

# Custom Made for You

Coulee Bluffs  
THE SERIES • BOOK ONE

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

GINGER RING



## ***Big city girl meets small town life.***

Small, scenic, and far from her life in the Twin Cities, Coulee Bluff is the perfect place for Ava Wellington to hide from her politician father's cheating scandal. Since it's also her mother's home town, she now has the chance to finally meet her mom's high school friends and learn more about the community.

Her summer job as a nanny is a stretch. She was raised by one, but Ava intends to leave her country club life far behind and blend in. Falling for a bike builder with tattoos, and a daughter, isn't part of that plan.

Kruz Tanner has been burned in the past by a pretty face, so the last thing he needs is to date someone from across the river. Yet the stunning new redhead in town draws him to her like no other.

Dating her may be a bad idea in more ways than one.

Or maybe his luck is about to change?

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GINGER RING

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Ava*

THE HALF-NAKED MAN LEANING AGAINST A MAILBOX WAS *NOT* what Ava Wellington imagined when her mother warned her to beware of any wildlife standing along the side of the road, but then, she'd never been to her mom's hometown before.

Ava slowed her car as she drove past, hardly able to believe her eyes. The guy was so drop-dead gorgeous one couldn't help but gawk. He looked dangerous, all right, but probably not in the way her mother meant. Who would want to "beware" of a man like that? If this was normal for Coulee Bluff, Wisconsin, maybe this summer job wouldn't be too bad after all.

By the time Ava focused back to the road, there, in the middle of the highway, sat a huge rocklike boulder. It was too big to straddle with her car and hitting it would take them both out. She slammed on the brakes, the tires slid on gravel, and her silver Honda skidded to a stop in a shallow ditch.

Hands shaking and heart pounding, Ava shifted the vehicle into park. Sliding a loose curl behind her ear, she took a deep breath and shook her head. What the heck just happened?

The sound of knuckles knocking on her window caused her to jump.

“Are you okay?” The ‘roadside wildlife’, who’d partially been responsible for her current predicament, stood outside her door. Ava fidgeted in her seat as she tried to figure out which button lowered the side window. After locking and unlocking the door at least twice, she finally found the right switch. The glass lowered, bringing with it a rush of hot, humid air.

All Ava could do was stare. From a distance it had been his muscled chest catching her attention, up close, it was his face. If guys could be called beautiful, this one certainly was. His deep, blue eyes were almost teal. They were the shade of a tempting pool at a resort she’d once stayed at. She nearly drowned in the swirling water so that should be a red flag to be cautious in this situation as well. And then there was the chiseled jaw, straight nose, and five o’clock shadow he sported. Swoon. It was as if she’d ordered the perfect man delivered to that very mailbox and he’d arrived at her front door.

“Are you all right, Miss?” he asked again. The scent of pine, leather, and gasoline tickled her nose.

“Yes, I’m fine. Thanks. I guess I got distracted and didn’t see that big rock in the middle of the road.” She blushed and pointed to the slow-moving reptile making his way across the yellow line. Was that a turtle? It was huge. “What is that anyway?”

“It’s a turtle.” Mister tall, dark, and hot answered with a laugh. He rested a forearm on the roof of the car and gestured toward the beast. “Haven’t you ever seen a turtle before?”

“Yes, in aquariums. They are usually about this big.” Ava held her hands together in a small circle. “That thing is like a prehistoric monster or something.”



“That’s because it’s a snapping turtle. They’re pretty big.” His smile showed off perfect white teeth.

“I can see that. Is it dangerous?” She hated to ask but what if she ran into one again? It also gave her a chance to admire him some more. Ava wiped clear the direction her brain had drifted like an eraser to a white board. She’d come to Coulee Bluff to get away from her men problems, not find new ones.

“Yeah, they can be. I wouldn’t recommend trying to pick one up or getting too close. They can snap at you from about a foot away. And I do mean snap.” He emphasized the fact by clamping his fingers and thumb together. “They have a jaw that will take your toe, or finger, right off.”

“I appreciate the advice, and I will be sure to stay clear of snappers.” Ava laughed. There was no way she’d get within ten feet of one of those things, at least not on purpose. She frowned as he wandered to the front of her car and stopped to take a quick look underneath. Were there more snappers? Hopefully not. Rounding the rear of the car, he came back to her side.

“Your car looks fine. You should be able to just drive out of the ditch.”

That was a relief.

“Where ya headed?”

He stood with a hand resting on his hips, and she couldn’t help but admire the black hair on his pecs and his flat, tan stomach. When she couldn’t find the words, he bent closer. His face was too close for comfort, and Ava breathed in the scent of him again. The man smelled like the outdoors; earthy, and fresh with a touch of what? Something not of nature.

Grease, oil, tires? His hands sported a haze of grey as if he'd been working on something dirty.

Returning her attention to those stunning, baby blue eyes, Ava was suddenly hypnotized and unable to look away. A train whistle sounded in the background. A gentle breeze drifted in the window. That rogue lock of hair blew in her eyes again, breaking their connection.

"I, ah, better get going. Thanks for your assistance with the, um, turtle and all."

"My pleasure." The sexy man stepped back and placed his hands on his slender hips again. Wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, she couldn't help eyeing his six pack abs and dark chest hair one more time. Dark jeans accented his long lean legs. Scuffed, black work boots completed his country boy outfit. Her mouth dry, she licked her lips. Suddenly she wasn't in such a hurry to leave.

"Hey, do you know where 954 Shore View Drive is?" She rested her wrist on the top of the steering wheel as she smiled out the window. Did she appear as awkward as she felt? Thinking of other questions to ask so she could study the lines of various tattoos on his arm. None of the guys at her private, religious school had those. Well, that she knew of.

"You're on Shore View Drive." He pointed to the blacktop. "Just keep going down the road about a mile, it's the last one on the right. It's on stilts."

"Stilts?" Did she hear him right? She'd never heard of a house on legs.

"Actually, they aren't stilts, they're cement pillars. They keep the home above the flood waters and keep the snakes out." He moved toward the car.

“Flood waters, snappers, snakes. The rental people said it was a nice place.” Ava felt faint. She hated snakes. Just thinking of them gave her the chills.

“Don’t worry. It’s a nice place. All the houses along the shore are built above ground. You’ll be fine. There aren’t any flood concerns right now and if there was, you’d know about it well in advance. The lock and dams protect us here.”

“What about the snakes? Is it their time of year?” Ava winced as goosebumps rose on her skin.

“Hold on a sec, I’ll be right back.” Tall, dark, and handy jogged back toward the garage. A graceful lope, if she did say so herself. He ran back, carrying a business card in his hand. “Here, take this. If you have any snake problems, give me a call, and I’ll be right over.” He handed her the card.

When his fingers brushed hers, Ava flinched. A jolt ran up her arm sending heat to her cheeks. Did he feel it, too? Regaining her composure, she read the card. Tanner’s Custom Bikes, Kruz Tanner, Owner. It was followed by a phone number, address, and a list of some of the services he provided.

She gave Mr. Tanner a once-over. Damn, a real-life motorcycle man? Even though Kruz had his own business, her father would be appalled to see her conversing with someone that rode a motorcycle, or even worse, made a living working on them. Ava sat up straight. It was time to stop daydreaming and concentrate on finding her new home. She placed the card on top of her purse and shifted her car into drive.

“Well, thank you again. If I encounter any reptiles, I’ll be sure to give you a call.” Ava waved and hit the button to roll up the window. The cool current of air conditioning refreshed her as she drove out of the ditch. After promising herself to

keep her eyes on the road, Ava risked a quick peek at him in the rear-view mirror. He was still there. In the middle of the road. Watching. The handsome man unnerved her to say the least. Why? It wasn't like they'd be hanging out or anything.

Ava had come to Coulee Bluff for the summer to relax in a country setting and to babysit the granddaughter of her mother's childhood friend. She'd barely made the turn off to Coulee before stopping to drool over a sexy, biker dude. That wasn't like her at all. Ava had always liked the business suit type. Well, to be honest, that was all she'd been exposed to. Proper, rich, and well-mannered young men with the John Wellington stamp of approval clearly visible on their foreheads.

Mr. Tanner looked like a man who wrestled alligators for breakfast and ate fried snakes for lunch; all while welding metal and working on Harleys. The last thing she needed was to get involved with a bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks or in her case, the wrong side of the river. Shoving the man's card deep into a side pocket of her handbag, Ava read the numbers on the mailboxes as she passed. 760, 830; there it was, 945 and yes, believe it or not, it was on stilts.

After turning into the driveway, Ava parked on the gravel next to the house. With purse in hand, she cautiously stepped out into the heat to get a better view of her new home for the summer. Despite the round concrete columns holding it up, the house was similar to your average, ranch-style home. Her heels wobbled on the crushed rock driveway until she safely reached the first step.

When she stopped at the top of the stairs, Ava turned to survey her new surroundings. Always living in the city, being this close to nature was an over-whelming experience. Taking

a deep breath, she inhaled the marshy scents of the nearby river and backwaters. She tried to identify every smell but could only recognize the odors of fish and flowers. The oppressive heat reminded her of swamps and the tropics. Just the brief time outside made her skin glisten with sweat.

Ava entered the five-digit combination on the keypad lock. Getting the first glimpse of her new digs turned out to be a nice surprise. She hadn't known what to expect especially after hearing about the stilts and snakes. So far, no snakes, and the stilts were really nothing to worry about unless there was an earthquake. After placing her handbag and car keys on the counter, she took a quick tour of her new surroundings.

The kitchen had fairly new appliances, spotless counters, and even a dishwasher. That probably wouldn't get much use since it would be just her living there. To the side of the kitchen was a half bath and nearby laundry room. Behind the kitchen were two rooms, a large bedroom with a queen size bed and full bathroom. Next to that was a small room which could be used as an office. The furniture was all clean and appeared brand new. The décor was pretty much an outdoor, cabin theme. A few antique fishing poles and a pair of canoe paddles accented the walls. The color scheme of rusty red, hunter green, and dark brown ran throughout the place.

Ava returned to the kitchen and smiled at the open living room. A 55-inch flat screen TV was visible from any area of the room. On each side of the television were patio doors opening to a screened-in patio. Ava opened the sliding doors and stepped out. It was easy to imagine spending many hours out there reading and viewing the boats traveling up and down the Mississippi. A huge barge floated by in the distance; the crew of the tugboat working on its deck. An eagle soared overhead, and the roar of a railroad train whistle added to the

Mississippi River adventure literally right outside her front door. Excitement rushed through her as she grabbed her keys again to unpack the car. There were so many amazing things in the area to capture on canvas she couldn't wait to get started. It took several trips to gather all her painting and drawing supplies.

As she reached the top step for the final time, her ring tone sounded. Closing the door to nature's clatter, Ava found her cellphone. The name flashed on the screen made her smile. Even though she was twenty-three years old, her mom, Lauren, still checked up on her as much as possible. After the trauma of the last few months, Ava was glad she did.

"Hi, mom. How are you?" A sense of calm settled over her knowing her mother always had her back.

"I'm fine but I'm calling to see how you are. Did you find the place all right?" She pictured her mom. Her blonde hair styled perfectly, not a hair out of place. Probably dressed in a chic suit, ready for Friday night dinner at the club. Her fingers fidgeting with the strand of pearls around her neck.

"Yes, I found it just fine. The home is nice, I like it. Dad would call it a dump, but it works for me." Ava walked out onto the deck to watch the boats go by as she talked. "Why did we never spend summers here? It's so pretty."

"You know your father, he's not one for small towns." The man hated them.

"But you grew up here." It'd always puzzled her why he cringed, or left the room, whenever someone even mentioned Lauren's hometown. The fact that he'd finally relented to let her spend the summer here was nothing short of a miracle. After graduating college, her father was eager for her to start work in the family business. Unfortunately, burning the candle

at both ends for the past year had left her burned out and not willing to continue employment with his marketing team.

Who was she kidding? Once the scandal hit, Ava was the last thing on her father's mind. Still, it was odd that her mother insisted Ava avoid using her last name and not to mention who her parents were. It was probably for the best. If the local press found out she was here, they'd be all over her for a statement.

After a brief pause, her mother, interrupted her thoughts. "Have you done anything yet? Stopped anywhere? There are some wonderful wineries and historical sites nearby."

"I know, and I plan to visit all of them, but I just got here. The first thing I need to do is find a grocery store and buy some supplies." At the mention of food, her stomach growled.

"I know there's a Piggly Wiggly about ten minutes away but there should also be a small convenience store in town, if you don't feel like driving far."

Ava couldn't help but giggle at her high society mom saying, 'Piggly Wiggly'. It was hard to picture her as a teenager working as a checkout girl, but Lauren had.

"I'm not sure what I need yet, so I'll probably just grab something to eat at the first place I see then buy a few things at the gas station."

"Well, make sure you call Claire tomorrow morning and get things set up for your job. I know it's their busy season, so it'll take a lot off her mind to know you've arrived."

"Yes, I will."

"And don't worry, Claire knows everything that happened and won't say a word."

“Okay.” Ava answered before an uncomfortable silence set in. She bit her lip, “Mom?”

“Yes, dear?” Lauren replied.

“I know this is your hometown, and you have no family left here, but really, why have we never visited the place?” Things had been strained between her parents for quite some time, but there were just too many unanswered questions about their past.

“You know your father thinks that everyone that doesn’t live in a big city is a hillbilly. He also doesn’t like to be reminded of where I came from. If he knew I’ve remained in contact with Claire all these years, he’d be furious.”

“But that’s crazy. You two were best friends. What difference does it make?” There was definitely more to the story.

“It’s just ...” a loud sigh followed. “Hey, I think your father’s home. I’ll call you again soon, okay?”

“But mom.”

“I’ve got to go. We’ve reservations at the Pendleton. Talk soon.”

“All right, have a nice time tonight,” Ava tried to sound hopeful, but her parent’s relationship weighed heavy on her mind.

The call ended with no farewell. It was hard not to worry. If her own life hadn’t been such a mess, maybe she’d have figured out what was going on long before her father went astray. Her stomach growled louder, bringing her back to the present. She needed to find some food. It was already past six, and she didn’t want to be driving all over an unfamiliar place



searching for something to eat. Gas station food would have to do.

Moments later, Ava put her Honda into reverse and drove toward the center of town. This time instead of looking at mailbox numbers she took a better look at her neighbors. The surrounding homes looked similar to hers. Some had garages or carports underneath. A few had cement pillars holding them up, while others were held in place by iron trusses. A lot of the vehicles parked outside had out of state plates. Boats on trailers were parked nearby. A man grilling outside waved in her direction. At least everyone was friendly so far.

She drove passed Tanner's closed bike shop. What was the man that'd come to her rescue doing tonight? The guy was probably out for the evening with some tall, gorgeous blond. The thought disturbed her. Why should she care? It was important to guard her heart and not fall for the wrong man again. There had to be a good guy out there for her. One that cared who she was as a person, not what her last name was and what her family's wealth might gain them.

Ava took a deep breath and crossed her fingers. She always felt like a fish out of water, hopefully coming to Coulee Bluff would help her find her place. A sign proclaiming food, gas, bait, and beer caught her attention. Well, two out of four wasn't bad. She did need some food and gas. According to the sign the Kwik Trip was just three blocks away.

As she headed down the street, Ava turned on the radio. Was it a sign that the song, 'Don't worry, Be Happy' was playing? The next few months were hers to enjoy and experience life outside the city and out from under her father's thumb. Who knew, maybe Coulee Bluff was exactly where she was meant to be. The seedlings of her mother's early life were

here. She could feel it. Whether they would transfer to her, take root, and grow, were yet to be seen.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Kruz*

KRUZ TANNER OBSERVED THE CAR WITH MINNESOTA PLATES drive down the road. Just his luck, another tourist lost in more ways than one. Dropping his chin to his chest, he arched his tired back before looking up. The turtle had made it across the road. So many idiot drivers just hit them for sport. There was nothing worse than spying dead animals lying along the side of the road. At least she tried to avoid it.

He used his forearm to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Damn, it was hot for late May. The humidity alone was enough to make him shed his shirt. Kruz laughed, thinking of her surprise at the size of the snapping turtle. She was a looker that's for sure. Pretty face and beautiful hair.

Damn, why hadn't he asked her name? Not that there was a need to know, just curious. It was probably something fancy like Tiffany or Chanel. The out of towners he'd met usually did. Kruz had enough problems to worry about without thinking about some redhead that was probably just in the area for the weekend. If he ran into the guy who owned her rental place, he might ask if she was here for longer. Not that he cared, he reminded himself.

Flipping through his mail, Kruz wandered to the shop. His buddy, Remi, was shaking the pop machine as he approached.

“When are you going to fix this damn thing?” The can of pop he was after finally dropped with a loud clunk. Remi took it out and held it against his face. “At least it’s cold.”

“I have more important things to do than fix it. Besides that’s something the vending company guy does, not me.”

Remi followed him inside and took a seat on a metal stool. “What was that all about?” He motioned toward the road.

“Some lady tried to avoid a snapper and ended up in the ditch. You’re a game warden, you should’ve been all over that.” Kruz tossed the bills on the desk in his office and the rest in the garbage.

“If she’d hit it, I’d stepped in, but I think the poor lady got an eye full of you and lost control.” The guy smirked and took a big sip of his coke.

“Yeah, funny.” Nonetheless, he slipped his work shirt back on.

“Seriously, dude. You should have asked her out.”

“What? You want me to ask some stranger, literally, off the street to go out with me? Do I look that desperate?” Kruz shook his head and picked up a wrench from his worktable.

“No, but when was the last time you went on a date?” Remi folded his arms across his uniformed chest. The guy should talk, he was a confirmed bachelor.

“When do I have time? That’s why my mom hired help for the summer. Between her greenhouse, and all the bikes I have to work on, plus the builds I need to start, I don’t have time for anything, let alone a relationship.”

“If you have someone in your life, you’d have help with some of that.”

“I don’t know. The few times I’ve tried to date in the last few years were disasters.”

“That doesn’t mean, you stop trying.” Remi crushed his now empty pop can and tossed it in the recycle bin.

“Yeah, since when did you become an expert on women? I don’t see you getting down on your knee to propose anytime soon.”

“I don’t need a woman. You do.” Remi stood when the dispatcher called him on the radio. “Catch you later.” He patted Kruz on the shoulder and hurried out to his truck.

“Yeah, see ya.” Kruz groaned as he examined the bike in front of him. It wasn’t a custom design, just a simple tune up for summer. It was nothing exciting, but those jobs paid the bills.

Hours later, Kruz washed as much grease off his hands as possible and locked up shop. Digging the keys out of his front pocket, he wandered toward his truck. His mother, and his girl, were waiting at home. He already missed her and couldn’t wait to see her pretty face again. Riley was the only female Kruz needed in his life.

Kruz shifted the pickup into drive and tried to convince himself he wasn’t interested in seeing if the stunning redhead from Minnesota had made it to her rental. Her house was on his way. If she happened to be outside, he’d wave and keep going. Well, unless she needed help with something, stopping was the neighborly thing to do. Maybe she had some luggage that might be too heavy to carry upstairs. He could stop and help. Damn. He must have heatstroke. The last thing he

needed was to be head over heels for some, here today, gone tomorrow, city girl.

He spotted her car, as he passed. The woman was nowhere in sight. Probably on the phone with her sugar daddy or ordering some complicated fancy drink and tofu to go. He frowned, running his left hand through his hair. It was getting long and needed to be cut. Would she like it if he cut it? Son of a ... Kruz swore and hit the steering wheel with his fist.

Obviously, he needed to get out more. If the sight of a good-looking face could throw him into this big of a tailspin, something was definitely wrong. Maybe he would see if his mom could watch Riley a little longer, maybe all night. He could head to Roxxy's, the strip club outside town. Damn, that wasn't a good idea either. That's how he ended up a single dad. He vowed to learn from past mistakes, not make new ones. He hadn't been there since before Riley was born and should be the last place he ever visited again. End of story.

Before Kruz knew it, he'd reached the driveway to his home. His mother's Impala was parked by the swing set. His body was sore from the long hours he spent bent over machines, but it was worth it to keep a nice place for his daughter. Pride filled his heart as he looked at the small ranch home surrounded by trees and a huge yard. He parked the truck near the garage and headed toward the house.

From the deck, he turned and admired the priceless view of the Mississippi River, one he never grew tired of gazing at, often while reading to Riley on his lap. Maybe later they would sit out here again.

Entering his house, Kruz, dropped a kiss to his daughter's forehead and hugged his mom. He didn't know what he'd have

done without her and his sister's, help in raising Riley. "How are my two favorite pretty ladies today?"

"We've had a busy day. Riley will sleep good tonight." His mother smiled and gathered up her purse and car keys.

"Thanks, I'm pretty tired myself." Kruz replied.

"Now remember, the green house opens on Monday, so the new babysitter will be watching her from then on, either here or at the shop."

"Are you sure she's qualified? I don't feel comfortable having a stranger watch my kid." The past few years, his sister had watched Riley while his mom ran her summer green house. With the recent birth of his sister's second child, it was too much to ask. His sister already had a three-year-old and watching two energetic children while taking care of an infant wasn't an option.

"Don't worry. She's a sweet girl. I'll be meeting with her tomorrow to figure out the details."

"I hope so." He grumbled and opened the door to the fridge.

"Get some rest Kruz. I'll let you know about the babysitter tomorrow." His mother replied as she headed for the door.

Kruz could feel the rumbling in his stomach. It'd been so hot all day, he forgotten to grab lunch. Now his gut complained big time. A quick glance in the refrigerator found no relief, either. Damn, he was going to have to head back into town or there would be no milk for Riley 's breakfast.

"Don't tell me you forgot to stop at the store?" His mother raised an eyebrow.

“I totally forgot.” He let out a deep breath. “I’ve been swamped. Who has time to shop?”

Eyeing Riley, Kruz had an idea to kill two birds with one stone. “I know you’re tired, sweetie, but if I get you an ice cream cone, would you go to the store with me?”

Riley’s eyes got as big as her smile, and she nodded. She was a trooper and always made him smile.

“Let’s go. I’ll race you to the truck,” he challenged her, and the little girl sprinted past her grandmother.

“Careful dear.” Claire cautioned.

After getting Riley settled in the truck, he waved goodbye to his mother and headed to the Kwik Trip.

If he wasn’t mistaken the mystery woman’s vehicle was right in front of him. Where was she going? Did she have a date? Why did he care?

Yes, he hated to admit it, but he did. Just for curiosity anyway. The Minnesota plates still bothered him. She wasn’t from here, and she wasn’t going to stay, so he needed to just forget it. Hell, the woman was probably a Vikings’ fan.

He hit the turn signal and headed to the marina. Kruz didn’t want to see where she was going and didn’t want to think about her any more than he already had. Despite his hungry stomach, he simply wanted to watch the water for a few minutes.

Pulling into the dock parking lot, he put the truck into park and rested his arms on the steering wheel. He loved the river. He needed to get more help for the garage and start fishing again. It was something he’d always enjoyed but hadn’t had the time since he’d become a father. Soon he would be able to start taking Riley more. She loved boat rides.



Turning to smile at her sweet face, a sense of calm took over. That was it, he needed to work less and enjoy life more. Heck, he'd worked years to build up a good clientele, Kruz deserved to take a day off now and then. The decision made, he put the truck into gear and headed to the convenience store.



*Ava*

Ava tucked a flyaway piece of hair behind her ear. It was hot and windy. The weather had to break sometime soon. She finished twisting the gas cap closed and then plucked her purse from inside the car. Making a mental list of what she needed to shop for, Ava hurried into the Kwik Trip store. Her small shopping cart was soon filled with fruit, milk, eggs, bread, butter, coffee, bacon, and a box of cereal; everything she needed to survive until she could get to the Piggly Wiggly.

As she proceeded to the checkout counter, the cashier greeted her with a bright smile.

“Hi. Did you find everything you needed?” The welcoming clerk wore a name tag, proclaiming her name to be Cassie. She had perfect teeth, tanned skin, blondish hair pulled up in a ponytail, and an infectious personality. Ava liked her approachability right off the bat and had noticed she treated every customer like they were her best friend.

“I think so. Oh wait. Do you carry wine?” Ava, glanced around the store. Dang, it was probably back in the refrigerated area.

“Sure, you can’t call yourself a gas station in this state if you don’t carry booze.” Cassie laughed and led her to the liquor aisle. “Any special kind you are looking for or do you want to try a local?”

“You have local wines?” Ava’s interest perked up.

“Sure, the Mississippi River valley has an ideal grape growing climate. We have many great wineries to choose from. Do you like red or white?” Cassie touched a finger to her chin, while studying the selection.

“How about a red?” Ava answered.

“I like this one. It isn’t too dry or too sweet.” Cassie handed her a bottle of red. “Oh, and for dessert, or if you just want to indulge in some extra calories try this.” She handed Ava a bottle called Mississippi Mud. “It’s chocolate wine. I love it. We drink it at our book club.”

“I’ll take both. Wait? You have a book club here?” What a great way to meet people and get more involved in the community.

“Yes, we have a room reserved at Mr. Whiskers on Wednesday nights. After a few drinks, we chat about the latest book and gossip about men.” Cassie giggled and went behind the counter. “You’re welcome to join us, if you’ll be in town.”

“Actually, I’ll be here all summer.” Ava was always ready to dive into a good story. “What book are you reading now?”

“Here, you can have my copy, I just finished it.” Cassie leaned across the counter and whispered, “It’s the steamy one everyone is talking about. I’ll stick it in your bag.”

“Ah, good.” Ava’s cheeks flushed. “I look forward to reading it.” She’d not had much chance to read, so was excited to give this one a try.

“Are you working here for the season or visiting family?”  
Cassie rang her items up and put them in a plastic bag.

“I start a new summer job on Monday. I’m staying at a rental on Shore View Drive. No family here. I guess the only person I’ve met so far is a guy named Tanner. He runs a bike place. I stopped to ask for directions, and he helped me out.”  
Ava left out the part about running off the road.

“Ah, Kruz. Now there’s a heart breaker. Too bad he only has eyes for one female in his life right now. What a hottie. He’s like family to me but I still enjoy looking. Ha, that sounds weird, doesn’t it? Would you like this on your Kwik Trip card today?”

Ava tried to grasp everything Cassie said as she handed her a debit card. “I’ll get one next time.”

Cassie finished up the sale and handed Ava her bags. “Thanks, and stop again.”

“Thanks. I will and I’ll definitely see you at the book club. Where’s the place again?” Ava slid to the side as another customer plopped a case of Bud Light on the counter.

“Mr. Whiskers. It’s a bar downtown. Wednesday nights at seven. Just look for the whiskers above the door.” Cassie scanned the beer and punched some numbers on the machine.

