



MARY  
CAMPISI

*A Family Affair:*

THE  
RING

TRUTH IN LIES BOOK 23



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# A FAMILY AFFAIR: THE RING

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A SMALL TOWN FAMILY SAGA

TRUTH IN LIES

BOOK 23

MARY CAMPISI

MARY CAMPISI BOOKS, LLC

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# CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

About the Author

Other Books by Mary Campisi

# INTRODUCTION

*Magdalena, New York, is the home of second chances, forgiveness and love...*

But what happens when that love is tested? When forgiveness is all but impossible? And there is no hope for that second chance?

Melanie Russell and Will Callahan were young, in love, planning a future together when an unimaginable choice tore them apart.

Eight years later, Melanie returns to Magdalena to settle her grandmother's estate and find closure with the only man she's ever loved.

Will Callahan no longer believes in opening his heart to anyone, not after the woman he planned to marry betrayed him. He prefers spreadsheets and a calculator over emotion and promises.

Melanie's presence in Magdalena stirs all sorts of memories Will does not want to relive. But the longer she's around, the more impossible it becomes to avoid his feelings.

Can this broken-hearted couple trust each other once again for a second chance?

*This book is dedicated to my brother Mark.*

*When I was little, you protected me...*

*When I went through difficult times, you supported me with  
words of encouragement and determination.*

*You have shown me the true meaning of kindness, honor, and  
integrity, and I am grateful you are my brother.*



**E**ight years before  
*Magdalena, New York*

WILL Callahan depended on himself and his abilities to exact an outcome. He did not require chance, destiny, or what some referred to as good old-fashioned luck to see him through. All he needed was determination, perseverance, and a game plan.

He'd never gone in for sugar-coated promises or over-the-top proclamations of love and ever after, but what guy did—especially when they had no idea what the word *love* meant? Sure, he loved his mother, and his older sister when she was around, and he really loved his dog. Pizza was high on the list, same as a double cheeseburger and fries. And football. Definitely football.

And then he met Melanie Russell. From the moment he spotted her sitting two rows over in chemistry class junior year—chestnut curls pulled into a high ponytail, slender neck bent over her notebook—he knew she was the reason for the sweaty palms and churning gut. When she turned and caught him staring, those hazel eyes sparkled, and her full lips pulled into a tiny smile.

How had he never noticed her before? Maybe because she was the studious type and not a leggy blonde stuffed into a sweater, with too much hair and not enough brains. This one had brains, horn-rimmed glasses, and a vocabulary that made him wish he'd paid closer attention in English class. From the first conversation after class that day to the cheeseburgers at Lina's Café, the walks in the park, the late-night talks...the first kiss, second kiss...Will finally understood what head-over-heels in love meant.

Melanie seemed to feel the same way and it wasn't just the breathy sighs or the soft whispers that swirled around him as he trailed kisses along her neck. Or the smile she gave him when he held open the door for her or brought her dark chocolate-covered strawberries. No, it was the *way* she looked at him with those hazel eyes, as though she could see right into his soul. And when she spoke in that husky voice? It was almost impossible to formulate a thought.

*Why are you with me, Will?* she'd asked a few months after they began dating. *You could have any girl you want. Why me?*

*Why? Because I don't want anybody else. I want you,* he'd said. *You're smart and beautiful and I can never quite figure out what you're thinking, which drives me crazy but in a very good way. You're unpredictable yet constant and real...* Oh, she'd liked that answer and it had been the truth, so he shared more. *You own my heart, Melanie Russell. I'm never going to want to let you go.*

She'd leaned on tiptoe, clasped his face between her hands, and kissed him long, slow, and deep. *Then don't.*

After that night, they began planning their future as only naïve seventeen-year-olds can do. They would attend the same college, Will for accounting, Melanie for nursing. After

graduation, they'd move to the city—Boston, Pittsburgh, Raleigh—work for a few years and then consider the next phase of their lives.

Together.

They had a “life” plan and for the next four-and-a-half years, they assessed, evaluated, and reworked that plan. Will even spoke words like *destiny* and *meant-to-be* along with the feelings attached to them. A guy in love doesn't worry about sounding like a fool because he already knows he *is* one, especially with the woman he loves. In their senior year of college, they began narrowing down where they might live, the budget for an apartment, and later a house...

It was so close. All they had to do was step into the life they'd planned...just a few more months...starting with Christmas break. Final exams finished late that morning, but Will and Melanie told their parents “break” didn't begin until tomorrow. The delay would give them one last night together before the craziness of “holidays with family” set in. How could Will turn down a chance to spend a night with the woman he loved in a swanky hotel that offered room service and a king-sized bed?

The hotel in Renova was everything the brochure said it was, along with champagne, a sunken tub, and rose petals on the bed. Melanie sure loved those rose petals, especially when he placed them on her naked skin... In a little while, they'd fill up the jacuzzi, sip champagne and feed each other the dark chocolate-covered strawberries he'd picked up yesterday. And then...

“I'm so glad you convinced me to do this.” Melanie made tiny circles on his chest, snuggled closer to him as they lay in the king-sized bed. “It's perfect.”

Yes, he had done a little convincing, but it hadn't taken much to get her to agree. A tiny shred of guilt spun through him as he thought of the "fabrication" they'd told their families. How much difference could a day make anyway?

*It could change a person's life.*

Of course, Will didn't realize that when he spoke the words. At the time, they were merely intended as an excuse to spend one last night together before they split off into the hustle-bustle of holidays with their families. Melanie's mother, Susannah Russell, was a fantastic baker and believer of all things Christmas, from the hand-strung popcorn, to the caroling, and homemade fudge. As an English teacher at the high school, *A Christmas Carol* was not only required reading, but Mrs. Russell expected her class to discuss the darn thing. And wear costumes! The weird thing was, nobody refused her, not the jocks, or the cheerleaders, or the geeks...nobody. Maybe it was the convincing presentation or the soft smile, or the excitement filtering through her voice as she told them about this great experience. *You'll learn about yourself and each other*, she'd said.

Umm...not so much, but it did turn out to be half interesting and who was he to argue with Melanie's mother? She seemed to like him, but then she liked everybody, or at least acted as if she did. Later, he would realize the woman was a great actor, in the classroom and in real life.

The soft sigh beside him made him forget about Susannah Russell and the hand on his chest made him wish he'd booked two nights at the hotel. Will planted a soft kiss on the top of Melanie's head, trailed a hand along her naked thigh.

"Can you come for Christmas Eve dinner?"

*Good question.* “I’ll see if my mom’s okay with it. You know how she gets...like she hasn’t seen me in five years and won’t see me for another ten.”

Small groan. “Same as my mom. No pressure or guilt and then they start piling on both when you make a choice they don’t like.”

Will sifted her long hair through his fingers, enjoyed the silkiness of it. “Yeah, that’s why I’m glad we’re not settling in Magdalena. Can you imagine what *that* would look like?” They’d promised each other they’d venture to a city after graduation where they could explore and experience the food, the people, arts, *and life*. Anywhere but the tiny dot on the map where they’d grown up.

That was the plan.

Melanie lifted her head, met his gaze. “I really don’t care where we go, as long as we’re together.”

“Agreed.” He pulled her closer, kissed her. “But I prefer the city.”

A tiny laugh, followed by a smile. “Me, too. And a king-sized bed like this one.”

Will grinned, eased away and opened the drawer of the nightstand where he’d hidden the velvet case a few hours ago. He pulled it out, flipped open the lid, and watched Melanie’s expression as she took in the solitary diamond winking from the satin pillow. It would take him months to pay it off, but what did it matter when he was making a lifetime commitment? And besides, Melanie was worth so much more. He cleared his throat, put sound to the emotion that had lived in his heart for so long. “Will you marry me, Melanie Eliza Russell? Walk through this life with me, share the good, the

bad, the dogs and children, love and heartache and all the joy that's meant for us?"

One tear fell, then two, followed by a breathless, "Yes, absolutely yes!"

Years later, Will would wonder what might have happened if he hadn't booked the fancy hotel in Reno that night but had driven straight to Magdalena. Would life have turned out differently or would the result have been the same, delayed by a few months, maybe a year or two? He'd pondered this question, considered the various possibilities and outcomes, but always ended up in the same place—nowhere, with no answers. All he had to work with was what *did* happen and the disaster that followed. But on that last night, they were a couple in love, sharing their bodies, their dreams, their hearts.

Life was finally taking shape and this time next year, they'd be married.

That was the plan.

Will eased out of bed, popped open the champagne that had been chilling in a bucket of ice, and poured two glasses. "Small wedding or big one?"

"Small. What do you think?"

He slid her a smile, handed her a glass of champagne and climbed back into bed. "Very small."

"Location?" Melanie clinked her glass against his, her engagement ring sparkling on her left finger.

A shrug, a soft "I don't care as long as you're there." Talk about sappy and ridiculous, but he meant it and the brightness in those hazel eyes said she liked his answer.

“Maybe a backyard ceremony? That way we could keep the cost down.”

“I’m okay with that. I don’t think we should expect your parents to help. It’s been hard enough for your dad since the layoff, and I don’t want to add pressure.” Ward Russell had been out of work for six months from the insurance company. Downsizing the middleman was what they called it and it had been brutal on the poor guy and had torched his self-esteem.

“Actually, I like the idea of an intimate gathering.” She sipped her champagne, trailed a hand along his arm. “What more do I need than you?”

“Well...” Will reached into the bedside drawer and removed a bakery box with a red bow. “I’m pretty sure these are on the top of your can’t-live-without list.” He handed her the box, watched as she untied the bow, opened the lid.

“You’re right.” She eased a dark chocolate-covered strawberry from the box, bit into it, sighed. “These are in second position.” Pause and a slow smile. “*You’re* in first.”

“I like the sound of that.” He traced the engagement ring, brought her hand to his lips and kissed each finger. “This is so much better than helping my old man untangle Christmas lights and listening to Johnny Mathis *I’ll be home for Christmas*.” Joe Callahan had no patience for tedious jobs or tedious people and avoided both, preferring to pass off tasks he found boring or mundane. Will was usually the recipient of such tasks, but he didn’t mind. In fact, if it made his father less agitated and grumpy, he’d even offer to *take down* the tree before he headed back to school. Not what he wanted to do, and his mother wouldn’t be thrilled with dismantling the house before New Year’s, but if it kept the man out of one of his moods? Definitely worth it.

“Let’s not think about tomorrow or the Christmas obligations waiting for us. Tonight, there’s just you and me.” She leaned toward him, brushed her lips over his. “That’s all I want, just you and me.”

There was no talking after that, nothing but touching, kissing, and making love. He and Melanie connected in a way he hadn’t known existed and it had begun with talking and sharing, two areas he didn’t usually offer up easily. But with her, it was natural, peaceful, real, because Melanie was real. She accepted him for who he was, *not* who she wanted him to be.

A guy couldn’t ask for more than that.

Tomorrow was soon enough to announce their engagement and brace for the questions *and* the opinions. As Will drifted off to sleep with Melanie tucked against his side, those opinions crowded his brain, fought to be heard.

*When’s the wedding?*

*Where will you live?* And of course, his mother would toss out more personal comments like *Have you discussed children? I’ve always wanted to be a grandmother.*

*Why do you want to give up your freedom?* No doubt that would be his sister’s first question.

As for his father, it depended on his mood, but either way he’d mutter something about *forever is a long time* or *make sure she’s the one.*

Melanie’s parents, Susannah and Ward Russell, wouldn’t be so obvious with their questions or their opinions. They’d act happy, excited, and polite. If they weren’t thrilled with the idea of their daughter getting engaged while she was still in college, they’d have *that* conversation in private. Not in front



of non-family members, even if those individuals would one day be related.

The questions and comments from Will's family wouldn't stop. Of course, they would all mean well, and if they offered suggestions, they'd insist it was *for his benefit*. His sister would be in town, five years older, independent with a lot of opinions—all focused on making a way for herself and not needing a man to define her. Whatever. Melanie would never need a man for her identity, but he didn't expect his sister to understand *or* accept the possibility that maybe a couple really *did* want to share their life, and maybe it was because they loved each other. Nope, Wendy wouldn't be interested in those words or that possibility.

No doubt some guy burned her and now she detested *all* guys. Not that he would know because Wendy loved to pretend her life was great and she didn't need or want anyone. Fine, maybe she didn't, but she wasn't going to ruin his happiness.

Nobody was going to come between Will and Melanie and the life they had planned.

Late the next morning, they packed their bags and headed toward the elevator, hand in hand. He didn't miss the way she kept glancing at her ring, moving her hand under the lights to make the diamond sparkle. "That ring looks good on you." He was glad he hadn't skimmed on the size or the price. How could you place a price tag on forever?

She lifted her hand, waved it under the hallway lights. "I love it." Melanie stopped in the middle of the hallway, eyes bright, voice soft. "Thank you."

"You own my heart." Will pushed past the lump in his throat, shared the truth. "You always will." He pulled her

close, kissed her with all the promise and hope of a man in love. If he hadn't been so distracted with the kiss, he would have heard the elevator ding and the door slide open twenty feet away. But he didn't because nothing else mattered but that kiss.

The muffled sound a few seconds later told him they weren't alone. Will broke the kiss and glanced toward the elevator door where he spotted a couple in their late forties. The man's hands framed the woman's face as he kissed her. And not just any kiss, but a desperate, I-want-you-now kind of kiss. There was something about the man's dark hair and tall build that seemed familiar, and the woman? Where had he seen that purple sweater before?

The man broke the kiss and eased away from the woman just as Melanie turned. "Mom?" Her voice wobbled in confusion. "Mr. Callahan? What are you doing here?"

Will clutched Melanie's hand, held tight as their parents approached them. Melanie's mother kept her head bent, dabbed at her eyes, while Will's father maintained a stone-faced expression, blue eyes homed in on Will.

"Mom?" Melanie spoke again, the wobble in her voice escalating. "What... What are you doing here with Mr. Callahan?"

Her mother's usually serene face crumpled for the briefest second as though she were about to cry, and then, she smiled: bright, bold, confident. "Well, I suppose I can let you in on the secret. I'm thinking of bringing your father here and I wanted a man's perspective, so—" she gestured toward Will's father "—I asked Mr. Callahan to take a look." A sigh and the softest "Your father's been having such a hard time lately and I thought this would be the perfect Christmas gift." Another sigh, a dab at her eyes. "He just hasn't been the same since he was let go, but maybe it will help to get him out of the house, away from the routines that can grow tedious and lackluster."

Maybe making him feel special would help, but it seemed sort of weird to have Will's father weighing in on family problems. Melanie's dad didn't even want to talk about the situation with *her*, and she was his daughter. Joe Callahan was

an acquaintance because he was Will's dad, but no doubt they'd share more now that Will and Melanie were engaged. Still, something felt off. "So, why did you visit the third floor? Wasn't there anything on the main level?"

Her mother's smile covered her as she spoke with a self-assurance Melanie wished she possessed. "We had no choice. Apparently, the other rooms were either occupied or having work done to them. And I believe two of them didn't have a jacuzzi tub." Those hazel eyes narrowed on Melanie. "But perhaps the bigger question at the moment is what were the two of you doing here?" A raised brow and an accusatory "Did finals finish earlier than expected, or did you plan a break between school and home?"

"I...we were just..." Melanie cleared her throat, shifted from one foot to the other, fought the heat rushing to her face. "We finished yesterday."

"I see." Those two words fell from Susannah Russell's lips, shifting the questions *and* the attention to Will and Melanie.

"We just wanted a little time alone together." Was the pathetic voice buried in apology really hers? "We were on our way home when we saw you."

"Well, isn't that disappointing?" Her mother sniffed, her eyes bright. "My own daughter lying to me." Another sniff. "I never thought this would happen and—"

"Stop!"

"Will?" Melanie eyed her fiancé. "What...what are you doing?"

"She's lying, Melanie. They weren't looking at this place for a special getaway...at least not for your dad." Disgust shot

through his words as he eyed his father.

Joe Callahan was an older version of his son; tall, lean, blue-eyed, dark hair peppered with silver. Melanie used to study him to see what Will would look like as he grew older. The man was quiet, stern, with a perpetual frown and a “dark” mood that was nothing like his son’s easygoing manner. She clasped Will’s arm, tried to calm him. “Why else would they be here? I think it’s very kind that your father agreed to help.” The man didn’t go out of his way to help anybody, at least that’s what Will had always told her, but maybe he’d done it for his son because he realized the Russells would one day be family.

“Kind?” Will stared at her, anger shimmering in his voice. “I *saw* them kissing, and I’m not talking about a peck on the cheek.”

“No, that can’t be true.” She darted a glance at their parents, tried to process his words. “It can’t be.”

“It’s a lie!” This from her mother followed by “Why would you say such a vile thing?”

His father still hadn’t spoken, but the scowl deepened, the pinched brows grew more furrowed, the blue eyes narrowed to slits. Word in town was nobody disrespected Joe Callahan, especially not his son. But Will didn’t seem to notice as he homed in on Melanie’s mother. “Guess you really will have to buy a getaway package now, won’t you?”

“That’s enough.” Joe Callahan burned his son with a look. “You will not disrespect Mrs. Russell.”

The laugh fell out, cold, harsh. “But it’s okay for *you* to disrespect *Mom*?” Will stepped forward, fists clenched. “*Again.*”

“Again?” Melanie’s mother uttered the word as though she didn’t have enough oxygen to get it out, and when she looked at Mr. Callahan, her bottom lip quivered, her eyes filled with tears.

Will’s father lifted a hand as though to touch her, but then he dropped it. “Susannah...”

“Again?” She repeated, her voice a mix of pain and disbelief. “What does that mean?”

Joe Callahan’s jaw twitched, the veins in his neck pulsing. “I’ll explain, but not here. Not with our children watching us.” He cleared his throat, pointed to his son. “*You’re* out of line, and we’ll discuss this when I get home.”

“Are you for real?” Will muttered a curse under his breath, spat out, “You’re sleeping with my fiancée’s mother and that’s all you can say?”

“Fiancée?” His father darted a glance at Melanie’s left hand. “What the hell are you talking about? You’re too young to get married.”

“You’re going to lecture me on marriage?”

“What do you know about commitment and the strain marriage takes on you, or the responsibilities that land on your chest, whether you’re ready or not?” The barrage continued. “Whether you want them or not? You’re twenty-two years old; you can’t even take care of yourself let alone a wife and wait until the kids start coming.” A harsh laugh, a shake of his head. “The stress will bury you alive.”

Melanie squeezed Will’s hand. She had to stop the accusations before they went any further. *Kisses? Sleeping together?* It was no secret Will didn’t get along with his father, but that didn’t mean he had to believe the worst, especially in

connection with her mother. Yes, this whole situation was off and if you just looked at the optics, they weren't great...but that didn't mean anything happened. "Will, maybe you need to take a minute."

"Take a minute? And what? Try to erase the kiss I saw or how they were hanging all over each other?" Those blue eyes flashed with anger and disgust. "I *know* what I saw and if you'd turned two seconds sooner, you would have seen it, too."

"Will." Her mother offered the smile she used when she was trying to convince her family to try a new recipe or do a chore they didn't want to do. "Surely, you must know we would never harm our families, especially that way." More smiling, a clearing of her throat. "Please, you must believe us."

He stared at her mother so long Melanie almost jumped in with words like *Of course we believe you*, but then Will spoke. "I always knew you were a great English teacher, but now I see your abilities extend to fiction as well. I think you have a second career in the fiction department, but don't expect Melanie and me to fall for your stories. We don't lie or make up tales because that's not who we are." He reached for Melanie's left hand, held it in front of them. "We *are* going to get married, and we are going to move away from Magdalena and have a life together. We are *not* going to be like either one of you, telling lies and pretending." His next words blasted his father with a warning. "You've got until tomorrow to tell Mom what's happening and if you don't, I will. You are not going to do this to her. Not again."

"I'll deal with your mother. That self-righteous attitude of yours is going to land you in a lot of trouble." Joe Callahan's

blue gaze narrowed, his jaw twitched. "It won't end well."

The threat that flashed through the older man's words made Melanie uneasy. Maybe this was why Will never wanted to talk about his father. *We're not close*, he'd said. *We have nothing in common.*

"Tomorrow morning or I spill," Will repeated. "And then I pay a visit to Mr. Russell. Somebody's got to let him know he's being played for a fool."

"What?" Melanie pulled her hand from Will's, turned to face him. "You can't do that to my father." She pictured her father in his favorite recliner, reading glasses perched on his nose as he worked the crossword puzzles he insisted kept his brain sharp. Such a kind, gentle soul who deserved to be loved, respected, honored.

