyes met with Peter’s, and he stood up.

He helped Lisa’s mother up too, and led her to the door and out into the corridor.

“This is Lisa’s mother, Mrs. Reynolds,” Peter told Niki.

“I’m Dr. Michaels.” Niki shook hands with Lisa’s mother. “Your daughter has a stab wound in her back. She lost quite an amount of blood, but we could stem the bleeding, and luckily neither her lungs nor her spinal cord was affected.”

Mrs. Reynolds slapped her hand against her chest and inhaled sharply.

Peter widened his stance and crossed his arms across his chest.

“Her leg was broken, but we also fixed that in surgery. Your daughter will be bruised and hurting all over for the next couple of weeks, but we expect a full recovery from those wounds.” She looked at him.

“We don’t know yet if there are any aftereffects of the drowning. But she’s breathing on her own, and her vital signs are good, even though she’s not yet fully awakened from the anesthesia.”

Dr. Michaels looked at Peter, then back at Mrs. Reynolds. “I gotta get back, but we’ll keep you posted, as soon as something changes.”

Mrs. Reynolds thanked the doctor and shook her hand.

Then Niki turned her eyes to him once again. “Lucky, you got her out of the water as fast as you did. I don’t think she would’ve made it otherwise.” She squeezed his forearm before she turned around and walked down the corridor.

“Thanks, for saving my baby’s life.” Mrs. Reynold’s voice was choked with tears. Then she squeezed his forearm and walked back into the waiting room to tell the news.

He swallowed.

He didn’t feel especially lucky or like he’d saved Lisa’s life.

She’d done that on her own.

What he needed was to have her back in his arms.

Healthy and whole.

The discussion of who would take the first shift at the hospital was settled by Mrs. Reynolds, who ordered everyone, including herself, to go home for the night.

Whether she knew or not, nothing would make him leave.

Luckily she didn't try.

He uttered a soft thank you and settled back down in his spot while the others departed, one group after another.

He wouldn't be able to sleep anyhow and wouldn't leave Lisa's side ever again.

Not ever.

Minutes turned into hours.

Sometime later, he must've fallen asleep because when the heavenly smell of coffee seeped up his nose, he opened his gritty eyes and blinked into his boss's face.

"News?"

Peter blinked, then sat up and took the cup. "Surgery went well, and she woke up sometime around five. But they wouldn't let me see her yet."

Richard Travers nodded and sat down. "I got some news." He looked at him.

Peter nodded.

"We found his body—looks like he hit his head on the rocks during the fall. Most likely, he was dead before he reached the water. His name's Anton Smirnov. Immigrated as a child with his parents. We're digging up records from his childhood—nothing as an adult. Possible abuse and neglect by his mother, but we don't know all the details yet. He'd also been in contact with a psychiatrist, but we don't know the details yet."

Travers sighed and rubbed his forehead. "He was a cab driver, mostly here in Whitebrook, but he lived halfway between Whitebrook and Moon Lake."

"Is it him?" Peter asked and looked at Travers.

“Could be.” Richard shrugged. “He would certainly fit the description, but it’s too soon. The search of his house is still going on. Got delayed until his dog was taken care of. There are no relatives to question, and neighbors don’t know anything. Who knew what he was up to? He’s a fucking taxi driver. Nobody’s suspicious of a guy in a cab. She must’ve had no clue until it was too late. You know we have to question her as soon as she’s awake, don’t you?”

Peter nodded.

But Richard went on. “Don’t shield her from that. Don’t try to protect her from her memories. She needs to work it all out, and talking about it is the first step.”

He sighed and nodded again. He knew just how important talking about what happened would be for Lisa.

As hard as it would be for him to hear it.

“So, now that we are on the topic of talking, I had a very interesting little chat with Special Agent Holt.”

Peter cocked his head to the side.

“You went behind my back in the investigation. I understand why you did it, but I don’t appreciate it.”