“Thanks again, Cassie, nice to meet you.” Ava called back as she pushed her back on the door to get out.

“You, too.” Cassie yelled back over the counter.

Ava struggled with the heavy door, when it finally gave way. A strong arm reached out to steady her before she lost her footing. She really needed to wear more sensible shoes.

Righting herself, she looked up into the sky-blue eyes of Kruz Tanner. The near fall, or was it just the gorgeous man, took her breath away.

“Easy there.” Kruz, let go of her with his right arm. “Hey, hello again.” The smile he flashed caused her heart to flutter. Near his left side was a little girl, her face and hair hidden by a baseball hat.

“Oh, hi.” Ava was thrown off balance, both by her reaction to seeing him again, and the fact that he must be married. The disappointment was a quick stab to the chest. That must have been what Cassie had meant about him only having eyes for one female. He was obviously a family man, also.

“Riley, go tell Cassie what ice cream you want, and I’ll be right in.” The little girl didn’t need to be told twice as she ran into the store.

“Can I help you with your bags?”

“Ah, no, I got this, but thanks anyway.” Rushing to her car, she hit the trunk button on her keyring, and it popped open. Placing her purchases inside, Ava scolded herself for being so easily taken by a gorgeous face and washboard stomach. He was totally not the type she usually went for, but then her most recent choices hadn’t been good either.

“Hey wait.” Kruz jogged to her side. “You dropped something.”

His long legs reached the car before she had a chance to turn around. To her horror, Kruz stood holding the book Cassie had given her. It must have slipped out of her bag and fallen to the ground. It was titled, *My Motorcycle Stud*. Ugh. It was the new erotic novel the media was buzzing about. From what she’d heard, the tale proclaimed that all women wanted a bad

boy on a motorcycle. If only the ground would open up and swallow her whole. Kruz must think she read smut and wanted to get laid by a biker dude.

A wide grin crossed his face as he held it out to her. Heat covered her face, as she accepted the paperback and tucked it under her arm.

“Thanks.” She quickly ducked around his large frame.

“You’re welcome.” Kruz nodded and took a step back. “Have a good evening.”

“Thanks, you also.” She fiddled with her keys.

“Hey.” Kruz called out and she turned with her hand on the door handle.

“Just so you know, I have a motorcycle in case you ever want to go for a ride.” Kruz winked and turned toward the store. “Enjoy your book.”

She tightened her lips. Her cheeks had to be as red as her hair. The nerve! “Jerk,” Ava spoke under her breath as she got into her car.

She thought the man that helped her along the road was different. A handsome hero in a pair of blue jeans. Unfortunately, he was a flirt, a dad, and obviously, married. Apparently, that still didn’t keep him from trying to put the moves on anyone in a skirt.

Well, forget him. She needed to concentrate on herself, do good at her job, and try to figure out what she was going to do with her life this fall. One thing was for sure, she didn’t need a man. They just complicated things.

Now that she knew where her new home was it didn’t take long to get there. The Kwik Trip was just a short two-minute

drive. It was nice being so close to everything she needed. Heck, maybe she'd buy a bike and ride it everywhere. Taking her purchases from the trunk and heading up the steps, she was looking forward to a little light reading and trying her new wine. After putting everything away Ava strolled to the screened-in porch with her glass of red and her motorcycle man book.

It didn't take long to relax and fall for the man between the pages. Then she heard it. It sounded like thunder rolling down a hill with a whistle announcing its way. Tossing the book to the side, she rushed to the screen. There were no train tracks in sight. Walking to the back of the house, she witnessed the flashes of dark metal of a locomotive between the trees. It was loud, and the whistle blew a few more times.

Taking a deep sigh, Ava hiked back to the porch couch. "Thank God, that went by now instead of at night." Twenty minutes later, she heard the train whistle again.

Ava read until she had to turn the porch light on. Except for the trains, it was a peaceful evening. The sound of the water flowing by combined with the wine lulled her to relax. After a nice bubble bath, she settled into the surprisingly comfortable bed. Sinking into the sheets, she smiled to herself. Just as her eyes started to close, the train whistle and the loud roar of a train, shook her bed.

It was going to be a very, very long night.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Ava*

AVA GROANED AS SHE ROLLED OUT OF BED. IT'D SEEMED LIKE she had finally settled into a deep sleep when it was time to get up. Ugh! The trains tapered off toward morning but still, the constant whistles and the rumble of the wheels would take a long time to get used to. Yawning, she rubbed her eyes. Chances were good there were huge bags under them. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror later confirmed that fact.

If she was going to get her act together, she had to do it quick. A new item to add to her to do list for the day was to find a place that sold ear plugs. Placing her glasses on her nose, she headed to the kitchen. She found a coffee pot, and some java to brew. Once she felt human again, Ava dialed the number of her new boss, Claire.

“Hello,” the friendly voice on the other end answered.

“Hi, this is Ava, Lauren’s daughter. I was calling to let you know I’m in town and ready to start work on Monday.”

“That’s great. Are you all settled into your new place?”

“Yes, it’s lovely.” Except for the trains, she added in her mind.

“Listen, dear. I know we were going to get together and chat today, but something came up. Why don’t you spend the weekend getting settled and we can get started at nine on Monday at the greenhouse? Does that sound okay to you?”

“Of course, I’ve been wanting to check out the town anyway, and I need to get my refrigerator stocked. I’ll plan on seeing you at nine on Monday.”

“Great, I can’t believe I finally get to meet Lauren’s daughter. I’ve missed her so much.”

With any luck, Claire would share some stories of their childhood together. Ava had so many questions about her mother, her father, and why the estrangement from her hometown.

“I’m hoping I can get her to visit me this summer.” Fingers crossed.

“That would be wonderful. Well, I have to get going.” Voices mumbled in the background. “I’ll see you on Monday. Have a great weekend.”

“Thanks, you too.” Ava hung up the phone and refilled her coffee cup. Drawn to the screened-in porch, she strolled outside. It was already becoming a favorite place to unwind while sipping her coffee and viewing the tugboats and barges drifting by in the distance. It was so easy to get lost in the river’s beauty, before she knew it a half hour had passed. After a quick shower, it was time to head to town. She needed to get her bearings of where everything was, plus there were a few places that had caught her interest the night before.

Ava took a survey of the goods in the refrigerator and her nearly bare cupboards and jotted down some items she’d need from the Piggly Wiggly. The half empty bottle of wine



reminded her that a trip to the winery Cassie suggested was a must. Handbag and keys in hand, she was out the door, and down the steps in a matter of minutes. As she stuck her key in the lock, a horn blasted making her flinch. Turning to the sound, she witnessed Kruz, wave from a pick-up window as he passed. Her pulse raced and her anger rose. How someone she didn't even know could so easily excite and irritate her at the same time was a mystery.

The jury was still out on him. If only he'd been available, things might be different. As it was, he was just another great looking man who was off the market. Taking a breath, she eased into the car and trailed him down the road.

What she wouldn't give to meet someone who had no clue who her well known father was and what all he owned.

In front of her, Kruz turned his truck into the motorcycle shop's parking lot. Too bad, she didn't need some bike parts, but they weren't on her list. Taking a deep breath, she pictured his strong arms, six pack abs, and gorgeous face. The guy really was easy on the eyes.

Passing through town, she spied a farmer's market taking place in the town square. The growing season was just getting started so there wasn't a lot of produce yet, but she left with some spring flowers, maple syrup, and a jar of honey. The downtown was full of picturesque shops and quirky restaurants. A short distance from town was the Wild Rose Winery.

The foundation of the place was an old building that had to have been built in the 1800's. Added on to it was a modern tasting room. Outside were old wine barrels cut in half and filled with budding flowers. Another month and they'd be overflowing with color.

It was early but already the parking lot was filled with cars with license plates from both sides of the river. A few patrons were already seated outside enjoying some wine and sun.

The aroma of wine and cheese filled her senses when she opened the door.

“Hi.” A familiar voice greeted her. “You must have liked the wine.” It was Cassie from the gas station.

“Hey.” Ava plopped her purse on the counter and smiled. What great luck to run into the kind woman again so soon. “Thanks for suggesting it.”

“Well, there are lots more to try. Do you want to do a tasting?” Cassie nodded toward the bar. “Come this way.”

“Ah.” Ava followed her in that direction. “Are you? It might be a little early in the day for me.”

“I wish. I’m working.” Cassie went behind the counter and wrapped an apron around her waist.

“What? You work here too? You’re a busy girl.” From the pink color on Cassie’s cheeks, Ava wished she could take the words back.

“I’m saving up for school.” Cassie admitted. Ava guessed the woman’s age to be around the same as hers. Maybe she was going for her master’s degree or some other continuing education.

“I know how that goes.” Actually, she didn’t but her goal was to fit in, not stand out. “I start a job here on Monday. I’m trying to get the lay of the land so to speak.”

Cassie slid a wine glass in her direction. “Here. Try the cranberry.”

Her taste buds gave her a high five. The wine was tart but sweet. Ava was used to the old vintage stuff her father had in the house but the fruit wines at this place were more to her liking. “It’s good but I’m kind of a light weight. If I drink any more on an empty stomach, I’m going to be tipsy.”

“Gotcha.” Cassie poured her a glass of water and placed some crackers in front of her.

“What else should I do to get myself acclimated to the area?”

“Well, the downtown is nice. There’s a farmer’s market every Saturday morning.”

“I stopped there on the way here.” And probably would every Saturday from now on.

“We have a historic villa, the casino, heck, just drive up and down the great river road. It has so many wonderful places to stop and enjoy the view. During the summer most communities have some kind of festival or fair. Oh, and did I mention all the cheese factories and local breweries?”

Ava chuckled. Cassie obviously loved where she lived.

“Sorry, I get excited talking about the place. There is so much to see and do here.” After wiping her hands on a towel, she poured Ava a glass of white, which was just as good as the red.

“Well, I can’t wait to see it all.”

Cassie picked up another bottle and Ava held up a hand. “Thanks, but I’ve got more driving to do today so I better just get a bottle of both to go and call it good.”

“Good idea, but the blueberry is the best. They have all of them at the checkout corner. Be sure to try a sample of the

chocolate cheese before you leave.”

“Chocolate cheese?” Ava wrinkled her forehead.

“It tastes like fudge.” Cassie assured before whispering. “It’s made with cream cheese.”

“Seems like I have a lot of things to try this summer.” Maybe she needed to take up running again with all the calories she’d be taking in.

“I live here and there is always something new to experience.” Cassie came around to the front of the bar. “Say, everyone usually finds their way to Frisky’s on Saturday night. If you’re up to it, why don’t you stop by tonight.”

“Wow. Thanks.” Ava bounced on her toes at being asked to join in the fun. “I just might do that.”

“Great. Well, I better get back to work.” More tourists were entering the building. “Hope to see you there.”

“Frisky’s?” What a unique name.

“Yes, Frisky’s. Look for the big catfish above the door,” Cassie called out as she rushed to take care of the crowd gathering in the tasting room.

After paying for her purchase, Ave left to shop at the quaint downtown stores. When fatigue set in, Ava refueled with a creamy cappuccino at one of the cafés. For being a small town, Coulee Bluff seemed to have everything a person could need or want.

Ava stood in line for over half an hour at an outdoor eatery famous for its boiled hamburgers. With burger in hand, she wandered to the park down by the river to enjoy her lunch. A crowd had gathered to witness a large barge squeezing into the

narrow lock and dam. It was amazing to see the huge vessel lower with the river's water level while it sat inside the lock.

Even though her meal was delicious, it was a challenge to keep the juicy meat and onions from dripping onto her clothes. She spent the rest of the afternoon reading under a tree and people watching. Fishermen and women sat on the shoreside of the lock hoping to land a big one. Kids laughed and screamed while playing on and around the various playground equipment. A long sigh escaped her lips as she spied couples strolling by hand in hand. Was it too early in life to decide to be a spinster and get a cat? Did they still have spinsters? Was she unlucky at love or just scared to take a chance on someone after her horrible experience with Sawyer?

Frowning, the handsome face of Kruz floated before her eyes. Why did all the bad boys have to be so devilishly good looking? Not that she had much experience with them but in the movies and books, they were always the most heart stopping and the most trouble.

The afternoon heat caused her to break out in a sweat, or was it the thoughts of that handsome young man? Fanning herself with the paperback, a train whistle echoed in the background. How could something so disturbingly haunting and loud at night be so comforting and romantic during the day? No one else seemed to be yawning or staggering around like a zombie. Hopefully in time, she'd be able to snooze through the entire evening. An idea popped into her mind.

In order to sleep well, one needed to be really tired. Right? Shoving her book, water bottle, and phone into her tote bag, Ava strode over to her car. She was going to Frisky's tonight and dance until the cows came home, or the catfish swam home, or whatever they did around here. If a person was

exhausted, they'd doze through a bomb going off. Right? She just had to get really, really tired.

After a light dinner, she put on her favorite blue dress. It was a high halter neck style with a flowy skirt. Adding some strappy, high heeled sandals, diamond earrings, and a beaded clutch purse, she was all set.

Her feet ached by the time she walked the two blocks from the closest parking spot to Frisky's. The music blasting from the historic old brick building could be heard halfway down the street. The large sign over the door proclaimed the place to be The Frisky Catfish, so Frisky's must be what the locals referred to it by. And yes, there was a large figure of a whiskered fish above the entrance.

Inside, the establishment was packed. So much so, that Cassie was nowhere to be seen. Next time, she'd be sure to exchange numbers. Searching the crowd, a certain biker by the bar came into view. Maybe this small-town gig wasn't so good after all. Kruz was everywhere. His arm now draped across of the shoulder of a girl. A lumped formed in her throat and her eyes watered.

Figures. It was obvious that women stuck to him like mice to a glue trap. He kissed the woman's cheek and the cheek of a small girl beside her. Her gut twisted. She'd had enough of men cheating on their wives. Of course, she couldn't consider Kruz being nice to her as cheating, but it was border line flirting. Wanting to take her for a ride. Indeed! Folding her arms in front of her chest, she gave him the stink eye.

Out of nowhere someone reached for her arm and swung her around. "Hey, don't you look pretty." The brute's breath smelled of onions and beer. He must have visited the same hamburger joint as she had. "How about a dance, little lady?"

Twisting out of his embrace, she searched the room for Cassie. “Sorry, I’m meeting someone.”

“They can wait.” He grabbed for her again.

“Hey, sorry but I don’t want to dance.” The hold on her wrist tightened. “Ouch. Let go of me. Someone’s waiting for me.”

“Oh yeah? Who?” The man wasn’t taking no for answer.

“Me.” Ava didn’t need to turn around to recognize Kruz’s deep, sexy voice. Heat rose on her skin when he put his arm around her shoulder. That same pine and leather scent she remembered comforted and enveloped her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Kruz*

THE PRETTY REDHEAD WAS DEFINITELY OUT OF HER ELEMENT, and no one deserved to be man handled.

“Sorry, Kruz.” The guy held up his hands as if he was being robbed at gun point. “Didn’t mean no harm.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open but no sound came out as he pressed his hand to her lower back and ushered her near the bar. “Are you going to a wedding or something?”

“A wedding?” She stopped and narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about? And please take your hands off me.”

This time it was Kruz who raised his limbs in surrender. “It’s just that... Well, you look so ...”

“So what?” She lowered her head and gazed up at him. “Like I don’t belong here?”

“No, not that at all. But babe.” He let out a low wolf whistle. “That dress on you. Gorgeous.”

“The name’s Ava, not Babe.” A pretty pout on her lips, Ava placed her fists on her hips. “Babe is the name of Paul Bunyan’s ox.”



“Right, Ava.” He rested an elbow on the bar and flashed her a smile he hoped would win her over. “Even your name is beautiful.” Not that he wanted some stuck-up, big city girl but there was something about her he liked.

“Oh, please.” She rolled her eyes. “I bet you say that to all the ladies. In fact, you were probably just whispering it to the ear of the chick you were at the bar with.” Even in the dim lighting, he could see her cheeks turn a bright pink. “In case you forgot. You kissed her cheek.” Her eyebrows arched.

“Jealous much?” He mirrored her expression.

“Conceited much?” Her lowered lip trembled again in a sexy pout made to be kissed.

“Kruz? Ava?” Cassie came up behind them. “I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“We don’t,” they said at the same time.

“Well, you should.” Cassie teased and squeezed his shoulder before turning her attention to the woman in front of him. “Ava, I’m so glad you could make it. I have a table out on the deck if you’d like to join me?”

“Sure, I’d love to.” Ava raised her nose in the air and followed without saying goodbye. It just proved his point. Miss Minnesota clearly thought he was out of her league and, was obviously, full of herself.

“Looks like you just got turned down.” Remi nudged him and took a seat at the bar. “But I’ll drink with you.”

“I wasn’t interested in the first place.” Kruz sat beside him and motioned for a couple beers. “I was just being nice.”

“Sure, you were. Is that why you jumped in like a knight in shining armor to save her from drunk Al? Everyone knows

he's harmless. If she'd have pinched him, the guy would've screamed like a little girl."

"Well, she didn't know." Kruz took a swig of the dark brew as soon as it landed in front of him.

"So, you're interested?" Remi's gaze met his in the mirror behind the bar.

"No. Wrong girl, wrong time, wrong place." All were true. Maybe if he was free of obligations, he'd have asked her out. Even if she was just a weekender, spending time at the river for the summer, they could've had some fun. "Why are you drinking? Aren't you working?" His best friend was still dressed in his game warden uniform. "Isn't that against your oath or something?"

"I'm off duty and didn't have time to change."

"Time for what? Getting drunk?" Remi seemed to follow his own set of rules, so you never knew what he was up to.

"Maybe." Remi tapped his bottle against his. "Cheers."

Twisting in his chair, Kruz focused on the faces in the room. Some he knew, most he didn't. If it was the off season, it'd be the other way around but now tourists and weekenders filled the place. Most were in t-shirts and shorts, which was one of the reasons Ava had stood out. Her dress reminded him of the color of the water and complimented her copper-colored hair and lovely eyes. Her hair was up in the back like she was a princess, while he was lucky to finger comb his most days.

"I'm waiting." Remi turned his way and the overhead light flickered off the badge on his chest.

"For what? To get a personality?" They'd been friends since grade school, so the banter went back and forth.

“You should talk. I’m not the one that just got shot down by a hot redhead in a blue dress.”

“Plenty of fish in the sea. Speaking of that, catch anything good lately?” It shouldn’t bother him that Remi wanted to talk about Ava, but it did. It even rubbed him the wrong way just thinking about her. When was the last time, a woman got under his skin? Too long, and yet not long enough. Hooking up with a stranger was the last thing he needed to do.

At this point in his life, he needed a partner not a summer fling. Things had finally started to turn around business wise. He’d recently had to hire help to do general maintenance on bikes so he could do more custom work. For the next few hours, and several beers, they talked about old times and current events. Other friends had joined in, while some stopped to say hello while passing through.

A couple times he glanced outside to see who was still on the deck. Ava sat at one of the tables enjoying what appeared to be a burger and some wine with Cassie. He’d seen her come inside a few times to use the restroom, but she never glanced in his direction. The anxious mood seeming to settle in his gut only increased as the evening went on. Even accepting a couple offers to dance didn’t improve his temperament and Remi’s knowing grin frustrated him even more. For some reason he couldn’t get Ava out of his mind.

“You like that chick, don’t ya?” Remi teased.

“I don’t even know ‘that chick’ so how can I like her?” Yet, he did.

“Go ask her to dance.” There was a live band tonight, and they were pretty good.

When he didn’t move, Remi egged him on. “Chicken?”

“Seriously? Are we back in high school?” Kruz shook his head. “I got responsibilities. Hoity toity girls from the other side of the river have no place in my world.”

“How do you know that?” Remi swirled his last French fry in ketchup and popped it in his mouth.

“Her car had Minnesota plates. Not only that, she’s probably a Vikings fan.”

“I’m not talking about what she drives, dumbass. Just because you had a bad experience with one woman doesn’t mean they’re all like that.”

So now his friend was part game warden, part philosopher. But it was true. He couldn’t go through life blaming everyone for mistakes he’d made.

“I dare you. Go ask her to dance.” Remi nodded in her direction.

Exhaling loudly, Kruz swallowed the last of his beer and rose just as Cassie and Ava entered the room.

“Hey, Cass. Who’s your friend?” Remi yelled as Kruz sat back down and rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans.

“Hi, Remi. This is Ava. She’s here for the summer.” They shook hands as Kruz listened. All summer? She was here for longer than the weekend? Maybe he could give love a chance, just one more time. Well, at least dating, love might be a stretch, but he was willing to give it try. If things worked out between them, Ava might stay longer.

“Nice to meet you Remi. I’ve never met a game warden before. That must be an interesting job.”

Just the sound of her voice caused his stomach to flutter, despite the fact her attention was on the man next to him and

not directed toward him.

“Well, it’s your lucky day isn’t it.” Kruz rolled his eyes as Remi put on the charm. “Have you ever met a bike builder?”

Ava’s eyes darted to his as she bit her lip. “Ah, well. I guess I have.”

“Sorry about him.” Kruz stepped in front of his friend and held out his hand to her. “He’s been trying to get me to dance with someone all night. I think he’s tired of my company. Would you like to?” Cassie sat in his chair and started to chat with Remi about an upcoming fishing tournament.

“Well, from what I could see from outside, he succeeded. I saw you on the dance floor a few times.”

The fact that she’d noticed caused the big grin on his face. “Keeping tabs on me, huh?”

“What? No. Of course not.” She shook her head and a strand of golden hair dropped to her rosy cheek.

His fingers flexed just thinking about tucking that soft curl behind her ear. “How about a dance then?” He motioned to the small wood floor space near the band.

Ava’s phone buzzed and she pulled it out. A scowl crossed her pretty face as she gave him her attention again.

“Sorry but I don’t dance with married men.” Her jaw tightened.

“I’m not married.” Kruz held up his ringless left hand as she frowned and turned to Cassie.

“Well, I ...” Ava fidgeted with the back of her earring.

“You what?”

“I saw you kissing that woman earlier at the bar and thought you were together.”

“Huh? What woman? God, no. That’s my sister I kissed on the cheek.”

“And the kid?” She let out a deep breath.

“Her kid.” He sat down and took a drink of his beer. They had obviously started and ended on the wrong foot. Sure, having a kid maybe gave off a dad vibe but was he acting married as well? No wonder she wasn’t interested.

“Is he married?” Ava asked while she glanced at Remi and Cassie, who shook their heads. “Then I would love to dance with you.” A timid smile brightened her face.

Not waiting for the lady to change her mind, Kruz took her hand and guided her toward the other dancers. Risking a glance back at his friends, Cassie and Remi, they gave him a thumbs up. It might be time to get out more if he was getting praise for dancing. Heck, he’d danced with several woman tonight but none of them had captured his attention like this one.

Just as they reached the floor, the band changed to a slow tune. Just his luck. Drawing her closer, the fresh scent of lilacs surrounded him. She smelled like a fresh summer day, and he breathed it in. He rested his cheek on the side of her head. Her long hair was just as soft as it appeared.

Kruz glanced up at the heavens. There was something about Ava that’d punched him in the stomach and nailed him in the heart at first sight. He’d been alone far too long and hated every minute of it. If she’d give him a chance, he was willing to do the same. Hopefully she wouldn’t mind that he was also a father.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Ava*

THE DANCES AT THE COUNTRY CLUB HAD BEEN FORMAL BUT not anywhere as romantic as being in Kruz's arms at the Frisky Catfish. Just the touch of his thumb along her lower back could make her miss a step. When the scruff of his jawline brushed her cheek, her knees nearly buckled. Never had she responded to a man like this. There was no denying their connection. From the intensity in his eyes whenever they were together, it was a good guess he could feel it too. They breezed around the floor as if they'd been in classes with each other for years.

The man was light on his feet. "Where did you learn to dance?"

"My mom insisted we learn as kids. She gave us lessons in the garage after school."

He smiled and her heart skipped a beat. "The lessons worked. I'm impressed." Ava tucked a damp lock of hair that had been stuck to her forehead behind her ear. The temperature had gone up a few degrees since they'd begun dancing or maybe it was the hot guy holding her close that caused it.

Earlier in the evening Ava wasn't going to give Kruz the time of day but a text from Chelsie, a friend from back home,

gave her the nudge she needed to take a chance. Sawyer had pursued her like a fish after a worm. Fortunately, she'd never taken the bait, her friend had warned her he was only after her money, a male gold digger hoping to marry into one of the richest families in the Twin Cities. The weasel also had his eye on a VP position with her father's company. It had never been about her. The text from Chelsie had included a picture of Sawyer locking lips with another girl who ran in their circle. Giving him the boot was the best decision she'd made in a long time. Well, that and coming to Coulee Bluff.

One of the things Kruz had going for him, beside the fact he was one of the most attractive men she'd ever seen, was that he had no idea who she was. Or at least he appeared not to.

"So, are you really here for the whole summer?" Kruz spun her around and back into his arms again.

"Yes, I have a job I'm starting on Monday."

"Doing what?"

Ava opened her mouth, and he briefly touched a finger to her lips.

"No, wait," he interrupted as the music stopped for the evening. "You can tell me tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why tomorrow?" She had no clue what to do the next day.

"Let's get some air. Where'd you park?" Kruz grinned and lead her from the dance floor. Cassie was nowhere to be seen but then according to the clock on the wall they'd danced till closing time. The bar was emptying out fast. Remi stood and nodded as they passed.



Normally wandering out into the dark night with a stranger would have her reaching for her keychain of mace but surprisingly she felt totally safe in Kruz's care. He did, after all, save her earlier in the evening from an overeager drunk.

Except for the always consistent train whistle in the distance, and a few crickets, the night was quiet and still. A cool, light breeze carried up from the water to cool her flushed skin.

As they neared her car, Ava turned. "Hey, what did you mean about tomorrow?"

"You mean today?" He glanced at his watch. "It's well past midnight, so it's Sunday already."

"Okay, what about today then?"

Kruz leaned against the side of her car. "I thought you might want to meet me at the dock, say around ten?"

"And why would I want to do that?" She purred. Did she really bat her eyes at him? Still shocked about the way she responded to him, the man could sell her ice on a cold winter's day, and she'd purchase everything he had.

"I'd like to take you fishing." He folded his arms across his chest. The motion highlighted the muscles in his arms even more.

"Fishing?" The corners of her mouth fell.

"Yeah, never been?" He smirked.

"I can't say as I have. I'm not real fond of worms either. Then there's the whole snake thing again." A chill ran through her. She shivered.

"How about I make you a deal."