Her mother finally spoke after long minutes of silence and unshed tears. "Melanie's right. Ward does not deserve this." She squared her shoulders, raised her chin to a level of superiority and delivered what Melanie would later realize was her mother's greatest performance. "You think he'll believe your lies?"

"*They aren't lies*," Will bit out. "Anybody with half a brain and decent eyesight can see that."

A small laugh covered in amusement. "Oh, Will, you are so naïve. What will you say when he asks why you and Melanie were at the hotel?" A tilt of her head, a smile. "You're such a proponent of the truth, so I'm curious as to your answer." Those hazel eyes glittered. "Melanie has always been his princess. Do you think he'll give his blessing to this marriage when he learns you're trying to destroy his family?"



“I know what I saw. Do you hear me?” He jabbed a finger against his chest, snarled, “I know.” Then he turned to Melanie, those blue eyes fierce, his voice firm. “Come on, Melanie, let’s get out of here.”

She should have followed him, should have trusted the man she loved. He’d never lied or pretended or accused. But what he’d threatened to do would destroy her family, and she could not let that happen. Melanie stared at the man who’d asked her to share his life, and shook her head. “I can’t do that, Will. I won’t ruin lives and you shouldn’t either.”

“You don’t care that everybody’s living a lie?” His handsome face burst with color, his words dripping disbelief. “What are you doing? What about standing for something, no matter how hard it is? Were those just words?”

If only she had grabbed his hand and clung to him, but she didn’t. She couldn’t. She needed time to think. “Please don’t tell my father. You’ll destroy him. And if you do that...you’ll destroy us.”

One more hard stare and then he turned and walked toward the elevator, leaving her behind with the parents who might not be telling the truth and a heart full of dreams that may never happen.



MELANIE no longer believed in destiny or meant-to-be, even though her mother still loved to toss around those words. But of course, she could afford to do that because *everyone* catered to her, made sure they created *her* reality, even if it wasn’t true.

*Destiny has a way of pointing us in the direction we're intended to go...*

*Destiny will guide you toward your place in life.*

*If you open your heart, destiny will find you.*

*Trust in meant-to-be...*

Right. Any hope of destiny or meant-to be shriveled when she refused to side with Will and what he claimed he saw. He'd been so insistent on exposing *everything*, even when he didn't have 100% proof and she'd been equally insistent on giving their parents the benefit of the doubt. There was a lot to consider: her father's struggle with depression, her mother's reputation, the well-organized life they all led. How could Melanie destroy all of it with an accusation she couldn't substantiate?

Will didn't see it that way. He said he'd gotten all the proof he needed the second he spotted his father and her mother together. Through all of this, Joe Callahan had remained strangely silent, eyes locked on Melanie's mother as though all he cared about was her and her reaction.

Why hadn't Melanie questioned *that*? Why had she listened to her mother's tearful claims about family and how much she loved their father, and the disastrous upheaval this would cause him? *Your father will not survive these lies and it will be on you, Melanie. You and Will Callahan. Who will you choose?*

The last time she saw Will, he'd stood outside her house—the day after a miserable Christmas—snow falling on his longish hair, jacket open, disbelief smearing his face. *I told my mother what I saw*, he said. *All of it and my old man had the nerve to deny it.*

*Can't you let it go? Can't you let them live their lives so we can live ours?*

Of course, she should have known the answer because Will Callahan did not back down from anything, especially what he saw as the truth. *I can't let it go, and I don't understand how you can.* And then the words that scorched her soul. *Who are you?*

They might have been able to get through it if Will hadn't contacted her father and told him what he'd seen. The only way to save the family *and* her father from a deeper slip into depression was for Melanie to repeat the story her mother prepared for her. Susannah Russell was after all a very good storyteller. *Mr. Callahan was helping Mom check out a surprise for you. I knew about it and that's why Will and I stopped there.*

Her mother insisted they had to massage the truth *for your father's sake. Ever since he lost his job, he's become convinced that I'll leave him. I would never do that. We must protect him, Melanie. We both know nothing happened, but in his state, he might not see it that way.*

Will certainly didn't see it that way. *How can you pretend nothing happened?*

*Because maybe it didn't.*

He'd expected her to stand beside him and "do the right thing." The right thing? Who knew what that was? At the time, she'd believed she *was* doing the right and honorable thing, and she'd been furious that the man she loved could not see it. Worse, could not accept it. The fights, the anger, the words meant to inflict pain? Oh, they'd done all that.

*Call me when you're ready to tell your father the truth, starting with why we were really at that hotel.*

Three days later, Melanie returned Will's engagement ring with a note: *My father hasn't gotten out of bed since your visit. He doesn't want to eat, and he keeps talking about what you told him. Was it worth it to know you've punched a beaten man, and he may never recover? How could you do it? You had no proof and yet you created your own proof. For what? Because you can't stand your father and wanted to hurt him? Or because you really believe you're right and you feel honor bound to speak up?*

*Both possibilities have damaged our relationship because now I see that you don't understand the real meaning of love. If you truly loved me, you would not have tried to destroy my family and you would not have asked me to help you do it.*

*Goodbye, Will.*

**E**ight years later  
*Magdalena, New York*

MELANIE STOOD in her grandmother's living room, remembering the afternoons she'd spent there, the mugs of hot cocoa with tiny marshmallows, the cinnamon toast, the stories Esther Russell told her of the early days in Magdalena. Oh, but the woman could tell a story, eyes lighting up, voice dipping with wonder as she relayed incidents of coyotes, black bears, and white-tailed deer. *The snow was waist high and we lost power for five days...your grandfather hauled in firewood to keep us warm and I cooked over the open flames... It was such an adventure. We might not have had much money but there was always food, clothing, and whatever your father and aunt needed. It wasn't the best or the newest, but the food filled their bellies, the clothing kept them warm, and they learned that life brought challenges, and a person could either accept that challenge or fall in defeat. Russells do not fall in defeat.*

Grandma Esther must have been horribly disappointed with their decision to leave Magdalena. There'd been no time for her to get used to the idea, and some days Melanie

wondered what might have happened if they'd simply stayed and faced their issues instead of running toward what they thought would be a new life. Of course, there was no convincing Susannah Russell to change her mind. *Your father needs a job to feel good about himself again and this move will help him do that.*

The move did seem to help her father's spirits; he found a job at a bank, began making repairs to the gray two-story house they purchased in a small town about an hour from Pittsburgh. A few months later, Melanie's parents renewed their marriage vows, which included a trip to New York City. They seemed happy; her father smiled more, watched less TV, and darn if he didn't start exercising. Melanie had gleaned this information from her mother when she called home to check on them. *He's doing well. Pause and a firm We made the right decision.*

The right decision? For whom she wanted to ask, but she didn't. Instead, she buried her emotions deep, so she didn't have to think about the last time she was truly happy or the person who'd been responsible for that happiness. Eight years was a long time to pretend and ignore...to hide and deflect... but eventually a person had to open their eyes and acknowledge what needed to be done if they were ever going to get a chance for a half-normal life.

Melanie sank onto the plaid couch that had been part of her grandmother's house for as long as she could remember. There was such comfortable familiarity in this home, from the gold-and-brown crocheted afghan to the three-foot ceramic cat in the corner. How she wished she'd spent more time with her grandmother...wished life had been different...

Once they moved from Magdalena, Grandma Esther had to travel to their new home outside of Pittsburgh if she wanted to see them. She accepted the plane tickets in the earlier days, but three years ago a broken hip prevented travel. *Can't you just come back to Magdalena for a visit?* she'd asked Melanie's father. *Can't you do this for me?*

No, he could not because as he put it *There are too many bad memories there.* Melanie should have made the trip, but that would mean running the risk of seeing Will again and she *could not do that.* There was too much pain between them, too much regret in her heart.

Melanie pushed aside thoughts of how she wished she'd made different choices and began sorting through her grandmother's belongings. China, hand-embroidered napkins, lace tablecloths, crystal. *Special occasions should be celebrated and honored,* she'd said. *Why doesn't anyone dress up for Christmas dinner or birthdays anymore? Why are they happy with paper plates and chipped crockery while the fancy dinnerware sits in the cabinet? So much worry a dish will break that it never gets used. I say, if not now, when? Why shouldn't we enjoy the delight of eating our birthday cake from a hand-painted plate? To save it in a cabinet, waiting for that "special moment" is tragic and sad. All moments are special, and life is so short. One year becomes ten, then twenty, and soon you're eighty-three years old, and all you have left are the memories. Make them good memories, Melanie. Make them count.*

Grandma had possessed such wisdom and joy for life and yet she'd known her share of sadness. How had she done it? How had she buried a husband, two parents, and three siblings yet still found a way to love life?

Melanie wished she hadn't waited so long to return to Magdalena. Why had she simply bought into her parents' belief that it was best to start fresh and erase the past? Her sister liked that idea because she wanted to be the "mystery" girl in town for once instead of the girl everybody knew. She said she could re-create her persona *and* her backstory and that's exactly what she did.

But she wasn't the only one re-creating.

Focus, denial, and the need to keep the family together propelled Melanie through graduation and a job offer at an emergency room in Pittsburgh. For the next several years, the adrenaline-fueled pace and long hours at the hospital consumed her. She avoided time alone, vacations, or too much introspection. What was the point in digging too deep when you might not like what you uncovered? And happiness? There were moments when she experienced it, but mostly, she settled for contentment. The money was good, the work challenging, and she'd been able to reframe her expectations so joy could be found in the ordinary and everyday moments: a sunset, an animal, a solitary walk.

Expectation was a complex and mercurial word. What did it even mean? Life and situations changed and what a person *thought* they wanted or believed would happen, shifted. Crumbled. Even disappeared, so they struggled to recall the moments when they understood where life was heading, when they possessed clarity and conviction. She'd convinced herself the man she'd planned her life with had been the wrong choice, and what they'd shared had been an illusion.

In the early days after the breakup, Melanie forced herself to eat dark chocolate-covered strawberries once a month until the taste did not remind her of Will... The sight of one did not



create a gush of tears or send shivers through her as she recalled how he'd shared the strawberries with her—in bed. And when she began a relationship two years ago with a cardiac resident, she told herself the dark hair, blue eyes, and tall frame attracted her *not* because they reminded her of someone else. No, it was simply because Alec Laurence was appealing, intelligent, with a broad smile, a wicked sense of humor, *and* he cared about her. A lot.

Maybe they would have found a life together if Melanie had accepted his marriage proposal. She'd almost ignored the last time she wore an engagement ring and agreed to the heartfelt offer, but when Alec opened the velvet box and spoke words like *cherish* and *forever*, she couldn't do it. Memories rushed back, blotting out his presence, until all she could see were visions of the life she'd had eight years ago...the plans...the dreams...the hope...

Another man, another ring, another pledge.

*Melanie? What's wrong?*

Alec was too kind and much too intelligent not to understand her reaction.

*I can't. I wish I could, but I can't.* She should have understood that eventually he'd want more... an open heart, a lifetime commitment... And she could not give those to him because that part of her was broken.

*You need help*, he'd said, his voice filled with resignation, his expression sad. *I love you, but I can't hold up both sides of the relationship. Not anymore.* He'd pulled her to him, whispered, *If you want us to have a chance, get help.*

Those words led Melanie to a forty-something counselor who didn't sugarcoat words or observations. *You've got a mess*

*in your past and a man at the center of it. Until you gain closure with him, you'll never find peace.* Of course, Melanie had fought that observation for months, until Grandma Esther called one day and asked if she'd visit. Then the reality of the disaster and confusion she called her life hit her. Melanie took a leave of absence from work and scheduled a time to visit her grandmother—and settle the past with Will.

Grandma Esther died three days before Melanie's arrival. Her father moved the memorial service to the small town outside of Pittsburgh where they'd spent the last eight years, away from Magdalena and the people who knew all about Esther Russell's penchant for collecting ceramic cats, baking from scratch, and Dean Martin's signature croon. The minister in the new town had never met her, never asked about her crocheted afghans or the time she chased a coyote from her backyard. Why would he when he hadn't known her?

Esther Russell deserved more than a generic eulogy and three songs, even if her own family didn't think so. It was the way the minister mispronounced Magdalena that sent Melanie into tears, made her realize she needed to go back to the town where she'd grown up, where she'd last felt alive and hopeful for the future. She'd do it for herself, and for her grandmother who had a right to more than a lackluster farewell.

And she'd do it for Will, because he might be as lost and confused as she was...and he did not deserve that.

When the doorbell rang a short while later, Melanie was still contemplating those questions. She'd arrived yesterday afternoon and no one even knew she was coming other than her parents. But when she reached the front door, she recognized the tall blonde on the other side, as beautiful and graceful as she'd been at twenty.

*Tess Casherdon.* Everybody knew about the tragedy that tore her and Cash apart days before their wedding and how years later, they found their way back to each other. “Tess? You haven’t changed a bit.”

The raised brow and laugh said she doubted those words, but the humor in her voice said she welcomed them. “I’m not exactly sure that’s accurate but I’ll take the compliment.” She held up a pan covered in foil, her smile spreading. “My husband’s been busy. I hope you like lasagna.”

Daniel Casherdon was the kind of man every woman dreamed about... Gorgeous. Charming. Devoted to his wife. And he cooked! “Are there any talents your husband doesn’t possess?”

A shake of her blonde head, followed by a sigh. “He’s got quite a few but don’t ever tell him I said that, or his head will grow five times larger than it is now.” Another shake of her head, a dip in her voice. “That man is something else.”

Talk about emotion and pure love. After all their years apart, Cash and Tess deserved happiness. “I love lasagna. There’s no eating one helping.” She accepted the casserole dish from Tess, nodded toward the living room. “Would you like to come in? I’ve got water, coffee, tea...”

“No, but thank you. I just wanted to welcome you and tell you how much we loved your grandmother.” Those green eyes filled with tears, and her voice wobbled. “Esther was special, and she doted on Cash. He’d stop over to change a lightbulb, reset her smoke alarm, or just to sit on her porch and chat. Sometimes she’d even drink half a beer with him. And when the kids came over?” Big sigh and a soft “She loved seeing them. We knew her time was coming, but it was still very

hard.” A sniff, a clearing of her throat. “She was ready, but... I guess we were the ones who weren’t.”

If Melanie hadn’t let fear keep her from returning to Magdalena, she might have less regret...less guilt... She might have memories of those last days and wouldn’t need a neighbor to relay the details. “Did she tell you I planned to visit her?” When Tess nodded, Melanie continued, “We were both so excited, but she passed three days before my trip.” Why did she feel it necessary to slip in that information as though to imply she cared about her grandmother too, even though she hadn’t been back in eight years?

“Esther kept telling us how she wanted to plan a big dinner once you got here, and she’d pull out the fancy china, the crystal, and the tablecloths. All of it, and she didn’t care if the kids made a mess because she wanted a celebration. We were going to plan the whole dinner and we started it two days before...”

Melanie nodded, blinked hard to keep the tears from coming. “I loved my grandma, and I should not have waited so long to come back. I should have done it for her and now it’s too late.”

Tess laid a hand on her arm, said in a gentle voice, “She knew how much you loved her, don’t ever doubt that. Come on, let’s get the lasagna in the fridge before your arms tire out.”

Melanie followed Tess into the kitchen, comforted by her kind words. She wanted to hear more about her grandmother’s life these past several years, and Tess Casherdon might be the person to fill her in. Of course, that would require sharing, and revealing emotions, but it would be worth it to hear about her

grandmother's life and the friends who'd been there for her when her own family had not been.

Will Callahan scrolled through the spreadsheet, examined the profit and loss column for Addie's Chocolates. Small company. Good projections. Decent growth. If the husband-and-wife team continued this trend, they'd meet their five-year goal. This couple was just another example of Rae Darlington Tramont at work. The woman continued to convince and encourage others to turn their "hobbies" into profitable businesses and she'd enlisted Will's help. He didn't mind, in fact he enjoyed the excitement and the endless possibilities of start-ups, but people didn't always understand the dynamics of keeping a company solvent. The main principles were simple: don't overspend and do *not* spend what you haven't earned. Orders can be cancelled, items returned, so *do not spend* that money until you're sure it's yours. And don't overspend what is yours.

Some people understood that concept right away, but there were others who chased the next "whatever" price tag and no matter how many conversations Will had with them, they still bought the sports car, the high-tech computer, the tickets to Hawaii. Those were the ones who weren't going to make it, and regardless of how solid their product was, mismanagement would take them down, every single time.

It wasn't just the small businesses or new owners who often needed a bit more handholding and repeated clarification. Some of A.J. Fergus Accounting's larger clients, run by second-generation owners, wanted the paycheck without the work.

*You're always going to have the client who wants to tell you what is and isn't a tax deduction, Andrew Fergus said. Those are the ones you have to watch, try to guide, and if you can't, cut them loose. In another year or so, this will all be your headache. Will's boss had laughed and adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. I'd retire today, but I haven't figured out what I'm going to do. You know, the problem for a lot of people isn't leaving the job—he'd paused, rubbed his jaw—it's what the heck are you going to do when you retire? I'm not a golfer... Don't exercise though Donna's been after me to join a gym. I might do that, you never know. We can always visit the grandkids, but I don't want to get into the babysitting business... And then there's travel. I would like to see the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. Donna's always wanted to take a cruise to Alaska... Still, those are vacations, not real life. What the heck would I do all the other days?*

*Take up a hobby? Will had asked.*

*Hmm. I've always been somewhat interested in photography.*

*Or you could teach a class at the community college if you wanted.*

Those dark eyes had lit up behind his glasses, a smile inching across the perennial frown. *I could do that. Hmm. I certainly could.*

Will and his boss had been having this conversation for seven months now, but the conversations had grown longer,

more detailed, and Andrew had even contacted the community college officer who expressed a serious desire to have him teach an advanced accounting class. When he told Will about the conversation with the college, the man had been more excited than the time his wife bought him tickets to the NASA Research Center.

*I could teach accounting and wouldn't have to worry about clients who don't understand deductions or taxes. No more letters from the IRS, no working long nights and weekends... No more tax season or dealing with people who think they can run a business just because they know how to make a beaded bracelet or knit a scarf. Creative types don't always understand that having a business means you run it like a business. You don't work only when you're in the mood or have no better offers... You work because it's what you do... You produce... That's creating and that's being a professional, and if you want to take your art and turn it into a business, then you act like a professional.*

He was right on that one, but people didn't always understand that concept, at least not in the beginning. Will had tried to help them with two-hour seminars on starting and keeping a business profitable and Christine Desantro was a huge help. Brains, beauty, humor, kindness—all wrapped up in the perfect package. She and Will had been working together for the past few years. He'd send clients her way for financial planning and investment advice, and she'd refer people for tax assistance. Win-win, for sure.

Will turned back to the document he'd been revising, updated a few columns and closed the file. It was going to be a full day, with a 7 p.m. meeting scheduled to end the day. The night appointments weren't horrible though Delaney sure complained about them enough. *You're never available. Why*



*can't they see you during the day? I miss you. When will I see you again?*

It should bother him more that he didn't see his "girlfriend" for two or three or even four days. Phone calls were fine, but he didn't like to hang on the phone, talking about nothing, though there had been a time... He cleared his throat, thought about Delaney and her neediness. She was the one who needed another hobby, but she was already a partner in her father's insurance business, a yoga instructor, *and* she filled in at Barbara's Boutique & Bakery over the holidays. Hadn't she mentioned something about contacting Harry Blacksworth for a waitress job one or two nights a week? *Since you're never available.*

He'd gotten very good at ignoring her veiled sarcasm because when Delaney attached a smile and lowered her voice to a whisper level, eyes bright like she might tear up any second, how could he push her away? He couldn't and the fact that he wasn't inching toward offering her "forever" even though they'd been together almost a year made him feel guilty. She deserved someone who could go all-in, commit and give her the time and effort she deserved. He'd tried to break it off once, sharing all the reasons she could do better than him, but Delaney disagreed. *I only want you, Will. I'll wait. If there's hope, I'll wait.*

Was there hope?

He couldn't say...

But his mother certainly had thoughts on the matter of Will and Delaney Hall.

The woman wanted a daughter-in-law so she could have grandchildren. *Please. I'm not getting any younger. You're*

*thirty years old, Will. I want to hold my grandbaby. Your sister certainly isn't going to comply, so it must be you.*

It was always about his mother. She was the reason he'd stayed in Magdalena, though that had never been his plan. But how could he desert her when he was responsible for destroying her world? Maybe he should have just closed his eyes and kept his mouth shut like everyone else had, including the woman who'd crushed his heart. Fool that he'd been, he'd believed honesty and telling the truth would always win over lies and subterfuge.