Peter’s stomach hardened. “I understand.”

Richard pressed his lips into a tight line. “I’ll mark these as special times, okay.”

Peter exhaled. “Okay.”

“And yesterday?”

“What about yesterday?”

“Why didn’t you call in? We’re a family, a team—the whole department would’ve helped. Instead, you went on the hunt with your little group of merry men without calling reinforcements. That’s not how we operate, and you know it.”

Peter sighed and searched for eye contact. “I know, I had a hard time thinking straight. Made the wrong call. I’m sorry.”

Travers held his breath, before he exhaled forcefully.
“You’re good at your job, Peter, but you can’t bend or forget the rules or take matters into your own hands.”

Peter nodded but didn’t flinch away. He deserved whatever dress-down was coming his way.

Travers kept up the staring contest until he nodded once.
“Special times. Okay, chap.” He tapped Peter on the thigh and then stood up. “Don’t pull something like this again. And keep me posted. I’ll send someone down here this afternoon for the statement.”

As soon as Richard left the room, Peter exhaled and slumped down in his chair.

His boss was letting him off easy.

He could’ve had his ass if he wanted to.

And Peter wouldn’t forget that.



Two days later, Lisa still hadn't talked to Peter.

She'd been awake at times, and either her sister, mother or Claire were sitting with her.

She never saw Peter.

The nurses told her, her fiancé was around a lot. But somehow, she always slept when Peter visited.

At least Lisa hoped Peter was the one impersonating her fiancé.

Belinda Graves, the friendly deputy sheriff, had stopped by yesterday to take her statement.

Somehow huge portions of the evening were vague and blurry in her mind. Could be her brain trying to shield her from the horrible memories. Could be the heavy pain meds she was on which knocked her out.

A knock on the door made Lisa stop her musings.

"Hello, Lisa..."

"Sheriff Travers..."

The Sheriff closed the door behind him and pulled the chair up to her bed. "How are you?"

"I'm good."

"Great. I read the transcripts of your statement."

Lisa's throat turned uncomfortably dry, and she cleared it twice, before she regained her voice. "I'm sorry I don't remember well enough."

But Sheriff Travers just smiled and grasped her hand, perfectly missing the IV. "You don't have to apologize. The brain is a mysterious thing."

"This, and the drugs they're feeding me."

Sheriff Travers chuckled but turned serious again. "Do you know why he picked you?"

Lisa wracked her brain. He'd talked about various things.

About how she wasn't a good girl.

The flowers he sent her.

Her dad.

"He wanted to know what was in the documents my dad kept in his shed. But he also mumbled about getting rid of no-good women. So, I'm not sure. Also, I grabbed the cab. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I don't think he planned to pick me. At least not then and there."

"Why did you leave?"

"Karen called, and told me to check on Mom. Peter and the boys were having a good time, and this cab was right in front of the bar." Lisa shrugged. "I thought it would take me half an hour max."

"So, he was interested in your dad's documents?"

Lisa nodded. "He said Dad was always wary of him. And he knew about Dad's friend."

Sheriff Travers scribbled notes on his small notepad. "I don't know if you got notified, but your father got cleared."

"Special Agent Holt told us on the day of the funeral. But she didn't say how."

Sheriff Travers tapped his pencil on his notebook. Then he rubbed his neck.

What was wrong—why was he hesitating?

“Peter.”

“Peter? I don’t understand?”

Sheriff Travers nodded.

“What about Peter?”

“He’s how your father got cleared.”

Lisa scrunched her face. This didn’t make sense at all.

“Okay...”

“I ordered him off the case, but apparently, he has a bit of a hearing problem.” Sheriff Travers looked at Lisa with a half-grin.

Her chest tightened, and she frowned.

This couldn’t be true.

Peter played it by the rules.

Black and white.

That’s what they’d fought about.

That’s why he had her father investigated.