“I’m listening.” How could she not? Kruz had her full attention. The moonlight emphasized his high cheekbones and enticing five o’clock shadow. It gave him a devilish, bad boy look.

“You agree to go fishing with me tomorrow and I’ll promise to bring no worms. I also promise to keep any snakes away.”

“I don’t know how to fish. And how do you catch one without a worm?”

“You really are a city girl, aren’t you?” he teased.

The comment irked her, so she mirrored his stance. When would people stop assuming she was some pampered person who had no clue how to do anything? Maybe she needed to stop giving that impression. It was time to step out of the protective box that’d been built around her since birth. “Just because I’ve never done it doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”

“I never said you were.” He pushed away from the car and placed his hands on his hips. “I’m sorry, I’m just used to being around people that’ve grown up on the water. It’d be my pleasure to take you out on my boat tomorrow, I mean today, and show you how beautiful it is. No worms, no fishing, just a boat ride if you want.”

Kruz seemed sincere but going out on the water with someone she barely knew was risky. A lot of things could go bad in a hurry. What if he was a serial killer who planned to feed her to the fish?

“Please.” He flashed her a puppy dog grin that caused her swoon all the way to her toes.

Based on the way others reacted to him in the bar, Kruz was well known and obviously well liked. There really didn’t

seem to be anything to worry about. Based on the number of boats she'd witnessed in the marina, it wasn't like they'd be alone on the water anyway.

Rolling her eyes, she gave in. "You talked me into it."

"Great. I'll pick you up at eight."

"That early? You better bring coffee." Ava opened the door of her car.

"How do you like it?" Kruz held it open while she settled in.

"Surprise me." If the man guessed right, she'd give him a few bonus points for sure.

"I plan to."

He winked and her heart skipped a beat or two. If she was around him much more, she might have to see a cardiologist. "We'll see." She buckled her seatbelt.

"Drive safe." Kruz shut the door and stepped back.

Turning the engine on, Ava took one more peek at the good-looking guy standing on the sidewalk. Was it a mistake to spend more time with someone so opposite of her? Only time would tell.

Driving down the block, she soon saw the headlights of his truck following her. When she parked in front of her rental, Kruz stopped at the road and waited until she was safely inside before driving off. If someone had done that in the city, she might consider him a stalker but here it seemed sweet and caring.

The clock above the stove showed it was late. Way later than she was used to getting home. Eight in the morning would come way too soon. Getting ready for bed, Ava

yawned. Even though she was excited for what tomorrow would bring, slumber came easy.



Shoving a beach towel in her tote, Ava jumped when someone knocked on her door. She peeked through the window. Kruz was here bright and early holding a takeout coffee cup in one hand and a white plastic bag in the other.

Ava rushed to let him in. “Good morning.”

“Morning to you.” He handed her the gas station mug.

Kudos to him for not selecting something from the not so good coffee shop downtown. Her parents would be shocked to know she didn’t share their taste for high-end java when the local Kwik Trip brand was her favorite.

“Hazelnut roast with French vanilla creamer, no sugar because you’re sweet enough as it is.”

She burst out laughing. “Now that’s spreading it on a little thick.”

“It brought a smile to your face, so it was worth it.” He set the bag on the counter. “Plus, I picked up extra sugar packets just in case.”

“Well, I happen to love hazelnut coffee, French vanilla creamer, and lots of sugar.” Peering in the bag, Ava pulled out a couple of white packets and added them to her cup. “I’d say you did pretty good at guessing.” Also inside the bag were chocolate dunkers. Her eyes lit up. Kruz just received a gold star for choosing her favorite donuts.

“You like dunkers?” he asked while taking one for himself.

Almost as much as you, she nearly caught herself saying.

“I’m a plain donuts kind of guy but I know all the women in my family swear by them.”

She bit into the sugar crusted delicacy. It was a mouthful of chocolaty goodness. “If an Oreo mated with a donut, it would be a Dunker.”

“True. Are you ready to go?” He glanced around.

“I just have to find some sunscreen. I know I have some here somewhere.” Ava rummaged through a bag on the counter.

“No need. I’ve got everything you could possibly need in the boat including life preservers.” He picked up her bag and slipped it over his shoulder. “Can you swim?”

“Of course, everyone at the cl... I mean everyone on my street knew how to swim. There was a pool just down the block.” The country club’s Olympic size swimming pool was nearby, so it wasn’t technically lying. This summer was about fitting in and being her true person, not the carbon copy of her parents whom her father encouraged her to be.

“Great. Well, then let’s go.” Kruz held the door as she gathered her sunglasses and purse.

“So, is your boat in the marina?” Ava rushed to keep up with his longer steps.

“It’s right there.” He turned and her mouth dropped open.

“That’s a boat? But it’s so small.” As soon as they left her mouth, Ava wished the words back. It was a simple fishing boat, the kind she’d seen numerous times in the short time she’d been in Coulee Bluff. Back home, everyone had yachts. Huge vessels that came with staff.

“Yes, it’s a boat and I assure you it’s big enough for the both of us.” Surprisingly, he didn’t sound too upset with her rude comment.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that.” Following him to the passenger side of the truck, he opened the door and placed her things in the back seat of the extended cab. The child’s seat stuck out like a sore thumb, but then she remembered his sister’s kids and it didn’t seem that odd at all. In fact, it made him even more appealing. Kruz looked after his nieces and or nephews so much he always had a car seat with him. He appeared to be exactly what she was searching for. A man she could trust. A caring and compassionate man.

They drove the short distance to the boat landing. There were several trucks and trailers already parked in the lot. Kruz stopped, got out, and placed the towels, a small cooler, their life preservers, and her tote in the boat before backing it into the water.

“Aren’t you taking the fishing poles?” Ava could see they were still in the bed of his pickup.

“I didn’t think you were really into it so, like I said last night, I’m going to take you on a boat ride. Show you the beauty of the backwaters.”

“Backwaters? Is that code for swamp?”

“No, not really.” He pushed the boat off the trailer with his foot.

Ava finally noticed he was wearing shorts. The man must go boating a lot because his limbs were tan from the sun. The sleeveless t-shirt he wore showed off his tattoos and muscles. The town’s bike builder was indeed a fine specimen of a man.

“Can you hold this while I park the truck?” He handed her the towline.

As she waited, Ava took in her surroundings. Families were heading to the beach. In the distance, commercial fishermen pulled in their lines. A large barge was waiting in line to go through the docks. Sea gulls squawked in the bright blue, clear sky.

“Ready to go, Ava?” He patted her shoulder as he passed.

“Sure.” After Kruz lined the boat up next to the dock, Ava hopped in. He’d added a soft cushion to the hard bench-style seat for her to sit on. “Just one more thing before we go.” Ava flipped her shades onto her head.

Kruz jumped in, shed his shirt, and took a seat on the bench behind her. “Oh yeah, what’s that?”

Ava snapped of photo of him and texted it to her friend. “Just in case I don’t return from the trip, my friend will know what the last person I was with looked like.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Kruz*

ANGER, ANNOYANCE, AND ANY NUMBER OF OTHER FEELINGS should be flowing through his mind as he maneuvered the vessel away from the docks. She thought his boat wasn't big enough and he might be a serial killer? Good grief, these city girls were uptight! Not only that, but he had to deal with a barge as well. Whenever those massive ships were released from the docks, they created a vacuum and waves. Despite having his photo taken, and his boat being called small, he couldn't be happier. His fishing boat was plenty big for what he needed but Kruz wasn't taking any chances with precious cargo on board.

What was he thinking? Obviously, Ava wasn't impressed with his Jon boat, but at least he could show her some of the most beautiful scenery around. If she wasn't awed by that, there was no point in pursuing her further. They were too many differences between them to overcome.

As soon as they cleared the dock area, he got the boat up on plane, and they sped along the shoreline. He touched her arm and pointed toward her place as they passed. Her red hair shown like rose gold as it caught the sun. Ava's fair skin appeared porcelain. He'd have to remind her to coverup or put



sunscreen on if they were out too long. The water intensified the rays of the sun.

Once civilization was behind them, he guided the boat into the channels off the main waterway. Coasting along the back water they rode in silence. Kruz tried to gauge her interest in their surroundings, but it was hard to tell staring at her back. A few times Ava shaded her eyes as she stared at an eagle or crane flying overhead. She took numerous photos of the towering bluffs and a spot where water seemed to flow from a wall.

His companion turned to smile at a row of turtles lined up on a log. As soon as the little reptiles heard the boat motor, they jumped in the water one-by-one like synchronized swimmers. Ava laughed at their antics. The sound of it brought him joy as well. Twisting, she pointed to show him some lily pads, but he only had eyes for her.

Fortunately, she didn't notice the water snake weaving its way alongside the boat. Not taking a chance of it getting any closer, Kruz turned up the throttle and aimed toward the main channel again. Spotting an empty sand bar, he drove to its edge. He leapt over the side, pulled the boat up on shore, and helped Ava out.

“Is this an island?”

“Technically it's a man made one. The corps of engineers make some of them. Theirs are the really high ones but this one is natural.” Kruz picked up a cooler and carried it to a flat place under a tree while Ava followed behind with a blanket.

“I thought we could have a little picnic.”

“Really? This is so sweet.” From the way her face lit up, it appeared that he'd done something right, small boat and all.

Scratching his chin, Kruz placed the cooler on the sand. With Ava's help, he spread the blanket on the ground.

"Did I say something wrong?" She shed her flip flops and took a seat on the teal throw. "You're kind of quiet."

"I've just never been called sweet before. I'm not sure how to respond." He chuckled. If Remi could see him now, he'd never hear the end of it. Maybe becoming a dad had changed him more than he thought. Quiet times with loved ones had taken first place over spending time with his buddies.

"Believe me, it's a good thing." He passed her a water bottle, and she took a sip before continuing. "I had no idea what to expect when I first arrived here and yet, I already feel like I'm making connections with the local people and making friends."

"Tell me more about your home."

A subtle, but brief sadness seemed to flow across her face. "Let's just say, I'm glad to be away for the summer."

"Why?"

Her lower lips quivered, and Ava gazed toward the river and the wide barge that'd finally caught up with them. As it passed, water rushed the shore.

"I'm sorry. Not my business." Kruz was used to being in Coulee Bluff where everyone knew your business without even asking. "I shouldn't have pried. Let's have something to eat." He opened the cooler. "I didn't have time to cook anything, so I just grabbed something from the deli this morning."

"It's all right, and you shouldn't have." Her eyes widened at the spread. "Wow. I'm really impressed."

Inside was fried chicken and several small containers of baked beans, potato salad, and cole slaw. “I didn’t know what you would like, so I got a little of everything. Sorry the chicken is cold.” Thankfully, the clerk had thrown in utensils and napkins, or they’d be eating everything by hand.

“It’s wonderful. I can’t believe you went to this much trouble. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Never eaten on a sand bar in the middle of the Mississippi River?” He bit into his chicken leg.

“Well, that too, but I’ve never been on a picnic.” Ava filled her plate with a little of everything.

“You’ve never been on a picnic. Like ever?” The thought sobered him. He’d been lucky to grow up the way he had and with the family he was lucky to belong to.

“No, my parents were always too busy to do stuff like that.” Ava took a bite out of her chicken.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Yes, a younger brother. He’s in the military.”

Her eyes were a stunning greenish-blue or maybe hazel. What did it matter? He could stare at them all day. “You must be very proud.” From the loving expression on her face, he knew she was.

“I can’t wait to see him again.”

“Well, when he visits, we can take him out on the boat.”

“He would love that. Jason was always more of an outdoorsy type compared to me.”

“So, tell me more about your life back home. Do you like any sports?” Ava frowned as she chewed. He got the

impression the last thing she wanted to talk about was back home. “I’m sorry I keep asking you questions but I was hoping to get to know you better. I have to admit, I haven’t dated much in the past few years.”

“Why not?” Ava tilted her head to the side.

“Just busy, I guess. I’ve worked a lot getting my business going, plus I know everyone in town. It’d be like dating your cousins or something else weird.”

“What about the weekenders?” Crossing her legs, she placed her plate on the blanket and rested her elbows on her knees.

“You know we call people that?” It was a term they used for the out of towners that only come on the weekends to use their sailboats or cabins before returning to their homes on Sunday night.

“Cassie explained it to me.”

“I’ve gone out with a few, but most are simply passing through, so there isn’t much future in that.”

“Maybe I’m just passing through.” Ava tossed out before returning the wave of numerous riders on a pontoon. “I mean I just have the job for the summer.”

“Hopefully you’ll like it enough to stay.” Kruz started on another piece of chicken.

“Time will tell, I guess. I have a business degree and not sure what to do with it. I really needed a break from my job.”

“If it wasn’t something you’re passionate about, then why did you get one?”

“It was my father’s idea. He paid for the schooling.” Ava let out a deep breath.

“Still, I would never want to pressure a kid of mine into doing something they didn’t want to do.”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, I did think it would be a good career choice. One I could use no matter what. But what I really love is painting.”

“You like to paint houses?” He couldn’t help teasing her.

She rolled her eyes. “No, silly. Landscapes, portraits, anything that catches my eye.”

“You’re an artist then.”

She blushed and brushed some sand from her thigh. “I dabble a bit in several types of media, but painting is my calling.”

“Interesting choice of words—calling. It’s what I feel when I create a new bike from the ground up. I’d love to see your work.”

“I don’t have anything with me, but I did bring all my supplies. It’s so beautiful here that I can’t wait to capture some of the things I’ve seen today. Do you mind if we stop at a few places on the way back so I can take some more pictures?”

He grinned. “Of course. That is, if I take you back. I appreciate how wise you are about who you spend time with, but I have to admit I was a little taken aback when you took my picture.” Her phone just happened to buzz at the same time.

“A girl can’t be too careful these days, and you have to remember I live in the city. I don’t even know my neighbors. Anyway, the friend that I sent the photo to said this.” She showed him the text and he removed his sunglasses to see it.

The text read – **He’s hot!**

“Do you usually share the same opinions as your friend?”

Batting her eyes, Ava hugged her knees to her chest and giggled. “Sometimes. She’s also trying to get me away from a corporate career and do something with the arts.”

“Well, you have all summer to think about the direction you want to take. I hope I can convince you to do whatever you wish here.”

“Thanks, but my parents would have a fit if I didn’t return.”

Hoping to hide his disappointment, he began to put things back in the cooler. “Well, unfortunately I have to do some work at the shop before we open in the morning, but I’d be glad to stop anywhere along the way for you to get your photos.”

“That would be great. I really should get some food and other supplies before I start work tomorrow.”

“You never did tell me what your job is.”

Ava opened her mouth and stopped as a sassy smirk lit up her face. “Why don’t I tell you all about tomorrow night at dinner.”

“Are you asking me out?” Now this was a happy change of events. Maybe his boat wasn’t too small after all. As much as he tried to peg her as a too-good-for-him big city girl, Ava had pleasantly surprised him several times by proving him wrong. Her cheeks were rosy while she awaited his response.

“Maybe.” He rose and pulled her up. The skin on her hand was soft and warm. Even outside he could still smell the sweet, flowery scent of her shampoo.

“What do you mean, maybe?” She planted her feet firmly in the sand and looked up at him. Those stunning eyes of hers drew him in.

“Well, what if I want to ask you out to dinner?”

“You don’t have to do that.” Bending to pick up their blanket, Ava continued. “I mean, the boat ride, the picnic. Everything has been wonderful. I’ve never seen anything like this before. I want to pay you back.”

“That’s not necessary. Any excuse I have to get out on the river is a pleasure. Besides, the first day at a new job can be stressful. Let me take you out. We could grab a couple of hamburgers from Pete’s and walk down to the shoreline to eat.”

“Okay, but only if I can cook, or treat you, next time.” She shook the sand off the heavy throw and folded it.

“Of course, it gives me more time to get to know you.” The date was going better than he’d expected.

“You really are sweet.” She looped her arm through his as they walked in the deep sand.

“Until today, that is something I’ve never been called before. And now you’ve called me it twice.” He placed their picnic items in the boat.

“Really?”

“I have the bad boy biker thing I have to uphold.” He puffed out his chest. It wasn’t true but still people often thought if you rode a bike, or had tattoos, you were bad news.

“Well, if they think you’re bad, they obviously don’t know you very well.” She winked.

“Obviously.” He winked back and helped her get in the boat so they could cast off.

As promised, Kruz stopped wherever his passenger wanted to on the ride back so she could take pictures. Were her paintings good? He was definitely curious to find out. Too soon, the trip came to an end. The parking lot was crowded when they returned. Some were enjoying the view while others tried their luck fishing from shore.

Luckily there was no one waiting to put their boat in, and in no time at all they were parked in front of Ava’s house. He’d barely put the truck in park when she was out the door.

“Hey, wait.” He called and rushed around to the passenger side. “You’re too fast for me.”

“Don’t worry, I can get my own door.” Ava missed a step and ended up in Kruz’s arms.

“It wasn’t the door I was worried about. I don’t have room to turn around in your yard, but I always see a lady to their door.” Not that he minded having her in his arms. Not. One. Bit.

“Thanks.” Ava regained her footing and stepped away from him and the truck. Kruz gathered her belongings and helped her carry them to the house. A multitude of emotions floated through his mind. He wanted to spend more time with Ava. He wanted Ava to like him and most of all, he wanted the fact that he was a single dad to not be a problem.

“Well, thanks again. What time should I meet you at Pete’s?”

“Meet you? I’ll pick you up.” He mentally counted the hours until they could see each other again.



“I’m not sure how long I have to work being that it’s my first day.”

“Okay. You still have my card, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Just call me and I’ll come get you.” Smiling, he waited by the door as Ava dug a key from her purse.

She unlocked the door and faced him. “I will, and again, thanks for a memorable day.”

“My pleasure.” Kruz nodded and headed toward his truck.

“Hey wait.” Ava ran after him. “You forgot something.”

“I did. What?”

“This.” She reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek before racing back to the house and shutting the door without a second look.

Smiling, Kruz shook his head and tossed his keys up in the air. Finally, he was doing something right in his life.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Ava*

STUFFING ONE FOOT IN A TENNIS SHOE WHILE TRYING TO PUT her earring in, Ava scurried to get ready for her first day of work. Last night she went to sleep feeling happy and more relaxed than she'd been in a long time. Even the annoying train whistle hadn't bother her. Being around Kruz felt natural, and the fact he had no idea who she was made it even better. It was the first time in a long time, the threat she might be used, or someone had an agenda, hadn't popped into her mind once.

Kruz seemed to genuinely want to spend time with her. But when would the shadow of her father ruin the friendships, she was developing with Kruz and others in Coulee Bluff? He always did. It was only a matter of time before he'd make his presence known and blow everything out of the water again. Sometimes it felt like her father hated her, but how could that be? She was his only daughter. Ava frowned. How could he do what he did to her mother? You think you know someone and then they go and do something so horrible it turns your whole world upside down.

Taking time off to rethink her career choice wasn't the only reason she'd come to Coulee Bluff. Eyeing the clock, Ava grabbed her bag of supplies and hurried out the door. Being a

nanny, babysitter, and whatever this job entailed was totally new. Sure, Ava had a young brother, but they'd had staff who helped raise Jason and her when they were small. Her mother assured her it would be nothing more than just keeping the child busy while her grandmother worked at the garden center. From what little she'd heard; the poor thing had no mother in her life.

One thing Ava already appreciated about Coulee Bluff was that one could get anywhere in town in less than five minutes. Claire's greenhouse was on the west side of town, the opposite side from the river, which suited her just fine. The last thing she wanted was to move a plant and have a water snake slither out.

"Hi Ava." Her new boss hollered after placing a flat of perennials in the back of an SUV. Walking toward her, Claire wiped her palms on the sides of her jeans and held out a hand. "You're the spitting image of your mom. I'd have known you anywhere."

"Really?" While Jason was blonde like their father, she didn't look like either one of her parents.

"Of course. You have her eyes." Claire's brown hair was pulled up in a ponytail. In addition to her jeans, she sported a t-shirt and an apron with the greenhouse logo on the front.

"I guess so. Although, mine are more green than blue."

"Well, either way, I'm glad you're here." Claire looped her arm through hers and guided her toward the store. "Riley is in the office waiting for you. You have no idea how much I appreciate your help. I'm getting too old for this."

"Kids can tire you out at any age." At least that's what Ava had heard. Hopefully she'd be able to keep up. "I bought some

coloring books and paper for drawing.” She patted the tote under her arm.

“She’ll love that.” Claire gave off a warm grandmotherly vibe. Like she could bake cookies and knit a sweater with the best of them. That alone, caused Ava to sigh in relief.

Inside the building, the smell of mulch and flowers was everywhere. A large yellow and white cat napped on top of a bag of dirt. “That’s Leo, he has mouse control at night so sleeps during the day.” The feline stretched and yawned. Claire scratched him behind the ears as they passed.

Inside the office, a young girl with dark hair sat watching a video on an iPad.

“Riley. There’s someone I want you to meet.” Claire smoothed the hair away from the child’s face. “This is Ava. She’s the one I’ve been telling you about.”

“Hello.” The little girl glanced up. Her brown eyes were guarded, yet there was something familiar about them. Probably because her grandmother had the same coloring. Although according to the roots, Claire had help from the local salon to keep the dark shade alive.

“Ava was just telling me about some coloring books she brought. How about you take her to the breakroom, and she can show you what she brought?”

Riley put her tablet down and strolled out of the room. “She’s shy at first but will warm up to you. Don’t worry.”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Ava followed the child to a larger room next to the one they’d left. The situation reminded her of a job interview she’d once had. But this time, little Riley was the prospective boss.

Riley guided her to a place appearing more like a classroom than a breakroom. Four large, white oblong tables were set up around the room. There were also the standard refrigerator, microwave, and coffee maker. What she wouldn't do for a cup right now.

“Feel free to help yourself.” Claire said from the door. “I just made a fresh pot, and there's juice and milk in the fridge for Riley.”

“Thanks, I think I will.”

A doorbell sounded overhead. “Well, I better get back to work. Just give a shout if you need anything.”

“We will. Thank you.” Ava poured herself a mug of coffee and took a chair beside her companion for the day. The girl sat on her hands and swung her legs under the table. She wore a Hello Kitty shirt and some shorts.

“So, Riley. Do you like to color?” Her only answer was a shrug of her small shoulders. “It's one of my favorite things to do in the world.”

Riley stopped and turned her way. “You color? But you're a grown up.” Her nose wrinkled liked she'd gotten a sour whiff of something.

“You're never too old to do things you love. Here let me show you.” Ava pulled a sketch pad from her bag. “Sometimes I color but most of the time I draw things. Do you like to draw?”

As soon as she'd gotten home from the boat ride yesterday, Ava had started on a few sketches from their adventure. “I went for a boat ride on the river yesterday and here are a few places I remember seeing. Do you want me to show you them?”

Riley glanced up. “Sure.”

“Wonderful. Here are some birds I saw.” She pointed to a quick sketch of some cranes. “I couldn’t believe how long their legs were.” Riley giggled as Ava turned a page.

“And here are some ducks.”

“That’s a mallard.” Riley stated.

“Wow. That’s good. You really know your ducks. How about this one?” She turned the page to another one. If it was in color, which she hoped to paint soon, it would have been easily identified by the bright colors, but this was only a pencil drawing.

With her little finger, she traced along the distinct head of the duck. “A wood duck.”

“That’s amazing. You must spend a lot of time outdoors.” The girl smiled and plopped her elbows on the table.

“And these turtles.” Ava could still picture them jumping off the log at the same time. “And this last one.” It was a spot in the backwaters where an eagle’s nest perched in a tree. The large white-headed bird stared down at them.

“I know where that is.” The girl kicked her legs faster.

“You do?”

“Yeah, my dad takes me fishing there.”

“Oh. Do you like to fish?” It was nice to hear the child’s father took the time to expose his kid to the outdoors.

“It’s okay. I like to eat them, but I hate worms.”

This time it was Ava who laughed. “I agree with you there.”

Riley looked up at her. “Do you have more pictures?”

“I have a few back at my house. These are pencil drawings, but I like to paint. Hopefully, I will have more time next weekend to work on those.”

“Painting?” Again, the scrunched-up nose.

“Yes. Have you ever done finger paints?”

“You put paint on your fingers and push it around the paper.” She smeared her hands around the table to show her how it was done.

“Well, something like that.” Ave chuckled and pulled a brush from her bag. “I use one of these to create art, not to swirl it around the paper. Here let me show you some I have made.” They spent almost an hour going through some of her artwork on her phone. Riley seemed thoroughly interested. Her face lit up at the paintings she done of people’s pets. Since cats and dogs were notorious for not sitting still, they were painted from photographs.

Surprisingly the morning went fast, so much so that Riley’s grandma had to stop in and remind them it was lunch time. Claire suggested they go to Pete’s hamburger stand.

It was nice not having to be constantly on the lookout for traffic as Ava walked and Riley rode her bike along the back streets to the popular eatery.

Spying the green and white awning in the distance, Riley squealed. “Petey’s.”

“Do you like hamburgers, Riley?”

“I love them.” Her little legs pedaled faster.

As they neared, it was easy to see how popular the place was. A line had formed at both windows of the small food stand.

“What do you want to get?” Ava took hold of the small bike and guided it to the side of a nearby building.

“A burger.” The child got off and, after struggling with the helmet for a brief moment, she placed it on the seat.

“What kind?”

“Onions.”

“But do you want a cheeseburger, California burgers, mushroom burger?”

“There is only one kind.”

Ava forgot it was true. Pete’s served boiled in water hamburgers with, or without onions, and that was it. The condiments included ketchup, mustard, and pepper.

They stood in line for about five minutes while enjoying the tourists strolling by. Burgers, numerous napkins, and bottled water in hand, Ava found them a table to eat at. She urged Riley to be careful of getting the juice meat all over her cute pink top.

“Here, dear, drink some water while I eat mine.” Riley did as told, and Ava’s tastebuds celebrated with the first bite. The burger was juicy, flavorful, and had just the right number of toppings. Funny how she’d been raised on gourmet food prepared by their personal chef but was enjoying the experience of eating food prepared in a truck. The burgers weren’t cooked by a chef but, like the sign said, after being in business for over one hundred years, it was obviously prepared with love. Again, her thoughts wandered back to her father and the ultimate betrayal he’d committed to her mother and the rest of the family.

“What’s wrong Ava?” Riley’s concerned eyes stared up at her. The kid was obviously aware of people’s emotions and her



surroundings.

“Oh nothing. I was just thinking about home.” After wiping her mouth with a napkin, she tossed their garbage in a nearby waste can.

“Do you miss it?” Riley asked.

“Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

Ava tapped the tip of her finger to the end of Riley’s nose and smiled. “It means that yes, I miss my home and no, I don’t, because I am very much enjoying my time here with you.” Her confession seemed to satisfy the young girl. “What do you say we get some food for your grandma?”