Apparently, he was the only one who'd felt that way. *She* and her family chose to pretend rather than admit the truth. There'd been no hope for a solid conversation or support that included comments like *I believe you and I believe what you're saying. Why would you lie?*

Right, why would he lie? He wouldn't but *she* hadn't cared about that. No, all she'd wanted was for him to calm down, and rethink what he thought he saw. *What he thought he saw?* There'd been real desperation in her voice when she begged him to let it go.

Of course, he couldn't do that and once he opened his mouth, it was over even if he didn't realize it. The visit to her father got him banned from the house with a string of threats and a warning to *stay away from my daughter*. Will's life fell apart that Christmas, leaving him with a father who cursed him, a mother who could not get out of bed, and a fiancée who returned his ring a few days after she had vowed to love him forever.

Gone were the dreams and the plans. No more hope, no journey together. His ex-fiancée avoided him the final semester of college, no doubt erasing him as if he'd never

existed. The Russells sold their house and moved to a small town outside of Pittsburgh, leaving their past behind.

They also left Mr. Russell's mother behind. Word had it Grandma Esther had begged them to stay. Good luck with that request. The residents of Magdalena did not understand what had happened to the Russell family, or why they'd left. But Will knew. Oh, yes, he knew the truth, even if everyone else chose to deny it.

He'd been working on recommendations for this afternoon's meeting with his newest client—a pottery maker from Renova—when his mother knocked on his office door, poked her head in with a soft “I hope I'm not interrupting.” The bright smile followed as she entered his office with a two-handled grocery bag. “I brought you lunch and a few goodies.” She placed the bag on the chair opposite his desk and removed an item wrapped in foil. “Banana bread with walnuts. Your favorite.”

True, but she'd made two loaves of that same “favorite” a week ago, *one for enjoying now and one for the freezer*. His mother hadn't come to simply deliver lunch and banana bread. Something was on her mind and no doubt she planned to tell him, just as she'd been doing since he was old enough to understand the meaning of *We need to talk* a.k.a. *You need to listen to what I'm about to tell you*. “I can't really break for lunch right now, Mom.” He pointed to the files in front of him. “I've got to finish preparing for a 2 o'clock meeting.”

A tiny frown pulled across her lips as disappointment reached her eyes, made her brows furrow. “I see. You don't have time and you're too busy. Of course, how silly of me to think you might consider this a *welcome* surprise.”

And there it was once again—his mother smothering him with her unhappiness and her I-need-you-to-make-my-world-happy comments. “I appreciate everything you do.” He pushed back his chair, stood and made his way to the other side of the desk where he hugged her and gave her a peck on the cheek. “I really am busy.”

His mother ignored his comment about preparing for a meeting and sank into a chair next to the goodie bag. “I worry you’re not eating. You look thin. I hear you’re not accepting Delaney’s dinner invitations either.”

Delaney Hall was offering a lot more than a meal and what she wanted in return was *him*, all of him, including his name. He’d tried to tell her he wasn’t ready, but she didn’t want to hear those words. *I’ll wait as long as you want. I’m not going anywhere, and I hope you aren’t either.* One day soon, they’d have to talk about expectations, the future or lack thereof, and he’d have to stop worrying about hurting her feelings and be honest. *I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready for what you want.*

Before he could tell his mother once again that she needed her own life and had to stop looking at his as though it were a soap opera or a romance novel, she commented, “I’d like to have you and Delaney for dinner. How about this Sunday? I’ll roast a chicken, make mashed potatoes, green beans... Strawberry shortcake with biscuits?”

Marjorie Callahan was determined to get grandchildren and she’d selected their mother. The only problem was she refused to acknowledge that Will might not agree with her choice. That wasn’t exactly accurate. The truth was he didn’t know if he could commit to *anyone* like that again. He’d been all-in once and everyone after that made him question his desire and ability to go through it again. He always found a

problem with the prospective choices. One wanted to see him every single night...another expected constant entertainment...yet another insisted on “romantic” getaways that included chalets, massages, and personal chefs.

Delaney had no major requirements, other than a ring. And him. He’d rather agree to the chalet and the personal chef. She vowed she didn’t want anything but him. Right, he’d heard it all before. The “I will love you forever” and “All I need is you.” Confessions of love and commitment that shifted to betrayal and heartache.

Melanie had scarred him, probably ruined him from ever opening up again. Delaney was comfortable, and she wasn’t cruel or vindictive. No, she was even tempered and agreeable—maybe too agreeable.

“William? Sunday, dinner? 5:00 p.m.?”

His mother called him William when she wanted his attention, and when she wanted him to know she was not about to take “no” for an answer. “Okay, let me get my work done and I’ll see you on Sunday.”

She offered a stingy smile, nodded. If the woman smiled once in a while, got rid of the perpetual frown, and did not look for a rain cloud in every conversation, more people would want to spend time with her...seek out her company...call her a friend. Will loved her, but there was no pretending she didn’t possess a demanding nature and an inability to take responsibility for her own happiness.

She wasn’t the first person whose husband walked out on her. It happened. Life wasn’t always a big party, but you had to deal with it and move on. Or at least try to...

But she couldn't, and she'd even tried to convince her husband to stay—begged him, actually—as he packed a duffel bag, slung it over his shoulder, and told her they were done. When he pulled out of the driveway that last time in his green Ford 150, she'd grown hysterical and didn't leave her room for three days.

Marjorie Callahan refused to accept that some people weren't meant to be together, especially when a cheating partner was involved. *I love him. I need him. I can't live without him.*

But apparently, *he* could live without *her*.

Some said Joe Callahan drove out West and took a job working on a ranch. Others said he headed South and signed on with a fishing crew. And then there were others who said he'd settled in Pennsylvania, not far from Pittsburgh, where he worked in a bar, drank too much, and stumbled from one day to the next. Nobody knew for sure, and nobody but his ex-wife ever inquired. *Maybe we should hire an investigator. Just to be sure. What do you think? Shouldn't we find out? Her voice would dip, turn sad and mournful. Don't you want to know?*

No, Will did not want to know.

Joe and Marjorie Callahan were never good together. They didn't respect one another, didn't understand how to appreciate a kind gesture, and they sure as hell didn't act like they cared about what happened to the other. Maybe they never had... Maybe it all circled back to the pregnancy that nabbed Joe Callahan and forced him to marry Marjorie Allister and become a father seven months after the wedding. *We are so blessed our baby survived her premature delivery*, his mother had said. *So very blessed.*

More pretending. More playacting. More lies.

“William?”

Another lecture was heading his way. If he could convince his mother to leave right now, he'd be able to concentrate on the upcoming meeting. But her next words sucked the oxygen from the room, tossed him back eight years to a life he wanted to forget.

“*She's* back in town.” She clutched the loaf of banana bread so hard it left marks in the foil. “*Stay away from her.*”

Harry Blacksworth had finally turned into a decent human being, but it had taken over fifty years to do it. He wouldn't pretend Greta wasn't the main reason for his transformation or that he didn't like the person he'd become. Of course, he had a long way to go, but he was on his way.

Gone were the days of carousing, drinking too much and pretending he didn't care about other people. Hell, he cared a lot. He didn't miss those empty days with too much time and not enough purpose. Now he had children and responsibilities, and he welcomed those challenges, even though they scared the devil out of him. The kids were tiny miracles who made him better, filled him with joy and wonder, and if he were honest, made *him* feel like a kid again.

Poor Greta, she had to deal with kids, a dog, and a husband who acted like a kid a lot of the time. But she didn't seem to mind it. In fact, she acted like she enjoyed her role as commander of the Blacksworth household. Give them all a list, point them in the right direction, and show up later for the follow-through. It was the follow-through Harry could never get quite right. Sure, he told the kids to clean out the gobs of toothpaste stuck to the bathroom sink and toss their socks and underwear down the laundry chute. But when they didn't,



what did he do? He closed the bathroom door because he already had his own toothpaste gobs to clean in the master bathroom, but he *did* pick up his clothes and managed to toss them down the laundry chute. Sometimes he even made a game of it with the kids.

And when it came time for the big stuff like discipline, you needed follow-through, but Harry really struggled with it. Still, Pop said one of these days, it would all click. *You just have to keep up with it and give it your best shot*, he said. *Set an example for those little ones, even the dog. If you set rules and let them break them half the time, then you're teaching them that rules are meant to be broken.* Of course, the old guy was right, but Harry had been a rule breaker most of his life, *and* a conflict avoider.

But if Pop really believed it was time for Harry to start “training” for the Godfather of Magdalena role, then who was Harry to argue? If the man thought he was up to it, then maybe he *could* do it. Pop would be by his side, steer him toward answers and possibilities and make sure Harry didn't royally screw up. Sure, why the hell not? He was still contemplating his future role and how to achieve it when he strolled into Lina's Café for his weekly breakfast with Pop.

He winked at Phyllis, who was waiting on a customer, and made his way to the booth she reserved for him every Wednesday morning. Talk about feeling special. He'd never felt this way when he lived in Chicago or worked at the family investment firm. Of course, his main focus at the firm, aside from managing his own money, had been telling off-color jokes at the water cooler. Or practicing his putt on the golf green in his office. Nobody took him seriously, but then why would they when he preferred jokes and smooth lines to honest conversation and real work?

Greta and the kids changed him, made him human... *Made him real*. So had Magdalena, the place he'd once called a rinky-dink, second-rate hole in the wall. That was when he didn't understand its importance or its value.

Harry adjusted his tie, scanned the diner. Pop would be here soon and then they could talk about how and when Harry's "godfather" training would begin. He wiped a hand over his forehead, blew out a long breath. It was one thing to say you were going to do something, but then to actually have to do it? What if he screwed up? Damn, he was going to screw up—that came with the territory—but what if it was bad? Real bad? What then? Greta said he just needed a little seasoning like adding salt and pepper to a roaster chicken, but people's lives were a little more important than a hunk of poultry.

Still, to have Pop consider him for such a prestigious title almost made him tear up. He cleared his throat as he recalled the other names he'd tossed at Pop, ones Harry insisted were better qualified for the job. Why wouldn't the man choose someone with a cleaner lifestyle and less baggage? *What do you think makes a good listener?* Pop had asked. *Somebody who's never stepped outside a line or made a mistake? How can that person offer a suggestion or a possibility, or even set an example if they've always had right on their side?* Those bushy eyebrows had pinched together, and Pop said in a low voice, *I've made my share of poor choices and missteps, and I'm not talking about trying to figure out the tango. No siree, but I learned, and I kept trying and my Lucy did not give up on me. She was the original Godmother of Magdalena. Before she passed, she said I had to spend my life helping others once she was gone and not feel sorry for myself.*

*But what about Mimi?* Harry had asked. *She'd be good.*

*Mimi's got her own way of helping and like I said, it has to be someone who's stepped outside the lines a few times. That's not Mimi.*

*Then Nate? Nobody would ignore his advice and from what I hear, he was no saint.*

*First of all, Nate doesn't give advice and second of all, he doesn't poke around in anyone's business.*

*Are you saying I poke?*

That question made Pop chuckle. *Harry, come on now. You poke, prod, and flat-out bellow your thoughts.*

*That I do, Pop. That I do.*

“What’s got you smiling like you just sampled a slice of Lina’s cherry pie?”

Harry glanced up from the salt shaker he’d been studying, grinned at his best friend. “Hey, Pop. That walk take you a little longer than usual? My belly’s growling and I’m ready for a strong cup of coffee and a plate of blueberry pancakes.” He leaned back against the booth, rubbed his jaw. “And since it’s the second Wednesday of the month, I get to add bacon.”

Pop unzipped his sweat jacket, tossed it onto the booth and slid onto his seat. “Did you ever think there’d come a time when you’d be negotiating with your wife about when you could eat bacon?”

Harry shook his head, laughed. “I never thought there’d come a time when there was a wife!” Another laugh that ended on a sigh. “But Greta sure is worth it, and if she asked me to give up bacon for good, I’d whine about it, but I’d do it.”

“She’s just trying to keep you healthy so you can chase after that brood of yours.” Pause and a grin. “Including the

dog.”

“Yeah, some days that dog is more work than the three kids. He wants a walk no matter how hot *or* cold it is outside. And not just around the block either. What kind of dog walks three miles and the second he gets home, wants to go again? Good thing I hired a dog walker, but I’m still stuck with one of those three walks.”

Pop nodded, rubbed his stubbled jaw. “You should be glad it’s only one. I recall how you promised to do anything if you could keep him.”

“I did promise, and I would do anything for that boy.” Harry’s chest ached when he thought about the day he found Cooper wandering on a country road, all alone, just waiting for his forever home. “He’s a good boy, but some days I wish he was a few years older with a little less energy.”

“Don’t wish those days away, Harry.” Pop’s eyes grew bright beneath his glasses. “Before you know it, ten years will have passed.”

*Ten years? Would the guy make it past that?* No, he couldn’t even think about it. Cooper was a rescue, like Harry, they belonged together, no matter what. Harry cleared his throat. “You’re right, Pop. No more complaining about Cooper.” Pause and then “I thought about hiring somebody to work with him again on the treadmill. He used to love it, but then he got spooked and that was the end of it. I worry about frostbite on his feet when it’s too cold and the guy refuses to wear boots. And when it’s too hot, there’s a risk there, too. Same risk for you.”

“I hear you, and I plan to take you up on the offer when the weather shifts. Or I’ll head over to Lily’s once Nate gets moving on the garage re-do. Vic’s going to help him, too.” Pop

chuckled. “Lily said she wants the whole place painted lavender and teal, said it’s a good *vibe* for exercising and working on her memory-keeper projects.”

“I’ll bet Nate loves that idea.” Harry burst out laughing as he pictured the mountain man who’d married his niece. Nate Desantro might have been miserable and ornery before he met Christine, but since they’d said their “I do’s” he’d mellowed out. And once the girls came along, the man was softer than a marshmallow, but only in front of his family.

“Yup, no doubt he’ll be trying to change Lily’s mind up until the day he has to buy the paint. Maybe even after, but you get somebody like Vic Tramont on your side, and if the man says lavender and teal suit Lily, she’ll dig in her heels and pester her brother until he caves.”

Harry shook his head. “Who can ever say no to Lily?”

“Dunno, because I sure can’t. Not when she asks for an extra batch of pizzelles or when she invites me to play checkers. There’s no refusing her, probably because she lights up with pure happiness when I say yes.”

Harry had been about to comment on that when Will Callahan headed their way. The young man was a real looker with a personality and a smile that had the women *and* their mothers trying to get his attention. And did the boy have style? Will had a few more years before he was in Harry’s “style and fashion” league, but he’d get there. “Hey there, Will.”

“Pop. Harry.” A smile spread across the young man’s tanned face. “Phyllis is tied up with a customer and asked if I could let you know she’ll be a few minutes.” He leaned toward them, lowered his voice. “Seems there was too much black pepper in the scrambled eggs last time, and the rye toast was too crisp.”

Harry turned and squinted toward the back of the diner where Phyllis stood, feet planted, notepad in one hand, menu in the other, and the biggest attitude he'd seen since Angus Waterhouse accused her of shortchanging him on his French fries. The woman causing Phyllis the annoyance was a petite, shriveled thing dressed in black. More squinting until Harry could almost make out her face. He turned and spoke in a half whisper, "Is that the woman who complained to the library about carrying those steamy romance novels?"

"That's Aurelia Beaucamp." Pop shook his head, let out a sigh.

"Maybe she should have read one or two, see what she's been missing." Harry shook his head. The woman looked like she hadn't experienced a day of joy—physical or otherwise—in her entire shriveled-up life.

Will cleared his throat. "Anyway, she should be finished soon."

Harry eyed Will, his gaze slipping to the perfect knot in his silk tie. "Since you used to work here, maybe Phyllis won't mind if you step behind the counter and get our coffee." Pop had mentioned something about Will working there one summer, said the young man came in and reworked the whole billing system for Lina and when he graduated college with an accounting degree, she told all her business friends about him. What Harry found more impressive was Will Callahan's ability to memorize orders without a notepad.

"Uh...sure." Will made his way to the counter, stepped behind it and poured two cups of Lina's special dark roast. When he returned, he set both mugs on the table. "There you go."

“Thanks, Will. So, I hear you used to take orders without a notepad.” Harry took a sip of coffee, pointed to his own head. “I need three reminders and chances are I’ll still forget. What’s the trick?”

“I guess my brain takes a snapshot of everything and then I remember it.” A slow swirl of pink crept up Will’s neck, settled on his cheeks. “It’s not such a bad thing to forget, Harry. Sometimes I think it’s better not to recall everything in vivid detail.”

“Really?” Harry placed both elbows on the tabletop. “If I asked you what Pop and I ordered last week when you stopped by our table, you would or wouldn’t remember?” Now he’d see firsthand if what the town said about the whiz kid was true or just a fable.

“Well...” A quick glance at Pop who nodded and offered a stingy smile.

Harry darted a glance at Pop, then settled his gaze on the whiz kid. “Tell you what, if you can get the order right, I’ll buy your breakfast for a month, and I’ll throw in two meals at Harry’s Folly. If you miss, even by one item, then you’ll take a look at my chef’s taxes and see if you can save him some money. While you’re at it, convince him to put more money into his retirement account. These kids never think they’re going to get older than thirty-five.” Jeremy needed some financial help, especially since he’d been talking about proposing to Pop’s granddaughter, Lucy.

“Deal.” Will shook Harry’s hand, his expression a mix of amusement and “gotcha”.

No way could the kid get last week’s order right since Pop had switched it up and added applesauce. “Go ahead. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Those blue eyes narrowed the tiniest bit and then Will spat out the order like it was a cash register receipt. “You had blueberry pancakes, butter on the side with maple syrup, and two eggs over easy.” That voice shifted an octave, continued, “Pop had the same, but he added a side of applesauce.” Pause and a tap on his clean-shaven jaw. “And he likes cream and one sugar in his coffee these days. How’d I do?”

Damn, but the boy *was* a whiz kid! Harry worked up a slow smile of appreciation and awe. “You did good, kid. And from now on, your boss isn’t handling my taxes, *you* are.”

That comment made Will stumble over his next words. “Mr. Fergus is very particular about his personal clients.”

Harry raised a brow. “*And?* I’ll have a chitchat with Andy and then you and I will have a chat. Plus, you’ll set up something with my chef. Jeremy needs somebody like you to give him a few pointers.”

“Sure. Thanks, Harry.”

A nod, a grin and then “Anybody who can rattle off a list from a week ago like you just did deserves to be noticed.” His grin flattened and he added, “If you ever see my wife, don’t mention the butter on the pancakes, okay? I told her I gave it up, but...”

*Tsk tsk.* Pop shook his head. “Harry Blacksworth, one of these days you’re going to realize that a partner knows everything, even if she doesn’t let on.”



“You think Greta knows about the butter?” Harry wiped his forehead and stared at his friend. “How could she know?”

“Phyllis might be your friend, and she might serve you up the best breakfast in town, and she might even give you an extra-large slice of cherry pie, but she and Greta are tight. If Greta asks about your breakfast order, Phyllis is going to share every bit of it, including the butter. But knowing Greta, she won’t ask because she’ll want you to do the right thing and fess up on your own.”

*Damn*, his wife had a way of guilting him into doing something even when she wasn’t here. And Pop? He didn’t have to think Harry didn’t understand the little switcheroo he just pulled on him. “Did you just see what happened here, Will? Did you notice how this man set me up, so now I *can’t* add the butter to my pancakes? And forget a pecan roll or sausage links, no matter how long it’s been since I’ve had either.”

The young man every woman in Magdalena and ten miles beyond was after laughed. “I see that. Well played, Pop.”

Pop rubbed his jaw, winked. “I thought it was pretty crafty.”

Harry shrugged, decided he'd forgo the butter and anything that wasn't "Greta approved" and tossed out a question to change the subject. "So, Will, what's going on in the bean-counting world?" The boy sure didn't fit Harry's idea of an accountant, not that he'd known many, but crew cut, glasses, middle-aged, incapable of cracking a joke, all fit Harry's visual. In fact, Will's boss fit that description. Someone who could multiply in his head and got excited over words like *tax free* and *tax deductible*, did not seem like a "chick magnet" or a natural charmer. But Will Callahan was both, and either he didn't know or he didn't care. The "not knowing" and "not caring" usually didn't happen until the guy was head-over-heels about a woman and couldn't see past her, but Harry would lay money that wasn't the case here...not with Will's current girlfriend, Delaney Hall. Natural blonde, pale blue eyes with a smile and a disposition that belonged in the "perpetually happy" section of humankind. Partner in an insurance business, yoga instructor, organic gardener, made her own tea and body scrubs.

Beautiful, intelligent, agreeable.

A bit too agreeable.

Vanilla swirled with maple syrup and a sprinkle of brown sugar.