But Sheriff Travers continued. “He researched further into your dad’s documents, especially the photos, because they looked exactly like ones that apparently Peter had been obsessing over.”

He sighed. “Like the ones on our files. So Peter dug deeper. As it turned out, Carl had a good friend. A guy named Sam Connors, who was a journalist. Not exactly hotshot, because it was only the Whitebrook Gazette, but he also acted as the liaison to the local sheriff department.”

Lisa just nodded; Special agent Holt had told them all of this.

“The former sheriff was a little lenient regarding what Sam had access to. So, the photos and stuff in the documents were actually copies of case files—our case files. They showed the crime scenes, and the girls’ faces—some things that weren’t broadcasted in the newspaper.”

“And my dad had those things in his shed.”

“I’m sorry you and your family had to go through all this, but it looked bad.”

“So, Peter?”

“Well, Peter found this connection. Sam Connors died some time ago, but his late wife talked about how obsessed he’d been with these cases.

So, Peter went to the FBI.

They didn’t listen to him at first, but Special Agent Holt told me he stuck to his guns. There might’ve been a little pestering involved, which is completely unlike Peter.

But he convinced Holt to work with him, and they made the necessary connection together.”

“So, this is it?”

Sheriff Travers nodded. “Except. You, finding the documents, and Peter and the FBI pushing the case, obviously made the real killer nervous. Really nervous.”

“So, he grabbed me?”

“So, he grabbed you.”

“Did you get him?”

Sheriff Travers’s lips pressed together in a slight grimace.

He didn’t answer for the longest time.

Her breath hitched, and heat gathered behind her eyelids. She turned and looked out through the window. Braced for the bad news.

This monster was still out there.

“We found his body.”

Even though the tension in her body suddenly evaporated, tears welled up behind her eyelids.

Thank God, he was dead.

He couldn’t hurt her anymore.

It took her a while to calm down, to look back at Travers.

“So, you think he’s the one who killed the others?”

“We’re still reconstructing everything, but we think he could be the one.”

Lisa nodded.

“And you became his target.”

Lisa nodded again.

Sheriff Travers turned silent again. He looked down at his notepad, before he closed it, put it in his chest pocket, and stood.

“He did this for you, you know that, don’t you?”

“The killer?”

Sheriff Travers smirked and raised his left eyebrow. “Peter. I’m talking about Peter. He went against my order. Against his better judgment. Behind the FBI. He could face disciplinary actions for this. Lose his job over this.”

Her eyes widened, and she must’ve looked alarmed because Sheriff Travers laid his hand on her arm.

“That’s not going to happen. But Peter knew it was a possibility...and he did it, anyway.”

He shrugged. “From what I heard, you hit a bit of a rough patch over this. So, I thought you should know.”

Lisa rubbed the heel of her palm against her thigh. She had been so quick to judge, she’d even accused him of not having her back, and the whole time he’d risked his job and his reputation to redeem her dad, and her family.

Why didn’t he tell her?

Her chest squeezed.

Because that’s not who Peter was. He did it, because it was the right thing for him to do. Not to impress her. That’s what made him the man he was.

The man she fell in love with as a young girl all those years ago.

The one for her.

Now she just had to tell him that. Open up and tell him how much he meant to her.

How she truly loved him.

“Is Peter somewhere out there?”

“Peter, his old gang, your friends, family. From the feel of it, half the town is out there, waiting to see you.”

Lisa smiled. “That’s Moon Lake.”

“Moon Lake, hmm. I guess I should check out what this small-town charm is all about.”

“You thinking of moving?”

“Nope.”

His face turned sad, and Lisa’s stomach roiled.

“Did I say something wrong?”

Sheriff Travers smiled, but sadness still lingered in his eyes.

“No, it’s okay. And please call me Richard. I have a feeling we’ll see each other a lot, so I think first-name basis will do.”

Lisa nodded. “Okay, Richard.”

“I’ll send Peter in, okay?”