“Okay.”

After waiting in line again, they grabbed a quick meal for Claire and headed back to the greenhouse. Ava had gained some points with her boss as Claire hadn’t had a chance to eat with all the customers. After playing hard for over an hour, Riley took a nap on the couch in the office.

Taking a break outside, Ava checked her phone. Kruz had sent a text earlier in the day wishing her good luck on her first day of work. It was so unexpected to think someone she’d only met shared a connection and enjoyed spending time with her.

**Ava: Job is going well. My boss is wonderful.**

**Kruz: Great news. Looking forward to seeing you later.**

Funny how just a few words from the right person could make your day. A sense of calm settled over her as she sat back in the chair and enjoyed the view of all the beautiful flowers in the greenhouse yard.

She'd barely finished reading the message when a text from her mother popped up asking about her day as well. She pushed the call button. Her mom answered on the first ring.

"Hello."

"Hi, mom."

"I didn't mean for you to call me. I was just wondering how you were getting along."

"I'm doing good. Riley is a sweet child, and Claire is very easy going. I think I'm going to like it here."

"Oh, you have no idea how happy that makes me feel. I know you didn't want to leave me right now, but it's for the best. You deserve some distance from the mess your father caused as well as time away from what's-his-name."

"Yeah, I couldn't agree more."

"Have you met any nice people?"

"I've made a few friends, and I'm going out to dinner with a nice guy who helped me when I ran in the ditch the other day."

"You ran in the ditch? Are you okay? Who's this young man?"

"It was nothing. I just got distracted and, well, it was nothing." Her mother didn't need to know she was distracted by the same man she was meeting later.

Riley came outside rubbing her eyes and hurrying over to the greenhouse cat lounging near a display of catnip.

"Hey mom. I have to go. Riley just woke up."

"Sure, let me know how your dinner goes."

"I will. Bye, Mom."

“Bye, dear.”

The afternoon flew by. They were out back on the patio area reading when Claire neared. “Ava, could you just wait a few more minutes before you leave? I’m afraid I have a customer needing more assistance.”

“No problem at all.”

“Thank you.” Claire rushed back inside as Ava glanced at her watch. Depending on how long it took, she wouldn’t have much time to get ready. Oh well, if things were going to work out with Kruz, he’d just have to accept her as she was.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” Riley squirmed out of her chair, and Ava followed her to the restroom near the front door.

As she waited outside, the door opened and Kruz wandered in.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Judging by the look on his face, he was as surprised to see her as she was of him. “I was just about to call you. I have to work a little later.”

Kruz tugged at the neck of his tight, black t-shirt. “What are you doing here? Are you picking up plants for your employer?”

“No, I work here. I’m spending the summer taking care of the owner’s granddaughter.”

“The what?” His face paled as he braced his hand on the checkout counter.

“The owner’s six-year-old granddaughter.”

Riley took that moment to come out of the bathroom. “Here she is.” But instead of staying with her, Riley ran to Kruz. Kruz?

“Daddy,” Riley hollered.

Kruz leaned down and picked her up in his arms. Daddy?  
Ava’s mouth dropped open. Kruz was Riley’s dad?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Kruz*

AVA HADN'T SAID A WORD SINCE THEY'D LEFT THE SHOP. Luckily, before work, he'd ask his mom to watch Riley for a couple hours so he could meet someone for dinner. Unfortunately, he'd no idea that someone was also his daughter's babysitter for the summer. It was just by chance he'd found one of Riley's dolls at the shop. She'd been missing for a while, and he wanted her to have it.

“What are you hungry for?” His question was met with silence. They'd walked toward downtown, but he didn't know if she was still willing to eat with him or not. Hopping in front of her to walk backward, he tried again. “Are you ever going to talk to me? Do you have something against Riley?”

“What?” She came to a stop. “Of course not. It's you I don't know about.”

“Me?” He put his palm over his heart. “Do you have something against single dads?”

“No. I just don't like being lied to. It seems to be happening a lot to me lately.” Ava shook her head and bit her lip as soon as the words were out.

“I never lied to you about anything.”

She wouldn't look at him. "You never told me you had a kid."

Exhaling, Kruz shrugged. "It never came up."

"Never came up?"

"I just. Oh, hell." What could he do but lay everything on the line? "Since Riley was born, I haven't had the time, or interest, in going out. When you came into my life, well actually you drove headfirst into it. I didn't know what hit me. I just knew I wanted to get to know you." Kruz looked straight into her eyes. "I didn't want to scare you off."

"You didn't give me much credit, did you? I'm not scared of kids." The frown on her face said it all. He'd messed up.

"Would you consider dating someone that came with another person?" He crossed his fingers behind his back.

"I don't know, but you took that choice away from me. When were you planning on telling me?" Ava ran the tip of her middle finger back and forth across her lower lip.

"I was actually going to tell you tonight."

She snorted. "Sure. I just bet you were."

"Honest, I was. How about a little truth from you? Would you have gone out with me if you'd known I had a child at home?"

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. "I don't know."

"Who's not being honest now?"

"I'm sorry, but I just don't know. I've never been in this position before."

“Can we get a table at the Catfish and talk about it?” He reached for her hands and held them in his. Her skin was soft but cold despite the warm evening.

“I’m really not hungry.”

“Please. Or do I need to get down on my knees and beg?” He is very close to doing just that.

This time it was Ava that let out a deep sigh. “All right.”

It was early and a Monday night, so the place was nearly empty which suited his mood. Kruz may have planned to tell Ava about Riley tonight but whether he’d have been able to go through with it yet was still up in the air. Now he didn’t have a choice.

A waitress greeted them and placed two menus on the table. “The special tonight is meatloaf. I’ll give you two a moment.”

“Thanks,” they replied at the same time.

The pain on her face was so clear, it felt like a hole had formed in his chest. There had to be more to the story, her sadness couldn’t be simply because he was a father. She wouldn’t be working with Riley if she didn’t like children. They finally ordered and stared at each other for a few minutes.

Ava interlocked her fingers on the table. “Where’s her mother?”

“Whose mother?”

“Riley. Your daughter.”

“Oh, right.” Leaning back in his chair, he puffed out his cheeks. “That’s a long story.”

She lifted her eyebrow. “You said you wanted to talk. So, start.”

“Okay.” He rubbed his forehead. “About seven years ago, I went out with a bunch of my friends. A buddy of mine had enlisted in the Army. It was his last night here, and we did something we’d never done before. I’m definitely not proud of it but ...” Kruz cringed and turned his head to the side. “We went to a strip club.”

“Go on.”

“There was a pretty girl there.”

“I imagine there were several.”

“Yeah, you could say that. Anyway, one caught my eye, or I caught hers. Either way, we hooked up in my truck after the place closed. It was stupid, I’d had too much to drink. I’m not making excuses, I’m being honest. I’d never even been to a place like that before. My parents instilled in me to keep my nose clean. It was a totally immature, dumb thing to do.”

The server brought their salads. Kruz waited until she left to start again.

“About ten months later, a woman showed up at my door. It was the woman from the bar. She had a baby in her arms and claimed I was the father. I was in shock. My whole world turned upside down. I’m embarrassed to say I wasn’t very nice about it either. I barely remembered her. How could I have a kid when I had my whole future planned out. I was in tech school working on a degree.”

His admission seemed to lessen the daggers she’d been shooting his way the last hour.

“You asked for proof?”



“I did and the results proved that I was, in fact, the father.”

“So, you share custody?”

“Not legally, but I have Riley full time.”

Ava puckered her brow. “What do you mean full time?”

“She left the baby with me one day and never came back.”

“She abandoned her? How could anyone do that to their own child?”

“From what I gathered, she wanted to be an actress. My guess was she got a call to star in some show and left. I rarely watch TV, so don’t know if she was successful or not. Who knows, maybe she found a sugar daddy and got married.”

“Aren’t you worried she might come back and claim her rights?”

“Every day. Even talked to a lawyer a few times. I tried to contact her at first, but the only number I had was disconnected. Call me a coward but I figured out of sight, out of mind. Believe me I’ve wanted to take Riley and hit the road numerous times, but I’m afraid it might make things worse.” The birth certificate was the only document he had claiming him the father.

“I’m sorry for all that you’ve gone through, and I want to apologize for my behavior.” Ava cleared her throat as the waitress placed their food in front of them.

They’d chosen the same thing, a bacon burger with cheese and a side order of fries. That she put a generous amount of mustard on her burger added to the many reasons he liked this girl. Now if she could forgive him for not telling her about Riley right off the bat.

“It’s all right. I should have mentioned it but, well, we’d just met. I didn’t know if whatever connection we might have was going to last or not. After what I went through with Riley’s mother, my trust issues are on heightened alert.”

“You’re not the only person with trust issues.” Ava said while popping a fry in her mouth.

“Oh yeah?” From the way she was vigorously nodding her head, it must be true. “Care to tell me your story?”

“Where do I begin?” When she shook her head, her red curls appeared golden under the bar lights.

“Anywhere you want.” He mirrored her and nibbled on some fries. The parmesan cheese coating made them even more appealing. Brushing his hands off, he took a bite of the burger.

“I was seeing someone before I came here. I found out he was only dating me because he was after something.”

“Some men are jerks. I hope you don’t think I’m one because of what happened in my past.”

“No, of course not. He wasn’t after what you think. Well, maybe he was, but he never got it. He worked for my father and was hoping to get a better position by pretending to like me. It was horrible. I really liked the guy, but it was all an act on his part.”

“I’m sorry. When did you find out that he wasn’t who you thought he was?”

“A friend caught him out with another woman. Sent me a photo. When I confronted him with it, he said it was just a one-time thing. That he’d had too much to drink.” She flipped a hand in the air. “Blah blah blah.”

“Just for the record, the day Riley was placed in my arms, I never drank again. Yeah, maybe for a toast at a wedding or a beer or two with Remi, but never to excess. I learned my lesson the hard way.”

“Well, he didn’t, and it happened again. Same story, different girl. My father fired him, and he blamed me. I still get a nasty text every once in a while.”

A few red flags went off in his mind. “Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“No, last I heard he was after someone else to improve his situation. He uses people to get ahead.”

“I can totally understand your having trust issues after that.”

“If that was the only thing.” From the way Ava shook her head there had to be more.

“Did something else happen? I’m a good listener and it might be good to lay all our cards on the table. Get it all out in the open so to speak.”

“My father did something horrible recently, but I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

“I understand, but if there is anything I can help with, just let me know.”

“Thanks, but no one can fix it.”

Not knowing what had caused her pain was hard. There was nothing he could do to help.

The waitress stood by their table. “How are you both doing? Is everything tasting all right?”

“Everything is great. Thanks.” After refilling their water glasses, she left to check on another table.

“Have you forgiven me for not telling you about Riley?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. It just took me completely by surprise that’s all. Plus, like I said, I’m dealing with some drama, and distrust, in my life and it caused me to overreact. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“I understand completely.”

“And by the way, Riley is a wonderful kid. You’ve done an amazing job raising her.”

“I had a lot of help from my mom and sister. Having a newborn basically dropped in your lap was quite the shock to my system.”

“I can imagine. She’s quite talented for such a young age. I showed her some of my drawings today and she started coloring and doing some sketches of her own.”

“I have a few pieces of her artwork on my fridge.” He chuckled. The one she’d drawn of him on his bike was his favorite.

“I’d love to see them sometime.”

“Does that mean you’ll go out with me again?”

She gave him a coy smile. “Maybe.”

He did a little fist pump in his head. Ava was the whole package. Smart, beautiful, funny, and the fact that she, so far, seemed to enjoy being around his little girl was a huge asset. “It’s not a yes, but I’ll take it.” Anything but a no was good news. “Would you like some dessert?”

“I’m stuffed.” Sitting back in her chair, she smiled and placed a hand on her stomach.

“I’ll get the bill and take you back to the greenhouse. Mom took Riley to eat then had a little book work to do. I promised to pick her up before seven.”

Glancing at her watch, Ava stood. “We better get going since it’s already quarter to.”

Walking back to the greenhouse, Kruz quelled the urge to take her hand in his. Now that he’d found someone he truly wanted to get to know better, it was time to take it slow. Enjoy getting to know each other better.

“How was dinner?” his mother asked as soon as they entered her shop.

“It was good. We both had the burger and fries at the Catfish. You should have joined us.” Ava was quick to add.

“Maybe next time. Are you ready to go home, Riley?” Claire gathered the child’s things and put them in her book bag.

“Yes.” Riley yawned.

“Can you say goodbye to Ava?” Kruz ruffled his daughter’s hair.

Riley ran over and gave Ava a hug. Shock ran through him, as if he’d touched an electric fence. His gaze met his mother’s. It was the first time they’d seen her hug anyone outside of the family.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Ava*

AFTER THEIR ‘DINNER DATE’, KRUZ AND RILEY FOLLOWED HER home and parked at the side of the road until she was safely inside. It was sweet that Riley suggested they wait, but she knew her father would have done it anyway. The sun hadn’t set yet, but the thought of making sure she was taken care of added to his appeal.

The fact he was a single father was still a surprise. If they were to get serious, she’d be Riley’s mother. It was too much too soon. Her summer to decide what to do with her future wasn’t supposed to include a serious relationship and motherhood, but if she continued to see Kruz, it would ultimately end up there.

To calm her busy mind, Ava sat in front of her latest painting, but didn’t pick up a brush. Sometimes it was nice to simply study her work and see what needed to be tackled next. It also inspired her to teach Riley to paint. Maybe they’d start with some finger paints then an age-appropriate paint by number set.

At first, she’d been really nervous about meeting Riley, but they’d gotten along great, and the day had flown by. When the summer ended it would be hard to say goodbye to her and her

dad. Her heart ached just thinking about. That was the main reason she really needed to think long and hard about what to do next.

What if she couldn't leave them? What kind of life would she have here in Coulee Bluff? Her degree was in marketing not babysitting or teaching kids to paint.

Truth be told, marketing wasn't her passion, either. It was all about charts and graphs and surveys. Something she had no interest in, but the only thing her father had compromised in paying for. His first choice for her was business, or even better yet, law. Again, something she'd no aspirations in pursuing. It now made sense why he'd wanted her to go into law, to help bail him out of some of the indiscretions he'd landed himself in.

Her father would hate Kruz and also think him not sophisticated enough for someone of her status. Not to mention, the hot biker having a daughter out of wedlock. That would not look good to his electorate. Again, he should talk after what he'd been caught doing.

The sound of a train whistle in the distance elevated her solemn mood. It was something she was used to, so why should it be any different here? Thinking back on her day with Riley and her dad, Ava's mood lifted. Her time with both had been fun, and to be honest, she couldn't wait to see them again.

After checking emails, Ava got ready for bed. Checking her phone before getting into bed she found a message from Kruz.

**I had a great time with you tonight, just like I do every time we're together. I'd love to get to know you better, but I know you had a shock today. I'm here when, and if,**

**you'd like to go out with me again. I'll leave the time and place up to you. Sweet dreams beautiful!**

Beautiful? Even her so-called boyfriend only ever called her 'pretty, in an odd sort of way'. He made it clear he preferred blonds and not redheads. Doubts serviced in the back of her mind. What could Kruz want from her? And shame on the people in her past for making her believe a man would only be interested in her for some kind of gain. The thing is, Kruz didn't know who she was. He'd never asked her last name and if he did, would he put two and two together?

If they were in Minnesota maybe. But did one follow local politicians in other states? She didn't, and her father was a senator.

Tossing and turning, Ava exhaled and tossed her arms across the empty side of the bed. Kruz was giving her time, and that's what she would do. Take her time. Dating was supposed to be fun, but when there were kids involved it was different. You had to put their best interests before your own. This week, she'd concentrate on getting to know Riley and her grandma better. She also needed to figure out if there was a place in their lives as well as a place for her in this town. The last thing Ava wanted was to be a burden, financial or otherwise, to anyone.

The next morning came early as the sun warmed her cheek through a part in the curtain. Ava quickly showered, dressed, and turned on the news as she warmed up some chocolate chip oatmeal in the microwave.

*Today there is even more drama in the case of Senator Wellington and the young intern he is alleged to be having an affair with. Other members of the congressional house, as well*



*as the governor, are asking him to step down. Will he or won't he, Kendra? What are your thoughts?*

Ava shut off the TV before she could hear the anchorwoman's response. No one wanted to hear about their parents having an affair, let alone having it played out on the local news channel. Thank God she wasn't back home. How could she hold up her head without everyone whispering as she passed by? How did her mother do it? Before falling asleep, she planned on phoning her mom to find out.

It was less than a mile to town, so with everything in a backpack, Ava walked to the greenhouse. Riley had a bike there so if she could find one for sale in town, she would get one, too. It would be great to take her for a ride in the park.

She arrived at her destination in about the same amount of time as if she'd driven. Claire greeted her as she strolled up.

Her boss was turning the sign to open. "Did you have car trouble? I can call Kruz to check it out."

"No. It's so close I thought I'd start walking each day. I'm also hoping to get a bike." She removed her backpack and followed Claire inside.

"I know where you can get one." Claire put her apron on.

"Really? Where?" Ava unpacked her lunch from the backpack and put it in the fridge.

"Follow me." Claire led her to an outside shed. "You are welcome to use this one while you're here. It's mine but I haven't ridden it in years."

"Are you sure?" Except for the tires being flat, the red bike was in great shape for not being used for so long a time.

“Of course. It would be great for you to take Riley for a ride. She loves to ride bike, but I don’t have the time.”

“Well, thank you. I will take it to the gas station and pump up the tires while she naps. If that’s okay.”

“Of course.”

A silence formed as they headed back inside. Claire either had a lot on her mind or didn’t want to ask how the dinner date with her son had gone last night. For that Ava was grateful.

Claire checked her phone. “Kruz is dropping Riley off. I’ll go grab her.”

“Thanks.” Was it cowardly that she let Claire go when it was technically her job?

In the breakroom, Ava gathered some books and the paints she bought.

“Hi Ava.” Riley burst in the room, her lunch bag and backpack banging against the door frame before she dropped them on the floor.

“Hi there. How are you?” She couldn’t help but smile at the energetic child.

“Good. Are we painting today?” Her eyes widened at the site of all the items on the table.

“We are, but first you have to pick up all your stuff and put them in their proper place.”

Riley bent to get her totes. Ava grinned as she witnessed Riley put her lunch bucket in the refrigerator. Next Riley took a picture frame out of her bag and set it on the counter.

“What’s that Riley?” Ava neared but couldn’t yet see what it was a picture of.

“It’s Daddy and me. I have it in my room at home but wanted to show it to you.” The selfie showed Kruz holding Riley on his hip. Her father had a look on his face that could only be described as love. His little girl held a small fish in her hand. A look of pure joy on her face. It was as little as a goldfish, but you’d have thought she’d caught a whopper.

It appeared recent. “When did you take that?”

“A couple weeks ago. Daddy had it made for me.”

“It’s lovely.” Her vision focused on the handsome man in the photo. Did he send it with her to remind her of him? He was wearing swim trunks. His chest was muscular, tan, and had a light coating of dark chest hair. Ava started to hand it back before she started to swoon. Wait a minute. She glanced at it again. It gave her a chance to study his tattoos.

“Riley, what is this drawing your dad has here.” She pointed to the picture piquing her curiosity. She’d notice a few other pieces of ink artwork on his arms. Most were artistic or Celtic drawings, but this appeared to be a heart.

“It’s me.”

“You?” Eyeing it again, it was too small to make out.

“It’s my name in a heart. He’s said it’s where I’ll always be. In his heart.”

Her eyes watered instantly. What would it be like to share such a strong bond with her father?

“What’s wrong Ava?” Riley asked while Ava tried to hide the tears.

“Nothing dear, so don’t worry. I’m just happy for you. You have someone that cares for you so much.” Her voice cracked. “That is the best thing in the world. You’re a very lucky girl.”

“Can we paint now?” The girl was obviously bored with what they were talking about.

“Of course.” It felt good to laugh after such a deep moment. Soon their hands were covered in colors of red, blue, and green. At least she’d remembered to bring a couple t-shirts she no longer wanted. It hung on the child, but the short sleeves were just the right length. Most kids would have just smeared it around, but Riley tried to do animals with her fingers which was a good sign. Tonight, she’d order some paint by number sets and see how that went.

“Ava?” A few hours later, Claire stuck her head in the door. “I didn’t have time to pack a lunch, could you and Ava walk down and get me a burger from Pete’s? Of course, you’ll have to get some for yourselves.” She winked at her granddaughter whose mouth dropped open as she vigorously nodded.

“Of course, we will. Let’s get this place, and you, cleaned up first and go.”

Except for a few missed spots of red paint on Ava’s legs, they did pretty good. The line wasn’t too long at Pete’s. They were on their way back to the store when the rumble of a bike thundered down the street. Even with the helmet on, she’d recognize the striking figure of Kruz. Riley did also. She hopped up and down and waved. Ava took hold of her hand in case she decided to dart out into the street. Luckily the kid knew better.

Kruz nodded but didn’t stop. A moment of relief, and disappointment, battled it out in her mind. She still needed time to think before seeing him again but she missed him. The thought caused her to stop short.

“That was my Daddy,” Riley stated.

“Yes, I know. I’ve never seen him on a bike before, but I guess he builds them so that makes sense.”

“They’re loud.” Riley held one palm over her ear.

“Ha, yes they are.” What must it be like to ride on the back of one? Never one to be a risk taker, the thought of riding a motorcycle with Kruz seemed appealing. Like an adventure she’d never dreamed about going on.

Before long, her day with Riley was done and Ava was on the way home. A few people were out in their yards either enjoying a meal on a picnic table or working with their flowers. It was easy to see herself feeling at home given a little more time.

She climbed the stairs where a long box awaited. Once inside she dropped everything in the kitchen counter and studied the return address. It was a flower place she’d passed in town. Probably from her mom. Flowers were her favorite thing to send to friends and family.

When she opened box, the sweet scent of flowers filled her senses. It was a bouquet of sunflowers, with some peach roses and baby’s breath mixed in. The arrangement was beautiful but didn’t seem to be the formal arrangement Lauren would pick out. Her tastes tended to be run to pastel.

After putting them in a vase, she searched the tissue inside the cardboard for a note.

The little envelope fell to the floor. She spied her name written in script on the outside. The paper within was a different handwriting, one more masculine and in a different color ink.

*I’m giving you space but that doesn’t mean you aren’t on my mind. Kruz*

Ava placed the card on the counter and wandered to her favorite place to think, the screened porch. She was determined to take the week to decide on her relationship. Whether she would last a week away from the handsome biker remained to be seen.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Kruz*

JUST BECAUSE AVA ASKED FOR A FEW DAYS ON HER OWN didn't mean he was going to let her think he'd forgotten her. The flowers were a start. For lunch the next day, he had ordered a meal from one of the local restaurants to be delivered for her, Riley, and his mother. Hopefully, she enjoyed chicken and biscuits as much as the other two did.

The following day he'd sent chocolates. What woman didn't enjoy chocolate? He was sure to pick both milk and dark in case she preferred one over the other.

Since today was Friday, he asked Cassie to pick out some wine from the winery his girl might like. He was already calling her 'his girl.' Man, he had it bad. With any luck, his efforts wouldn't be in vain. Cassie promised to gift wrap them and add a copy of a new book she might like. After dropping off the gifts, Cass was to ask Ava to meet her at the Catfish on Saturday night where he would surprise her again. What that surprise would be, he hadn't figured out yet.

While punching the button on the pop machine outside his garage, a black Mercedes drove up and parked. Fancy cars, especially vintage ones, were commonplace around the great river road, but they rarely stopped in front of his bike shop.

A sharp dressed man in a navy suit stepped out. He was tall, clean shaven, with slicked back salt and pepper hair.

Kruz set down his coke and walked to the gentleman. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah. Are you Kruz?”

“Whose asking?” Something was off with the man. Something raising the hair on the back of his neck. The first thing that popped into his head was Riley’s mom had sent an attorney to serve him papers to get her daughter back. It was a nightmare he lived with every day.

“Me.” Mr. Suit stated and headed toward the shop.

“I’m Kruz. What can I help you with?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re a custom bike builder, correct?”

“Yes. But begging your pardon. You look more like a lawyer than a biker.”

“Very preceptive, aren’t you.”

There was a hostility about the guy that was hard to miss, but Kruz waited patiently for him to continue.

“You guessed right. I am a lawyer, or I used to be, now I work in private business.”

“I’ll ask again, what can I do for you?”

“I want to commission a bike. Place a custom order. Whatever you call it.”

“That I can help you with.” Kruz motioned toward the front door. “What’s your name, sir?”

“John.”



“Okay, John. Please come into my office where we can talk about the details.”

Once seated in his office, Kruz pulled out a photo album and some order forms. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Do you have a Brandy Alexander handy?”

“Sorry, I don’t. I can do water, coffee, or pop from the machine outside.” Damn, his drink was baking in the sun and would be undrinkable by the time he went back out to it.

“What kind of a bike are you looking for?” He clicked the top of his pen and placed the tip on a sheet of paper.

“What kind do you suggest?” The man folded his arms in across his chest.

“Huh?”

John loosened his tie. “I guess I’m new to this. Not sure where to start.”

“I’m sorry, but do you even ride?” His chair creaked as Kruz leaned back in his chair. “I guess I’m trying to get a feel for why you are requesting a bike build.”

“I better start at the beginning.”

That would be good. Kruz set the pen down.

“I represent WellTel energy in the cities.”

“WellTel?” Kruz whistled. “That’s a huge company. I hear you provide power to most of the state and Iowa.”

John puffed out his chest. “We do. Recently we remodeled our headquarters. One of the staff members suggested we put in a few eco-friendly recreational vehicles in the lobby to promote green energy options. I’m heading the project.”

“Must be a huge lobby.” It also sounded like a bunch of BS.

“It is. This is the budget.” The number of zeros on a card John slid across the table caused Kruz to sit up straight.

“We should probably start with the body. Are you thinking a standard motorcycle versus a chopper?”

“What do you suggest? A standard one?”

“That would be easier. Colors? I have a great painter who could do the company logo and anything else you require for the body and frame.”

“Excellent.”

For the next hour, they discussed further details and although he had no alcohol to serve, he did get his customer a coffee, black.

Kruz finally jotted down all the suggestions and figured out the total cost.

“It looks like I can do it for a lot less than you have budgeted. Is there anything else you’d like us to add?”

“Like I said, I want it to be energy efficient.”

“Sure, I have several ideas, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Then it’s a deal.” His customer reached into his pocket and pulled out a cashier check. “Here’s \$50,000. We can settle up when it’s done.”