Happy. Always happy.

There was something about her that didn't sit right with Harry. He'd sensed it the first time he spotted the "Love is the Only Answer" bumper sticker on the back of her compact car, and again when she entered Lina's Café almost a year ago and spotted Will Callahan reading the *Magdalena Press* as he devoured a plate of blueberry pancakes.

It took Harry less than five seconds to identify the woman's actions as she moved toward Will in her yoga outfit, long braid swaying with each step.

Desperation.

Thick. Clinging. Consuming.

The woman wanted a man, and the intensity in that pale blue stare said she'd located her target. Three weeks later, Delaney Hall attended the silent auction at the hospital where Will served on one of the boards and "got her man." How an intelligent guy like Will couldn't see her coming from a golf course away was hard to believe.

Maybe he thought he could control the situation *and* the level of involvement, but Harry hadn't been a bachelor for over fifty years to not understand the players or the game. Women like this one could act sweet and sincere and they might even be that way, but if the game went on too long, or they felt threatened by a rival? Well, the rules changed and so did the interpretation of fair.

Watch out for the unexpected and the unforeseen.

Forced marriage, fake pregnancy, you name it.

A guy had to keep his eyes open and take precautions, no matter how sweet or sincere the woman appeared.

Harry wasn't ready for the Godfather gig and he knew it, but worry that little Miss Sweetness might trap a decent guy like Will Callahan crowded out logic and made him open his big mouth. "How serious are you about the insurance lady?"

"What?" Red splashed Will's face, snaked to his neck. "I..."

Okay, that either meant serious but haven't told her or *not* serious but haven't told her. Harry opted for choice number two because Will didn't seem like someone who didn't know his own mind. "Well, if you're interested and not planning to pursue your current situation, I could introduce you to the new girl in town." He slid a smile at Pop, winked, and turned back to Will, prepared for a bit of "Godfather" magic. "She's not actually new to this town, but I never met her before. Tall, leggy, a real looker with chestnut hair and eyes the color of a putting green on a cloudy day."

The boy had turned quiet, the red in his cheeks gone, brows pinched together. Oh, he was interested in hearing more, and Harry planned to deliver. If he'd taken a breath to notice Pop's "not happy" look he might have stopped spewing information like a fire hydrant. But Harry never was one to slow down when he had a plan, especially if he thought it was a good one.

"My guess is she's about thirty or so." He rubbed his jaw, eager to provide more details to entice him. "She came into the restaurant a few days ago, and we had a long chat, said she's visiting from Pittsburgh. She's a nurse in the emergency room. Name's Melanie." Chuckle. "Bet she gives her patients heart palpitations."

"That would be Melanie Russell," Pop said, his words sharper than ice. "Her grandmother passed a few months ago and she's here to sort through her things."

Harry didn't miss the dark look or the pinched lips when Pop shared that information. "What's wrong?" Harry darted a glance at Will whose expression matched Pop's. "Okay, what's going on? I was only trying to open the door for Will and let

him know about the new girl in town in case he wanted to walk through it and get to know her.”

“And you thought he needed your help?” Pop blasted him with a stink eye. “You thought this fine young man with enough brains and charm to court all of the single ladies in Magdalena needed Harry Blacksworth’s help?”

Was that a trick question? Obviously, Harry had missed something here. “I thought he might like a reason to have a conversation with her.”

“And Delaney Hall? What about her?” Pop pointed a bony finger at Harry, scowled. “Should he pretend they haven’t been keeping company for the past ten months? Should he just ignore the candlelight trips to your restaurant and the roses he sent her on Valentine’s Day? Maybe catalogue them as a friendly gesture and not a *romantic* intention?”

Harry opened his mouth to tell Pop he’d done those very things back in the day and they’d been more of an appeasement tactic than a romantic gesture, but Will edged him out. “Pop, how did you know about the restaurant visits and the roses?”

No mistaking the curiosity steeped in annoyance smothering Will Callahan’s words. “Right,” Harry piped in. “How *did* you know who’s been visiting my restaurant?” If Lily had been tossing him tidbits of information on couples, he’d have a talk with her about privacy and personal space *and* threaten to move her to the kitchen instead of hostess. They’d had this conversation before she started, and she promised not to share what she heard *or* saw at the restaurant. But Pop was a crafty one, and if he wanted information, he knew how to get it. Harry slid a look at his friend, caught him staring back with equal suspicion.

“It’s not who you think it is, so stop giving me the evil eye. I happened to witness one of the restaurant events firsthand, took it all in as I munched on a slice of homemade bread dunked in olive oil and a banana pepper stuffed with hot sausage.” A shrug, followed by a half-smile. “People watching is better than a front-row seat at the theater. Entertaining and interesting, especially if you’re dining alone or waiting on a dinner partner. Mimi was running late, so...”

“So, you decided to snoop around and draw conclusions about my patrons?” That did not make Harry happy, and if word got out that people’s privacy wasn’t being kept private, goodbye to Harry’s Folly. Nobody would trust it *or* Harry.

“Snooping and drawing conclusions?” Pop let out a huff as though Harry had just accused him of peeking in windows and looking through people’s mailboxes. “I was passing time, savoring the homemade bread and dipping sauces and then I spotted Will and Delaney Hall, and something just didn’t sit right. She was doing all the talking, laughing, even let out a giggle or two. He just listened like he was in school, and she was delivering a lesson. There were a few nods, a half-smile, maybe a shrug, but not much else. I started to observe the body language and Will might as well have been sitting in the kitchen because he was a hundred miles away. Delaney would have pounced on his lap and fed him his salad if he’d let her.” He tapped his fingers on the table, stared at Harry and then slid a glance at Will. “So, why was that?”

The squared shoulders and closed-off look said Will Callahan did not like being the subject of conversations, especially one involving relationships. “Don’t know, Pop. Why don’t you tell us?”

“Guess it’s the same reason you bought the yellow roses instead of the red ones last Valentine’s Day.”

“He doesn’t love her!” Crap, had Harry just said those words out loud in front of Will? Harry wiped a hand over his face, cleared his throat. “Sorry, kid. I get excited when Pop puts me on the hunt. I didn’t mean to say that.”

Pop ignored Harry’s outburst, swung his gaze to Will. “And then you have to ask why doesn’t he love a girl like that? Good-looking, sweet as cherry cobbler, intelligent, kind, sings in the church choir. Who *wouldn’t* love a girl like that?” He settled back in the booth, let out a long sigh. “Only reason I can think of is that she’s either the wrong one or...”

“Or?” Harry had to hear the rest of this story, because when Pop told it, he couldn’t stand not knowing the ending.

“Or he’s still carrying a torch for someone else.”

“He is? Like who?”

When Pop answered, Harry realized why his friend was the Godfather of Magdalena and why it would take a long time for Harry to earn that title. “Like the young woman you tried to fix him up with...the one who broke his heart and maybe still owns it. Melanie Russell.”

It took Melanie two days to work up the courage to visit Will. She'd driven by his house several times, took in the white Cape Cod with black shutters, black door, and neatly trimmed front yard. When they'd talked about their first home, he's told her *It depends on where we are. If we're still in the city, we may be looking at a condo. If it's the suburbs, I'd like a little land so you can grow your flowers and vegetables.* He'd smiled, brushed his lips against hers, added, *Maybe we'll put up a swing set.*

This house sat on a postage-size lot and there were no flowers unless you counted the yellow mum on the front porch. Was there room for a swing set in the backyard? Did he *have* a backyard? She'd poked around town and asked a few vague questions about him, but no one was offering anything, especially those who knew their backstory. Could she blame them? Melanie was no longer one of them and they would protect Will, no matter what.

She stopped at Barbara's Boutique & Bakery, picked up six dark chocolate-covered strawberries and one custard-filled éclair. Will once said that aside from her, a dark chocolate-covered strawberry and a good custard éclair were his favorite sweets. Maybe it would serve as an apology, and an olive



branch. She'd leave them in the car until she could gauge his reaction to seeing her again. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but if she didn't start with the truth, the therapist said she'd live the rest of her life in misery and regret.

The truth had eluded her for too many years, though, in retrospect, it had always been there, she just hadn't wanted to see it. Instead, she'd chosen to believe her mother to save their family and she'd ended up destroying her chance for happiness.

And Will?

What had she done to him? Had she destroyed his chance for happiness, too?

It was late afternoon; the air was crisp with hints of fall surrounding the town. She had no idea if he'd be home but had decided to take a chance. Melanie drew in a deep breath, parked on the street next to the Cape Cod and made her way up the driveway. Music drifted toward her as she climbed the front steps. Will had always loved rock and roll and once claimed he wanted to come back in another life as a drummer. Melanie fell back all those years ago to the first time they discussed rock bands over a burger and fries at Lina's Café.

*You can't beat the Stones.*

*No argument there, he'd said. But sometimes it depends on my mood. They're not an all-occasion type of band.*

She'd laughed. *No, definitely not.*

*But...no matter who I listen to, I compare everybody to them.*

*Yep.*

Melanie had been so caught up in yesterdays, she didn't realize the door had opened until *he* spoke. "Melanie? What are you doing here?"

Will Callahan faced her with a not-happy expression on that unforgettable face. The blue eyes, the strong nose, the full lips had haunted her for years. And now he stood less than a foot away, but he looked nothing like she remembered. Gone were the faded jeans, T-shirts, stubbled jaw and shaggy dark hair. *This* Will Callahan was clean-shaven with an expensive haircut, a button-down dress shirt, and tailored slacks. Her gaze slid to the leather wingtips. There'd been a time when he'd only worn tennis shoes...

"What do you want?"

She struggled to find the words that would erase eight years of separation, failed. Her gaze shifted from his shoes to his face. "I was hoping we could talk."

Those blue eyes that had once devoured her narrowed in suspicion. "Talk? The time for talking is long gone." Pause and a firm "Like eight years gone."

Melanie bit her bottom lip, determined to push past his resistance. "There are things I should have said and didn't, and I think it would help both of us if we had a conversation about it." That seemed to annoy him. A lot.

His lips flattened, the left side of his jaw twitched. "You think it's going to help me?" He shook his dark head, those lips she'd once known so well pulling into a scowl. "Whatever happened, I don't need reasons, excuses, *or* an apology. It was a long time ago, and I've moved on." He shoved his hands in his pockets, stared at her as though he could see right into the unrest that lived in her soul. "If you haven't been able to do that, I'm not sure what to say."

“I see.” He was not going to listen to her because he *had* moved on and didn’t need anything from her, especially a conversation or an apology. Could she blame him? She’d sided with her mother’s confusing and questionable story that tagged Will as a liar...only he wasn’t lying.

“Look, I’m sorry you felt the need to come here, but it wasn’t necessary. Not for me.”

He eyed her as though he’d never touched her, never kissed her, never—

“Life moves on and that’s what I did. You should do the same.”

There’d been a time when he’d spoken to her with such tenderness, promised to protect and love her...and then... She cleared her throat, let the truth spill out. “But what if I can’t move on?” The darn tears threatened to fall, but she couldn’t let them. Not in front of him. “What do I do then?”

Those blue eyes flashed with heat for a second before they turned to ice. “You see a counselor and have them help you figure it out. I’m not your guy.” Coldness spread through his next words. “I haven’t been your guy in a long time.”

“I did this to you, didn’t I?”

More staring, a clench of his jaw. “Did what to me?”

A sip of air and then she forced out the words. “I made you cold and unfeeling.”

The laugh said she gave herself too much credit for her ability to affect him. “You might not have moved on, but I have. I’m just a little smarter than I was with you.” Pause, then a hard “It’s called self-preservation.”

Before she had a chance to respond, a car pulled into the driveway and a blonde woman rushed out, carrying a bag of groceries. “Hi! Sorry I’m late. I brought the steaks.” She slowed as she approached Melanie, offered a smile and a hand. “I’m Delaney. And you are...?”

“Melanie Russell. My grandmother was Esther Russell.”

The woman squeezed her hand, her pretty face a mix of sadness and empathy. “I’m so sorry to hear about Esther. She was such a lovely woman.” After the millisecond condolence, she turned to Will, leaned on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth, leaving a pale sheen on his lips. “So—” she turned back to Melanie. “How do you know Will?”

How, indeed? *We were going to marry, have children, grow old together... So many dreams so many—*

“We went to school together.”

No emotion in her ex-fiancé’s voice, not a hint of melancholy or regret. Melanie kept her gaze on Delaney, forced a smile and held it in place until her cheeks hurt. “Yes, we knew each other years ago.”

The woman’s laugh turned giddy. “This man knows everybody in town.” The smile she gave him bordered on hero worship.

“Well, it was very nice to meet you, Delaney.” Melanie shifted her gaze to Will, caught him studying her. “Goodbye, Will. Nice to see you again.”

Melanie didn’t draw a full breath until she was on her way back to her grandmother’s. She should have waited to contact him, prepared a speech instead of trusting her gut to guide her. Why had she assumed she’d know what to say?

Because she thought she still knew him?

She didn't know him at all.

How had she expected the encounter to go? Even back in the day, when they were planning their future together, he'd been hesitant to share his true feelings. But when he finally did, the emotion had poured out, letting her know *she* was the reason for his ability to share, she was everything he'd ever wanted. That's exactly what he'd said the night he gave her the engagement ring and asked her to marry him. Oh, but they'd had plans, so many of them. If only they'd gone straight to Magdalena...not decided to celebrate at the hotel.

If only...then.

What would have happened if they'd witnessed a similar event between her mother and his father later, after they were married? Maybe at a Christmas gathering or a birthday party? Would Melanie have believed Will then, stood beside him and ignored her mother's pleas to remain silent? *I would never betray your father. Never. Surely, you must know...*

How many hours had Melanie replayed that scene, the tiny details, the expressions, the touches and almost touches between Mr. Callahan and her mother? A parent was supposed to protect their child, do what was right by him or her, not use them to save themselves.

But that was exactly what happened that day, and it would take years for Melanie to understand the truth.

O'Reilly's Bar & Grille had been around a long time, but since Nick and Delilah Borado had gotten involved, the place had a trendy, upscale feel. Chicken avocado sliders, roasted red pepper hummus, stuffed portobello mushrooms, all compliments of Delilah O'Reilly Borado. Now that couple's story was interesting and almost unbelievable.

The more unbelievable part of it all was the fact that Nate Desantro agreed to appear in Nick's clothing catalogue! Who would have ever believed that possible? Nobody, not even Nate's closest friends, but the guy surprised them all and did it. Will guessed a guy would do anything for the right woman, and word had it Christine had been involved in the asking part of getting her husband in that catalogue.

Will sat in a booth at O'Reilly's, sipped his beer and waited for Cash. Tonight was specialty wing and slider night and Cash had invited him for a few beers and tax advice. Will and Cash developed a bartering system a few years back: Will provided tax expertise and Cash offered home repairs. After they'd gotten past the initial jabs about Will not knowing how to use a power screwdriver and Cash not understanding depreciation, they'd settled in and decided to concentrate on their own areas of expertise.

Will could get a lot of work done on his house just for offering insight into how a person could save money. He enjoyed the challenge and the intricacies of tax code, and while some might call it boring, he looked at it as a puzzle to be dissected and solved.

“So, got a new list for me?” Cash Casherdon slid into the booth across from Will, set his beer bottle on the table. “Maybe one that includes an addition?” He slid Will a look, raised an eyebrow. “Say...a nursery?”

The guy might be married with kids, but he would always be a tormentor. No problem, because Will knew how to push back and when to ignore the guy. This was not the time to ignore. “Hmm... Not sure you’re up to that challenge yet... An entire room addition? You’d have to sub that out and then what? I’d have to do your taxes for free for the next twenty years, *and* all your friends and their friends...”

That comment made Cash laugh, his eyes crinkle at the corners. “Good one. Really good one. I have a lot of friends who have skills, so I could get a whole house built with my connections.” Big sigh and another laugh. “That’s a lot of taxes and a ton of tax advice.”

“You think you can just use that charm to get whatever you want? Let me guess... Pete Finnegan would be the general contractor...Vic Tramont would handle carpentry...Beck Durrell for electrical...and I’ll bet you could even talk Law Carlisle into pitching in if you mentioned the word *nursery*.” Will sipped his beer, pushed a little further. “But what would Nate say about all of this? And how about your wife? Do you think Tess would be okay if she knew you were trying to barter my services through retirement by offering up your friends to do the work?”

Cash's smile slipped, shifted to a frown. "You really haven't learned what the line is, have you?"

Of course, Will knew the line and he liked to walk right up to it. Cash could dish out his torments, but if Will mentioned Tess or how she might not think her husband was an above-board, stellar human being? Game over. "You knew I was going to play that card the second you started pinging me about a nursery, which implied marriage, which implied a proposal...which implied commitment..."

Cash's shoulders relaxed, but his gaze narrowed on Will, his tone serious. "Okay, maybe that was a bit much, but... Was it really? You're thirty years old, have a good job, own your house, been with the same woman for almost a year... So?"

"So?" Everybody wanted him to get married and start a family, especially his mother. Maybe he wasn't ready, maybe he didn't want that sort of commitment, not now, maybe not ever...though there had been a time...

"So, guess you know she's back in town."

And there it was, tossed onto the table between them—the real reason Will was sidestepping his intentions with Delaney. If he played it cool, maybe Cash would let it slide and circle back to talk of household additions and nurseries.

Or not.

The shrug and sideways glance said he had a lot more to say and was trying to decide how much to share. "Tess and I both saw her. She looks great."

"Good to know." Eight years had only made her more beautiful, more sophisticated, more—

"Figured she'd head back here now that her grandmother's gone. It's not like anybody else in that family is going to come



here and clean out the place.”

“Right.” Susannah Russell wouldn’t set foot in this town again, neither would her beaten-down husband. Nope, apparently, they’d rather pretend around what had happened, move to a different town, and start over. Start over? Nobody could start over. Did they really think they could leave the past behind like it never happened? Bury the secrets with a new address and a different backstory and *pretend* they were different people?

Good luck with that. Everybody carried scars and memories, no matter how much they wanted to deny it. Will should know.

“I’m just saying, Delaney’s a nice girl, and I hear she bakes killer chocolate chip cookies, but that doesn’t mean you have to spend the rest of your life with her.”

“Thanks for expanding on what I figured out a while ago.” The guy was poking around, trying to gauge Will’s reaction to Melanie’s reappearance in Magdalena. Wait until he found out she’d visited him and tried to apologize. Of course, where his ex-fiancée was concerned, he could only pretend for so long. She’d burned him, ruined him from ever opening his heart again... But he wasn’t admitting *that*.

“Have you seen her yet?” Cash eyed him with those whiskey-colored eyes as though they were in a poker game, and he’d just “called”.

Did the guy already know the answer? Had the questions all leading up to this second been to see if Will would admit the truth? “I saw her.”

“Well then.” Cash blew out a long sigh, his expression unreadable. “She’s sticking close to her grandma’s, trying to

sort through a lifetime of memories. I stopped over the other day to fix a leaky sink and a broken cabinet hinge.” The narrowed gaze homed in on him. “I like her. Tess likes her too, and my wife is a hard sell. She invited Melanie to join in on a girl’s night next month. You know, the ones where the women sit around, drink mimosas, and talk about life, love, and how they can fix us.” He laughed, took another long pull on his beer. “And then they admit they might like to *tweak* a few things, but there’s not much they’d change.”

That’s because they’d figured it out and gotten the right partner. Cash and Tess Casherdon. Nate and Christine Desantro. Ben and Gina Reed. Adam and Bree Brandon. Bree had picked a real loser the first time, but she got it right with the lawyer husband. Delaney was desperate to get invited to one of their get-togethers, had hinted at Will asking Cash who might suggest it to Tess. Not happening. Will didn’t poke around in other people’s business and ask them to invite his girlfriend to their gathering.

*Girlfriend.* He guessed that’s what Delaney was, but he couldn’t say she’d ever make it past that title. Life partner? Wife? Mother to his children? It was a stretch to picture that. In fact, it was a stretch to picture anyone with those titles, not since—

“So, no details on when and where you saw her?” Curiosity spilled through Cash’s words. “Maybe just a hint?”

Fortunately for Will, Nick Borado interrupted with more beers, a platter of sliders and a basket of wings. “Extra hot sauce on the side.” He patted Will on the back, pointed at Cash. “This guy says you take too long to decide, so he ordered ahead of time.”

Cash's laugh bounced from the table to Will. "Hey, unlike some of us at this table, I have a wife to get home to and don't want to hang out here all night while whiz kid compares the saturated fat content and calories."

"Funny." Will eased a slider onto his plate, scooped up three wings.

"I do have my moments." Cash grabbed a slider, tore into it.

"I never thought this place would buy into anything with avocado in it."