“Okay.”



“We’re getting married, or so I’ve been told.”

Peter laughed and closed the door behind him. Lisa still looked fragile and small, her skin ashy and dark circles under her eyes.

But at least they were open, and she was awake.

It had been almost three days since her surgery, and there hadn’t been any further complications in her recovery process.

Thank God.

It was tough for Peter to read her statement about what had happened on that cliff, but he was proud of her resilience and beyond happy to have her back in one piece.

She grinned. “So, what about that? Why does the staff here think you are my fiancé?”

He laughed again and took a seat by the bed. “It’s because I lied.”

Lisa inhaled sharply and, in a theatrical voice, said, “No, not you—why would you ever lie?”

Then she laughed, and it was so good for Peter to see her so loose and happy.

“I lied because of the disclosure-to-family-members-only thing. They wouldn’t have told me anything about how you were doing, and your family wasn’t there yet, but I got this”—he stood up, fished a small box out of his pocket, and pulled out a ring—“a while ago. I wanted to wait until you’re on your

feet again, but since you're well enough to joke around, I trust you can handle this as well."

He got down on one knee in front of the hospital bed. "Elisabeth Alexandra Reynolds, will you marry me?"

Tears pooled in her eyes, but her face beamed with happiness. "Yes."

He got up; heat radiated through his chest, unlike anything he'd ever felt before. He leaned forward and wiped away a tear from her cheek. "You make me the happiest man alive." Then he pressed his lips carefully against hers. Something shifted and settled in his chest.

Like the splinter in his heart, that had pinched him all his life, had suddenly disappeared.

He sat down again, held her hand, and slipped on the ring. Thank God, or thanks to Claire, it fitted perfectly. "So, you and Richard talked?"

She nodded, and her smile, which had made her whole face light up just minutes ago, dimmed instantly. "He had questions regarding my statement, answered some, and told me some things he thought I should know."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "He did?"

"Yes, he did."

Whatever Richard told her was probably things Peter already knew.

Special Agent Holt had given him full access to the case. "Okay."

"He's the one, isn't he? The one who killed Sophie?"

Peter shrugged. "He might be. There's some strong evidence, and he fits the profile perfectly."

"I'm sorry, it must be hard, but now you finally know."

Peter nodded and looked down at his clenched fists. "I haven't told Mom."

Lisa hissed. "Isn't Special Agent Holt going to tell her?"

Peter shook his head. “I asked her not to. I want to be the one—I might do it today before she hears something on the news.

Plus, now I can tell her the good news, as well.

Balance it out a little.”

There was a knock on the door, and Peter turned around.

“Hello, may we come in?” Peter’s mother, Mary, stepped through the half-open door, and behind her, his father entered. “We didn’t want to bother you, Lisa; I just wanted to check in on you real quick.”

She smiled. “Come in. Come in. I always love to be checked on by you.” Lisa beckoned her in, and Peter vacated the chair so his mother could sit.

He shook hands with his father, who hovered by the door and then went around the bed to the other side.

Lisa grabbed his hand.

They exchanged a long look, and Peter understood, without words, what she was telling him.

They should tell them now.

For better, for worse.

Together.

“So, you feeling better? You definitely look good.” Peter’s mother caressed Lisa’s face before she sat down and carefully clasped her hand.

“I’m fine. I feel better with every passing day. I’ll get to go home in a day or two, and I so look forward to that. Hospitals really aren’t my thing.”

Mary nodded in agreement.

Peter squeezed Lisa’s hand before he released it, fetched a second chair, and sat next to his mother. “Mom, Dad, there is some news we have to tell you.”

Mary didn’t miss the serious expression on his face.

Or the change of mood in the room.

She instantly let go of Lisa's hand and turned toward Peter. "Now? Here?"

He nodded. "There really isn't any good place or time, Mom."

He grabbed Lisa's hand for support. "They might've found Sophie's killer."