Kruz took it. The number of zeros made him a little dizzy. It took everything he had to remain calm and cool. “And how soon do you want it finished?”

“The end of summer will be fine. We still have some work left to do before we are ready for the bike.” John glanced at his watch.

“Perfect. Well, I have all your information and here’s my card. If you have any questions, or want to get any updates, give me a call.”

They shook hands and Kruz accompanied him out to his car. “Say before you go, can I ask why you came to me? There has to be a qualified builder closer to you than Coulee Bluff.”

“I saw your work at the tattoo and bike show last year in Minneapolis.”

Again, the scenario, seemed off. Maybe he was wrong, but he was pretty sure this man, one, never had a tattoo or any interest in one. And two, had never set foot at the show. The guy would’ve stood out like a cow in a horse race. It could be someone else from his company who had been there and recommended the place to him, but still. “Well, I’m glad I’d made such a good impression on you.”

“To be honest, there is one more reason.” John reached for the car handle.

Here it goes, this was all a joke and a scam. Maybe Remi had set it up to get back at him for who knew what. “And that might be?”

“My wife is from Coulee Bluff. She’s always talking about how nice it is here, and I wanted to give something back to the community.”

“Interesting. What’s your wife’s name? Maybe I know her family.” His family had lived here forever. There wasn’t a person in the area they didn’t know.

“It was a long time ago. Any relatives she had are now long gone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, but I appreciate the business, nonetheless. Any other questions I can answer for you?”

“No. I think we’re good.” They shook hands before his customer got in his car. “Just do a good job. See you at the end of the summer.” John gave him a salute and started his Beemer.

“Will do.” Kruz waved before returning to the shop. He spoke briefly with his employees about the progress on different jobs before going into the office to start drawing his design, gathering the info about the bike, and putting the check in the safe. The chance to do something new and innovating got his creative juices flowing. This was his ultimate goal. To build more bikes and do less maintenance. Granted they went hand and hand, but still.

A knock on the opened door drew his attention away from the laptop. Remi pulled out a chair and sat down. “What are you working on? The guys said you’ve been in here for hours.”

“What?” A glance at the clock said it was true. “Seems like I just sat down.” Turning the drawing around, he pushed it in front of his friend. “What do you think?”

Remi let out a whistle. “That’s a beauty. Who’s it for?”

“Some guy from the cities wants it for the lobby of the company he works at.”

“Big lobby. What’s the name of the place?”

“WellTel.”

“WellTel? Isn’t that owned by some politician or something?”

“No clue.”

“Are you for sure it’s legit?”

“He left a huge check that I’m taking to the bank first thing in the morning. I’m going to make sure it clears before I order the parts.”

Remi whistled again. “Congratulations. That’s a huge account. I think they power most of the Midwest.”

“Don’t make me more nervous than I already am. This could be my big break.” Kruz pulled the design close. “I’d love to have more financial security for Riley and myself, and also be able to help out the rest of the family.”

“Well, based on what I see here, you’re on your way.”

His friend’s encouragement meant the world. “I hope so. How’d your day go?”

“Good. A few people fishing without licenses, but otherwise a pretty uneventful day.”

“Plans for the night?” Kruz saved and closed out his programs.

“Hitting the Catfish.”

“Seeing anyone yet?” Kruz enjoyed ribbing his friend.

“You know I like being alone.”

“Everyone says that until they meet the right person.”

“Have you met the right person?” Remi laid his baseball hat on the table and ran his fingers through his sun-bleached hair.

“I’d like to think so, but I kind of screwed up.”

“The redhead?”

He nodded and slumped into his chair. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

“We had a great weekend but then she found out about Riley before I could tell her.”

“Doesn’t she like kids?”

“She must as she’s her new babysitter for the summer.”

“What?” Remi roared. “That’s perfect. They’ll bond and get to know each other.”

“The problem is, I didn’t tell her first. She’s got some trust issues.”

“So, it’s a no go.” His friend frowned.

Kruz knew his buddy only wanted the best for him. “Not yet. I’m giving her some time to think things over. It’s hard when it’s a package deal. If someone dates me, they have to be sure they want to take on the added responsibility of a child. It’s different with you Rem. If they date you, they know they’re getting just you.”

“And the ton of baggage that goes with it,” he joked.

“You’re a good guy, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” Ever since getting out of the service, Remi had struggled with several issues. Issues that he’d not share with anyone but Kruz, and he probably only knew the half of it. Sleepless nights, headaches, any number of PTSD symptoms. At least he’d kept himself busy and hadn’t fallen into any quick fixes of alcohol or drugs. They did meet up for beers now and then,

but the man had the strength to always quit at a certain number.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“I have to pick up Riley and then grab some dinner and go home. Want to join us?”

“Yeah, I would. Thanks.”

An hour later, he'd gotten a pizza to go, and drove down by the marina park to eat. Remi strolled in a few minutes later with some cokes for the guys and a small carton of milk for Riley.

“You ‘membered’ my favorite kind.” Riley kicked her feet under the picnic table.

“How could I forget?” It was chocolate flavored. “It’s mine also.” He winked at the little girl.

“I think you’d make a great dad, Remi. I think you need to start dating.” Kruz handed him a plate.

“Stop. Who’m I going to find in this town?” He took a bite of the juicy slice. “Well, the new redhead in town is kind of cute. What’s her name again? Ava?”

“No, not Ava.” Riley pouted and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“What? I thought you liked her.” His heart took a nosedive, if Riley didn’t like her, there was no reason to pursue her anymore. From everything Kruz had heard from her and his mom, they got along great.

Riley inched closer, cupped her hand over his ear and whispered. “I don’t want him to date her, I want you to.”

He chuckled and glanced at Remi. “I agree, Riley. Remi needs to find someone else. Ava belongs to us.” Riley nodded. “At least I’m going to try and convince her to.”

“And I’m going to help,” his daughter stated before returning to eat.

“You want to help?” Kruz asked. “I think I have an idea on how you can.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Ava*

AVA INHALED THE BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS GRACING HER KITCHEN counter. Kruz had pulled out all the stops this week in his quest to get her to say yes to dating him, and to be honest, it was working. Not that she cared about the gifts, that had nothing to do with it. The fact was, he cared enough to make the effort. No one else had before, unless the person had an angle and something to gain. He still didn't know she was the daughter of a powerful politician embroiled in a huge scandal and one of the heirs to a multi-million-dollar corporation.

The fact she was keeping a huge secret from him wasn't the only issue bothering her. In just a week, her attachment to Riley had grown, which probably wasn't a good idea. When, or if, she decided to go back home, it would only create more heartbreak for the kid. It was obvious the youngster craved someone in her life in addition to her immediate family. Ava couldn't imagine growing up without a mother to help her through the happy, and difficult, moments in life.

Could she handle taking on the role so soon in her life? Kids were the last thing on her mind. What about Kruz? Being a single father surely wasn't number one on his lists either when he found out he was dad. His mother had shared

with her his dreams of a career in engineering and design. He'd excelled at science all through high school and had numerous scholarships lined up at big-name universities but was doing the groundwork at a local tech school when Riley showed up.

Turning the vacuum off and winding up the cord, there wasn't a speck of dust or dirt in the house left. Ava knew the hours were numbered until she'd see Kruz again. Being in this kind of situation was the last thing she'd expected to happen when moving to Coulee Bluff for the summer. It was temporary. Her eyes watered as she bent close to the flowers. Not because of the fragrance but because of what she knew she had to do. Say no to Kruz. She simply wasn't ready for this kind of commitment.

The timer on her phone sounded. She had to meet Cassie at the Catfish at six for dinner. Picking up her keys and phone, Ave took a glance at herself in the mirror. The glow of happiness surrounding her since she'd met Kruz had disappeared. It was going to be a long couple of months as they were bound to run into each other often.

Entering the Frisky Catfish, the buzz of tourists, staff, and locals hit her immediately. It was Saturday night, but they were eating early before there'd be a line. Cassie's blonde hair was hard to miss, not to mention, the arm she was waving wildly.

"Hey girl." Cassie sprang up and gave her a hug. She wore a fitted yellow dress and her hair curled in waves. "Did you do anything exciting today?"

"No, just some painting. You look great. Love your dress."

"Oh thanks. You never know when prince charming might stop in and sweep a girl away."

“Ha, yeah. Is that what you want? To leave town?”

“No.” She shrugged. “I don’t know. Just talking smack.”  
The far off look on her face said otherwise.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“Me, gosh no. Who has the time, and besides, everyone I know in town is like a brother to me.”

“I’m kind of finding that out. You either have to move or fall for someone visiting.”

“You mean the weekenders? Like me?”

“Well. You’re not really a weekender. You’re more like a summerer. Is that even a word?” Her friend laughed as she studied what the special was for the night.

“Hey, Cassie.” They turned to see a slender young woman with sandy blond hair.

“Hi, Megan. I was hoping you would come tonight. Have a seat.” Cassie pulled out the chair next to her, and her friend joined them. “Ava, this is Megan. Her parents own the winery I work at. She’s home helping them.” Her mouth opened to add more but didn’t.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you. I love your wine.” Ava offered her hand to Megan.

“Thanks. It’s been in our family forever, but unfortunately my folks are struggling with some health issues, so I’ve taken a leave of absence to help out.”

“I’m sorry to hear that but glad to meet you. Hopefully you can join us more often.”

“Thanks. I missed the book club meeting this week but plan on making the next one.”

Ava took a sip of water. “It has to be fascinating to work in the wine business.”

“It is but I differ with my parents on how it should be run.”

“How so?” If it was one thing Ava knew, it was not agreeing with your family on certain things.

“I think they are really missing out on the wedding business. It would be a perfect venue for a country/outside wedding. Wineries are making a killing by adding it to their repertoire. We should at least be offering fireside pizza and a light lunch.”

“I agree it’s a beautiful location. I can already picture the stunning photos that could be taken there.”

“At least someone agrees. The only update my folks want to do is hire some wine specialists from Italy to come and teach me updated wine techniques. I’m an event planner from Chicago. The thought of having some stuffy, old guy instructing me in wine making is the last thing I want to do.”

“Well, I’m sure it will all work out in the end.” If only that advice would work for Ava also.

Cassie passed Megan a menu before adding. “I think I’ll have the fish.”

Ava closed her menu. “I’m hungry for a burger and something to drink.”

After giving their order to the server, they discussed what was happening on their favorite reality shows and speculating about the clientele in the establishment.

“I’m thinking that one’s hoping to meet a man.” Cassie nodded to the brunette at the bar.

“Really?” Ava leaned back to check out the woman Cassie indicated. “How can you tell?”

“Easy, I just saw her slip her wedding ring in her purse.”

Ava’s jaw dropped. “No. How horrible.” It also reminded her of the situation back home. Was her mother off doing the same thing? Payback for what her husband had done? Nonsense. Lauren was too prim and proper to do anything like that. The woman was probably at a charity event, or at home working in the garden.

They enjoyed their food while continuing to play the guessing game.

“You’re really good at this Cassie.” Ava popped another fry in her mouth.

“Well, when you work as many jobs as I do, you get a lot of experience working with people.”

“I know you work at the gas station and the winery but is there somewhere else, too?” It was on the tip of her tongue to ask why one would need so much money, but she was already regretting the rude inquiry. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. Not my business, and I remember you said you were saving up for school.”

“That’s okay. I live with my father and he’s having a bit of a rough spot, so I need to help out.” Cassie bent her head and swirled her fork around the plate.

“Oh no, is he ill?” Ava sunk into her seat. “Again, I shouldn’t be so nosy. You don’t need to tell me.”

“No worries. You’re already becoming a local, wanting to know everyone’s business just as we do.” Cassie grinned and motioned for the waiter to refill their drinks.

It wasn't missed by Ava how Cassie had avoided the question. She didn't want to pry, but if there was something Ava could do to help, she would.

"Let's go back to the guessing game."

"If you insist." Next time she saw Claire, Ava intended to ask her about Cassie's father and see if she could do something, even if it was in an anonymous way.

"I found one for you." Cassie stretched her neck and snickered.

"Okay." Ava and Megan said at the same time.

"I see a little girl sitting with her dad. They come here often but tonight I think they are hoping for someone else to join them. The dad is lonely but he's afraid no one will ever love him and want to be the mother to his child."

A chill ran down Ava's back. It sounded just like her situation. "And is he going to find someone?"

"Well, he's a looker, and I see several women checking him out."

The urge to turn around was strong, but Ava held tight. That's all she needed was a reminder of her decision to not see Kruz. Just the thought he might be there caused her heart to race.

"He is very handsome, and the daughter is adorable." Megan and Cassie faced the same way.

"Wait. Maddie from the coffee shop is heading to their table." Cassie's eyes widened and Megan frowned.

"What?" She had no idea who Maddie was, but jealousy spiked. What if it was Kruz and Riley who were here tonight?

Was Cassie simply not saying their names? “Someone’s going to their table?” She swallowed around a lump in her throat.

“Yes. He seems relieved, and there’s a smile on the girl’s face.”

Even though she hadn’t known Riley for very long, Ava missed spending time with her today. “What’s happening now?”

“I think they must know each other. He stood up and kissed her cheek.”

Oh no. Again, Ava eyes watered, and there were no flowers in sight to cause the reaction. “That’s, that’s good. I’m happy for them.” The drink she took seemed to lodge on her throat, but she managed to get it down.

“Oh, wait. It’s Kruz, I didn’t realize it was him and Riley at first.”

“What?” Ava spun around so fast; pop flew from her glass. There at a table across the room was Kruz and Riley but they were alone. “I thought there was someone with them.”

“And it obviously upset you. Now don’t you think you owe it to yourself,” Cassie nodded toward the pair, “and them, to give your relationship a chance.”

“How did you know I was even considering it?”

“Again, it’s a small town. I just wanted to give you the push, punch, or nod in their direction to see where a relationship might lead.”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“A moment ago, you were ready to hurt someone who might be at their table where you should be sitting.”

“I don’t know.” Ava nibbled on a fry as Megan listened in silence.

Cassie reached across the table and placed a hand on Ava’s forearm. “Then that’s what you need to find out. You don’t always get a second chance in life. Any minute some woman could walk in here, over to their table, and take your place in their hearts.”

“Maybe I’m not in their hearts.”

“Do you want to watch that happen?”

Ava shrugged. “I don’t know. I just know I want them both to be happy.”

“If that is how you truly feel then you care more than you want to admit.”

It was true. She did care. Maybe she was too hasty in her decision to say no. They could just be friends in front of Riley. They could make it work.

“Now go stake your claim before someone else does.” Cassie winked.

“Ugh, I don’t know.” Ava wiggled in her chair. “I don’t know.”

“Well, that woman does.”

“What?” Ava spun in her seat. It was still just Kruz and his girl alone at the table. “You tricked me.”

“I want you to be happy, and I’m selfish. I enjoy hanging out with you, and if things work out with biker boy, you might end up staying forever.”

“I don’t know about forever but ...”



“I think you should go for it.” Megan threw in her two cents worth.

“Go.” Cassie insisted.

“I’m supposed to be with you tonight.”

“We’re good, and I see Remi at the bar. We’ll go bug him for a while.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” They both nodded.

Slowly she rose from the table and smoothed her skirt. It had no wrinkles she just needed something to do with her hands.

As soon as her gaze locked onto Kruz’s, there was no stopping her. It was as if he drew her like a fisherman reeling in a catch. She couldn’t look away if she wanted to. He stood to greet her.

“Ava.” The smile he flashed caused her to skip a step.

Riley turned at her name and ran toward her. “Are you here to eat with us?”

Reaching for her hand, she let the youngster guide her to their table. “I was here with Cassie but then I saw you. What are you having to eat?”

“Fish sticks.” Knowing her father’s fondness for fishing it wasn’t hard to believe. The child probably grew up eating them.

“Are they good?”

“The best.” Riley twirled around.

“Ava.”

His voice never failed to send a thrill all the way down to her pink tipped toes. As far as she was concerned, they were the only ones in the crowded bar. Her attention was solely on the pair in front of her. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“Me too.” Riley tugged at her hand again. “Come sit with us. I’ll give you one of my sticks.”

Ava relented and looped her arm over the little girl’s shoulder. “Thanks, but I already ate, and you need to eat all those sticks, so you grow big and strong.”

“I try not to give her much fried food, but she loves fish sticks. So, when we can, we have them for a treat. Don’t we sweetie?” He ruffled her hair. The ponytail she sported had slipped over to one side.

“Yes.” Riley sat down and started to eat again.

“Will you join us?” He pulled out a chair and she took a seat next to him.

“Thanks, I was here with Cassie and spied you two having some dinner.”

“I have a confession to make.” Kruz lifted a glass to his lips and took a sip. “I knew you would be here.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I asked Cassie to bring you here. I was hoping you’d see us and want to join us.”

At least he had the decency to glance away. He had an agenda, but the man seemed genuinely interested in her. Maybe it was time to give them both a chance. “It worked. Thanks for all the gifts this week. You didn’t have to do that.”

Kruz grinned and picked up a piece of fish Ava had dropped on the table and set it on a napkin. “I know. You said

you needed time, but I wanted you to know I was thinking about you.”

“I’ve been thinking of you also, both of you.” Ava put her hand on the table. “I don’t know what I’m doing but if you are still interested, I’d love to spend more time with you this summer.”

“Me too?” Riley piped up.

“Yes, of course, you, too.”

“Woohoo.” Kruz hollered and several people turned their way. “Sorry, but I’ve been hoping all week you’d say yes.”

“As of an hour ago, the answer was going to be no.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“I guess I’m selfish. I wasn’t sure what to do but I know I didn’t want to let you go, let both of you go, without giving us a chance.”

“Like they say, life’s a gamble. I’m thrilled you gave us a chance.” Reaching for her hand, he kissed the back of it. It seemed like an old-fashioned thing to do but it was perfect, just like him.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Kruz*

HE OWED CASSIE BIG TIME. IF IT WEREN'T FOR HER GETTING Ava to the Frisky Catfish ... well, he didn't want to think about it. Dating these days was alot different than when he was younger. Much different. Even though they planned to go on dates to get to know each other better, they agreed to let Riley still believe that Ava was only there for the summer. The last thing they wanted was for her to get more attached to her nanny than she already was.

Based on the admiration in her eyes, every time Ava was near, the child had already formed a bond. So had he. Every time he drove by her house, Kruz checked to see if Ava was home. Because she watched his daughter Monday through Friday, he heard firsthand every night what they'd done during the day. Maybe it was wrong to be together. It was a disaster waiting to happen and if they didn't get along. Who would they have to take care of Riley until school started if something went wrong?

Laughter from his two favorite girls could be heard from the driveway. Riley wanted to invite Ava over for Sunday brunch. After throwing everything in closets, or drawers, that shouldn't be out, they were ready for their guest.

“Welcome.” Kruz opened the front door and greeted her. “I wish you’d have let us pick you up.”

“Nonsense, I didn’t realize you were so close. I could’ve walked here.”

“Please don’t, it’s a safe enough area but I always worry about vehicles tearing down the road and not seeing people on bikes or out for a stroll.”

“I’ll be careful if I do.” She winked. His concern just endeared him to her more. Today was about getting to know each other better and easing Riley into seeing Ava on her days off.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” The little girl practically bounced off the walls ever since she found out they’d have Ava over.

“How could I turn down such a kind offer?”

As soon as her eyes locked on his, a flush of warmth flew through his veins. He had it bad. “We’re glad you’re here. Riley, come in and set the table.” She rushed in the door. When Ava neared, he reached over and kissed her cheek.

“What was that for?” Blushing, she tilted her head to the side.

Damn, she looked pretty in her long, peach dress and sandals. It was way too fancy for his place, but she appeared comfortable in whatever she wore. Ava had put her auburn hair up in a bun. A few flyaway strands gave her a sweet and sexy look.

“Well?” She lifted an eyebrow and smirked.

“Sorry, I got distracted by how beautiful you are.” It was the truth. She took his breath away and caused his mind to turn

to mush. “I kissed your cheek because I had to touch my lips to you, or I’d die. If I touched your mouth, I wouldn’t have been able to stop.”

Her eyes widened. They were the prettiest teal green.

“Are you coming?” Riley yelled from the inside.

He loved his daughter with all his heart, but she wasn’t making this easy. “Welcome to my world.” Kruz chuckled.

Taking his hand in hers, she whispered in his ear. “I happen to like your world very much. I’m excited to see your home.” This time he did give her a quick kiss and not on the cheek.

“Then come on in.” As he led her inside. It was hard to keep his breath even. He was no interior decorator, that was for sure, but the place was clean and safe for Riley. That’s all he ever cared about but he wanted her to like it too.

Ava followed him around. “It’s nice and homey. I don’t know why, but I was expecting black leather chairs and pictures of bikes on the walls.”

It was about as far from that predication as you could get. His home was more lake house than biker club for two. The ranch style house was pretty basic. An open floor plan including a kitchen with a counter where Riley liked to eat her breakfast, a living room with a sectional facing a TV, and some patio doors opening to a deck with a great view of the Mississippi.

“We set the table here, but if you’d like we could eat outside.” The smoke from the barbeque on the porch blew the opposite way so they should be good.

“I think that would be wonderful. I can help move things out there.” She stacked the plates and silverware while he

picked up the glasses.

“Riley, you grab the steak sauce and ketchup.”

In less than a minute, the picnic table was set, and he checked the grill. “How do you like yours done?”

“Wow, steak. I didn’t know you were a master griller.”

“I wouldn’t say I was a master so keep your fingers crossed.”

“Then I will take medium for mine. What does Riley like?”

“Hamburgers.” He flipped the lone burger over and flattened it with a metal spatula. “Oh, can you watch these, I just have to get the beans from the stove.” When he’d invited Ava over for lunch, he failed to tell her his cooking skills were limited, but steak he could do. The baked beans came from a can.

Taking the pot from the stove, he stuck a big spoon in it and carried it to the deck. “Sorry we aren’t fancy and usually just serve from the pan.” He set it on a trivet and scooped a helping onto Riley’s plate to cool.

“That’s fine with me. Since I live alone, I do that also.”

Next, he pulled off the grill a large packet of tinfoil filled with sliced potatoes and onions. Steam rolled out as soon as he pierced the covering. He placed a hamburger on top of a bun for Riley, and the medium streak went to Ava.

“Thank you.”

A funny feeling tickled his stomach at her bright smile. Her cute, little laugh made him feel, well, happy.

“Sorry, I probably should have taken you somewhere to eat.” Being from the cities, she probably had her choice of many fine places to eat.

Ava frowned. “What? Why? This is wonderful and the view here is breathtaking.”

They did have a wonderful view and it was one of the reasons he rented the place.

“It’s nothing fancy. We have meat, potatoes, and beans.”

Ava giggled and placed her hand on top of his. “The last thing I want is fancy. I only want real.”

“Real I can do. I’m sorry about our shaky start. I guarantee no more secrets of any kind.”

“That’s all I ask for.”

Based on the serious expression on her face, she meant it.

“In fact, my sister is coming to the greenhouse for lunch tomorrow. She can watch Riley-belle if you’d like to come over to my shop. I can show you around, and you can see what I’m working on.”

“Really? If it’s not too much trouble I’d love to see what you do there.” Ava helped Riley put ketchup on her burger.

Kruz cut into his steak. “Are you doing any painting?”

“I am. I did a smaller one of some flowers, and I’m working on a larger landscape of the river.”

“I’d love to see them some time.” It was hard to imagine what they looked like. True to life or more abstract?

“Of course. You show me your work and I’ll show you mine.” The ruddiness on her cheeks spoke of a double meaning for sure.



“Me too. I want to see.” Riley spoke up. Her mouth dripped with red ketchup. Ava dabbed it with a paper towel.

The gesture hit him hard in the chest like a lightning bolt. It was so easy to imagine her in their lives every day. But it was too early to be dreaming of holidays and vacations together. He’d no clue where she’d want to go or do. As of yesterday, he was still hoping for her to give him a chance to go on a date.

“How about you and I work on one tomorrow?”

His little girl nodded and reached for a piece of potato with her fingers. “Fork please.” The dad look he gave her worked, and she went back to using her utensils.

“You have a lovely home here, have you ever wanted to live anywhere else?”

“When I was looking at colleges I thought about out west, maybe Colorado. Some place with mountains, but my plans changed, and I haven’t had time to think about it much. Besides, like you said, we have a great view here, don’t we girl?” Riley nodded. Since she was born, he’d not had time, or money, to do anything so vacations and a change of scenery had been the last thing on his mind.

“Colorado is gorgeous. We used to go skiing in Aspen all the time.” Ava bit her lower lip and glanced down at her plate.

“You’ve been there several times?” Even though they were supposed to have no secrets between them, Ava seemed uncomfortable sharing much about her family. It was a good bet that skiing in Aspen was an expensive holiday. If she was rich, why would she be spending a summer babysitting? Maybe her family had cut her off or something?

“A few. Hey, you were cutting yourself short on your cooking skills, this steak is perfect, and I’ve never had potatoes done like this before. What do you call it?”

Kruz chuckled. “Grilled potatoes.”

“Really? Well, they’re delicious. And the beans?”

“From a can.” He gave her hand a little nudge. “So don’t start asking for the recipe.”

“I can’t say I’m much better. If it wasn’t for takeout, I might starve.”

“They give cooking classes at the kitchen store in town. My mom’s a great cook.” Again, no mention of Ava’s mom or home cooked meals. Maybe she had to work a lot. Apparently, their mothers grew up together yet Claire never talked about her, either.

“I might have to check it out.”

After their meal, he took them out on the boat for an afternoon ride. It was perfect weather, not too hot and not too cold. There was a light wind, so a few sailboats skimmed over the water. Ava sat before him with her arm around Riley. She was a natural with kids. Why the woman wasn’t a teacher was beyond him.

They stopped at the same sandbar again to stretch their feet. He only allowed Riley out of her life vest if she promised to stay seated on the sand but that wasn’t happening, so she ran around with it on. Ava was stunning in bare feet and her dress flowing in the breeze. After exploring a little she came to sit beside him on the blanket he’d spread on the sand. It was hard to resist draping an arm over her shoulder.

“Thank you for coming today.” And for being content to be in his arms.

“My pleasure. I know this is a weird situation with me being here for only three months but who knows. If I find something more permanent to do here, I’d consider staying longer, or maybe for good. This place is growing on me, as are the people.”