Cash shook his head, reached for a wing, dipped it in hot sauce. "How about the whole hummus thing? It's one of my favorites."

"Ah, so you're a hummus and avocado guy?" Will's lips twitched. "Do you drink appletinis too?"

"Shut up. And just so you know, I understand what you're doing."

The guy wasn't playing right now, but that didn't mean Will had to own up to anything, especially about Melanie. "You do? Because I was just trying to decide if I should bring finger sandwiches and punch to the next card game."

"The next card game?" Cash raised a brow, his lips pulled into a flat line making it impossible to tell if he were serious or teasing. "Keep talking like that and there won't *be* a next time."

Will took in the harsh lines on either side of his mouth, the narrowed gaze, the tense jaw. If he attached that to the man's words, assessed and analyzed, then a person would conclude that—

“You are so damn easy.” Cash let out a howl, eyes sparkling. “*Too* damn easy. No wonder you can’t figure out what to do,” he mumbled under his breath. “You’re too busy creating your spreadsheets so you can study them.” Another howl and then “Human relationships do not require spreadsheets or heavy analysis.” He balled a hand into a fist, placed it over his heart. “It’s all about feeling and going with your gut. You either feel it or you don’t. It’s either there or it isn’t.” Pause and a soft “And it’s not there with Delaney.”

“Thanks for the analysis.” Deep down, Will knew he was right. *It* wasn’t there...it had never been there, and casual compatibility was not a reason to plan a future with someone.

His friend’s next words scorched his brain. “Not like it was with Melanie.”

“And what’s your point?” He didn’t wait for Cash to respond because he already knew where this was heading. “Are you going to drown me with advice like give her another chance? Try again? There’s nobody like her and there never will be? Every other woman is a fake compared to her?” Will tried to shut down his emotions, but they spewed out like a gusher. “You’re lost without her, and you haven’t been the same since you split up? Or how about the real heart breaker? It’s *always* been her?” He sucked in a deep breath, blew it out and finished with “It will never be anyone else *but* her no matter how much you deny it?”

Five seconds ticked by, then ten before Cash placed his half-eaten chicken wing on his plate, eyed Will. “I was just going to ask if you liked her new haircut.”

**I** heard Melanie Russell's back in town.

*I see she waited until poor Esther died to swoop in and raid the house.*

*Poor Esther indeed. She did not deserve this.*

*Nobody deserves to have their family desert them.*

*Left town and never looked back.*

*Talk about wrong.*

*Worse than wrong.*

*Did they think sending Esther a plane ticket once or twice a year erased everything?*

*As if it could...*

*And Melanie? Hah. She's as bad as her mother.*

*Poor Will.*

*That boy got blindsided and it almost destroyed him.*

*She crushed his heart, stole his dreams, and left town for good.*

*Don't forget the engagement ring she gave back.*

*So cold.*

*I thought he'd never trust a woman again, but I think Delaney might be the one.*

*Maybe so.*

*Esther said Melanie was seeing some doctor, and thought it was serious.*

*Humph. I hope he breaks her heart. I hope she ends up miserable and alone after what she did to that poor boy.*

Pop heard the rumblings the second Melanie Russell drove into town. Some people just loved to retell a tragic tale, stir it around like a pot of minestrone, add sprinkles of doubt and chunks of judgment until you couldn't separate fact, fiction, or possibility. There was a lot of contemplation and guessing going on right now and most of it had to do with Melanie Russell's return.

Of course, it wasn't just a simple *She's back* and *How dare she?* No, the gossips wanted to know when she was leaving as in *Get her out of our town. She's not welcome here.*

Pop waited until Melanie had been in Magdalena seven days before visiting her. No sense bombarding her with her grandmother's letter before she had time to settle in. Nope. Better to wait until she'd walked into town, sorted through a few of her grandmother's belongings, maybe run into Will Callahan. He'd wondered if Melanie would approach the boy if she spotted him, but his source told him she'd gone to his house, and it hadn't ended well. Pop heard this from Cash who'd pieced it together from the conversation he'd had with Will at O'Reilly's the other night. Talk about a predicament with no good or easy way out.

Pop zipped his jacket and began the trek to Esther's place. It was a long walk, and he might need to ask for a ride back,

but the journey there would be a good one. The leaves had begun shifting from green to red and gold, the air crisp, the gravel crunching under his feet. And the birds? That chirping filled his soul. Who knew how many more autumns he had left to enjoy? His ticker was still good, his joints achy but tolerable. His brain? Still working, but the good Lord could shake things up and decide at any moment that Angelo Benito's work on this earth was done. That's why he had to get Harry in training for the Godfather of Magdalena role.

Harry was well-suited for it; all he needed was a bit more confidence and a little less fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants solutions. Like Lucy said, *Once you put sound to thought, you can't take it back, so make sure what comes out of your mouth is what you want to come out...* Lucy had been the smart one, the true guiding light, the Godmother of Magdalena. Pop wouldn't involve Harry in the current situation between Melanie Russell and Will Callahan until he understood a bit more, like what was really going on between those two and where, if anywhere, was this couple headed.

Eight years of trying to move past heartache and betrayal was difficult, but situations changed when truths were revealed and who knew what might happen once Pop delivered the letter to Melanie? Cash told him about her attempted apology a few days ago and Will's refusal to even acknowledge it... making some nonsensical comments about moving on and not living in the past. Ha, who did the boy think he was kidding?

He might be playing footsie and everything else with Delaney Hall, but that girl was never going to crawl her way into his heart. Nope. Not when someone else already lived there. According to Esther, her granddaughter had a few dances of her own, one ending in a proposal which she refused. Now, wasn't that interesting?

Pop walked along the edge of the road toward Esther's house, hoped he didn't run into anyone who might relay his "jaunt" to Nate or Christine or Miriam or anyone else... Not Harry either. They'd all have something to say about it and then they'd start accusing him of not using good judgment, risking a fall or getting run over like poor Leah Darlington had in Florida. Not going to happen. Pop was alert, he knew how to scoot out of the way...

But two-thirds of the hike in, he realized that maybe he should have asked someone for a ride. Harry had offered him a *call me whenever you need to go somewhere* years ago. Had he taken the man up on it? Maybe once, no more than twice. Same with Christine... Ditto with Tess, Nate, Vic...and several of the other residents in town. As he trudged up Esther's driveway, he admitted a few things to himself: his legs were tired, his throat parched, he hadn't gotten out of traffic's way as quickly as he used to...

Okay, he'd ask for a ride back into town. He pulled out a handkerchief, wiped his forehead and made his way to the front door, the letter from Esther resting against his chest. When Melanie opened the door, Pop took an extra-long look at the young woman standing before him. If he changed out the jeans and sweater for a frilly blouse, skirt, high heels and lots of jewelry, she could be the spitting image of her mother. Dark hair, hazel eyes, perfect complexion. And the extra height gave her an I-know-what-I'm-about air. But Pop recalled the kindness and the gentle nature of the young woman—two traits her mother did not possess. "Melanie, you sure are a sight."

A smile spread across her face as her expression burst with happiness. "It's so good to see you, Pop." She stepped aside to



let him enter, hugged him. A real hug, too, not one of those feeble pats on the back or side hugs.

“It’s been too long.” He stepped back, held her gaze. “I sure am sorry Esther couldn’t be with us.”

Those hazel eyes filled with tears. “Me, too.”

Oh, but there was some pure misery in that voice and a look that said she was about to spill a bucket of tears. Pop laid a hand on her arm, said in a gentle voice, “She loved you, Melanie. Your grandma never blamed you for leaving, and she didn’t hold it against you that you never made it back. When you called her a few months ago to tell her you were coming for a visit, you lit up her world.”

“I should have done it sooner. I should have...”

Pop shrugged out of his jacket, draped it over his arm. “Why don’t we sit while we talk? I just finished traipsing back roads to get here, and my legs are a bit tired.”

“Pop, why didn’t you tell me you needed a ride? Are you still driving, or did you give it up?”

Now there was a question. “You mean because I’m not a young pup anymore? I *can* drive, but I’ve promised certain people not to get behind the wheel.”

“They just want to keep you safe.”

She motioned toward the living room and the couch where Pop and Esther had shared many a conversation over a cup of tea and a sweet treat. Pop sank onto the couch, settled in. “I know they mean well, and it’s not just my son.” He blew out a sigh, started rattling off the names. “There’s Nate and Christine Desantro... Nate’s mother, Miriam... Harry Blacksworth...” He pointed to his left. “Cash and Tess next door... I could keep going but I think I’ll stop now.”

“It’s wonderful that so many people care about you, but I’m not surprised. You’ve done so much for everyone, and when you’re ready, I’ll be happy to drive you home.”

Pop grinned, offered a nod. “That’s a mighty fancy car you have out there. I see it’s one of those foreign jobs?”

“It is.” She smiled. “And it’s a lot of fun to drive.”

“Hmm. I’ve never driven a car like that before. Mine are usually slowpokes with questionable get-up-and-go and no frills.” He rubbed his jaw again, asked the question before common sense got the better of him. “Do you think I could sit behind the wheel? Just to get a feel for it?”

“If you get the okay, I’ll take you to the school parking lot and let you drive it.” Her voice dipped, turned softer than melted caramel. “What do you think about that?”

He raised a brow, snorted. “The okay? Who’s going to give me the okay and who’s not going to give me the okay?” The shrug said she had a few ideas, but the opportunity to drive her car made Pop agree. “How about if I ask somebody who’s most likely to say no? Would that make you happy?”

“Yes, it would. And who would that be?” She tapped a finger against her chin, studied him. “If I’m guessing, I think Nate would be the hardest sell, but it could his mother. And Cash seems easy-going, but I wouldn’t want to cross him... And then there’s—”

“You were right the first time. It’s Nate. I’ll talk to him and once he says yes, which he will, then we’ll head to the school lot so I can open it up a bit.” The look on her face said maybe this was not such a good idea.

“Pop, I’m still responsible for you.”

“And I’m still in possession of my faculties and not about to do anything that would jeopardize either of us. Rest assured on that one.” He pointed to the kitchen, ready to change the subject. “Do I smell banana bread?”

“They’re banana nut muffins. Would you like one with a cup of coffee or tea?”

“Indeed I would. And I’ll go with the tea since I’ve had my coffee limit for the day. Green tea if you have it.”

“Green tea it is.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and Pop settled against the couch cushions, contemplating the conversation he was about to have. What would Melanie say when she read her grandmother’s letter? Life was sure an interesting journey that sent you in one direction and another, confusing you one minute, spinning you around with too many questions and no answers...but if you followed your heart *and* your gut, you usually ended up exactly where you were supposed to be.

When Melanie returned with four scrumptious-looking banana-nut muffins, Pop knew she’d spent a fair amount of time in the kitchen with her grandmother. The mother was a decent baker, but not like Esther. “These sure do look good.” Pop reached for a muffin, glad she’d added extras to the serving plate.

“Enjoy.” Melanie sank onto the couch, placed a muffin on her plate and broke off a piece. “It’s really good to be back here.” Pause and a soft “There’s nothing quite like home.”

Hmm. “I always thought of home as where your loved ones were...”

Those hazel eyes filled with tears. “I always thought that too. I just never believed I’d have to choose between the

people I loved.”

*What to do with that comment?* She was talking about her parents and Will Callahan, and how she’d had to choose between them. “Family isn’t always about blood. Family is about the people who are there for us, the ones who help us through the hard times when we think we won’t make it. They’re the ones we share good and bad with, and they won’t leave us no matter what.”

A sniff, followed by a wobbly “I let my own issues keep me from seeing Grandma and she did not deserve that. I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

The girl kept picking at the muffin and if she continued, there’d be nothing left but crumbs. “Melanie, you can’t keep punishing yourself for what you wish you’d done. She loved you, and she had her own share of wishes and regrets. I learned something a long time ago—you can have a second chance, but you’ve got to take it. If you don’t, then you’ll keep living in the past with too many regrets, and you’ll wind up in the same place every single time. It could be a relationship issue, work, family... Friends... Or it could be what’s inside here.” He placed a hand over his heart, said in a gentle voice, “You can’t undo what happened with your grandma or anyone else.” *Not even Will Callahan.* “But what you can do is forgive yourself and learn. I had quite a few talks with your grandmother, and she told me how she worried about you, said you worked too much and never took a break. She thought you were running from the choices you’d made and regretted. And every time there was a young man, she hoped he would be the one but deep down she knew he wouldn’t be...none of them would be.” Might as well get it all out so Melanie knew exactly what he meant. “Do you know why that is?”

This time, tears accompanied the sniffs and she tried to swipe them away, but there were too many. “I know why but it doesn’t matter.”

Pop placed a hand on hers, squeezed. “It *does* matter. That boy’s never been the same and I’ve been watching him for a lot of years...eight long ones. Oh, he might smile, and he might be with someone he calls a girlfriend. And he might even tell himself life is good. But I see it... It’s in the eyes... It’s in the actions... You and Will need to get things straight and forgive each other so you can either be together or move past it.”

“I tried to tell him how sorry I was, but he wasn’t interested.” Another swipe of tears, two more sniffs. “He told me he’d moved on and there was no point in my apology because he didn’t need it or want it. I’ll never reach him, Pop, no matter how sorry I am, no matter how much I wish things were different.”

“I think you will. It’s going to take time, patience, some prayers, and the belief that this is what you have to do.” He reached into the pocket of his shirt, pulled out the envelope containing the letter from Esther. “I planned to give this to you once we had more time to chat and get reacquainted, but I can see you need to read this now, so you understand you aren’t the only one with regrets and the desire to make things right. Esther had plenty of her own.”

“This is from my grandmother?” She studied the envelope with her name scrawled on it.

“She had a lot to say to you. Go ahead and read it.”

Melanie slid the letter from the envelope, unfolded it and began to read:

DEAR MELANIE:

*I've wanted to tell you so many times and yet I couldn't. I wish we had spoken about this when it first happened, before your parents packed up and moved away. If only I had said what was in my heart, you might have been spared such pain. I watched you struggle year after year, confused, uncertain, heartbroken. So lost.*

*I can no longer remain silent. You see, I must bear some of the responsibility for your struggles. Had I been honest about what I knew, your life might be different—you might have peace...you might be happy. And you, my dear, deserve to be happy.*

*I hope I can deliver this letter to you in person but if you're receiving it from Pop Benito then I've gone to meet your grandfather. Life is so short and as the days grow shorter, I have made a vow to work on the regrets I carry. You and Will were good together and that boy's honesty got him punished, made him an outcast...and now he's forced to spend his days trying to appease a bitter woman who will never be happy and never be appeased. I'm speaking of his mother. Marjorie is a miserable, vindictive woman who wants everyone to pay for her unhappiness.*

*Now I will talk about the reason you moved away. Your father has always loved your mother and he will until his last breath. But when that love is not shared equally, it makes the other person vulnerable and sets them up to get hurt. It wasn't enough that your mother had a devoted husband who loved her, two beautiful daughters, a respectable job. She wanted excitement, and she wanted to feel young and beautiful. And*

*she wanted a man to give it to her. That man would never be your father and that's why she turned to Joe Callahan. I do believe the man loved her, just as I believe she used him for her own selfish reasons.*

*And while your father might not have known the particulars of what was happening between your mother and Mr. Callahan, he did know something was going on. Never doubt that or that your father eventually forgave her, even if she didn't deserve his forgiveness.*

*Have you ever wondered what happened to Will's father, and why he left town? It's not because Marjorie booted him out of the house, because word had it, she begged him to stay. The sins of the parents are the sins of the parents and yet everyone, including me, pretended we didn't understand what had happened. But we understood. That boy wanted you to stand by his side and trust him when he spoke the truth. But you couldn't do it because it meant destroying your own family.*

*We are the ones who betrayed you and Will with our silence. We are the ones who caused you both such pain and heartache, and we must bear those crosses. I'm sorry I did not tell you sooner, but I hope to tell you face to face, if the good Lord is willing and if he's not, then please forgive me.*

*I love you,*

*Grandma*

After Pop's visit, Melanie had a lot of time to think about her grandmother, the disappointment and sadness she must have felt from their moving. Families were supposed to stick together, love each other, and never give up. Melanie vowed she'd trust her grandmother's words, *and she'd listen to Pop Benito. The man had told her to *Open your eyes and live your life, not the one everyone thinks you should have. Find out what you want, not what others want for you.** Grandma and Pop were right. It was time to find out what she really wanted in life, and then go after it.

There'd been so many years of running that she'd lost her way, lost her ability to find joy and peace. Since she'd returned to her grandmother's house, she'd slept better than she had in years, an odd claim to make in a house with questionable insulation, an old mattress, and clutter. So much clutter in the form of photo albums, figurines, cookbooks, and knickknacks, all part of what Grandma Esther called memory makers. *I can tell you the significance and the history behind each one of these,* she'd once said. *Ask me and I'll tell you.*

Melanie had been sorting through cooking and house magazines circa 1978 when the doorbell rang. She set the magazines aside, made her way to the screen door. A tall,



attractive blonde in a killer outfit and perfect tan stood on the other side, a briefcase clutched in one hand, a business card in the other. The smile revealed white teeth and lots of confidence.

“Melanie Russell?” She held up a business card. “Tara Ambrose. I’m with Cornwall & Angus Realty. May I come in?”

She might have been gone eight years, but Melanie recognized the name of the real estate firm that had been in Magdalena forever. She opened the door, and the woman stepped inside. “I’m not sure how I can help you.”

Tara Ambrose held out a hand, the smile spreading as she ignored Melanie’s question, slathered on charm. “I’m glad to finally meet you.”

The firm handshake and assessing gaze said she was on a mission, and that mission involved this property. Well, the place wasn’t for sale, not yet. It was much too soon to think about someone erasing Grandma Esther’s presence from this home. Did this woman think she could just walk in here with her fancy clothes and big smile and try to convince Melanie to sell the place? She could think again, *and again*, because Melanie wasn’t letting some stranger stick a For Sale sign in the front yard and then tell her how to make the house “more appealing.” “What do you want?”

Those pink lips flattened the tiniest bit. “You don’t know why I’m here? I thought your father would have told you. I’m the real estate agent on this property.”

“He’s putting it up for sale...now?” Other than a tepid *At some point, we’ll have to decide what to do with the place*, he’d never mentioned specifics such as when that “some point” would be. The time was not now, not with all the

memories waiting to be relived and stored away. And Melanie wanted to do right by her grandmother, show the proper respect and reverence as she dismantled a lifetime.

*Yet her father wanted to just sell it?*

The woman moved to the living room, peeked into the kitchen and heaved a big sigh. “Whew. This place needs a complete overhaul.” She turned back to the living room, pointed to the stacks of magazines on the couch and coffee table. “I’d start with those. Who reads magazines these days? This is going to take concerted effort, but we’ll get it done. I told your father I could send someone to help, and I’ll have a dumpster delivered.”

“A dumpster?” She wanted to reduce Grandma Esther’s life to a dumpster?

Tara Ambrose must have realized her misstep and offered another smile, a softer approach. Compassionate, understanding...almost caring. “I’m sure she was a lovely woman and I’ll do right by her, but it’s already fall. We need to get this place on the market so it doesn’t sit all winter. Winters here are brutal on empty houses, especially the older ones.” She glanced at the ceilings, took in the hardwood floor and the cracks on the walls. “You really want to get it sold before the first snowfall.”

She tilted her head, took a few steps toward Grandma Esther’s curio cabinet. “Families with children have already made their moves so this might be real estate income or—”

“Is this coming from my father or are these *your* recommendations?” Why had her father said nothing about a real estate agent putting the house up for sale days after Melanie arrived? Or had that been the plan all along?

The faintest pink crept beneath the woman's tan, settled on her cheeks. "It's my job to make recommendations to the client. I offer suggestions and they can either accept, amend, or decline. Your father accepted."

"I need to speak with him before we go any further. I'll get back to you, but don't be surprised if there's a change of plans."

The woman stood in the middle of the room, studied Melanie as though assessing her ability to override the situation. "Of course. But please, don't let emotion take over. I've seen this happen too many times, and in the end, the client is left disappointed and empty."

Melanie replied politely but firmly. "And I've been in situations where people didn't trust their gut, *or* the emotion tied to it. They went on what someone else wanted or said they needed. *That's* where a person really ends up disappointed and empty."

A tight smile, a brief nod and then, "I guess we'll be in touch. Call me after you speak with your father." The woman made it to the screen door, had her handle on the knob before she turned and said, "I'm sure it's hard to let the past go, but it's gone. Hang on to the memories, discard the rest and move on. It's all a person can do."

Melanie waited until the woman pulled out of the driveway to call her father. "Hello, Dad."

"Melanie? How are you, dear?"