Mary inhaled sharply and slapped her hand over her mouth.

Peter's father walked to Mary and laid a hand on her shoulder, which she immediately clasped.

"He's dead, but we're pretty confident it was the same guy who did this to Lisa and a long history of other women. They found some evidence in his house to link him to Sophie's murder, as well."

Mary trembled, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

It was hard for Peter to watch his mother fall apart.

His father appeared frozen, stony-faced, and hardly breathing.

"Mary, Eugene, I'm so sorry." Lisa switched her hand to Peter's and stretched the other toward Mary.

For a few minutes, there was silence in the room.

They held hands, but each of them was deep in their own thoughts and memories.

Finally, his mother's tears subsided.

The truth about Sophie's murderer didn't change anything. His mother had lived with the grief of losing a daughter for a long time.

As had his dad.

As had he.

Lisa had shown him that feeling guilty about Sophie's death wasn't the most healthy way to deal with it. And he was trying.

His mother cleared her throat, then broke the silence. “Is that an engagement ring?”

Lisa looked at him.

They both smiled at each other, and he grinned at his mother and nodded.

“Congratulations, I knew you two would finally get it.” She stood up, hugged Peter, and then turned to Lisa, while Peter’s dad patted him on the back.

“Well done, Son.”

He shrugged, then nodded. He was still unsure about having his father around, but his parents seemed to enjoy each other’s company, so who was he to judge? His mom deserved all the happiness she could get.

She laid her hand on Lisa’s cheek again. “You make him the best man he can be. I’m thrilled you chose him.”

Peter scowled. “Hey.” She patted Peter’s cheek as if he was five again. “I’m happy you finally got your act together, child of mine. You chose well—should’ve done so years ago. Now don’t mess it up. Again.”

He inhaled sharply.

Holy shit.

How the hell did his mother know?

But she just grinned.

Lisa’s grin turned a little wobbly, and Peter instantly softened.

He leaned forward. “I really am the lucky one. I love you.” He kissed her on the lips before he turned and smiled at his parents.

There was another knock on the door, and Lisa’s family pooled in.

The good news was shared over and over again.

The room was soon filled with chatter and laughter.

Peter took up the position next to Lisa's bed and held her hand.

He listened in on his mother and Mrs. Reynolds, then on Claire, Karen, and Lisa, who made plans for an engagement party, once Lisa felt better.

He was content not to be part of any of the conversations.
To observe.

His hand tingled where he touched Lisa, and his heart felt light.

He had everything he needed right here.

Then Blake walked in, followed by Lucas, Rey, and Christopher, and his contentment turned up another notch.

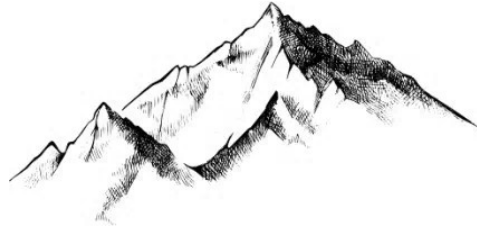
He looked down at Lisa with a grin, and her returning grin told him everything he needed to know.

They were home.

Surrounded by love and family.

And he wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

EPILOGUE



As it turned out, the engagement party and welcome-home party took place three days later.

Lisa had finally been released from the hospital the previous day, and Peter insisted on her staying at his house for the first night.

Now they were on the way home to the Inn.

“I’d marry you today if I could,” he said.

“That’s nice of you, but I don’t want to hobble down the aisle. Plus, if we wait a little longer, maybe the boys can attend.”

He shrugged. The boys had been called in for some emergency. They had to cut their visit short and had left the day before.

That was the life of a Navy SEAL.

Had been his life for the longest time.

She sighed. “I promised them we’d wait.”

As much as he loved his former teammates. Postponing the wedding until their busy schedules allowed it wasn’t something he was willing to do. “But-”

“No, but. They want to be there for the wedding. For you. They’re your friends. So, you should want that too.”