Seeing that Riley was facing the other way, he pulled Ava close. Caressing her cheek, he traced her jaw with his finger. Her skin was warm and smooth like silk. His thumb brushed her lips as she parted them for his kiss. It would be so easy to be lost in the woman. She was like a siren from the sea, drawing him closer. At first, he was worried about Riley getting too attached if Ava decided to leave at the end of the summer, but it would tear him apart also. They say when you find your soulmate, you know it. The feeling comes out of nowhere and hits you like a lightning bolt. Well, he’d been singed and on fire ever since he laid eyes on Ava sitting in her car in the ditch. Was it fate that brought them together or just a snapping turtle in the wrong place at the wrong time?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Ava*

WALKING ON AIR WAS A NEW EXPERIENCE FOR HER. YET, she'd been a few inches off the ground ever since deciding to give Kruz a chance. There was no comparing him to her last boyfriend. None at all. It was too soon to be in love, but it was definitely more than infatuation. Never did she think going for a simple boat ride would bring such joy, but it wasn't only the adventure, it was who she was with.

And his kisses. They stopped, and started, her heart at the same time. It was hard to sleep last night thinking about them. She'd stayed for dinner. Making waffles had never been so fun. They were all covered in a light dusting of pancake mix and sticky with syrup.

Riley asked Ava to help her get ready for bed while Kruz cleaned up. She was happy to do it. After their busy day, the girl fell asleep as soon as her little head hit the pillow. Kruz walked Ava to her car and gave her another kissing session releasing a flutter of butterflies in her stomach. Riley may have been quick to fall asleep, but Ava was up for hours yearning for her bike-builder beau.

Exhausted more than the usual Monday morning, Ava stopped at the gas station for some higher-octane java. The

town needed a coffee shop, that was for sure. If brewing was something she was familiar with. It would be a great business opportunity to explore, but that was a big no. There wasn't a big call for paint supplies either, so starting an art supply business didn't seem like something profitable either.

For the first few hours, she worked with Riley on subjects she needed to be familiar with for the next year in school. As Kruz had said, his sister stopped to have lunch with her mom and looked after Riley so that Ava could visit his shop. A bit of guilt popped up that she had skipped out on her duties but it was shut down fast. It almost seemed like his family was encouraging the two to get together. She'd not met Kruz's dad yet, as he'd been out of town for a while helping on his brother's farm in southwest Wisconsin while his brother was laid up with back surgery. But the rest of the family was nice.

Not knowing if Kruz would have any lunch, she stopped to get a couple subs from the grocery store deli. For years she'd taken for granted having a personal chef at their house. All she did was ask and it was prepared. What would Kruz say if he knew that? Not to mention the Aspen mess up.

It was her suggestion they always be honest with each other, yet her 'other' life was a complete lie. Well, technically everything she'd told him was true but what she'd omitted was huge.

Several cars and bikes were parked outside his shop. With her luck, he'd be too busy to show her around, but she'd barely parked before he'd popped out of the open garage door to greet her.

"Wow, you must have been waiting for me." The instant she was out of the car, he pulled her close and dropped a

panty-melting kiss on her mouth. He tasted of peppermint and coffee.

“All my life sweetheart.” His embrace tightened before he let her go.

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only my favorite ones. Come on, let me show you around.”

“Wait, I bought lunch.”

“Thanks, you didn’t have to, but I’m glad you did. We’ve been super busy this morning.”

The place had the same smell and sound as the few car dealerships she’d visited after picking up a vehicle or two her father had bought for her. The zipzip of the air guns and smell of tires were hard to miss. She was quickly introduced to his crew, given a tour of the building, and shown a photo album of some of his builds.

“I can’t believe you create such amazing bikes. How do you do it?” In the book were numerous photos of unique bikes, even a few choppers. All were awe-inspiring and sporting amazing paint jobs. “What do you do first?”

“Some customers have no clue what they want so I created a sheet with questions. Design, colors, styles, different options that help me make it custom for them.”

“That’s fascinating.” Not only did he design beautiful machines, but they were also functional. Works of art a person could go places with. “I’m really impressed.”

“This is what I’m working on now. It’s the biggest one. Make that, the most expensive one, I’ve had the opportunity to work on. I’m not allowed to say who it’s for, but they want it

to represent the upper Midwest, the beauty of the area, while also being energy efficient.”

The design pictured on the computer was magnificent. Not that she knew anything about bikes but from an art aspect, it was very original. “I’m afraid I’m not an expert on motorcycles, but this is really cool.”

“I was wondering if you would be interested in helping me on it.”

Her head snapped up. Did she hear him right? “How? I’m no mechanic.”

“No, but you are an artist. I want you to paint an image of what will go on the gas tank and fenders. If the client likes it, I’ll have the painter put it on the bike.”

“Seriously, are you sure? I’ve never done anything like this before.” What an amazing opportunity.

“I think you’re an amazing artist, but the client has to approve it.” She’d showed him photos of a variety of her work. Never in her wildest dreams did Ava expect something like this.

It was a chance she’d never expected. The thought of doing something new and challenging intrigued her and gave them something to work on together. Looking at the design again, it wasn’t a hard decision. “I’ll do it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’d loved to. It’s my dream to make a living as an artist, but this is something I’d never dreamed of doing.”

“Great, I can’t wait to see what you come up with.”

“How soon do you need it?”

“Tomorrow.”

Her jaw dropped. “What?”

“I’m kidding.” Kruz nudged her with his shoulder.

Ava collapsed in a nearby chair and laughed. “You scared me.”

Taking a seat beside her, he rested his chin on his fist. “Sorry about that and thanks. I’m really glad you agreed. I’ve only seen a few of your works of art but that’s what they are, works of art that should be in a gallery somewhere.”

“If only my family thought the same way. They want me to get a real job.” She did air quotes for the word real. “Something that makes real cash.”

“Who’s to say you won’t make money doing that?”

“My father. He’s all about working 24/7, sometimes at the expense of his family.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to bring up unhappy subjects.”

“That’s all right.” If he only knew how miserable her mother was right now.

“You haven’t mentioned him much, what does he do?”

How does one not lie when asked a direct question that you don’t want to answer? “He’s in business, but we’ve been estranged lately.” At least that was the truth.

“What happened?”

“He cheated on my mom with another woman.”

“What a bastard.” A flash of anger crossed his face. “Sorry I shouldn’t have said that about him, but I believe when you get married, it’s for life, and you do everything you can to make the other person happy.”



“How are you not married? You sound like the perfect husband.” Mr. Bike Builder checked off a few more items on her ideal man list. A list Ava never knew she had.

“Well, like I told you before, having a kid has been my first priority. Riley always will be, but I’m ready to share her and myself with a special someone and see where it goes.” His tanned cheeks appeared to blush. “Did you have any clue this was happening? The affair?”

“No. But like I said, we’d not had the best relationship.” It hurt just to talk about it. So many of her friends were daddy’s girls and yet, her brother was clearly the man’s favorite. “It’s almost as if he resented me for some reason, but I don’t know why.”

“I can’t understand that at all. Riley is everything to me. I’d give my life for her.”

Again, her affection for this man increased. Why couldn’t she have had a dad like that? Someone who didn’t appear to want to be in the same room as her, and if he was, acted as if she didn’t exist.

“Whenever I question my mom about it, she just brushes it off saying he was stressed and under a lot of pressure at work.” He did work hard to give them a good life and she should appreciate it. Watching Kruz and Riley together made her covet their kind of relationship. They may not be rich in wealth, but they were overwhelmed with love and family. It was a goal for anyone wishing to be happy in life.

“I’m sorry for what you’re going through. Is that another reason you’re spending the summer here?”

“In a way. I guess I needed some space from the drama. Getting out from under the thumb of my father and making my

own way and my own decisions.”

“Good for you. I believe in you, and I know whatever choices you make will be the right ones.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“I didn’t mean to bring you down, but I’d love to have you work on this with me. I think you would be perfect for this build.”

“Let me do some sketches and when I get home tonight then I will put it to canvas.”

“Are you sure this is okay with you? As excited as I am to have your help, I don’t want you to feel any pressure.”

“I’m thrilled to have this opportunity.” Ava picked up a pencil and pulled the sketch pad toward her.

“And I will pay you for your work. So, name your price.”

“Hmmm.” Holding a pencil to her lips, she smirked.  
“Dinner.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“I don’t care. You plan your perfect date, and I will go.”

“Challenge accepted.”

His hand touched hers sending waves of warmth down her spine.

“Hey, boss.” One of his workers poked his head in the doorway. “We need some help out here.”

“Sure. I’ll be back, hon.” He kissed her cheek before leaving the room.

Hon? Good thing she was sitting as her knees went weak. His touch left her wanting, and his words had her dreaming.

Dreaming there were options in life other than being a number in her dad's employ. Could she weave her way permanently into the community of Coulee Bluff? Would she miss the big city life? The answers were easy. Yes, for the first one and no, for the second. Since being here she hadn't thought about her life back home except for the bad. The few things she enjoyed, the large art supply store, her favorite coffee shop, those things were in the past. What she needed could be ordered online. As far as coffee, the gas station in Coulee wasn't that bad.

Chuckling, Ava picked up her pen and studied the list. The requests were pretty standard. Mississippi River, wildlife, energy efficient, quaint. A small doubt formed a knot in the back of her head. Could she do this? That last thing she wanted was to disappoint one of Kruz's clients.

Pushing all doubt aside she set out to do her best. It was important to Kruz. Seeing the cost estimate on the sheet said this would go a long way to help their finances.

If it was the last thing she did here, Ava would make sure she left the people here better for having known her which meant putting her all in the project.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Kruz*

THEY'D SETTLED INTO A ROUTINE. A COMFORTABLE, WARM, and amazing routine. On his way to work with Riley, they'd pick Ava up, and then drop both off at the greenhouse.

When he'd park outside the store, it was always a struggle to get in a goodbye kiss without Riley witnessing it. They were still only friends in front of his daughter.

If she left in the fall, he'd be lost and even more alone. Kruz pushed the ugly thought from his mind. After that, he'd go to work. Sometimes he'd join them for lunch, but with the deadline getting closer for the bike to be completed, lunch dates were far and few between. Once, he was finished with work, Kruz would pick them up and they'd go out to eat or cook something at either his or Ava's place. That Riley didn't seem to think it was odd they spent so much time with her nanny was a blessing. The pair got along like they were lifelong friends.

Ava completed her drawing the same afternoon he'd told her about the custom bike. The next day she painted it in stunning colors. Texting a photo of it to John, he soon received the go ahead to continue. He'd been working on the bike every day to stay on schedule. Soon the tank and fenders would

arrive from the painter. If it came out anywhere close to what she'd created, it would be a home run.

Watching the clock most of the morning, Kruz counted the minutes until the guy showed up.

As soon as the van with paint spatters on all sides rolled in the lot, Kruz was out the door to greet him. "Hey, Jake. It's great to see you." They shook hands and strolled to the back of the vehicle.

"I've never seen you this excited about a job before." Jake pulled open the back panels, while Kruz tried to get a peek inside.

"I've got a lot riding on this project, not to mention a friend painted the pics I gave you. I can't wait to see how they came out."

"In my opinion, pretty damn close. Here, you carry this one and we'll get them in faster."

Kruz carried the large box inside and placed it on the worktable. Impatiently he waited as Jake carefully unwrapped them. Was he deliberately taking forever? Kruz shifted his weight back and forth.

"Calm down, you're making me nervous." His painter laughed and shook his head. "Have you ever been unhappy with anything I've done?"

"No." The guy had always done excellent work.

"Then what makes this one so special?" He paused and Kruz let out a deep breath.

"If you'd open the damn boxes, I'll tell you."

Jake shook his head and popped the lid. "There must be a woman involved."

“What? No. Well, kind of.” Ava had turned his whole world upside down in record time.

“Ha, you got it bad.”

“Tell me about it.” He wanted Ava to love the bike as much as the buyer.

“Who is she?”

“My daughter’s nanny.”

“Dude, that’s gross.”

“What? Wait, no. She’s twenty-three years old, not some teenager.”

“Well, that’s a relief. You making the bike for her?”

“No. She’s the artist who did the drawing. I’m hoping if my client likes her work, it will encourage her to stay. She’s very talented. I could get her more work or she could open a gallery.”

“Not from the area?” The guy still hadn’t taken the items out.

“No.” Kruz’s anxiety was off the chart waiting to see what was in the boxes.

“Well, I’ll be honest. The paintings you gave me were amazing. I hope I was able to do them justice. I could spread the word around and maybe get her some more work.”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

Jake carefully lifted the gas tank and unwrapped the tissue surrounding it.

Kruz drew a quick breath. It was remarkable. The colors were perfect and matched Ava’s artwork to a tee. Jake was able to fit all the beauty of the bluffs, the river, and wildlife

Ava had created onto the different places of metal. Jake was a master and the ducks and deer appeared 3-D.

Kruz whistled. “You did good man. This is gorgeous.”

The fenders were just as spectacular. “Glad you like it. Wait until you see the bill.” Jake slapped him on the back and walked out the door.

Kruz ran a finger lightly over the artwork. Together with his rustic frame design and Ava’s artwork, the bike would be spectacular. Something he should enter in a contest, but he’d have to read the contract again to see if that was possible. Usually, he did a contract himself, but this guy had brought his own. Something about copyrights, privacy, and a whole bunch of other stuff he should care about but didn’t. It was weird John didn’t want the name of his company anywhere on the chassis.

After checking the status of his employee’s work, he asked his best fabricator, Eli, to help him fit the tank and fenders to the bike. Once done, all he had to do was ride it to make sure everything ran smoothly.

“Looks great, boss.” Eli admired their work as the others gathered around.

“That’s the best one yet and that paint job. Sweet.” Another one added.

“Now the real test. Let’s get all the fluids in and see how she runs.”

Turning the ignition key fired him up. It purred like a kitten. The energy technology he’d used was something he’d been working on for a long time, but had never had the opportunity, or the spendy budget, to test it. With any luck, the

customer would love it and want to invest in some additional bikes. Fingers crossed.

An invention of this kind would set him and his family up for life. No more working all day at the green house for his mom. Well, she'd probably still want to do it because of her love of plants and visiting with customers every day, but at least she could hire more help to do the heavy work.

He'd buy his sister a bigger house as their space was getting smaller and smaller with their growing family. His father could retire. Riley could go to any college in the world she wanted to, and he could travel the world with Ava taking her to spectacular sites meant to inspire her art. But he was getting ahead of himself. Way ahead of himself. It was a hybrid bike and he'd used all aluminum, so it was very light weight.

"It's so quiet," his newest staff member remarked.

"It's meant to be. The client wanted an energy efficient and eco-friendly bike. It's quiet because of the engine design and because it cuts noise pollution."

"But don't bikers want loud motors?"

"Some do, but not this person. This is exactly what he asked for. Energy efficient and ecofriendly."

"Well, take her for a ride and see how it runs." Eli opened the bay door as Kruz swung his legs over the seat and put a helmet on his head.

"See you in a bit." He revved the motor and sped out of the building. It was smooth, real smooth, and fast. The tires they'd installed were the top of the line. This motorcycle had a different feel than anything he'd ever built or ridden. Used to the loud roar of most bikes, this one gave the rider the ability



to carry on a conversation with the person behind him. Some people may not like that aspect but again, he built it to the specifications of the customer.

He took it down a back road. Best to keep it a secret and not let too many people see it before John. The last thing he wanted was for someone to snap a photo and post it on social media, but it was important to make sure it worked perfectly and safely.

Returning to the shop, he made some slight adjustments before hiding it in a backroom and covering it with a soft tarp. The only person that would be seeing it again before it's owner would be Ava. It was almost closing time, so he quickly helped his staff finish up their work before taking the truck to collect his girls. His girls? It sounded like heaven.

“Hey, Dad.” Riley ran up to him as soon as he entered the greenhouse. He pulled her into his arms and the sweet scent of her strawberry shampoo and graham crackers surrounded him.

“How's my sweetie?”

“Hungry.” She wore a new Hello Kitty shirt her grandmother must have bought for her.

“Really? You're never hungry.” He loved teasing her. “Where would you like to eat?”

“I can make something.” Ava came up from behind him. Her voice never failed to warm his heart and cause him to smile.

“Thanks, but I'd love to take you out to celebrate tonight.” Finishing the job was like writing ‘the end’ at the end of a very long book.

“Really, why's that? Is the bike done?” Clasp ing her fingers against her chest, her eyes sparkling, Ava was

obviously as excited as he was. “Can we see it?”

“Of course. Get your stuff girls. I’ll show you the bike then we can go somewhere special.”

“Pete’s?” Hamburgers were always Riley’s first choice.

“Wherever you both decide. Now let’s hurry.”

While his daughter rushed to get her backpack, Kruz sneaked a kiss or two.

All the way back to the shop, he was on pins and needles. His first responsibility was to the client, but it was just as important that Ava love what they’d created with her artwork.

Holding his breath, he ushered Ava and Riley to the bike and lifted the cloth covering it. When neither said a word, Kruz glanced back at the bike. Had something happened to it?

“Oh my god.” Ava covered her mouth with her hand before reaching out to touch it. “It’s incredible. I can’t believe something I painted is on a bike.” Leaning over to study it closer, her eyes watered. “It’s so beautiful. Do you really have to give it away?” She laughed.

“I wish I could afford to keep it. What do you think little girl?” He pulled Riley near his leg.

“Pretty but I don’t think I can reach the pedals.”

“It’s not for you silly. I built the bike, and Ava did the artwork.”

“You made it together. It’s like your baby.”

Leave it to kids to tell it like it is. Yes, it was their baby. Reaching out he took Ava’s hand in his. “Thank you. This is the best bike I’ve ever worked on. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Just thinking about combining their talents had his head spinning. She fit in perfect to his life, but did they fit into hers?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Ava*

THE CALENDAR HAD TO BE LYING, IT COULDN'T BE THE 4<sup>TH</sup> OF July already. A TV weatherman announced it was going to be hot, humid, and horrible out today. A perfect day for the bikini she wore under her loose sundress. Ava twisted her auburn hair up in a bun while studying her reflection in the mirror. There was a difference in her reflection today and she couldn't put a finger on. What was it? Confidence? Newfound strength? A woman in love?

Her feelings for Kruz had grown day by day as had her affection for Riley. There was already a growing dread about leaving them behind at summer's end. Riley would be back in school and no longer need a babysitter. If she were to stay it would mean finding more permanent employment in Coulee Bluff. So far, she hadn't missed the conveniences of the big city at all. Well, a nice coffee shop would be great. Frowning into the mirror, she vowed to come up with a way to make things work. Already she couldn't imagine having to leave the two, but she also wouldn't rely on someone else to pay her bills.

Gathering more of her things, Ava shoved them in a backpack. This was not only a holiday but was also the day of

the annual Tanner family picnic. She'd changed outfits half a dozen times, but this would have to do. All the Tanners would be there today, and it was important to make a good impression. At least to her it was. Kruz told her not to bring anything, but she'd bought some wine and cheese curds in town. Both were packed in a cooler and already at the bottom of the stairs waiting for Kruz to pick her up.

A pop-up text announced her ride would be there soon. The flutters in her stomach arrived also. His kisses left her breathless and wanting for more. If they pushed their relationship any further, it was a given she wouldn't be able to leave. She'd be too far gone to pull up stakes, or in her case, easels, and leave.

Never one to honk and wait in the truck, Kruz had parked outside, and his boots pounded up the stairs. Rushing to the door, she opened it before he could knock. His strong fist was held in midair.

"Hey, beautiful. Ready for today?" He leaned a shoulder against the door frame. Gone were the black jeans and biker tees, today he was dressed in beach wear. Flip flops, board shorts, and a light blue, sleeveless t-shirt. His dark hair needed a trim and a few locks hung over his forehead like some rakish pirate on the cover of a romance novel. Be still my heart.

"Everything okay?"

"Couldn't be better." The urge to paint him with a ruffle shirt and sword flashed in her mind.

"You're looking at me a little weird." Scratching his chin, Kruz glanced at the truck probably keeping an eye on Riley.

"I've just never seen you dress so, so ..." Words escaped her.

He arched an eyebrow. “So ...”

Swinging her backpack over her shoulder before he could grab it for her, Ava locked the door before shutting it behind her. “So, summer handsome.” She shuffled down the stairs, giggling the whole way.

“Summer handsome? I don’t even know what that is.” He chased after her.

Giddiness as well as excitement at meeting the rest of his family overwhelmed her. Once she reached his truck, Ava waved at Riley then turned to Kruz. “I’m used to the whole bad boy biker outfit. Now you look like a California surfer dude.”

“That I am not. Let me take this for you.” He retrieved her bag and placed it in the extended cab of the truck where Riley was sitting then opened the front door for her. “After you, sweetheart.”

Kruz may appear to be a tough and scruffy biker most days, but he was a total gentleman when it came to her and his daughter. All of his family in fact.

“How many people will be there?” She asked after he got in the truck.

“A lot. Cousins, friends, my immediately family. Mom invites everyone.” He shook his head while putting the truck in reverse. “I hope it won’t be too overwhelming.”

“I think it will be fun.” Even though her nerves were a bit high strung at the moment, it turned out she had nothing to worry about.

There was a ton of people gathered under the shelter near the beach when they arrived. Picnic tables were piled high with food of all kinds. Ava added the wine and cheese to the

assortment. Riley joined her cousins and the other children in attendance to play ball or draw with chalk on the large sidewalk next to the parking lot.

The rest of his family was just as welcoming as his mother and sister. A tall, good-looking man appearing to be an older version of Kruz approached her with a beer in his hand.

“Hi, I’m Rick, Kruz’s dad. You must be the new girlfriend.”

Ava choked on her lemonade. As much as they tried to keep their relationship a secret, everyone knew better.

“Are you all right dear?” He handed her a bottle of water from a nearby cooler.

“Yes, sorry. It went down the wrong pipe.”

“I’m so glad we finally met. I’ve heard so much about you from my wife, Riley, and Kruz. You’ve made quite the impression on all of them.”

“Hopefully in a good way.”

“Of course. I look forward to getting to know you better.”

“Thank you. You as well.” Claire had shared numerous stories of Kruz in his youth, and it was a given his dad would have some good ones as well.

“Enjoy the picnic.” Placing a hand on her shoulder as he passed, Rick joined his wife and daughter at a nearby table.

“Having fun?” Kruz came out of nowhere.

The Tanner men were keeping her on her toes. “Yes, I have and you? Did you win your horseshoe game?”

“Of course.” He brushed his fingernails on his shirt and blew on them. “No sweat.”

“Ha, show off.”

“Say, my sis is keeping an eye on Riley. Would you like to take a walk with me?”

Or course she would. She always enjoyed time alone with him. “Sure.”

“Great.” Kruz took her hand and laced his fingers with hers. Ava glanced around but no one was paying any attention to them as they strolled along the water’s edge. The river was calm today except for when a boat cruised by.

“Perfect day for sailing.” She admired their colorful sails adding to the stunning landscape of the day.

“It is. Most will stay out all day to view the fireworks at night.”

Ava waved a hand in front of her face. “Dang its hot. Do you mind if I jump in the water to cool off?” It was also a bit stressful meeting all the new people.

“Of course not.” Kruz pulled off his shirt, and the day got hotter. It brought back memories of the first day they’d met. Him bare chested by the road, and her tongue tied at the sight of him. Soon her dress joined his on the sand.

He whistled as his eyes lingered on her chest. “You wear the suit well.”

“Oh, stop.” Now her cheeks were burning and not just from the sun.

“Here give me your hand. Sometimes it’s slippery here.”

The water had the temperature of a bath. Sand slid between her toes as her feet sank into the wet ground. But it wasn’t slippery at all. Ava stopped and gave him a puzzled look.



“Okay guilty, I just wanted to hold your hand.” Letting go, he dove under the water and swam about twenty feet before surfacing.

Kruz was obviously born swimming and familiar with the area while her water skills were sadly lacking and limited to a pool. Making sure to stay close to the shore Ava sat in the water to enjoy everything going on around her. The water, though warm, was wonderful. Even from a distance, the conversation and screams of children from the picnic could be heard.

Kruz returned to the shore, and as he stepped out of the water, her mouth dropped open. He was gorgeous, like some warrior from the sea. If she wasn't so star struck, the thought that'd popped in her brain would have caused her to laugh, but it was true. Ava was over the moon for this small-town guy. No one at the country club had a body anywhere close to his. Kruz's muscles came from hard and honest work, not a rowing machine. The tattoos and dark curls of chest hair stuck to his skin, added to the overall hotness package.

“I feel like you're undressing me with your eyes, sweetheart.” Kruz sat down and snuggled in close to her. He rested his tanned forearm on her thigh.

“Maybe I am. Does that bother you?”

“Not at all because I'm guilty of doing the same thing. Have I told you how beautiful you are today?”

“That old dress and a swimsuit?”

“You're lovely no matter what you have on. Ava, you're beautiful from the inside out.”

She, may or may not, have sighed like a teenager at a pop concert. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“There are no other girls. Only you.” He kissed her lips before resting his head against hers. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Do you remember me telling you when the bike was done, I would take you on a special date?”

“Yes, of course, but that isn’t necessary. I was happy to do it.”

“Well, this has nothing to do with the bike. My sis will watch Riley tomorrow night. I want to take you somewhere special, just the two of us. Overnight.”

A lump formed in her throat. “You mean us, together, in the same place, all night long?”

Kruz smiled and nodded. “Yeah, us spending the night together in a romantic place because I want to take our relationship to the next level. I know we’ve been keeping things casual and not wanting to share that we’re seeing each other with Riley and others, but I can’t anymore. Everyone knows anyway. I haven’t been able to hide how happy you make me feel. I’m in this for the long haul. I want you in my life and my daughter’s. That means being honest with others, honest with ourselves, and exploring how we feel about each other. My parents and sis already know how fond I am of you. I want to go on a real date in public, and I want to spend the night together, the whole night.”

The intensity of his stare stopped her heart. This was a totally new experience. Other boyfriends didn’t compare. They were just that, boys. This was a man, and it should scare the heck out of her to be feeling so much for someone she’d only

met a few weeks before. Surprisingly it didn't. She trusted him.

Kruz stood up. "I'm sorry, I pushed too hard. I guess I thought we were ready."

She jumped up beside him and held out her hands. "No, no. That's not it at all. You just took me by surprise."

"We can talk about it another time." Kruz stared at the waves rushing over their feet.

"No, I'll go. I mean, I'd love to go on a date with you. As for the rest, we'll play it by ear. Okay?" She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. Enveloped in his embrace, there was no doubt in her mind she wanted him as much as he'd confessed about wanting her. Her parents were not a good example of marriage but the love she'd witnessed between the members of his family showed respect, love, and devotion.

Having that in her life was worth the risk. Ava peeked up and smiled. "Where are you taking me on this date?"

"I haven't totally figured it out yet, but it will be nice. I promise."

"Any place where you are is special."