Ward Russell was the kindest, gentlest soul she'd ever known. Also, the most gullible. "Dad, how could you?"

Worry filtered through the line, grabbed her. "Melanie? What's wrong?"

“I just had a visit from your real estate agent. When were you going to tell me you put grandma’s house up for sale?”

Long pause, a longer sigh and then “We don’t want to be sitting on an empty house when winter sets in.”

No doubt Tara Ambrose had told this story enough times to make the listener believe her words. While an empty house in winter wasn’t ideal, it shouldn’t be the only reason to sell. “Did the real estate agent sell you on that story?”

A clearing of his throat and a quiet “What she said made sense.”

*Of course, it did because she’s a salesperson!* Melanie drew in a breath, asked the question she’d been wondering about for a few days. “Dad, why don’t you come back to Magdalena, help me go through Grandma’s things?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Is it Mom? Did she forbid it?” They’d left Magdalena and never talked about it, as though it hadn’t been a huge part of their world...as though they hadn’t left behind people they loved...

“No, of course not.”

“She’s not the one who’s pushing for this sale and keeping you from coming here?” She didn’t wait for his answer. “I think she’s trying to erase everything that happened before the move. But guess what? She can’t...none of us can.”

“Melanie, please, don’t say that.”

“Why? I have to live with the mistake I made eight years ago. That’s what kept me from seeing Grandma and I have to live with that, too. But I’m here now and I can’t tell you how much peace this gives me. I’m going through her belongings,

remembering what she told me, and I'm healing, Dad. I need this. Please don't put the house up for sale yet. Come back here and just breathe. Can you do that?"

"I wish I could." His voice cracked, turned hoarse. "But I can't."

"Yes, you can. You don't have to protect Mom any longer. She should have protected us, should have been honest, and she wasn't. Grandma wrote me a letter. I'll share it with you if you like. It's full of her regrets and wishes; the biggest wish is for me to move on and forgive everyone who hurt me and kept the truth from me, especially Mom...and you."

*What's going on between Will Callahan and Melanie Russell?*

*I thought he had a girlfriend.*

*I thought so too.*

*So, do you think something's going on between Will and Melanie?*

*No way. That young man would never open his heart to her again.*

*But what if he can't help it? What if seeing her again makes him think he's twenty-one, on top of the world, and ready for his future?*

*You mean before Melanie Russell demolished his dreams?*

*What she did to him is unforgivable.*

*He'd never be interested in her again; besides, he has Delaney. Sweet. Loyal. Perfect for him.*

*Fingers crossed Will isn't caught up in the past, because Melanie Russell will hurt him again. No doubt about it.*

*Agreed.*

And then there were the two women in Lina's Café who'd spotted Melanie sitting in a nearby booth enjoying blueberry pancakes and reading the *Magdalena Press*. They shot her how-dare-you-come-back-here looks and raised their voices to make sure she heard them.

*I was certain Delaney would have a ring by Christmas.*

*Such a sweet girl.*

*She'd never hurt Will. She'd never walk away.*

*Absolutely not.*

*But more than one man has been played for a fool and I hope Will Callahan isn't fooled twice by the likes of Melanie Russell.*

*I wish she'd just leave.*

*I wish she'd never come back.*

Melanie heard these comments and others, some whispered loud enough for her to hear, others accompanied by a hard stare. Not everyone gave her the evil eye or snubbed her. There were some who seemed happy to see her back in Magdalena, honoring her grandmother, maybe even trying to find her way. She'd run into Ava Ventori Carlisle a short while ago and the woman had welcomed her back with a fierce hug, a smile, and one of the river rocks she'd created. Teal and silver with the word *Believe* scrawled across the top. *So glad to have you back*, Ava had said.

Her husband, Law, had been stacking tomato products when he spotted her, a smile spreading across his handsome face. Gone was the bad boy she remembered as he inquired about her stay, her grandma's house, and darn if the man didn't offer his help. *I know Cash has you covered, but if there's anything I can do, I'm pretty handy with a hammer and a drill.*

Who would have thought Ava Ventori and Law Carlisle would end up together, married with a baby? Who would have thought he'd *ever* settle down? The whole town was certain he was heading straight to prison, but people changed. Maybe all he'd needed was a second chance and a woman who believed in him. Melanie was pondering the couple as she selected apples from a large display and didn't see the woman approaching her until she spoke.

“Hello, Melanie. I see you've finally come back.”

Melanie looked up from the apples she'd been selecting, met Marjorie Callahan's ice-cold stare. Will had his father's blue eyes, not the silver hue of his mother. Even when she smiled and laughed, those eyes held the chill. Melanie had never been quite certain whether the woman liked her or not, but after what happened eight years ago, no doubt the woman despised her. “Hello, Mrs. Callahan.”

Those silver eyes narrowed, matched the coldness in her voice. “I have two things to say to you. How long will you be staying and stay away from my son.”

Yes, the woman despised her, maybe she always had. “I'm cleaning out my grandmother's house, so however long that takes... A few weeks... Maybe a month.” She did not respond to the woman's demand that she stay away from her son.

The raised brow indicated curiosity, and her next words dove in with questions. “What? No big-city job you have to get back to as soon as possible? Certainly, there must be one.” A short laugh, cold, hostile. “There absolutely must be one, considering everything.”

She meant breaking the engagement with her son. Ignoring him and his requests for answers and the attempts to work things out. It all seemed so convoluted and disjointed now, but



it hadn't when it happened. And when her parents insisted the only way to save their family was to cut all ties with the Callahans? She'd been trapped. *That boy won't stop telling tales*, her mother had said. *He only thinks he saw something, but he's wrong. I fear he won't stop until he destroys this family, and that's why you have to break it off with him. He'll destroy all of us.*

Melanie had been too naïve to consider her mother might be the one lying, and she'd definitely not thought of the repercussions of her actions. No, she'd never considered what life would be like *without* Will Callahan. Instead, she convinced herself that what they shared was young love, and despite the plans and hopes for marriage and happily-ever-after, he was only her *first* love. Not her only love. There would be other opportunities for mature love, deeper love. Real love. Of course, her mother and even her father made sure to convey the same message. *There's a whole world out there. You're young. You'll meet someone else.* Oh, yes, they'd tag-teamed the delivery with such emotion and consistency that Melanie believed them.

Why wouldn't she when they were her parents, the ones who had always looked out for her, guided her...loved her? What she did not understand and would not admit for years was that perhaps Will Callahan was her *only* love. Her true love. If that were accurate, then she'd have to find a way to make peace with that possibility, and the reality that she would spend her life alone—without a partner, maybe without children, definitely without her one true love.

“My son is happy.” Marjorie Callahan's voice pulled her back. “He has a girlfriend who idolizes him, and I wouldn't be surprised if they weren't engaged by Christmas.”

Will planned to marry Delaney Hall?

“I see you’re surprised. Did you think he’d never find anyone again?” Laughter spilled from her thin lips. “Oh, dear, you are so naïve. There’ve been *many* women since you; beautiful, intelligent, captivating. But none he could commit to for longer than a few months.” A quiet sigh and a tiny smile. “And then he met Delaney. They’ve been together almost a year, and I’ve never seen him this happy.”

*Breathe. Don’t let her see she’s gotten to you.* It should not have bothered her to learn there’d been so many other women or that he was apparently serious about the woman who’d brought him groceries the afternoon Melanie visited. She was beautiful, soft-spoken, and it was obvious she idolized Will.

No, it shouldn’t bother her, but it did.

And that was a problem because Melanie had no right to anything Will Callahan did, and while they may have planned a life together, that was long gone. She settled her gaze on Will’s mother and smiled. Not a real smile because that would be too painful, but she’d gotten quite good at manufacturing her emotions—and hiding them. “He deserves to be happy.”

“Yes, he does.” She clutched the grocery cart, spat out, “My son tried to be honorable, but you and your family didn’t want to hear any of it. No, you wanted to run away, pretend nothing ever happened. Well, it *did* happen.” Her knuckles turned white, her eyes filled with tears. “You almost destroyed my son. Delaney is the first person who’s made it past six months, and you are *not* going to step in and confuse him.” Anger swirled through her words, landed on top of Melanie. “Do you understand me? Stay away from Will and go back to that self-important life you’ve been living in that pretend world of yours.”

A nod was all Melanie could manage though she wanted to tell Will's mother how sorry she was for hurting him. But Marjorie Callahan wouldn't want to hear it, not when Melanie's parents had pretended around the truth and convinced her to do the same. Pretending normal, that's what they'd done, and it had been wrong and caused its own level of damage.

That's why Melanie couldn't commit to a long-term relationship, and her younger sister had moved across the country to avoid spending time with her own family. *Sorry, I can't get away. And the worst, I already have plans. Rain check?* Except there never seemed to be a rain check, not for Melanie or their parents.

*And what about her parents?*

They'd renewed their marriage vows, took trips and acted as though they were each other's heaven. *Were* they happy or had they settled because they were petrified to be alone? And if her mother had chosen Joe Callahan over her husband, what then? Would Will and Melanie have survived that?

There was no way of knowing.

Marjorie Callahan gave her one more threatening look before she steered her cart past the produce aisle, her warning burned in Melanie's soul. *Stay away from my son and go back to that self-important life you've been living in that pretend world of yours. Leave him alone!*

Melanie had just removed a tray of chocolate chip cookies from the oven when the doorbell rang. She'd decided two dozen cookies could serve as a thank-you for everything Cash and Tess had done for her since she arrived in Magdalena. Grandma Esther had always said "thank-you" came in many forms, and she preferred to give *and* receive the edible kind. She'd once mentioned how much Cash loved her chocolate chip cookies and one day, she planned to teach Tess how to make them. *That sweet girl insists she's no good in the kitchen, but I'm sure I could help her master these cookies. A few lessons and she'll be all set.*

Unfortunately, that was the year Grandma Esther broke her hip and she never did get around to teaching Tess how to make those cookies. As Melanie made her way to the front door, she decided if Tess still wanted to learn, then she'd teach her. She opened the door, expecting to see her friend on the other side.

She did *not* expect to find Will Callahan staring back at her.

"We need to talk."

The serious expression told her something had happened. Maybe he'd heard about his mother's conversation with her. Or someone had relayed the gossip traveling through town

about how Melanie should never have come back here. How she wasn't welcome or worthy of a conversation with her ex-fiancé, let alone create upheaval with his girlfriend. "Are you sure it's safe?" Pause and then "Your girlfriend won't mind?"

The scowl said he did not appreciate either comment as he grabbed the handle and opened the door. Melanie stepped back to let him enter, annoyed that his presence could still make her pulse triple. "What do you want, Will?"

He closed the door behind him, stepped into the living room. "I want to apologize for my mother. She's never been one to know where the line is."

"The line? I'd say she knows exactly where it is *and* continues to cross it to show everyone who's in charge. Why can't she just mind her own business and let other people live their lives?"

He shook his head, frowned. "I've been asking myself that for a long time. I spent years despising my old man for what he did to our family, how he broke us apart and made us all miserable." He stared at her, eyes bright. "But what if it all stemmed from *her* and her inability to be a decent person?"

"I'm sorry, Will." Nobody cared for Marjorie Callahan, but they tolerated her because of the children and because of the "situation" with her husband. People said a man who brings home a paycheck and contributes nothing else to the family in terms of affection, guidance, *or* concern is *not* a family man. And if that same man heads to the bars or worse, disappears for hours at a time, then that man is not a partner *or* a parent. Melanie had heard all the stories about Joe Callahan, long before she and Will started dating. It was her father who told her Will's dad wasn't a bad man, he was just confused and trying to make sense of his life. *Don't believe everything you*

hear, he'd said. *Rumors are often attempts to entertain or make a person feel better about themselves or their own situation.*

Will began pacing, his long strides covering the length of the room in mere seconds. "All I've done with my mother is make excuses for her constant state of dissatisfaction; she can't find a decent job, she's too old to get job training, she's heartbroken about my father... She misses my sister... It's always something and it *never* stops." He blew out a loud sigh, dragged a hand through his hair. "As long as I keep refueling her needs, she's happy—or as happy as my mother gets. Need a new roof? Sure. Want a trip to Charleston? You bet. Want me to show up for Christmas Eve *and* Christmas dinner, even though I dread it? I'll be there. But when she comes after you? That's a line I won't let her cross."

"I can handle your mother." The dark expression and the frown said she had no idea what she was talking about. "Listen, why don't we head to the kitchen, and you can try out a few chocolate chip cookies." Pause and a soft "I put walnuts in them."

Those blue eyes narrowed, his jaw twitched. "I haven't had those since..."

*Since we broke up?* she wanted to ask. *Why would you do that? To obliterate the memories, or to obliterate me?* But she didn't ask, because deep down she didn't want to know the answer. "Well then, you should definitely try at least one." She didn't wait for his response but headed toward the kitchen and the cookies he'd once claimed were his favorite. Melanie removed the cookies from the tray, lined them up on the wire racks and began filling another tray with cookie dough.

"You always were a great baker."

She glanced up, caught him studying the rows of cookies, his hands resting on the edge of the Formica countertop. “Thank you.” If he didn’t eat chocolate chip cookies with walnuts anymore, what about dark chocolate-covered strawberries? Were they off limits as well? Oh, how she wanted to ask, but to do so would reveal too much interest and what if he asked *her* the same question? What would she tell him? *I gorge myself until I’m numb, so I won’t feel anything when I look at them?*

What did that say about her other than she had some serious issues, and he was at the center? No surprise there, even though she’d denied it for too many years, until she listened to the last therapist. But that didn’t happen until she broke her ex-boyfriend’s heart because she could *not* commit to a life with him.

Because of the man standing on the other side of the counter.

Before she left Magdalena, she *would* have her life figured out and she *would* have closure with Will Callahan.

He picked up a cookie, gaze narrowed on it. “I wonder what the ratio of walnuts to chocolate chips is?”

Melanie shot him a look. “You’re wondering this...why?”

A shrug, a twitch of his lips that reminded her of the old Will Callahan. “It impacts the taste, so what ratio would be required for the walnuts to overpower the chocolate chips? Would you say fifty-fifty? Sixty-forty?” He toyed with the cookie, drew in a deep breath, opened his mouth... And then he cleared his throat, placed the cookie on the counter and stepped back as though the darn thing had burned him.

Fine, he wanted to pretend he didn't want the cookie or *any* of the memories associated with it, including her? No problem. All he had to do was deny it. Melanie lifted the tray of cookies, placed it in the oven and set the timer. Then, she selected her own cookie, bit into it and let out a slow moan of pleasure. "So good." Will stared at her lips, those blue eyes shifting to silver. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it. Continued to stare as she took another bite, offered up a smile and another tiny moan. "These are almost as good as dark chocolate-covered strawberries. Almost, but...not quite."

She should be quiet and let him pretend he didn't remember how she fixed him chocolate chip cookies with walnuts as he crammed for a test or when they lay side-by-side watching a movie, nibbling on cookies, so close, so intimate. So perfect. Or the night she made him cookies at his college apartment wearing nothing but his T-shirt. Oh, she bet he remembered *that*. She took another bite, let out a soft sigh, held out the rest of her cookie. "Sure you don't want any?" The left side of his jaw twitched, the brackets around his mouth deepened...and those eyes...so bright...so intense... "Will?"

"I know what you're trying to do and it's not going to work."

"You do? I'm simply offering you a cookie."

More jaw twitching, and a snarl. "I know what you're trying to do, Melanie, what I don't understand is why."

Eight years ago, she knew almost everything about William Joseph Callahan and what she didn't know, she asked. It was so simple, but now? Her ex-fiancé wanted to pretend what they'd shared was so insignificant that he couldn't remember it? That was a flat-out lie, and she wasn't going to



let him get away with it. “I’m trying to get you to acknowledge that we meant something to each other. Enough that you proposed, and I accepted.”

“And?” The tone of his voice was cold, harsh, unforgiving. “The acceptance lasted less than a week. It hardly qualifies.”

That was cruel. “I don’t care if it was three minutes. You proposed and I accepted.” Darn the man and his coldness. “We loved each other, and I’m sorry that it’s inconvenient for you to accept or acknowledge that, but it’s true. And you can walk around in your button-down shirts and fancy haircut with your stares and scowls and pretend that you don’t see me, and you don’t remember, but you do and that’s what I’m trying to get you to admit.”

“You want me to admit to a time in my life I wish never happened? For what purpose?”

That comment did not sound as though he hadn’t cared. No, absolutely not. *That* comment sounded as though he’d cared a lot and wished he hadn’t. Maybe he was as messed up and broken as she was because they’d never reached closure. One day they were planning a life together and the next, they were over.

How could a person move on from that if it had all happened with the force of a tornado and there was nothing left but the aftermath of destruction? Melanie pushed out the truth she’d refused to accept for too many years. “I haven’t been able to move on since we broke up and I’ve tried. It hasn’t worked and the only hope I have of finding a decent life and some sort of lasting relationship is to have closure with you. But that does not involve pretending or acting as though we never mattered. It doesn’t work because I’ve tried both.”

Her confession made him lash out. “Closure? I don’t need closure. I want to forget *we* ever happened, and I am not going to dredge this all up so I can live through it again. You’re not going to do that to me.” He glared at her, stone-cold furious. “Not again.”

“Who’s pretending now? You once accused my whole family of pretending around the truth about what happened. I sensed they weren’t being honest, but I didn’t want to admit it. And now you’re doing the same thing with what happened between us. You say you want to forget, but have you been able to do that? Why aren’t you married?” She fisted her hands on her waist, didn’t miss the flinch. “Why haven’t you found someone?”

“It just hasn’t happened.”

“It hasn’t happened, or you won’t let it happen? From what I’ve heard there’ve been a lot of applicants over the years.” She tried to keep the hurt from her voice, failed. “A lot.”

A shrug, and then “Sometimes a guy learns after he’s been burned and isn’t going to let himself get burned again.”

“Ever?”

He mumbled a curse under his breath, just like he used to do when he did not want to answer a question. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Well, somebody’s been thinking about it, and that somebody is Delaney Hall. Oh, and your mother is darn certain Delaney’s the one for you. In fact, it sounds like they’re both banking on a ring by Christmas.”

He stared at her as if she’d just told him he was giving *her* a ring by Christmas. “That’s crazy. I never said anything about a ring.”

“Your mother was very firm about what she thought was going to happen, and how I was standing in the way.” Let him figure out the rest. She was not going to spell it out for him.

“Did my mother tell you I planned to propose to Delaney?”

No denying the surprise in his voice, which could be attributed to the possibility he *wasn't* going to propose to Delaney, *or* he didn't want Melanie to know. She erased the emotion from her words and answered. “Pretty much.”

“Damn her.”

“She's never liked me, Will. And then after what happened, she hated me. I think she wanted to make sure I heard how happy you were.”

“I'm not marrying Delaney.” Determination mixed with annoyance sifted through his voice. “I'm not marrying anyone.”

It was foolish to let herself feel joy and the tiniest bit of hope with those words. What did it matter? He'd just told her he wasn't marrying anyone, but what he didn't add and should have, was *especially you*. “I'm sure your mother won't be pleased to hear this.”

“I'll deal with my mother.”

*What did that even mean?* And what about the past and what they'd meant to each other? “Can you really just erase the dreams and experiences we shared? Pretend they never happened?” Pause and a quiet “Pretend *I* never happened?”

The coolness in his voice and the closed expression said that's exactly what he'd done and what he planned to continue doing. “It's called self-preservation. Maybe you should try it.”

“Really? That’s what you’re going to say? Live half a life? Do you have any idea how many therapists I’ve seen about this, how difficult it was to open up? I failed every time and never dealt with it until the last one. Before that, I kept making excuses for my inability to have a long-term relationship. Oh, I told them all about the boyfriend and the nano-second fiancé, and I even told one about what our parents did. But the last one let me know I wasn’t fooling her, and that’s when she helped me realize I was *never* going to get past *us* until I dealt with it. My guilt. My betrayal. What my parents did and how my family reacted, and I guess even what yours didn’t do. *You* were the one who was left damaged and betrayed. But what we didn’t see was that we’d all been damaged. I can’t live that way any longer.” She sucked in a breath, blew it out as she gathered strength to finish what she needed to say. “I *won’t* live that way.”

The jaw twitch said she’d gotten to him, but the Will Callahan she’d once known was buried so deep behind the need to *never* open up again that her words didn’t matter. “I’ve got to go. I hope you find your closure.” One more hard look at those cookies and then he turned and left.