Peter squeezed her hand, and a wicked grin spread over his face. He would do whatever his love wanted him to do. “Not even married, and already you tell me what it is I should want. You’re really bossy, woman.”

Lisa grinned too. “Well, that’s who I am; you should’ve thought about that before asking me.”

And he wouldn’t want her any other way.

Fighting with Lisa was ten times better than spending time with anyone else.

He loved her bossiness. Her opinions. And the way she called him out and made him a better man.

They parked the car in front of the Inn, and Lisa’s eyebrows shot up. “Who are all these people?”

Peter rubbed his neck. “Since you made the news, business has picked up significantly for the Inn, but I think the whole town showed up for your welcome-home party today. Are you up for it?” He grabbed her hand and pressed his lips into her palm. “Just give me a sign, and I will sweep you away, if it gets to be too much.”

And even if she wouldn’t.

One sign of her getting tired or overwhelmed and he would send everyone home.

And he wouldn’t even think twice about it.

Lisa smiled at him, and after he handed her the crutches and helped her out of the car, she kissed him. “Thank you.”

His heart leaped.

This amazing woman was his and his alone.

He was one lucky son of a bitch for the second chance they got. And he sure as shit wouldn’t take her for granted.

Not for a single moment.

They went around the Inn toward the patio, and it seemed like the whole town was out and about.

For her.

For them.

The heavenly smell of grilled food wafted toward them from the meadow, and Lisa's stomach growled loud enough for him to hear. He chuckled. "Let's get you fed, my love."

The smile she gave him was enough to elevate his heartbeat.

She was everything he ever needed and wanted in a woman.

She made him whole.



Hours later, Lisa felt bone-weary. Her eyelids felt heavy, and she cuddled into the deck chair on the patio. Her propped-up leg and the stitched-up wound on her back were pounding. Maybe she had overdone it a little.

Peter hadn't left her out of sight the whole time, and even though he'd tried a couple of times, he'd accepted her choice to stay and celebrate.

There were only a few people left—mostly family and friends. Even Peter's father had attended the party, and he, Peter, and Peter's mother had a long talk.

Maybe there was a chance of healing their relationship, as well.

Claire had been all over the place.

She organized and managed the whole event.

With Blake's substantial help. He'd been so attentive to her. Had managed, assisted, and flirted with her throughout the event.

But even though Claire had smiled and made all the right moves, Lisa couldn't shake the feeling that she was preoccupied with something.

"Hey, bestie, come here."

Claire settled down in the deck chair next to hers.

“Thanks for the party and for holding the fort. Was it too much? You look stressed.”

Claire took one of the pillows next to Lisa’s deck chair and propped up her feet too. She looked over the remaining people, and zoomed in on Blake and Peter, who stood on the other end of the patio, deep in conversation.

Was it Blake she was looking at? Her expression turned from neutral to longing before she caught herself, and her face turned grim.

Something had happened between those two since they last spoke.

“Claire?”

She turned her head. “I’m okay. I’m glad to have you back.”

Her eyes turned misty. “I was terrified, you know—didn’t feel safe, couldn’t sleep. I’m so glad you’re here. All of this—I need you, you know that, right?”

Lisa’s eyes were brimming with tears.

Claire always held her feelings close to the vest. Lisa probably knew her better than anyone, and even with her, she didn’t often open up completely.

Showed her vulnerable side completely.

She’d built a wall around her feelings as a defense mechanism. Most likely to keep out the terrible things that happened to her in the past. Or to prevent it from ever happening again.

But maybe this was a sign of her lightening up, of her giving up the tight rein she’d always kept on her emotions.

It would be good for her.

Good coming out of her shell. A chance to overcome the shadows of her past. Lisa had witnessed more than one nightmare, and the tight grip this tragedy still had on her best friend.

Maybe this was her chance to escape.