"Ava, darling. This is going to sound corny, but I didn't realize how much my life was missing until I found you." He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her as if she was the love of his life. In the background, she swore she heard a round of applause.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Kruz*

THE PRESSURE WAS ON TO CREATE THE PERFECT EVENING. It was their first day and night, spent together as a real couple, not a pair sneaking around date. It had officially started last night when he kissed Ava in front of everyone. She'd been a big hit with the family but that was a given. What wasn't to like? Ava was sweet, kind, pretty, smart, a great artist, and she cared for Riley as if she were her own. What more could he ask for? Well, there is the matter of getting Ava to stay past the end of the summer.

His first stop this morning was for flowers. It was a Saturday, so the florists were busy with finals touches for a wedding, but he managed to get a pretty bouquet of pink roses. Eli was overseeing his garage today, so he didn't need to worry about anything. His best staff member had the place under control.

Next, he stopped at the new winery Ava raved about. Not a wine drinker himself, he knew she'd appreciated it.

"Hey, Cassie." The poor girl always seemed to be working somewhere.

"Hey, Kruz. What brings you in?"

Plopping a hand on the counter, he placed the other on his hip. “Looking for some wine for a special lady.”

She squealed and raced around to the front. “I heard you’d made it official by planting a juicy one on her in front of the family.”

Kruz rolled his eyes. Even before social media, news traveled fast in the small community. “Yeah, it was time to get things out in the open. Today I’m taking her for a date then we’re staying at the River’s Edge rental tonight.”

“Very romantic.” She poked him in the gut. The feisty blond had always been like a sister to him and the fact she’d taken Ava under her wing as soon as she came to town, endeared him more. “Looking for some bubbly for the big night?”

“How did you guess?”

“Because guys always do the typical things on a date or for gifts. Flowers, chocolate, wine, yadda, yadda”

“Damn, I forgot chocolate.” He still had time to stop somewhere and get some.

“Or you could do something different and surprise her?”

“Like what?”

“You know what she likes, figure it out.” Cassie studied their selection of wine, picked a couple bottles, and set them on the counter. “I know she’ll enjoy these. Girl has a sweet tooth just like me.”

“Thanks, Cass. I owe you.”

“I’ll put them in a pretty bag for you.” She added some colorful tissue paper and some ribbons to the handle.

“Appreciate it.” He paid with cash and added a generous tip. “Keep the change.”

“That’s over ten dollars.” She held up the bill.

“You gave me a great idea.” Cassie never shared why she worked so much but he had a hunch what it was. Through no fault of her own, the woman had a rough homelife. She was proud, so he tried to help out whenever he could, even if it was in a small way. Packages in hand, he waved goodbye and made his next stop the stationery and print store.

Ava was an artist so he wouldn’t begin to guess what kind of supplies she’d need but he could get her something and make it her own.

It was near eleven when he had everything packed and stopped to pick up his girlfriend. He loved the sound of that. His beautiful, red haired, artist, girlfriend.

Ava must have been as eager about today as she was out the door and scurrying down the steps before he could put the truck in park. Ava was a vision in her floral, sleeveless dress. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun.

“Slow down, woman.” He got out and rushed over to grab her overnight bag. “You should have waited and let me get that for you.”

“You spoil me. I’ve been so used to doing my own heavy lifting that I don’t even think about it.”

After getting her bag settled in the back, he pulled her close for a kiss. She tasted like cinnamon and coffee. “That was nice.”

“Just nice?” Ava glanced up.

“Better than nice. It was epic. Are you ready to go? Did you want to stop for anything before we go?”

“No, but then I don’t know where we’re going.” Her stunning face was flushed with excitement.

Kruz held the door so she could get in before returning to the driver’s side and starting the truck. “I know you love history, so I’m taking you to a little town south of here.”

“Can’t wait.” After they got on the road, he took her hand in his. It remained there the rest of the trip.

They traveled south on the Great River Road along the Mississippi for about an hour. It was beautiful seeing the bluffs all the way. For most of the trip Minnesota was on the opposite shore of the river but now it was Iowa across the water.

At their first stop in Prairie du Chien, they visited a historic home on St. Feriolo Island. They crossed into the twin towns of Marquette and MacGregor, Iowa to visit the shops and then made a stop at a riverboat casino. Returning to the island, they strolled along the buildings of a bygone era making it easy to imagine themselves back in time.

“It’s beautiful here. I can’t believe all the flowers.” Floral-filled pots lined the riverfront walkway.

“I hoped you would enjoy it.” She’d tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow. “Are you hungry yet?”

“I’m always hungry.” She patted her flat stomach.

“Then it’s on to our next destination.”

Ava turned. “You’re really pulling out all the stops today. I’m loving every minute of it, but it isn’t necessary. I just enjoy spending time with you no matter what we’re doing.”

“I do, too, but it isn’t often I get a chance to do something for you. You’ve been doing a wonderful job taking care of Riley.”

“But this isn’t about Riley, is it?” She wrinkled her forehead.

“No, it’s not. It’s about you and me.”

A smile returned to her lips.

“Ready to go?”

“Yes.”

After he’d left the winery, Cassie had texted him the name of a great restaurant in the area. At the casino, Kruz had called the place and ordered take out. With their dinner in the back seat, Kruz soon turned into the driveway of a charming log cabin in the woods where they’d be spending the evening.

It had appeared romantic and rustic on the website, but would Ava think the same?

“Is this where we’re staying?” She sat up straight and surveyed their surroundings.

“Yeah, but if you don’t like it, or don’t want to stay, we don’t have to. We can go somewhere else or go home.”

She was out the door as soon as they stopped. Ava ran up on the large porch and gazed out at the view. They were high on a bluff, so the view of the Mississippi was spectacular. “I love it. I can’t wait to see the inside.”

The look of wonder on her face took his breath away. She waved him over. Their bags would have to wait.

The inside was cozy, and like most places in the area, had a slight up north décor with red and black plaid curtains, a



wood fireplace, and a bear skin rug on the floor.

“It’s so cute. You did good, Tanner.”

It should be for the price he’d paid but she was worth it. “It’s missing one thing. Close your eyes and wait here.” He rushed to the truck then back into the cabin.

“Now what are you up to?”

“Open them.” He held a long box in front of her.

Ava pressed her hands together, happiness written all over her face as she lifted the lid. “You got me flowers? They’re so pretty.” She wasted no time pressing her nose to the petals. “I adore the scent of roses. How did you know I liked them?”

“Lucky guess. They were the most beautiful in the shop, so I knew they must be for you.”

“Ahh, Kruz.” A tear glistened in the corner of her eye.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to make you cry.” He cupped her cheek with his palm.

“The tears are because I’m happy.”

“Well, you’re about to be even happier.” Kruz placed the bottles from the winery on the table. “This I did have help with. Cassie said you liked these.”

“I do. You’ve thought of everything.” Ava wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Not everything, I still have to bring in the food.” He dropped a kiss to her forehead.

“Here, let me help.” She followed him outside.

For only staying the night, there was quite a bit to haul in. Kruz took the heavy ones and Ava handled the lighter ones. “What’s in this bag?” It was the one from the stationary store.

“Don’t look. It’s another surprise.” He took it from her and held it behind his back.

“Seriously Kruz, this is too much. You’re spoiling me.” Stomping her foot, she appeared to be mad but continued to smile.

“Making you happy makes me happy.” Even to himself, he sounded sappy, but it was true.

The restaurant did a wonderful job in following his instructions for the meal. They ate outside and enjoyed their salmon cooked to perfection while witnessing the sunset over wine and chocolate cake.

“This is delicious.” Ava licked every bit from her fork.

“Agreed. I might have to buy some for the ride home. I’m going to take these dishes in quick.”

“You do dishes too. You’re the perfect man.”

“I’ll do them in the morning. Tonight, is all about you.”

When he returned outside, she stood staring off in the distance. Kruz enveloped her in his arms. She leaned her head back on his chest. Her scent reminded him of the roses.

“Thank you for this. You’ve given me the most romantic night of my life.” Ava faced him.

“I’m glad but, it’s not over yet.” She blushed but kept his gaze. “You know I’d never make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Of course. I trust you completely.”

“Are you ready to go in? We can make popcorn and watch movies.”

“Yes, I’m ready to go in, but I’ll pass on the popcorn and movies.”

“What do you want to do?” He held his breath.

“Just be with you, all night.”

Waking up next to Ava was heaven. Auburn waves of wild hair covered her cheeks. He pushed it aside so he could see her face. Even with no makeup she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Her pale cheeks were dotted with a few freckles. Her long lashes fluttered as she awoke and pulled the blankets higher.

“It’s too early to be up.” Snuggling closer, Kruz gathered her in his arms.

“With a young kid at home, I’m always up. You stay and I’ll make some breakfast.”

“Oh no, let me help.” She swung her legs to the side of the bed.

Kruz pushed her gently back to the bed. “No need. I cheated and grabbed some donuts and instant coffee yesterday, but I can go to town if you want something stronger.”

“Of course not. You’re the only strong thing I want.” Despite wanting to help, Ava soon fell asleep in his arms again. She’d been working hard. No one knew how much a little kid could wear a person out better than he did. Kissing her nose, he eased from the bed. The final gift still needed to be put together.

Cassie said to give her something personal and from the heart. Pulling the sketch book and pencils from the bag, he got to work.



*Ava*

Coffee, hardy and strong, tickled her nose. Ava stretched and hugged her pillow one more time before rolling out of the comfortable bed. Wrapping Kruz's flannel shirt around herself, she wandered out to the kitchen. Her man was bent over the table writing something in a book.

“What're you doing, hon?”

Kruz jumped and covered something with his arms. “Hey, you're up.”

“Yes. I am.” The donuts were too tempting to resist. She bit into a chocolate dunker. They were pure bliss. “What are you working on?”

He quickly tossed things into a gift bag and pushed it in her direction. “You're last gift.”

“Seriously, Kruz. The only thing I need is you.” She sat in the chair next to him. When he nudged it closer, she finally picked it up, opened the bag, and pulled out the sketch pad.

“I know you probably have a ton of books just like this, but I wanted to personalize it for you.”

It was true, at home she had piles of them, but as she flipped the pages, Kruz had written on each one. Things like, ‘favorite part of the river,’ ‘happy place,’ and ‘special moment.’

“What is this?” Ava closed it up and stared in wonder at this hard-core biker with the kindest heart.

“It’s a memory book of the summer. I know you love to draw as much as paint. You can fill it up with all the things we’ve done and will continue to do. You know I want you to stay, but if you decide to leave, you’ll have this to remember it by.”

Kruz had woven his way into her heart more and more every day. The fact that he’d put so much thought into this gesture pretty much sealed the deal.

“I know which page I will fill out right now.” She opened to the page saying, ‘worth the wait.’ “I’ll be outside sketching this cabin with you sitting on the step.” Ava choked over the words.

It took everything she had to get out the door without bursting into tears. They’d only known each for a short time but Kruz, and Riley, were two people becoming more important to her every day.

When he found out about her family would he still want to be with her?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Ava*

BY THE TIME MONDAY CAME AROUND SHE'D FILLED OUT A couple more pages of the sketch book. On the page with the title, 'First impressions,' she captured Kruz standing by his mailbox the first time they'd met. 'Brand new world' was her virgin voyage in his boat and her first time seeing the Mississippi from the ground up, well, water up in that case.

After meeting with the rest of Kruz's family, she'd been invited to stop in any time at a number of businesses and their homes. He really had a great support system in the area. It was surprising that she was even needed here, but thank God she was, or she'd never have met her new man.

It was easy to be on an emotional high about their budding relationship, but sometimes doubts trickled in that it was too good to be true. It was usually the case in her life. Riley had stayed with her grandparents the entire weekend and Kruz had to go in early, so she decided to drive herself into work. The walk would have been good, but she'd thought about taking Riley for a trip to a historical site in the area. Afterward they could take a hike on a nearby trail listed on a website.

After packing some sandwiches in her insulated tote, Ava left for work. Since she enjoyed spending time with Riley, it

didn't really seem like work. The child was fun, easy to get along with, and well behaved. Kruz and his family had done an amazing job with raising her. Her thoughts turned to Riley's mother. What kind of a person would desert her baby? If she were ever pregnant with Kruz's child, she'd never be able to leave either one of them behind. But did she want to stay?

That decision weighed heavier on her with each and every day she became deeper involved in their lives and the town of Coulee Bluff. She tried not to worry, but it was a cloud hanging over head. The closer the end of summer got, the darker and lower the cloud became.

On the way to work her mother called. She hit the button on her steering wheel to answer. "Hey mom."

"Hi dear. How's everything going?" At least she seemed happy.

"Great and you. How are things there?"

The long sigh dashed her hopes that her mother was doing better. "I need to get away from the wagging tongues. Go where no one knows me."

"Where are you going?" Flipping on her turn signal, Ava turned into the greenhouse parking lot.

"I thought I would visit you."

Ava put the parking brake on before hitting the actual brake and the car jerked back and forth. "You're coming here? Really? You've not been here since you finished high school."

"I know, but that was because of your father. After the mess he'd dragged me through, the man doesn't have much say right now on anything I do."

His affair was the scandal of the year and refusing to step down from office showed how arrogant he was. They'd never gotten along. Something she'd never realized until the last few years. Witnessing other fathers at father/daughter dances was a sobering and heartbreaking revelation while she sat there alone. He'd never attending any of her school events. He was always too busy or traveling. Her brother, whom her father showered with affection, also mentioned the oddity. Had she done something wrong somewhere along the way that he could never forgive? If she had, he'd never told her. Did he regret her being born? Had he wanted a son instead of a daughter?

“Ava?”

Her mother's voice woke her from her contemplations. “Oh, yes. Sorry. You said something about coming to visit. When?”

“This weekend.”

“Okay, I'll figure out something for us to do. You'd love the winery here.”

“No need to plan anything special. I'm just happy to spend time with you.”

“It will be fun. I'm looking forward to it.” It would be nice to hear her memories of the town and see if it had changed much.

“Me too, dear. Me too. Have a good day.”

“Thanks Mom. You, too.”

Turning the engine off, Ava sat for a moment to collect herself. What did her mother's arrival mean? Her father's affair had been devastating to the family, but she still hoped they could work it out. Lauren had lived the high life for so long, she'd be lost in a small town.



Riley and Claire were waiting for her when she entered the greenhouse. “Hi, sorry I’m late. My mom just called.”

“No worries at all. Everything all right?” Claire seemed to genuinely care about her mother’s well-being.

“I think so. She’s coming to visit.”

Claire’s eye grew big, and her jaw dropped. “Well, I’ll be. That’s fantastic news. I can’t tell you how wonderful it will be to see her again.” She clapped her hands together. “We should plan a welcome home party or something.”

“You might want what to hold off on that. I’m a little worried. As much as I hoped my parents could work things out, her coming here has me concerned. Like I’m about to get some bad news or something.” Hopefully that wasn’t the case.

Claire, always the motherly type, put her arm around Ava and led her to the break room. “Here let me get you a coffee with extra cream on top. That always fixes me up.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” The smell of the hazelnut blend Claire preferred did the trick or maybe it was the knowledge she had people here who cared about her. As she took a sip, Riley plopped down next to her and eased closer. It was as if she knew Ava was down and wanted to help.

“Of course.” Claire placed the mug in front of her and patted her shoulder. “Take your time. Riley said you were planning on going somewhere today.”

“Yes, to the Potter house then hiking.” That perked Riley up as she nodded vigorously while kicking her feet enthusiastically.

“I think that will be a good choice for both of you. Let me get you some money for the tour.”

“Of course not. My treat.”

“Are you sure?” Claire turned at the sound of customers entering the store.

“Yes. We’re all set. Thanks. You go, and don’t worry about us.”

“All right, but remember, whatever happens we have your back.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Again, the feeling of being surrounded by family overwhelmed her. She fought back tears when Riley grabbed her hand.

“Can we go now?”

Or maybe the kid was just anxious to go. Chuckling to herself, Ava smiled. “Of course. Put your books away, while I finish this drink and we’ll go.”

A couple hours later they sat at a park picnic bench enjoying the sandwiches, chips, and cookies she’d packed for their picnic. Come to think of it, it was the first one she’d ever planned. She’d done a good job if she did say so herself.

Riley rubbed at the melted chocolate from the cookies. “Do you have wipes?”

“Why yes I do.” Ava did an imaginary fist pump for remembering all the necessities. “Did you enjoy the tour?”

“I liked the playroom. I wish I could have played with the toys.”

The historical home of one of the first families in the area they’d toured had a wonderful display of all the rooms in the home including the rooms of the family’s children.

“They’re very old and are probably fragile. They might break if you played with them too hard.”

“Hmm. Can we go on the hike now?”

“Of course. Let’s put this stuff away and put on our sneakers.”

“Okay.” Riley tossed their trash in the garbage while Ava put their bags in the car. After tying her shoes, they headed over to the start of the trail.

“Have you been here before?” Ava took Riley’s hand in hers as they walked across the blacktop parking lot.

“A couple times. Dad always yells for me to stay on the trail.”

“Good advice.” As soon as they reached the crushed rock trail, Riley dropped her hand and skipped ahead a little. Hopefully the exercise would wear her out some.

It was a beautiful day. Flashes of sun filtered through the trees as they wandered. The bluffs across the river stood proud and strong, the river mighty and ever flowing. If she were a writer, she’d probably put a chair along the shore and put words to paper, but she was a painter. There she said it, she wasn’t meant to be a marketer for her father’s company. Ava was right brain, not left or whatever side it was that was creative. Even if she did return to the city, she wouldn’t be returning to her job. Life was too short to be miserable.

It was hard to breathe after so much debate, it just came to her at that exact moment in this exact spot. It was as if her life was about to change in a big way. Stopping, she breathed in the fresh air and listened to the leaves blowing in the wind. The river was magical and something she could stare at for hours letting its peacefulness flow through her.

Rustling in the trees, drew Ava's attention from the river. Where was Riley? She was nowhere in sight!

"Riley. Riley, where are you?" Rushing ahead, Ava searched the area on each side of the trail. Just trees on one side and the bank and river on the other. No, no, no. Where did she go? "Riley! Riley!" Had she fallen in and been swept away?

Her heart pounded. Her blood ran cold as panic filled every pore of her body.

The child's scream set her pulse racing as she ran toward the sound. There she could see Riley down the bank, tears streaming down her face as she pointed to the ground. Ava's heart stopped at the coiled snake, her fear of snakes momentarily paralyzing her. Its tail rattled and true fear turned her focus to black and white.

"It bit me," Riley whispered.

The confession knocked Ava for a loop. She gripped a nearby tree for balance. She was no expert on snakes but a bite from a rattler had to be serious, if not deadly.

"It's okay, stay still." Keeping her hold on the tree, Ava reached down. "Slowly take my hand. No sudden moves. All right?" Riley nodded once and did as told. The snake rattled again, and Ava fought the urge to hiss back. How dare the beast hurt one hair on this child's head. Using strength, she didn't know she possessed, Ava carefully lifted Riley up and away from the threat. Once she was up on the trail, Ava hugged her close and ran with Riley on her hip to her car.

By now Riley was sobbing. Setting her on the picnic table where they'd just enjoyed lunch, Ava examined her lower leg.

Two bite marks pierced her skin. and the area around it was starting to swell. To make matters worse, they were alone in the park.

“We have to go.” As fast and as carefully as she could, she lifted Riley and put her in the car. Tires spun as she tore out of the lot and floored the pedal to get to the town’s hospital. They would know what to do. Riley had stopped crying. A quick glance in her direction showed that she’d passed out but was still breathing.

Praying all the way, Ava skidded to a stop in front of the emergency room. Not bothering to turn off the car, she rushed to the passenger side and carried Riley into the hospital.

“Help,” she yelled. “Someone help me. She’s been bit by a snake.”

The woman at the desk called for a gurney. Soon staff had Riley on the stretcher and wheeled her back to an ER room.

A nurse tried to get as much information from Ava as she could, but she didn’t know about Kruz’s insurance and Ava’s allergies.

“Oh my God, I have to call her father. I’ll be right back.”

Ava ran to her car, drove it out from under the canopy, and parked in a parking spot. Her hands shook as she fumbled in her purse for her cell. It took a couple times before she could punch in the numbers correctly.

“Hey, hon. What’s up?” Kruz’s cheerful voice did little to calm her.

“Kruz. Please get to the hospital as fast as you can. Riley was bit by a snake.”

“What? What kind of snake? Is she okay?”

In the background she heard him telling his staff he had to go. Soon the sound of his truck turning over and tires squealed came through the phone.

“I don’t know. I think it was a rattler. I’m so sorry Kruz, I just turned my head for a moment, and she was gone. I heard her scream and, oh, please God, keep her safe.” Tears ran down her face. She dropped the phone as Kruz’s truck flew into the parking lot squealing on two wheels.

He tore out of the truck and raced toward Ava as soon as he caught sight of her. “Where is she?”

“In the ER.”

“Let’s go.” He grabbed her hand. She could barely keep up with him in his rush to see his daughter. The automatic doors were too slow, so he pulled them aside.

“Kruz, she’s in room two.” The nurse obviously knew who he was and hit the button to open the door to the exam rooms. When Kruz pushed aside the curtain. Riley lay still, her eyes closed, as white as the sheet she laid on. Ava collapsed in a nearby chair and Kruz dropped to his knees next to her bed.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Kruz*

THERE WERE TIMES IN HIS LIFE WHERE KRUZ WAS SCARED TO death and his heart nearly stopping. Hitting sand on his bike while going too fast, having a truck go through a red light and miss him by inches. But nothing prepared him for seeing Riley appearing to be dead in a hospital bed. His knees buckled as he reached for her small body. He squatted next to her.

As soon as she opened her eyes, he choked as if coming up for air after being under water for too long. He gasped and felt faint with relief.

“Riley, Riley. Sweetheart, talk to me.” Gently touching her cheek to feel her warm skin, he was afraid to move. Afraid he was dreaming.

“My leg hurts,” she mumbled.

It was then he noticed her leg was uncovered, a nasty red mark where the serpent had bit into her. When she was safe, he was taking Remi to the spot and eliminate any others they could find.

“What did the doctor say?” He hated that he’d snapped at Ava.

Ava started when he addressed her. She was probably more in shock than his little girl was.

“I ... I don’t know. As soon as they took her in, I called you.”

He patted her knee. Ava was as shook up as he was. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bark at you. You did good. Thanks for getting her here so fast.”

Ava nodded once, her skin pale and her eyes wide.

“Hi, Kruz.” Dr. Ted Wilson entered the room followed by a nurse. Kruz had done work on the doctor’s Harley several times.

Kruz stood, shook his hand, and introduced him to Ava. “Doc, how’s my girl?”

“She’s tough, just like you.” The doctor looked at the wound while the nurse took Riley’s temp. “We gave her some antivenom. The swelling is already starting to go down. I think it’s best we keep her here for a couple more hours for observation. If there are no complications, Riley can go home. She’ll be fine.”

“That’s good, but I think I lost a few years off my life in the past hour.” Kruz rested his shoulder against the wall.

Riley smiled and reached for Ava’s hand.

“Part of the joy of having kids. We’ll contact Remi about the snake so he can close the area while he searches for it. Hopefully it was just a lone one and not a nest. Knowing Rem, he’ll have the area cleared in no time.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He should be wanting to help Rem, but right now he was emotionally exhausted.



“Take care Riley.” The doc tapped her good leg and said goodbye to Ava. The nurse told them they’d let Riley rest for a while longer before dressing the bite. They’d also receive additional discharge information. After they were alone, Ava sunk back in the chair, her complexion as white as his daughter’s had been.

“Thanks again for all you did. I don’t know how to thank you.” Kruz sat next to her.

“Thank me? I’m so sorry Kruz. If it weren’t for me, this wouldn’t have happened.” She slumped forward and cradled her face in her palms.

“What are you talking about?” He took her hands in his and led her from the room so Riley couldn’t hear. “She could have died if you weren’t there. You saved her life.”

“I turned away for a minute and she was gone. How can you trust me to look after her anymore?”

With his thumb, he brushed away a tear rolling down her cheek. “You’re being so upset reassures me that you are the right person to be with her. I admit, I was terrified, but this was in no way your fault. I hope I never made you feel what happened was in any way your doing. Where was Riley when she got bit?”

“She was off the trail and down on the rocks.”

“Did you tell her to stay on the trail?” He arched an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Her lower lip quivered.

“Just like I do all the time. If I’d been there, the same thing could’ve happened.” He pulled her close to his chest, and Ava collapsed against him. Kruz could feel her shaking. “It’s going to be all right, hon. I promise.”

“Daddy?” Riley called out.

“What is it?” Kruz rushed to her side and swept her hair away from her face.

“Can we get ice cream?” Riley never missed an opportunity to ask for a treat.

Chuckling, Kruz felt more of the anxiety leave his system. If she was asking for food, his kid was on the way to feeling better already.

“Of course. What kind do you want?”

“Chocolate and peanut butter.”

“You got it.” He rubbed her nose with his.

“I should probably leave.” Ava fidgeted and picked up her purse.

“Ava you can’t go.” Riley reached out with her little fingers. “You have to come with us.”

Ava stepped closer and wiped at a tear before placing her hand on top of Riley’s. “I’d love to.”

Kruz added his on top of the pair. Riley had scared the hell out of him today but so did the thought of Ava leaving them. They both needed her, more than she could imagine.

It was later than it should’ve been when they finally got home. Except for when eating her ice cream, Riley refused to let go of Ava’s hand. In such a short time, Riley had bonded with Ava. It would break her heart if she left, his also.

After they both put her to bed and kissed Riley good night, Ava was quiet as they settled on the couch in the living room. She’d been subdued most of the night.

“I can call for a cab to take me home.” After driving her car home from the hospital, Kruz had picked her up to go for ice cream then they’d come to his home.

“Please stay.” Riley needed her and so did he.

“I feel like my life is spinning out of control right now. I don’t know what to do.” Ava admitted.

“Welcome to the world of being a parent. I know this is scary. I’m scared too. The thought of you leaving, not just tonight but at the end of summer will kill me and Riley too.”

“I don’t want to go either. When I thought something had happened to Riley, I died inside. I’ve never felt such pain. I’ve grown to care about you both as well as a lot of other people in town.”

“Say you’ll stay.” He hugged her close. The familiar scent surrounding her never failed to make him feel like he was home. After several agonizing moments she finally spoke.

“I don’t know what I’m doing or what I’m going to do, but I know my place is here.”

Kruz thanked the stars above. Pressing his lips to hers, everything felt right with the world. Riley was fine, and he was falling in love with Ava. Probably was in love already. It was hard to remember what life was like before she entered theirs. He only knew it wouldn’t be the same if she left.