Will made it out of the driveway and five seconds down the winding road toward his house before he blew out a long breath and let out a string of curses. Was this *ever* going to be done? Was *she* ever going to not affect him? Oh, he'd played it so cool, watching her with those damn cookies, sharing her pain, her regrets, *her heart* and it had been almost impossible to stand there and pretend he wasn't affected. The woman had always been able to get to him in good and bad ways, and he'd be a fool to try and convince himself he didn't care. He didn't *want* to care, didn't want to think about her or her need for closure as she called it. *Closure*? How did you have closure on an open wound that would never heal? Sure, it might scab over for a little while, but then a reminder crept in and broke it open all over again—as painful as the first time.

What had she expected him to do? Grab a few cookies—he could have eaten half a dozen—agree to talk about the old days, and everything stuffed in between like hope, promises, love? Right. So he could feel those emotions and then she could cross each one off her list as completed? This wasn't a questionnaire or an activity to be gotten through, resolved, case closed. Did she expect to do that? Maybe *she* could, maybe that's why it was so important for her to do this. Once

she got her closure, she could move on, find her guy, be happy. Good for her.

He'd found his own sense of peace and he'd settle for peace rather than the ups and downs of letting someone else own your heart. Not happening again, especially *not with her*. Another curse, another sigh. What was he really worried about? Could he just friggin' admit it one time?

Fine, he'd admit it. If he started spilling his guts and having "honest" conversations with her, what did he think could happen? Would he get his closure? No, he could fall for her all over again, and even if she said she felt the same way, promised him he owned her heart, and she'd *never* betray him or leave him or any of the other ever-after BS couples said, he'd never be able to draw a clean breath again. No, he'd be waiting for the next "situation" that would crush them, and he was *not* going to do that.

Would he have felt differently if she'd shown up six months after they'd split? What about nine months or a year? Okay, even two years? He'd still been raw and angry, but by year three, he'd gone numb and that made him determined to shut down any possibility of letting a woman get close enough to hurt him. And if that person were Melanie? Hard pass. Not even going to consider it.

So why did his gut feel like he'd eaten a dozen of O'Reilly's extra-hot wings? And why did he have the beginnings *and* the middle of a headache? And how could he get out of this foul mood and regain calm? By the time Will reached his driveway, he'd plummeted into full-blown agitation over the whole conversation *and* his reaction to it.

Will parked the car and headed into the house he'd bought five years ago that still didn't feel like home. How did a

person live in a place for this long and not find comfort or familiarity in it? Maybe because he wouldn't let himself? Or maybe because the reality didn't mesh with what he'd envisioned? He grabbed a beer and made his way onto the deck before his brain could pummel him with more "what ifs" and "maybes." There was a lot of green making up the backyard: shrubs, oak trees, grasses. No flowers, no vegetable garden, no pops of color.

*Someday I want a big vegetable garden where I'll grow tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, even jalapeño peppers. The woman he'd loved had laughed. Maybe I'll even add cayenne or ghost peppers. Aren't you the one who said he'd never met a pepper he couldn't eat?*

*That's me. And I suppose you'll smother the backyard with flowers?*

*So many flowers. We'll have a pollinator garden.*

*A what?*

*A pollinator garden. You know, the kind of garden that attracts bees and butterflies and hummingbirds. My mother could never be bothered with anything like that because she said it was too messy and the flowers grew outside of the borders, and she couldn't tolerate disorder. Those hazel eyes had turned bright, her voice shifting with emotion. I love a certain disorder, especially the random kind that reveals beauty in nature.*

*He'd traced a finger along her lips. And what about strawberries? Do you think you could grow those and dip them in dark chocolate?*

*Of course. You just wait. I'll make you the best dark chocolate-covered strawberries you've ever tasted. When*

she'd smiled this time her gaze roamed his body from his lips to his thighs, back to his lips. *One day I'll teach our children to make them.*

*You will?*

*Yes, and I'll tell them the secret ingredient is love.*

Will pinched the bridge of his nose, blocked out those memories. He had to find a way to avoid her. How hard could it be? Hopefully, she'd leave town in a few weeks. But he should have known that no matter how much he thought he could control his life, sometimes destiny had other ideas.



THE NEXT MORNING, Will stopped at Barbara's Boutique & Bakery for an éclair. From the second he'd entered Esther Russell's home, the smell of chocolate chip cookies smothered his senses and he craved the taste in a way he hadn't for years. He refused to believe *her* presence had anything to do with it, but he'd be a fool to think otherwise. Maybe he *was* a fool because he'd spent years avoiding reminders of Melanie Russell, acting as though refusing a chocolate chip cookie or a dark chocolate-covered strawberry or the smell of citrus... or staying away from a woman with chestnut hair and hazel eyes would make him forget. Well, maybe she'd proven her point that he *couldn't* forget, but that didn't mean he had to act on it.

Will stepped into the bakery, made his way to the counter, just as Lily Desantro opened the backroom door. Her face lit up when she spotted him and she gave him the biggest smile.

"Hi Will! Did you come for your éclair?" She pointed to the row of chocolate éclairs, winked. "How many do you want today?"



Chocolate éclairs had become his go-to when he wanted a sweet and he usually only bought one though he really wanted two or three. Lily teased him every single time. *Why don't you save yourself a trip and just buy three instead of coming in three times in five days?*

“Just one, Lily.” He let out a sigh, slid her a smile. “If I take three, you know what’s going to happen, don’t you?”

Her blue eyes sparkled. “They’ll be breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner.”

That comment made him laugh. “You’re a very smart girl. The only willpower I have is keeping them here and it gives me a reason to visit you.” Lily always put him in a good mood, made him wish *he* could find such joy in day-to-day living. How did she do it? How did she—

“I like seeing you too, Will. So, what’s up? Any news for me?” She tapped her fingers on the counter, tilted her head as though waiting for him to spit out everything he’d been doing since the last time she saw him...almost as though she knew.

“Not really. Just the usual.” He rubbed his jaw. “Work, more work...and chocolate éclairs.”

The laugh said she liked his answer, but the raised brow said she doubted that was 100% accurate. “What’s going on with you and Delaney? I saw her at Lina’s Café and she had the saddest look on her face, like she was going to cry. She was all by herself and I almost stopped at her table to see if she was okay, but Mom said sometimes people need to be alone with their thoughts.” Her gaze narrowed behind the thick glasses, and she scrunched her nose. “I wonder what kind of thoughts she was having? Hmm. Do you think they were about you and why you haven’t asked her to marry you yet?”

Maybe he *should* start loading up on the éclairs and make fewer visits to the bakery. Lily had a way of asking questions that poked several layers beneath the niceties and curiosity to the real issue. When she asked questions like this, it was hard to brush her off or make up excuses. “I hope not. I don’t know why she’d think that.” But after what Melanie had told him about her conversation with his mother, he had a good idea why Delaney *would* think that. And not long ago, Pop mentioned something about Delaney wanting a ring. *Are you going to give her one? If not, why are you still seeing her? Don’t send mixed messages.* Will almost considered it once or twice, but he couldn’t do it.

“Or maybe she’s sad because your old girlfriend’s back in town.”

“Lily, what are you talking about?” How did Lily even know he had an old girlfriend? Somebody was talking. It would never be Nate Desantro, or Cash, or their wives, but what about Harry or Pop?

“I hear things and I put them together. It’s just little tidbits —” she lifted her hands, made a small motion to indicate how tiny the information was “—but if you get a lot of tidbits, you kind of sew them together, like when Mom’s making a quilt and then you see a pattern.” Her voice drifted, and she nodded. “So, you look at the pattern and you say, huh. What do we have here? That’s what I did with you and Melanie. You’re thirty years old and you’re not married, and that’s okay, but you’ve had a lot of girlfriends but not for very long. Then you start dating Delaney and everybody thinks she’s sweet, and she is... But I heard her asking some lady about wedding cakes and places to have a wedding. And what was the most romantic spot for a honeymoon. Isn’t that weird if you aren’t even engaged? So why would she do that? And why would she

buy a bride magazine at Sal's Market *and* visit the jewelry store? I don't know what she did in the jewelry store, but I'm guessing she at least looked at the engagement rings. And do you want to know why?" She didn't wait for him to answer, tossed out the zinger. "She was planning her wedding to *you*."

Lily placed her hands on the counter, leaned forward and whispered as though there were ten people in the bakery. "She's been doing this stuff for three months, but now she's sad and that doesn't make any sense, unless...you told her you're *not* getting married or she *thought* you were getting married to her and then your old girlfriend who is also your ex-fiancée came back to town, and now you're acting different."

"Lily, I am *not* acting different. I'm still the same guy who comes in here for éclairs, goes to work every morning, and runs five miles a day."

She shook her head and if she weren't wearing a hairnet those curls would've danced about her face. "Nope. You're *acting* the same way Cash did when Tess came back to town. He is *the* most handsome man in the world, and I remember how he did not want to still be in love with Tess and she did *not* want to still be in love with him." Her voice dipped and she sighed. "But they were."

The whole town knew Lily had a serious crush on Cash and compared every man to him and every situation to his. "Well, this isn't the same. Melanie came back to clean out her grandmother's house and that's all."

The look she gave him said try another excuse, and the words confirmed the look. "And that's why you're not seeing Delaney anymore? That's why your face gets all twitchy when I say Melanie's name?"

The storm rolled through Magdalena on a Wednesday at 6:52 p.m. Will had just finished the last of his mother's manicotti and was reading an article about a thirty-two-year-old entrepreneur when the rain started. There was nothing like a good rain, but when the winds kicked in and the thunder and lightning blasted the area, that's when he knew this storm was trouble. Will pushed back his chair, headed to the kitchen window and glanced outside. The trees bent and swayed as the rain pelted the house, landing sideways on the paned windows and siding. There'd been warnings about a severe storm watch, but who took them seriously when 75% of the "weather predictions" never happened?

People loved their drama and Will stopped listening to the hype three years ago when he stocked up on supplies for the once-every-100-year storm that didn't happen. After that day, he started ignoring the weather predictions and studied the radar maps himself. He could usually count on his analysis to guide him, but when he wasn't sure, he conferred with Jack Finnegan. The guy might be crusty and sparse with his words, but he knew his weather. *I can smell it coming.* Or Jack would point to his beagle and say *I been watching the way Roland's walking the perimeter of the property, nose in the air, like he's onto something, and it's not a rabbit. He smells it, too.* Jack

and Will might seem like unlikely friends—Jack favored hip waders and beef jerky while Will didn't own a fishing pole and avoided smoked meats. But when Will helped Jack's nephew after he got into tax trouble for “creative accounting,” the two men became friends. Not the let's-hang-out-and-drink-beer kind, but the I've-got-your-back, just-let-me-know kind.

Will was glad he'd listened to Cash and hired someone to trim the trees, shore up the dead stuff and lessen the chances of a tree landing on his house. He recalled a few years back when a storm rolled through and uprooted five trees on Rex McGregor's lot. They were lucky no one got hurt and no structures were damaged. His thoughts shifted to Esther Russell's place. Had she kept up with her tree maintenance? Surely, Cash would have taken care of any issues for her. The guy had treated her like family, and she'd done the same. That knowledge pinged his brain, shot to his gut and gave him heartburn, which he blamed on the second helping of manicotti.

There'd been a time when Will had thought *he'd* be Esther's relative, and while they'd had numerous conversations over the years, there'd always been giant holes in them because neither ever referenced “family.” Except for that one time when Esther brought it up. Seven months after the incident that changed their lives, Esther told him she needed to see him. Courtesy and respect had forced him to her doorstep and while he'd refused to admit it, curiosity propelled him inside. There'd been iced tea and the best sugar cookies he'd ever tasted. He sipped the iced tea and downed three cookies while Esther talked about the blessings of living in Magdalena, the friendship of neighbors like Cash and Tess Casherdon, and how they kept an eye on her. Will should have picked up on the way she made subtle comments about Cash

and Tess, adding in snippets about pure love and getting past heartache to build a future together. But he'd been so busy stuffing cookies in his mouth and trying not to stare at the pictures on the mantel of the woman who'd crushed his heart that he'd missed the message until it hit him head on.

*Forgiveness was the only chance that couple had to share a life together, but they refused to see it. It almost destroyed Cash. Esther had leaned toward Will, placed a hand on his. Poor boy was so lost, scared and running, depending on all sorts of vices to make him forget. Of course, there was only one thing that could help him recover. She'd looked at him with those blue eyes, waited for him to ask what that was.*

He wouldn't do it. He couldn't. *I know what you're doing but this is not the same...nowhere near it.*

*I know you've got a hole in your heart, just like I know she does. You're both hurt and scared, but what's going to happen when you have nowhere else to run? What's going to happen when you realize the only person who can save you is Melanie...and she realizes the same about you?*

*Did she ask you to contact me?*

*Heavens, no. That girl would be horrified if she found out I'd reached out to you. Her voice quivered, her eyes filled with tears. But I've walked this earth long enough to realize when two people belong together and I can't sit back and remain silent. You love her, Will, and she loves you.*

*It's not that simple. He'd forced the emotion from his voice, kept his expression even as he repeated the story he told himself every day, the one that was still difficult to accept. I don't trust her. I'll never trust her. And then the words that still buried him. It's over.*

*I'm sorry, Will. I'm truly sorry that you and my granddaughter can't get past this. And I hope that one day you'll both find happiness.*

That was the last conversation about forgiveness and getting a second chance with Melanie they ever had. Will stared out the window as the storm continued to rip leaves from the trees, hurl branches to the ground, and pummel rain against the house. But all he could picture was Esther sitting on her plaid couch in the powder-blue sweater that matched her eyes, feeding him sugar cookies, and speaking about belonging together.

Who knows how long he would have remained in that past memory, caught between the desire to shut it down and the need to replay every word she'd spoken, especially the one about Melanie being the only person who could save him. Why would Esther have said *that*?

Fortunately, his cell phone rang and interrupted the question that had plagued him for too many years. "Hey, Cash. What's up?"

"A tree landed in Esther's driveway. Nate's out there with a chainsaw and a few other guys are coming over. It's going to be a long night and of course, Tess wants to feed these guys. Do you think you could pick up a few things if I text you a list?"

Will sucked in a breath, blew it out. "Is everyone okay?" *Is Melanie okay?*

Long pause. "We're all fine, but the car in the driveway isn't. The tree branches landed on the hood and dented it pretty bad."

No one was injured. *She* was okay. “Send me the list and I’ll head out in a few minutes. What else can I do?” Before Cash could respond, Will spoke. “Do you need more help clearing the wood?”

“We’ve got it covered, but thanks.”

Storms like this rolled through Magdalena every few years serving as a reminder that nature could be as dangerous as it was beautiful. Cash lived on the outskirts of town in an area that lost power more often than the “in town” sections, but the guy told him an occasional power outage was worth the land and the freedom that came with it. It was more than that, and a few years ago, Cash confessed that he and Tess had dreamed of building a log cabin like the one they lived in—before the disaster that pulled them apart. There was a whole lot more to that story, but all Cash said was that he’d been given another shot at happiness with the only woman he’d ever loved, and he wasn’t going to blow it.

Good for him. At least some couples could work past their issues and get another chance. That didn’t happen with everyone. In fact, Will bet it didn’t happen for most. He thought about Cash and Tess as he changed into jeans and a sweatshirt, found a pair of work boots he wore when he cut the patch of grass he called a lawn, and shoved his work gloves in his back pocket. His father had accused him of having soft hands, not made for labor. *You better use that mind of yours because you’ll never make it with your hands. If your mother didn’t baby you so much, I’d put you to work until you got calluses. A man with working hands garners respect.* On and on he went until Will made it a point to avoid anything that could be termed “labor.”



Could he have changed out a washer and dryer? Absolutely.

What about a garbage disposal or a dishwasher? Yes, he was certain he could do that as well.

No doubt, he'd be able to do a lot of maintenance-type projects if he set his mind to it because he had a knack for figuring things out, analyzing, and following detailed instructions.

But every time he considered trying, he'd look at his hands, hear his father's torment—and push the ideas aside. His old man had wanted to taunt him into learning the skills he thought made a man: splitting firewood, building a deck, digging a trench by hand. It was all there in those blue eyes and the stone-cold expression. That made Will more determined to *never* use his hands for labor.

But tonight, he'd go back on his word to always hire out manual labor, because no matter what Cash said, they needed help and Will was going to do more than deliver groceries. When he arrived at Esther's, several floodlights illuminated the front yard and driveway. The monster oak Esther Russell called "the family tree" lay sideways on the property, smashing the hood of Melanie's BMW and extending across the property into the side yard.

Two men with chainsaws worked on the tree, while others piled up the brush, dragged away branches, and loaded logs onto a trailer. Will pulled into Cash's driveway, parked near the other vehicles and hopped out. He popped the trunk, lifted the water and hefted it into his left arm. There were a few bags of groceries from Sal's and while he was there, he'd run into Harry Blacksworth. The man was in the dairy aisle trying to decide between chocolate peanut butter and triple chocolate

ice cream, tossed both in his cart along with chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and salted peanuts. When he heard about Esther's tree landing on Melanie's car, he looked at Will a bit too closely, commented, *Looks like Mother Nature's stepping in to right a few wrongs.*

"Can I help?"

Will turned to find Melanie walking toward him from Cash and Tess's house. His foolish heart thumped in his chest as she drew closer. The ponytail, sweatshirt and jeans reminded him of their college days when they'd study, eat pizza and wings, and then fall into bed, exhausted and in need of sleep...but not too exhausted to... He cleared his throat, pushed back the old memories. "Sure. Sounds like it's going to be a long night." Will handed a bag to Melanie, careful not to touch her, even more careful not to hold her gaze. "You okay?" Damn, why had his voice slipped into caring mode? He did *not* care about her or her situation as anything other than one human being to another.

"I'm fine. My car..." Long sigh. "Not so fine."

Will lifted the other bag of groceries, closed the trunk and began walking with her toward Tess and Cash's house. "You were lucky you weren't anywhere near the car when the tree fell."

"I think Grandma was watching out for me because I had the keys in my hand, and I was going to move the car closer to the house when—"

"What?" Will stared at her. "Why would you do that? Did you stop to think for one second what could happen?" He fought to keep the emotion from his voice, failed. "You could've...you could've..."

“No, I didn’t think about it. I wanted to save my car and I thought I had time.”

The look she gave him and the tone said she didn’t like his questions. Too bad. “It only takes a second to change a life or take a life. *Think* next time.” Anger, fear, and some hidden emotion threatened to explode when he thought about what could’ve happened to her. He did not want to think about it, did not want to acknowledge it, did not want to—

“I’ve been in more dangerous situations than this and I survived.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Did you get held up at gunpoint? Kidnapped? Were you ill? What could be worse than almost getting taken out by a damn tree?”

A big huff and then “I betrayed you, didn’t I? Is there anything worse than that?”

Then she moved past him toward Cash and Tess’s front yard, farther and farther away until she reached the steps to the log cabin and headed inside, leaving Will to contemplate, decipher, and catalogue what she’d just said.

He waited a full ten minutes before he entered the house, made his way to the kitchen where Melanie was removing the sandwiches from the bag she’d carried in. He set the water and the groceries on the counter, cleared his throat when she didn’t acknowledge him. “I’m sorry. I know you were just trying to save your car, but...”

A flash of anger burst across her face. “But I’m not intelligent enough to reason through what could have happened? I acted on emotion? Not all of us possess the cold calculation you do to assess *every* situation and *every* possible

outcome.” She removed bags of chips, crackers, cookies.... A dozen apples...

“Maybe I got a little carried away with the food.” He pointed to the pile in front of her, shrugged. “But Cash did say it was going to be a long night.” For the briefest second, her expression softened, and it felt like the old days when they could tease each other about silly things. Adding pineapple to a pizza, counting the number of bites in a waffle. The necessity of a dark chocolate-covered strawberry to make a person remember what was important in life—like love and each other. Will forced aside the image of Melanie feeding a strawberry to him, concentrated on his next words. “Again, I’m sorry I lost my temper.”

A shrug, followed by “I guess I should say it’s nice to know you weren’t hoping I was in the car when the tree landed.” Another shrug, a narrowed gaze. “I’m sure you thought of ways to get rid of me once or twice.”

*Ways to get rid of her?* He’d tried to block her from his mind, his life, his heart, and most of the time he’d been successful. But that was when she was miles away and not standing a counter-width from him. “I’m being serious.” Will had played out the scenario of Melanie standing on the front porch, preparing to run toward the car. He’d calculated the seconds that passed before she hesitated and changed her mind. Those seconds saved her life because in another scenario she might have been trapped in the car or in the path of the tree when it fell.

“I was, too.” She smiled, added, “Sort of... Anyway, I had second thoughts and didn’t run to the car. If something happened to me, who would clean out Grandma’s house? Who would go through the cupboards and drawers, set aside her

chocolate cream pie and banana nut muffin recipes?” Her voice dipped, softened with memories. “Who would honor her life?”