To find peace.

To find home.

“We’re in this together. I couldn’t do any of this without you as well.”

Claire nodded.

“This is our dream, and nothing, and nobody will ever change that. I’m so lucky to have you as my best friend. I couldn’t wish for a better friend.”

Claire got up and hugged Lisa carefully. “I feel the exact same way.”

Claire got back into her chair, and they talked about the last few days that Lisa had missed, about the new guests arriving soon, and how and when the wedding should take place.



Peter and Blake sat on the concrete railing of the patio, nursing a beer.

“How are you holding up?” Blake looked at Peter.

“I’m fine. We’re fine. I got her back, so everything is good.”

“Okay, that was the official answer, I get that, but how’re you really holding up?”

Peter looked at Blake for a long time. Blake knew him better than anyone else. “I don’t know how she does it. She seems so normal, as if nothing bad had happened, but it must’ve been a nightmare.

In fact, it was a nightmare, for Christ’s sake.

She was captured, abducted, and stabbed. She had to fight for her life, and I wasn’t there to protect her from any of it.

But she seems okay.

She’s talking to Richard daily; I don’t know why, but somehow she’s comfortable confiding in him. She didn’t have nightmares last night, so I guess she’s dealing with it just fine.

Me, on the other hand”—he pointed with his bottle at himself —“I’m stressed out. Overcompensating, overprotective, easily irritated. If I let myself think about how close I was to lose her...” Peter paused. “I still can’t even compute that. So...” Peter wiped at the dew with his thumb. “I’m not quite there, but getting there.”

Blake leaned to the side until their shoulders slightly touched. “Maybe, we should take the boat out someday soon. Do a little recreational fishing.”

Peter nodded and hopped off the railing. Blake followed his lead, and they both made their way to the women.

“All good?” Peter leaned down, carefully swooped Lisa up, and settled down with her on his lap.

Blake hesitated, then he lifted Claire’s feet, swept the pillow underneath onto the floor, sat down, and put her feet on his lap, and rubbed her feet.

Now that was an interesting turn. He’d never seen his friend give a foot rub to any of his hookups.

Thinking of it, he’d never seen his friend so content and settled, either.

“Great party, ladies. You really liven up our little town,” Blake said.

Lisa and Claire chuckled and enjoyed the last rays of the sun before it vanished behind the mountains. The last of the guests said their goodbyes, Lisa’s mother turned in for the night, and soon they were the only ones left.

“So, what’s up with you two?” Peter asked with a smile, and a shake toward Blake’s thumb pressing into Claire’s inseam.

Claire looked out at the lake, and Blake’s face resembled a blank mask.

Clearly, they had no intention of answering the question.

As if avoiding tough questions and ignoring reality had ever worked.

They just needed to look at him.

But whatever.

Maybe they didn't know they were falling for each other.

Or maybe they needed a little time to come to terms with it.

The only thing he knew for sure was he'd never seen Blake treat any other woman like he did Claire.

Had never seen this protective, caring side of his friend play out. With his buddies—sure. But not with any woman.

And if he knew his friend at all, he was either denying he was falling for Claire, or hadn't even recognized it yet.

But whatever was going on between them was something they had to work out for themselves first.

He sure wasn't in any position to give advice, given his past as a major idiot.

“We're just hooking up. Nothing serious is going on.”
Claire said matter of factly.

Blake's head snapped around, and he glared at her for a second before he schooled his expression.

Okay.

Maybe he was wrong, and Blake had finally found a female version of himself.

And by the looks of it, he didn't like it at all.

Well, Karma is a bitch.

Peter hid his grin in Lisa's hair and squeezed her against his chest.

Loved that, at least between them, there was no tension.

No distance.

No uncertainty of whether they would make it or not.

“I love you,” he murmured against her ear.

She sighed, and the sound settled deep into his heart.

Then she turned her head and looked up at him.

“I love you too.”