Riley rattled off what she wanted to do so fast it was hard to keep up with her. Except for the bandage on her leg, you’d never know she’d recently had a run in with a dangerous snake.

“And I want to get a Pete’s hamburger for lunch and then go to the playground and then ...”

Kruz held up his hand. “Calm down.” He snickered. Listening to her was heaven after seeing her so lifeless in the ER bed. “I know you’re feeling better, but I still think you need to take it easy today.”

“We can still walk to Pete’s for lunch. I bet your grandma would love one of their burgers. We could bring it back and eat with her,” Ava suggested.

“No onions.” Riley picked up a piece of bacon and put it in her mouth.

“Yes, no onions for Grandma.” Kruz placed another plate of pancakes in the middle of the table and took a seat. It felt right having Ava here with them. Like they were already a family. A feeling which could only be described as joy filled his heart. After having Riley literally dropped in his arms, except for family, women had been nonexistent in his life. It was almost unbelievable that someone he’d so recently met had become so indispensable. She’d slept the night in his arms, both seeking the comfort the other provided.

She healed his scarred heart and cared for his motherless child, but what did they have to offer her?

“Can I get you some more coffee?” Ava poured herself another cup.

“Thanks, but I’m good.” He took a sip of the brew. She made it just the way he liked it. “Hey wait. I just thought about something.” Something that might work to keep her in town.

“Yeah, what?” Ava rested her jaw on her fist and looked up at him. Her eyes were the prettiest shade of green he’d ever seen.

“You’re always talking about the lack of a good coffee shop in town. Maybe you should open one.”

“Just because I like it doesn’t mean I want to do it. Besides, I have no clue how to roast coffee. Nice idea but I think I should leave it to the professionals.” She dug into her eggs and scooped a helping into her mouth.

“Art store?” There had to be something.

This time she shrugged. “I don’t know if they’d be enough call for an art store here. You can get everything online these days.”

“That’s true.” So far, he was batting a zero. “Art gallery?”

“I’d love to have my own gallery, but again, do you think there would be enough business in such a small town?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “There has to be something you could do here. Heck, you could move in with us. That would save on rent.”

Ava dropped her fork and Riley shouted with glee. It was clear his child wanted her to stay as much as she did.

“Wow, I ... Ah, thanks but I always promised myself I wouldn’t live with someone I wasn’t engaged or married to.” She raised a hand as if to stop his words. “And please don’t propose, because we haven’t known each other long enough for that.”

It’d been on the tip of his tongue to ask her to marry him, but she was right. It was too soon. They still had a lot to learn about each other.

“We’ll figure something out.” Kruz reassured both his girls. Time was running out to come up with a plan.

“Can you drop me off before work so I can take a quick shower before going to the greenhouse?”

“Certainly, but you don’t have to go to work today.”

“I don’t?”

“Riley’s spending the day at the shop with me. I know you haven’t had a lot of time to yourself, so I wanted you to enjoy the day. Relax. Paint. Do whatever you’ve been wanting to do but haven’t had the time.”

Ava perked up. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. Yesterday was stressful for all of us. You deserve a break.”

“Well, thanks. I do have a few things to take care of.”

“Great. It’s settled. Everyone done with their breakfast?”

Riley pushed her plate forward and Ava followed suit.

“Good. Riley, gather your things for the day. I’ll put these dishes in the sink, and we’ll see you to your place on the way.”

When they turned into Ava’s driveway, they couldn’t miss the brand-new Mercedes SUV parked next to the house. Kruz pulled up alongside it. A blonde woman got out and came around to the front of the SUV. She was dressed in pair of tan pants and an ivory blouse.

“I wonder who that is?” Kruz turned to face Ava.

“My mother.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Ava*

“MOM? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” AVA GAVE HER MOTHER a hug. The rich fragrance of her perfume reminded her of home. “I had no idea you were coming to visit so soon.”

“I can see that. Imagine my surprise when I found your car here, but you weren’t.” She kept glancing toward Kruz, who’d slowly approached and stood by Ava’s side.

“I was with Kruz and Riley. She had a pretty traumatic day yesterday, as we all did.” Her stomach rolled just thinking about it.

“Hello, Mrs. Wellington. I’m Kruz Tanner.”

Lauren seemed to cautiously study the hand Kruz offered before agreeing to shake it. “Please. Call me Lauren. You’re Claire’s boy, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve heard many stories of the two of you growing up together.”

“We did have some good times. I’m looking forward to visiting with her later today.” Lauren clutched the pearls draped around her neck. “What happened with Riley?”

“She had a close encounter with a rattlesnake. Too close.” Kruz nodded at his daughter. “But she’ll be fine.”

“Oh, dear. Poor thing.”

“I have to get to work, but it was a pleasure meeting you, Lauren. Ava, I’ll talk to you later.” He kissed her cheek and left.

Heat flooded Ava’s face as she looked at her mother. Lauren raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows and wrapped an arm about Ava’s shoulder. “Looks like we have a lot to catch up on.”

After she’d showered and changed, Ava sat on the couch and angled her body to face her mother.

“You didn’t tell me what a handsome young man Riley’s father is.” Her mother’s eyes shone like she was teasing. “Or that you were, shall we say, involved with him.”

“It just kind of happened, and now I don’t know what to do. I feel like I have one foot here and one foot back home. I’m torn between two places, but I’m still so hurt by what Dad did to you. How could I ever go back and work with him?”

“You have to do what makes you happy not what makes others happy.” Lauren crossed one leg over the other. “I was in love with someone from Coulee Bluff when I met your father. I’d always dreamed about getting out of this hick town, as I used to call it. Little did I know how much I came to miss it and the people once I was gone.”

“You had a boyfriend here yet fell in love with father and moved? I never knew that.”

“It’s complicated. I moved because John offered me another life I thought I wanted.”

“I don’t understand.” What else didn’t she know about her parent’s relationship?



“The reason he hates Coulee Bluff and never wanted us to visit was because John always felt the place was a threat to our relationship. That I might want to return and stay.”

What? This was news to her. “Wow, I guess I always knew there was something not right between the two of you, but never expected that. You mean he thought you would leave him for this other man? Did he cheat on you as some type of revenge?”

“I never, ever gave John any reason to believe I’d be untrue, but he had doubts. Once he got into politics, and was gone so much, those insecurities grew.”

“Why would he be insecure, and why is he always so hard on me? He’s texted me several times insisting I return early and start work in the marketing department.”

“You were top of your class. Anyone would want to hire you.”

“I simply can’t imagine doing a job I don’t like for the rest of my life.”

“And I don’t want that for you, either.”

Was her mother speaking from first-hand knowledge? “What do I do? I’m falling for Kruz more and more every day. Not to mention Riley. Dad will hate me if I turn him down.”

“Just know that I love you enough for two people. That is why I came. I’m here for you and will always support you. Don’t do what I did. Don’t abandon love for material things. As the saying goes, you can’t buy love.”



They'd spent the rest of the day together visiting some of Lauren's old hangouts and Ava's new ones. Funny how they'd lived their whole lives together and yet Ava knew nothing of her mother's dream of opening a shop. Lauren loved fashion. In high school she had dreamed of design school and a boutique of her own.

Despite Ava wanting her to stay longer, Lauren returned home. When she departed, Ava had even more to think about. Time was slipping away. She only had one more month to decide what to do.

Funny when you're waiting for something fun to do, it takes forever for the special day to arrive. When you're dreading something, it arrives in a hurry. It seemed like it was only yesterday, Ava had missed a turtle and met a man. The image of Kruz by his mailbox would be forever etched in her brain.

It was with a sense of melancholy, she helped pick out school supplies with Riley and Kruz. Her heart felt as if it was being ripped apart every time she considered leaving. She finally decided she couldn't do it. Tonight, she'd share the news with Kruz. Then she would set about finding another job once Riley returned to school.

"Would you look at this list? You'd think she was going to medical school not grade school." Kruz grumbled under his breath.

Ava laughed. It did seem a bit much, but Kruz had seemed stressed all morning. Hopefully admitting she was staying would help ease some of it. "Is everything all right?"

"Actually, no." He ran his fingers through his dark, thick hair.

“What’s wrong?” She placed a comforting hand on his arm.

“You remember the bike that you did the artwork for?”

“Of course. Did they not like it?” She’d be crushed if it was her painting the customer disagreed with.

“He’s never been back for it.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I’ve left messages several times but got no response. That was the most expensive bike I’ve ever done, and I had to foot the bill for everything the deposit didn’t cover. I’m getting concerned to say the least.” He gave a nervous laugh.

“Oh no. What are you going to do?”

“Well, he finally got back to me and is coming tonight.”

“That’s good news.”

“Thanks. I hope. Riley has a sleepover at her cousins,’ so after I drop you off, I’m taking her there then meeting up with him at the shop. Hopefully, I’ll be by later tonight with a bottle of champagne to celebrate.” The wiggle of his eyebrows spoke volumes for what they’d be doing once he arrived.

“That’s wonderful. I have a surprise for you also.”

“Oh yeah? What is that?” He tossed another notebook in the shopping cart.

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if you knew, now, would it?”

She’d been working on the memory book he’d given her shortly after they began dating. It would be her gift to him followed by the good news she’d planned to stay in Coulee Bluff.



Ringling her hands together as she paced her living room was about to send Ava into an anxiety attack. What was happening? He should be home by now. Not able to wait any longer, she drove to Kruz's shop to find out if the buyer liked the bike her man had put his heart and soul into.

Parking along the side, she didn't want to barge in and ruin any of their dealings. Luckily, even though the place was closed, the door was open. Quietly she wandered to the bay area and overheard Kruz praising his new energy efficiency bike. She also heard a familiar voice - her father's.

"I don't care about the damn bike. I don't want Ava ending up with some small-town biker." John Wellington yelled.

"Are you kidding me? You hire me to build an expensive bike only to back out on the deal unless I break things off with your daughter? What kind of a monster are you? She's a grown woman who can make her own decisions."

"Not in this case. I only agreed to let her come here because of her mother's insistence, but it was never meant for her to stay. I need her skills at the company, and those plans don't include you. So, do I pay you the rest of the money for the bike or do you choose Ava and go further in the red when I leave you high and dry?" He sounded like a high-priced lawyer pleading his case to a jury.

Ava placed one hand over her mouth and the other on the wall to keep her standing upright as she peeked around the corner. Her father truly was a monster if he would do something like this. Kruz had no choice but to give her up to save the business he'd worked for years to build.

“No deal. I’ll find someone else to buy it.” Kruz refused to take the bait.

Ava’s heart soared that he would care so much about her, but could she let him do it?

“I was afraid you might do something like that. That’s why I had plan B set up.” Her father dropped a file on the table in front of Kruz.

“What’s this?”

“A legal document I had one of my lawyers set up giving your daughter’s mother full custody.”

“You bastard.” Kruz clinched his fists.

“I’ve been called worse. It’s business, Mr. Tanner. You have until the end of the week to break it off with my daughter or lose your own.”

On wobbly legs, Ava fled the building. She been left with no option. Her mind was red with rage as she drove home. Remi waved as he waited at a corner but it barely registered.

Tonight, she would pack up and leave. That’d give her all night to think of a way to break it off with Kruz. There was no way she could come between him and his daughter. Even if it cost her a soulmate and a life of servitude to the man who only provided the sperm to create her, but obviously cared for no one but himself.



The next day, Ava pulled her luggage behind her and past the breakfast room. Her parents looked up from their coffee and iPads.

“Ava?” Lauren set her cup on the saucer. “What are you doing here? I thought you still had another week in Coulee Bluff.”

“Ask him.” She glared at her father.

“John? What’s going on?”

“Yes. John.” Ava had never called her father by his first name before, but she was livid. “Tell her what you’ve done.”

“Is that why you wanted to speak with me this morning?” Her mother picked up a spoon and added some sugar to her tea.

It just dawned on her that her father hadn’t been living at home this summer, yet he was here. “Maybe he’s going to drop a bomb on you like he did to Kruz. Maybe if you stop seeing me, he will let you continue to see my brother.”

“What are you talking about? Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” She tugged at her pearls. It appeared she was already dressed for a day at the club

Her father rose and shut the doors to the room giving them privacy from the ears of their staff.

“Ava, please take a seat.” He pulled out a chair next to the table.

“You may be my father, but you can’t tell me what to do anymore.” She planted both her fists on her hips.

“You’re correct on one account.” John let out a deep breath. “I can’t tell you what to do because I’m not your father.”

The only sound in the room after his confession was the echo of Lauren’s spoon hitting the fine China and bouncing to the floor.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *Ava*

HER LIFE HAD BEEN TURNED UPSIDE DOWN TWICE IN THE LAST twenty-four hours. Ava sat down before her legs could give out.

“Do you want to tell her or should I?” John got up and paced.

Her mother’s face went white. “I will.” The blue of her eyes was almost navy with tears.

It finally made sense. Ava had red hair and green eyes; coloring that didn’t match anyone else in the family. Not even her cousins. She wasn’t a Wellington.

“As you know, I grew up in Coulee Bluff. There was a boy in high school I dated and cared for very much. He was my first real love.” Her husband winced. “Anyway, this boy was content to stay there while I wanted nothing more than to see the world. We’d parted ways the end of senior year. I met John soon after. He was spending the summer there with a friend after graduating from college. It was attraction at first sight. At the end of August, John asked me to get married. I, of course, said yes and moved to the cities to be with him. Much to the disappointment of his parents, soon after I realized I was pregnant. We couldn’t be happier and moved the wedding up.

It wasn't until we had the terrible car accident when you were four that we realized John wasn't your father. The blood types didn't match. I thought you were just born early but it wasn't the case."

Her father, make that, John kept his eyes focused on hers. "I never intended for it to change how I felt about you, but it did. I was filled with self-doubt. I was afraid it would change how your mother felt about me. When I found out she was pregnant with your brother, it was like we had a second chance. As you grew, you looked more and more like him." John cursed under his breath. "I took my frustrations out on you.

"A few years ago, I got into politics hoping it would make me feel better, give me the attention I thought I deserved." He bent his head. "It was just the first curve in the spiral of my downfall, and your mother and our relationship. When she told you about the summer job, I thought it was a reason for her to go back, not you. I had people in town keeping an eye out in case Lauren returned. At first, I had ordered the bike from Kruz as a good will gesture to your mom. Show her I was helping out the community." John groaned as if the life was draining from his body or maybe it was just purging everything he'd done. "When I heard about you spending time with that man, it was like I was living the same nightmare all over again. I would lose you to some small-town guy with good looks and no future. Then who would help me with the company?"

"I lost my way. I was never home. I had a stupid affair with someone I didn't care for in the least. Then last night I did something I will never forgive myself for. I told your boyfriend to break it off with you or I'd see his child taken away."



“John!” Lauren gasped, tossed her napkin on the table, and stood. “How could you?”

Anger like she’d never known surged through her. “Threatened? I was watching from outside the room. You had a file in your hand. Documents you already had filled out.” Her yelling could probably be heard next door.

“The envelope contained some forms I had to sign for a leasing project. I brought them in with me at the last moment, just in case he said no.”

“You’re a horrible person.” What Kruz must think of her and her twisted family. “How could you do something like this?”

“That is why I came to see your mother this morning. I’d had a reckoning. I hit bottom.” John slumped in chair, looking older than he had in years. “I’ve changed these past years into a person I don’t even recognize any more. Blame it on politics, blame it on a midlife crisis, blame it all on me. I came here today, Lauren, to tell you that I’m resigning as state senator. I’m also cutting back on work in the company. I’ve been a complete bastard to two people who did nothing to deserve it. I know it’s going to take me years, decades to make it up to you, but can you forgive me, both of you?”

Too stunned and angry to speak, Ava just stared.

Lauren shook her head and pointed a finger at him. “John, you have to make this right for Ava. We will deal with our relationship in time, but she didn’t deserve this.”

“I know. I’m so, so sorry for everything. I promise to do whatever it takes to make things right.”

“It’s too late.” Ava couldn’t listen anymore. “I didn’t want him to have to deal with any guilt about dumping me to save

his daughter. I left him. It's over." She left the room, slamming the door behind her.



*Kruz*

The last day had been hell. He'd sent out feelers all over to find a buyer for the bike he'd newly named Doomsday, but so far nothing. Ava had ghosted him, leaving a vague text saying it was her, not him. His mood went back and forth between believing she was just like her old man and thinking it couldn't be farther from the truth. But what had happened and where was she?

The thought that someone could be so evil as to want to take his daughter away in exchange for not seeing his own daughter made his head spin. Sure, he'd do anything to keep someone away from Riley who would do her harm, but this was beyond messed up. Had he been played all along? None of it made sense, but right now he had to save his business in order to keep a roof over their heads. Not to mention help him forget his heart was broken.

"Hey." Remi knocked on the open office door. "Got a moment?"

"Yeah, come on in." He was in no mood to talk to anyone, but Remi always put a good spin on things.

"I heard Ava left." The legs of the folding chair screeched as he pulled it out and took a seat.

“Bad news travels fast, doesn’t it?” Kruz rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand and yawned. Sleep had been nonexistent last night.

“What happened?”

He spent the next few minutes filling him in on what’d transpired the previous night.

Remi shook his head. “Do you love her?”

“If love feels like your heart’s been pulled out of your chest and stomped on, I guess I do. I guess she didn’t feel the same way. I thought she was the one.” He choked on the lump in his throat.

“I was driving by her place this morning when I saw Carole there cleaning. She waved me down and gave me this.” He tossed the sketchbook he’d given her on the table. “Carole said she’d been contacted to clean the place after the renter left early. She found this under the couch and wasn’t sure what to do with it. I think you need to take a look.”

It was the book he’d given her. Guess she didn’t care about enough to take with.

“I think you need to look at it. I’ve got to go.” Remi stood.

“Yeah. Thanks.” He let out a deep breath.

Remi rested his palm on Kruz’s shoulder as he passed. “I’m no expert but I think she is the one for you also. Don’t be so fast to let her go.”

Kruz knew his friend meant well, but he needed to think long and hard before bringing Ava back into their lives. Riley was all questions this morning; questions he had no answers to.

His email notification pinged. He opened it and nearly jumped in the air. It was a bid for the bike. Not only a bid, but well over his asking price. At least something was going right. After responding, Kruz leaned back and took a deep breath.

Ava's book caught his eye. She probably never used it and that was why it was under the couch. Flipping through the pages, he was surprised to see they were all full. It was like a snapshot of their summer together. Drawing after drawing of their special moments. A few pages made him pause. Under the suggestion of scariest moment of the summer was a photo of Riley on the trail with a snake under the bushes. Special moments included their first boat ride together. 'Favorite places to eat' showed the three of them eating hamburgers at Pete's. But it was the last page that caused him to still. Under the title of 'Things I Love' was a picture of Riley and him.



*Ava*

*A week later*

She hated her job. It was like pulling teeth getting up in the morning and heading to work. Marketing was not her passion, and she missed Coulee Bluff. No, her passions were all back in the little town of Coulee Bluff, her friends at the book club, and other places in town. Her love of painting the landscape, taking yoga with goats (well she hadn't done that one yet, but it sounded fun), going on boat rides on the river, and she

missed taking care of Riley. Most importantly she missed Kruz.

Her fingers had hovered over the keypad many times to send the many messages she written to him, but she couldn't do it. The man must hate her for what her father had done. John said he would make it right, but she'd yet to speak to him. She only took the job at her mother's insistence. She needed to make some money if she ever wanted to move on. Only she didn't know where.

"Ava?" Beth, the floor receptionist popped her head in. "This delivery came for you."

"What is it?" She was in no mood to deal with any salesmen today.

"I don't know. A man brought it. He asked if he could wait. I told him to go down to the waiting room. The phone's been ringing off the hook or I'd have brought it sooner." Beth tapped her finger on the door frame. The woman never liked being away from her desk for any length of time.

"Ah, sure. Just leave it on the table and I'll take care of it."

"Okay. Thanks Ava. Just call if you want me to bring him back."

Whatever it was, it smelled nice. Giving into her curiosity, Ava opened the long box. Inside was a bouquet of sunflowers and baby's breath. The exact same flowers Kruz had given her. It was too much to hope for that they were from him, but who else would have sent them? Searching the box, there was a card.

*Ava,*

*Despite all that has happened, I can't get you out of mind. I know we can work this out. Everything will be fine. Riley*

*misses you, my mom misses you, the whole damn town misses you. Most importantly, I miss you. You took a piece of my soul with you when you left, and I won't feel whole until you bring it back. I'll wait for ten minutes, if you don't come out, I'll know it wasn't meant to be. Love always, Kruz.*

Ten minutes? He was here?

Racing out to the lobby, Ava searched for his handsome face before returning to receptionist's desk.

“Beth, Beth. Where's the man who dropped off the box?”

“Why? Is he gone? I told him to wait in the lobby, but I guess I took a little too long in taking the package back. Was it important?”

“More than you know.” Ava fled the room.

## EPILOGUE

*October*

IT WAS HARD TO BELIEVE THAT IT'D BEEN TWO MONTHS SINCE she'd raced after Kruz screaming his name. Joy filled her heart when she found him outside her office building sitting on a bench looking like he'd lost his last dollar. As soon as he saw her face, he ran to meet her halfway. He picked her up and showered her with kisses.

Ava gave her notice that day, packed up her bags, moved back to Coulee Bluff, and never looked back.

A lot had happened since she returned. Her house on stilts had been rented, so she'd moved in with Kruz and Riley. John had done his best to make amends. Knowing Kruz would probably refuse to take any money from him, he had a third party buy the bike for twice the asking price. When he found out it was John who had made the offer, he refused it. His so-called doomsday bike had turned into a winner. A major bike company was interested in manufacturing it. It looked like he'd be set for life.

Soon after they were together, a large envelope had arrived at Kruz's shop. Inside were official legal documents, signed by Riley's mom giving Kruz full custody of his daughter. Apparently, John had her tracked down and after being offered

an undisclosed amount of money, Riley's birth mother gave up all rights.

John had resigned from office, cut back on work, but still wasn't living back at home. They were going to a marriage counselor, so only time would tell.

"Are you ready for the big day?" Kruz kissed her neck as she put her earrings in.

"Yes, I'm excited and feeling like I need to throw up at the same time."

"It will be great. Everyone is cheering for you. Hey, before we get dressed up for the day do you have a few minutes to go somewhere with me?"

"Where? I'm still in a tank top and shorts." It was a warm day for the beginning of October, but still.

"I want your opinion on something I've been thinking about getting."

"Great, let's go." Firing up his bike, Ava jumped on behind him. It was just a couple miles or so down the road so they wouldn't be gone long. As they neared the destination, he slowed and pulled up in the small driveway of a large lot of land overlooking the river valley.

"I'm thinking about buying it. Putting up a house, shed, maybe even a barn in case Riley wants a pony. Do you like it?"

"It's gorgeous." Ava turned toward the water. "The view is stunning." Twisting around, she was shocked to see Kruz on his knee in front of her. Time stood still as her legs wobbled and threatened to give out. Kruz took her hands in his.



“From the first moment you came into my life, you turned things upside down. In a good way. You’ve brought so much joy to my life and to Riley’s. I can’t imagine ever being without you. Will you marry me, Ava Wellington?”

“Oh my god.” Her eyes watered. “Yes, Kruz Tanner. I would love to.”

He stood, lifted her up, and spun her around. He kissed her with so much love and passion it was hard to tell if her feet were still off the ground or if she was floating on air.

When he finally set her down, Kruz pulled a small box from his pocket. Inside was the most beautiful ring she’d ever seen. It was rose gold with an emerald cut diamond. He removed it from the box and slipped it on her finger.

The diamond sparkled as the sun hit it. “It’s perfect. I love it.”

“It was custom made for you, just like you were for me.” Tears threatened to fall again as he hugged her to his chest.

“No crying even if they’re happy tears. You have a big day ahead and since you’ve said yes, you have even more to plan. But if it’s too much, the house, a wedding, your business, just know I will wait forever for you. I didn’t know what I was missing in my life until I found you.

“I love you Kruz.” The thought that she would now officially be Riley’s stepmother hit her too. “I’m going to be a mom.” Laughter filled her.

“She already thinks of you that way. Riley loves you just as much as I do.”

“I’m so happy.” All her dreams were coming true.

“Me too. What do you say we go back and celebrate a little before the second big event of the day?”

“Sounds like a plan.” On the ride back, she couldn’t help holding her hand out and wiggling her fingers. The ring was flawless, and her future felt the same way.



He straightened his tie beside her. Damn, he was handsome in dress clothes.

“What?” His eyes met hers in the mirror.

“Just admiring the view.” Ava rubbed his back.

“The view from here is just as nice but if we don’t go soon, we’ll be late.”

“Okay, let’s go.” She kissed his lips feeling happier than she ever had before.

There was already a crowd of her biggest supporters waiting outside her gallery. That’s right, her gallery. In addition to her painting, she had a variety of artisans from the area displaying their goods there.

She was out the truck door before it was barely parked. Her mother cheered as Cassie, Remi, Megan, and so many others who had been so welcoming to her stood clapping and yelling.

The chamber of commerce members were there with a thick, red ribbon and a giant set of scissors. After the grand opening ceremony, it was a whirlwind of well wishes, congratulations, and sales she’d only dream about. Riley was there with her grandma, and even Ava’s brother was in town to say hi. Kruz admitted he’d had his daughter help pick out the

ring. The little girl couldn't have been more excited about the thought of Ava staying with them forever.

At the end of the day, Ava was exhausted but never felt so alive. Coming to Coulee Bluff was supposed to be temporary chance to get her head together. Yet it had become her new home. Ava had a business making her feel complete and inspired. Friends making her feel welcome. And as she caught sight of Kruz wandering in her direction, the whole world seemed right.

He'd loved her enough to risk his hard-built business, and his heart to fight for her and help make all her dreams come true. Kruz may be just a bike builder to some but whoever created him had custom made him for her.

*The End*

## DEAR READER

Thank you for reading the first book in the new Coulee Bluff Series. I'm better known for writing romantic suspense so the opportunity to write a small-town romance set in the area I know so well was too hard to pass up. The town of Coulee Bluff is a combination of many places in the upper Mississippi Valley.

Be sure to keep an eye for the rest of the series.

Book Two – Megan's story.

Book Three – Cassie's story.

Book Four – Remi's story.

Book Five – TBA

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ginger Ring is an award-winning author with a weakness for cheese, dark chocolate, and the Green Bay Packers. She loves reading, watching great movies, and has a quirky sense of humor. Publishing a book has been a lifelong dream of hers and she is excited to share her romantic stories with you. Her heroines are classy, sassy and in search of love and adventure. When Ginger isn't tracking down old gangster haunts or stopping at historical landmarks, you can find her on the backwaters of the Mississippi River fishing with her husband.



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