Her sweet smile shone a warm light on his existence.

She made him whole.

For the first time in his life, he felt truly at peace.

“So, when’s the wedding?” Blake asked back, his tone without inflection.

Peter looked at him.

Blake’s eyes narrowed. His expression held a silent warning. Was it to send a message about Peter minding his own business? Or was it a display of unhappiness about his current situation?

Didn’t matter.

They stared at each other for a couple of seconds.

Peter nodded once.

He would always have his friend’s back. No matter what. Even if he didn’t want to face the truth.

Lisa turned her head to him again and studied his and Blake’s nonverbal communication. Then she smiled again and snuggled against me, and nothing else mattered.

“As soon as the boys can come back, and I’ve lost the cast and crutches. We’ll have all the plans in place,” Lisa answered.

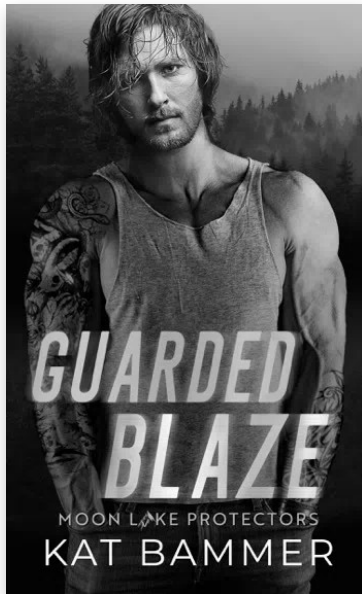
“And where will it happen?” Blake asked.

“Where do you think? There’s no other place like home. Here at the Inn, in Moon Lake. With family and friends and the whole town in attendance.

And the man I love.”



Want to read more? The Moon Lake Protectors Series continues with Blake and Claire’s story in [Guarded Blaze](#) [HERE](#).



Remember the bonfire... right before Lisa and Peter went skinny-dipping in the lake? Do you want to know what Blake and Claire did? Find out in this exclusive bonus scene [HERE](#).

Or, if you're on a Kindle or reading this on paper, and clicking the link doesn't work (been there, very frustrating) go to <https://links.katbammer.com/ml1-bonus> to get the bonus scene.

DEAR FRIEND,

Since you came this far, I just claim you as my new friend. So hello, friend.

I hope you liked the story of Peter and Lisa and I would love to hear from you if that's the case. So, with that out of the way, I wanted to tell you a little bit about this book and me.

Lisa first came to me in a dream. Standing on the cliff. The killer behind her and the drop before her.

Severely bleeding and hopeless.

Let me tell you, I woke up in a cold sweat.

I don't do horror, or thriller, or any of the likes. I love reading contemporary romance, and romantic suspense. Been an avid reader for as long as I can remember.

But anything that comes too close to thriller-territory. (Books, movies, scary stories told around a campfire... just all of it).—It freaks me out.

But somehow Lisa stuck with me. The next night I had the same dream, but it went a little further. Lisa heard Peter call her from down on the boat.

You can't imagine the relief I felt when I realized Lisa wasn't alone...that not all was lost.

And when she decided to jump, I cheered her on, even though I probably wouldn't be brave enough to do it in real

life.

Well, maybe if it was life or likely death or...certain death.

Let's hope I'll never have to find out.

Let's hope we never have to find out.

So, Peter and Lisa - and that's where it all started.

I'd never written anything before, hadn't even thought about writing a book. But those two just wouldn't shut up.

So I started writing.

The little town of Moon Lake, the lake, the forest, the mountains are a conglomerate of childhood memories, from when my family spent summers at a lake nearby.

Soon Moon Lake was born and populated with women I wanted to be friends with and protective, sexy, honorable military guys who would do anything to protect the people who couldn't protect themselves.

And when I finished this book. I just knew.

This is it.

This is what I want to do.

And to be able to share it with you is a joy and an honor.

So thank you!

Kat