Certainly not Ward and Marjorie Russell. “I wondered if you’d come back. After your grandmother broke her hip and couldn’t travel anymore, she sort of gave up...at least that’s what Cash told me. I thought...” Should he say what had been on his mind? *I thought maybe you’d come back after it happened. Wondered about it—a lot.* And was there a tiny piece of him that hoped she would? For what? No, he would not admit *that*.

“I thought about coming back. Actually, I thought about it quite a bit, but I couldn’t, or at least I thought I couldn’t.” Big sigh. “My life is a mess and I told myself if I stayed busy and just kept moving in and out of each day, eventually things would make sense. *Life* would make sense and I’d be happy again.” She lined up the sandwiches as though the task required extreme concentration.

He shouldn’t ask this next question, but he had to know. “And did you find your happiness?”

The tiny headshake gave him his answer and the words attached to it told the rest. “I couldn’t find it and I tried.” Her gaze slid to his, and he spotted the tears in those hazel eyes. “Everything started and stopped here—” another shake of her head and the softest “—with you. I was coming to see Grandma because I needed to find a way to get back to myself, but I was too late. I waited too long, and she died alone. I will never forgive myself for that.” She cleared her throat, swiped at her eyes. “So, even though I’ll never make up for not seeing her again, I *can* honor her life. I can honor who she was and what she meant to all of us, and the way to do that is to sort

through her belongings, cherish what she taught me and so many others, and not bring in a dumpster to just toss things out.”

The emotion tied to those words pinged his brain, squeezed his heart. Will could say he didn't care about her or her apologies, but it hurt to see her like this and there was no denying that truth. “Of course, you wouldn't bring in a dumpster.”

“Thank you. I wouldn't and that's exactly what I told Tara Ambrose when she suggested it.”

Ah, Tara Ambrose, real estate magnet. Beautiful. Ruthless. Determined. “She's trying to get you to sell the house?”

A tear slipped down her cheek, then another. “My father contacted her. He said ‘we don't want to be sitting on an empty house when winter sets in.’ This place is so much more than just an empty house and I don't know why he can't see that.” Her head dipped as more tears spilled. “I don't understand...”

“Melanie.”

A sniff, a clearing of her throat and then she looked up at him and there was no mistaking the pain and misery on that beautiful face, and the regret. “Oh, Will. I am so sad.”

“I know.” He was two seconds from making his way to the other side of the counter when Tess opened the back door. “The guys are ready for the sandwiches and...” Her gaze darted from Melanie to Will, no doubt figuring out they were *not* talking about sandwiches or packaged cookies. “Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

Melanie swiped her eyes and glanced at Tess, smile bright, voice calm as though she hadn't been crying or smothered in

sadness. “I hope everyone’s hungry because there’s enough food here for thirty.”

What had just happened and how had Melanie turned off the tears and the misery so fast? The Melanie he knew had never been able to hide *or* manufacture emotions. Had what happened to them made her guarded and unwilling to share her true feelings? Hard to tell, and too much to think about right now. Will turned to Tess, forced a smile. “If you don’t need me for anything else, I’ll head outside and start loading and stacking.”

The slightest hesitation said Tess knew he was not a loading or stacking guy. “Sure, if that’s what you want to do.”

He grabbed the work gloves from his back pocket, careful not to look at Melanie. “I’m ready to work.”

Melanie sat on a pile of wood that had once been part of her grandmother's favorite oak tree. When she was ten, her father added a makeshift swing to one of the thick branches. There was nothing quite like pumping your legs to see how high you could go, the breeze lifting your hair, blowing over your face. Pure bliss. Simple times filled with hot dogs, lemonade, ice cream cones. She and her sister would toss an old quilt on the ground and blow bubbles, play Monopoly and card games. So many years ago... So many dreams ago...

"I'm glad your grandma isn't here to see the empty spot in the front yard."

Cash Casherdon sat on the log next to her, his gaze fixed on the stump where the old oak had stood for so many years. "She would've been sad, but I don't think she thought about it coming down in the storm or the possibility of it hurting someone if it did."

"Esther was a tough one and if she ever once considered the tree could do you harm?" He laughed, shook his head. "She would have hobbled outside and taken an ax to it herself."

The visual of Grandma Esther clutching an ax between her arthritic hands made Melanie stifle a smile. "Now that would



have been something to see.”

Another laugh, this one deeper.” I’ll bet it would earn a front-page spot in the *Magdalena Press*. I can picture it now. Esther Russell takes on the oak.”

She could see why everyone loved Cash. It wasn’t just the good looks, the engaging smile, or the words that said he would never take himself too seriously. It was the way he made people feel comfortable in an uncomfortable situation. Nate Desantro was a standup, honest guy, but it would be a stretch to say the man made *anyone* feel comfortable, his wife excluded. Melanie had witnessed another side of the man tonight when he spoke of his wife and children. The frown had softened, the deep voice gentled, and those dark eyes sparkled. Who would have thought it possible?

“So, about the car...”

Melanie sighed. “Yes, the car. Maybe someone was trying to send me a message.” Her lips twitched. “Pop asked to drive it.”

Cash slapped a hand on his knee, howled. “No kidding? Pop in a BMW. I would have wanted to see that.”

Pop had been so excited and now she’d have to tell him it wasn’t going to happen. “There were rules and I told him he’d have to get the okay from Nate and if he did, we’d go to the school parking lot.”

“You know Pop’s got a lead foot, right?”

“I was not aware of that.” She glanced at the crunched hood of her car. It was just a car, but if she hadn’t hesitated... She thought of Will’s words, his anger and the fierceness in his expression when he’d spoken about the seconds that could have taken her life. He’d disappeared to the backyard a while

ago to help the other men clear up the rest of the brush, but something had happened between them tonight in the Casherdons' kitchen. While she couldn't identify it, she *felt* it when she looked at Will or caught him watching her as she picked up twigs and small branches.

“Guess we'll have to see about getting you a rental. Let me know what your insurance company says.” Cash rubbed his jaw as if considering another possibility. “Tess and I might be able to share the SUV for a week or so and you could borrow my truck—”

“Absolutely not. You've done so much for me, and I am *not* going to inconvenience you anymore than I already have. Once I contact the insurance company, I'll get a rental, and no one will have to give up their vehicle.”

“It really wouldn't be a big deal.”

The man was kind, handsome, compassionate, and she could see why Grandma Esther called him her second son. “No, Cash, but thank you and thank you for always watching out for my grandma.”

“Esther was like family. I loved her.” His voice turned hoarse. “I miss her.”

Cash's words stayed with her the rest of the night as she lay in bed, listening to the wind and another bout of rain. So many people had loved her grandmother, cherished her wisdom and spunk, and they truly missed her. A few of the men had offered their condolences tonight, shared a story and a smile regarding Esther Russell and her spunk.

*Did you know she once chased a coyote out of her backyard?*

*Your grandmother taught your grandfather how to drive a stick shift!*

*She rototilled her vegetable garden and trimmed the bushes?*

*I remember the time she fired a shotgun in the air to scare the deer who were munching on her tomato plants.*

The stories spanned decades and had been shared in families as an inspiration and a reminder of the woman's spirit and goodwill. Melanie had always known her grandmother was a special person but hearing it tonight made her even more determined to honor this remarkable person in the only way she knew how—by going through her belongings with respect and consideration. No dumpsters, no mass discards. There was a lifetime to understand and perhaps if she took her time, she'd find peace and maybe even a bit of happiness.

As she drifted to sleep, she thought of Will and what he'd said before he left. *Your grandmother would be proud of how you pitched in tonight. It doesn't matter how long it took you to make it back here.* He'd paused, his gaze intent, his expression unreadable. *What matters is that you came back.*

She woke the next morning to slivers of light spilling through the blinds and the sound of birds chirping. Melanie eased out of bed, made her way to the window and peeked through a slat. The backyard was scattered with leaves and twigs, but the major branches had been sawed and piled up. Cash said there were more trees to address, and he'd send someone out to get an opinion and a quote on what needed to be done. She hadn't planned on a storm like this to distract her from taking care of the inside of the house, and she certainly hadn't planned on losing her car.

Why wasn't she more upset about the car and the annoyance of getting it repaired *and* finding a rental? Add that to the storm cleanup and going through Grandma Esther's things? That was a lot, and yet, she'd slept through the night, no headache, no upset stomach, none of the signs she usually exhibited when stress overtook her.

If she were back in Pittsburgh, in her other life, she would not have the patience to deal with *any* of this. But here in Magdalena, there'd been so many people who'd pitched in that she couldn't employ her usual refusal of assistance. Why hadn't she accepted help before? Why had she thought she had to do everything and *be* everything to everyone—except herself? What had she been trying to prove? All she'd done was lose herself and her ability to find joy.

That had to stop because she had to find a way to move forward in her life. Would she return to the pressure-filled adrenaline of an emergency room or critical care setting? Or would she opt for a calmer, quieter aspect of healthcare? Would Pittsburgh be the city she'd return to, or would she find a new location?

Grandma Esther had once told her, *We are who we are, the good and the bad, the old and the new. We can't pretend otherwise, but we can grow and change, and learn from the parts of ourselves that need to be reworked.*

What a wise woman she'd been. Melanie washed up, tossed on a sweatshirt and jeans, and headed to the kitchen where she made coffee and a bowl of oatmeal with raisins, brown sugar, and a splash of cream. Just like Grandma Esther used to make for her. She was on her second cup of coffee and twelfth to-do item, when she heard the rumble of an engine outside. Had Cash sent a tree person already?

Melanie pushed back her chair, made her way to the front door, opened it—and froze. Will eased out of the silver blue Mustang convertible; tall, lean, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes. The sunglasses shielded his eyes as he approached the steps, his long strides closing the distance in seconds. When he spotted Melanie, he offered a wave and a half smile. Why was he here? And why had he driven *that* car?

She opened the door and stepped outside. “You still have Genevieve?”

“Of course I do.” The smile inched wider as he removed his sunglasses, hooked them on his T-shirt. “How could I get rid of the old girl?”

Genevieve was the name of the car he once said he loved almost as much as her. “Did you ever fix the heater?” She should not have inquired because the question held meaning and implied intimacy. *Would you please get this fixed so I don't freeze?* she'd asked every time the temperature fell below fifty. Will would reach for the blanket resting on the backseat, tuck her in with a kiss and a gentle *I'll take care of my baby.*

He cleared his throat, his cheeks shifting to a dull red beneath his tan. “I did get it fixed.”

She moved past him, toward the car that held so many memories. Their first kiss...the deep conversations...the drives back and forth to college...the promises and dreams and —

“I got her a new paint job because she was looking a little sad.” He opened the door, pointed. “What do you think of the seats? And check out the stitching.”

Silver stitching complemented the blue seats; clean, precise, sharp. “Very classy. I like it.”

“I had a whole new stereo system installed. Remember that time I blew out the speaker and...” His voice trailed as if in memory or an attempt to *block* the memory because she’d been with him.

Melanie slid her gaze to his. “Thanks again for your help last night. I really appreciate it.”

A nod, a shift from one foot to the other. Will used to do that when he wasn’t comfortable with a topic, and if he were *really* uncomfortable, he’d tap his hand against his thigh. Would she *ever* forget his traits and behaviors? She recalled more about him than any of the other men who’d been in her life...

“So, since you don’t have any wheels and the rentals around here may be a bit scarce...I thought you could borrow Genevieve until you get your car.”

“You want to loan me your car? I can’t do that.”

Those blue eyes narrowed the tiniest bit. “Why not?”

How could he ask that? Couldn’t he see the reason? “Because it wouldn’t be right. You love that car. You always said nobody was getting near your car and you only let me drive it once and then critiqued me the whole time.”

A shrug, a quiet, “It’s just a car. Let me do this.”

Genevieve was not just a car and they both knew it. “Why?”

He opened his mouth to speak, cleared his throat twice, and darn if he didn’t tap his hand on his thigh. “Hell if I know, but it seems like the right thing to do and for once I’m not

going to analyze it. I'm just going to go with it." He reached into his jeans pocket, pulled out the keys. He still had the same Rolling Stones keychain, the one she'd given him when he bought the car. "I figure if you call your insurance company today and they send someone out, the body shop might be able to work on it by next week. Hard to say. You're going to need a way to get around and why should you have to worry about a rental when this beauty is sitting in my garage?"

Did he really want her to give him the many reasons why this was such a bad idea? The challenge on his face said he was prepared for whatever she tossed at him, but there was also something else in his expression. Confusion? She owed him and maybe this was the first step to moving forward. The only question that pinged her brain and shot to her heart was if they were moving toward one another or away from one another? And then another question barreled straight at her, landed in the center of her brain. Which one did she want?

Will was a numbers guy who preferred to rely on facts and data to draw conclusions. Gone were the days of letting emotion and feelings impact his decisions, especially in relationships. He'd been burned once, and the scars were a reminder of the white-hot pain he'd suffered.

But he should have known that once Melanie walked back into Magdalena *and* into his life, the emotions would resurface and he'd lose his objectivity. Sure, he could pretend she didn't affect him, could act as if he was neither happy or annoyed she'd returned, but he could only keep the scowl in place for so long. And keeping her from his thoughts? Probably going to fail on that one, too, unless he could find a diversion.

Delaney wasn't the answer; neither was drinking or burying himself in work. He pondered other solutions, decided the answer to his predicament was a straight-up confrontation where he didn't hide the anger that had plagued him for too many years. And maybe that would—

“I was wondering if you were coming home at all tonight.”

Delaney sat on the swing at the end of the porch, rocking back and forth, blonde hair brushing her arms, eyes bright, hands folded in her lap. Not happy. “What's wrong?”



“Why didn’t you tell me that you were engaged to her?”

No sense pretending he didn’t know who she was talking about. “It was a long time ago.” Tears shimmered in those blue eyes, followed by a sniff. She was two seconds away from a full-on cry and he did *not* want that. “Look, Delaney...”

She held up a hand, shook her head. “Is it over?”

He was not going to have this conversation with her. “Of course, it is. Why would you think otherwise?”

A sad smile crept over her face. “Why? Because since that woman came to Magdalena, we haven’t shared much of anything—not a bed, a conversation, not much more than a dinner and even that’s been awkward. You’ve been avoiding me, and I thought it might be something I’d said or done, but it wasn’t me at all.” Another sniff, a swipe of her eyes. “You still care about her.”

“Look, we were over a long time ago.” Who’d told her about him and Melanie? And why had they done it? Small towns were notorious for spilling secrets, but they were also very good at keeping them. The people who knew about Will and Melanie were also the ones who wanted to protect *him*, and that meant not talking about it—to anyone.

She stood, crossed her arms over her chest as though preparing for a cross-examination. Gone was the sad face, replaced with a blend of accusation and curiosity. “What happened? It must have been something for the whole town to stay quiet about it. Was she pregnant? Was it a forced engagement? Did she lose the baby? Did she—”

“It’s personal and I’m not going to talk about it.”

“*Personal*? That’s what you say to the woman you’re supposed to...” Her voice trailed off. “I really believed we had

a future together.”

How had she found out about Melanie? And why—

“You were never going to ask me to marry you, were you?”

Delaney was over the sad-and-want-to-cry routine. What to say to her question? *I don't know? I was waiting to see if I could develop stronger feelings for you? I had my doubts but didn't want to face them?* She wouldn't want those kinds of answers, even if they were true. But he *could* share the other piece, the one that was also accurate. “I didn't want to rush things. I preferred to let everything play out and see where we landed.”

That made her laugh. “You're an *accountant*, Will. You love your projections and analyses. You didn't need spreadsheets or data points to talk yourself in or out of this or to 'see where we landed.' That's what a creative, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants person says. Not someone like you. It wasn't going to happen, no matter how good I was in bed or how much you loved my Veal Scallopini. I see that now.” Pause and a cold “It's always been her, hasn't it?”

“It was a bad breakup and I struggled to commit again.” There. He'd said it. That should be enough. What more did she want? What more did she—

“You struggled to commit? No kidding. I thought if I made life easy on you, no expectations, no pressure, and gave you *everything* you wanted, you'd see how good we were together. You'd want more.” Her voice shifted and there was no denying the hurt. “I thought you'd want forever. I stopped by to talk to you because obviously you weren't accepting my invitations for dinner, or anything else.”

Will dragged a hand through his hair, wished he could feel more than fondness for her. “Sorry. I’ve been busy and...”

“Can we just be honest about it? I could dye my hair, become a nurse, change my name and you *still* wouldn’t want me. Do you know why?”

He had a feeling, but he also realized Delaney’s need to tell him. “Why?”

“Because you want *her*, or think you do. You and Melanie Russell have unfinished business and until you take care of it, you can’t move on.”

“Unfinished business? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. I thought you’d tell me.” She raised a brow, a faint smile pulling across her lips. “Your mother is absolutely not a fan.”

“*My mother?* What did she have to do with any of this?”

“Mothers always know. Haven’t you learned that by now? Marjorie told me a lot of things, including the real reason you and your ex split. She questioned your integrity and basically called you a liar. *Your* father and *her* mother? Ugh, that is pure disgusting. And she—”

“That’s enough. My mother had no right to tell you *anything*.” Once this conversation was over, he planned to head straight to his mother’s and demand an explanation. Why did she always feel the need to play the victim, the one misery always landed on top of, no matter how hard she tried to avoid it? Maybe she should look at herself, admit to the vindictive streak that caused most of her problems.

“Your mother thought I deserved to know about your past with that woman, especially after I found the engagement ring.”

*“What?”*

The shrug said she did not consider this admission an invasion of privacy. “Your mother decided to do a load of laundry and I was helping her put things away. I thought I’d organize your socks by color and that’s when I found the ring. Silly me, I thought you were waiting for the right time to propose. I couldn’t stand the excitement and rushed to show your mother. But the anger on her face when I opened the box to show her the ring said there was a whole other story behind it, and it had nothing to do with me.” Her next words sliced him. “She told me Melanie Russell, the fiancée I never knew existed, had worn that ring.”

“You had no right and neither did my mother.”

“You made me look like a fool. All this time and everyone knew about her but me.”

“I wasn’t ready to talk about it and maybe if we reached a point in our relationship where I thought you needed to know, I would have told you. But that didn’t happen, and it wasn’t going to happen until *I* was ready. Sometimes I wondered why we couldn’t get to the ‘next’ stage of the relationship, but now I understand *exactly* why. You’ve brought it all into focus for me, and I should have realized it sooner. If I wanted to spend my life with you, I wouldn’t need spreadsheets or data to figure that out. I would have felt it inside because you can’t hide or pretend around that sort of feeling. So, thank you for making me see that.”

“And that’s it?” She glared at him, nostrils flaring, lips pinched. “Ten months together and we’re done? We don’t even get to talk about, see if we can compromise and work on a fix?” She fisted her hands on her hips as though ready to do battle.

Will blew out a quiet breath. “I’m sorry, Delaney.”

The woman he’d almost talked himself into believing he loved scowled. “Does she know you still have a thing for her?”

Will ignored the taunting, wished he’d trusted his gut months ago instead of ignoring it. “Goodbye, Delaney.”

“Goodbye? You think you can just send me away like I don’t matter? Think again.” A snarl, followed by “This is *not* over.”

And then she was gone, leaving Will to contemplate the mess he found himself in. Delaney and he were through, no matter what she thought. His mother could not be trusted. And Melanie? She was at the center of it all, and there was no sense denying it any longer.



SURPRISES OFTEN REVEALED certain truths and did not permit the other person to conjure up a tale that bore no resemblance to reality. Will’s mother had a lot of explaining to do, starting with what she’d told Delaney and ending with the conversation she’d had with Melanie.

Will didn’t bother to knock when he entered the house where he grew up, the one that had never quite reached “happy,” but rumbled with constant unrest and disappointment. His father had not been a model husband or a standup person, but Will couldn’t pretend his mother had nothing to do with what tore their family apart. Why had she never been able to find a shred of happiness or contentment, not even a kind word about her husband or other people? Bitterness, jealousy, anger. All of those had festered in their

lives and he didn't blame his sister for escaping to another state the second she could.

He'd lived in his own world, buried himself in sports, school, and a dream that included Melanie Russell. No sense acting as though she wasn't the one who pulled him out of his misery, made him believe life could be good and not every couple ended up hating each other. There'd even been a time when he considered her parents an ideal couple: committed, in love, happy.

How wrong he'd been!

"Mom? Where are you?" The chair scraping in the kitchen, followed by footsteps, and then his mother appeared in the kitchen doorway, curiosity and apprehension clouding her thin face. "William, I didn't know you were coming, or I would have put on a pot of coffee and pulled a banana bread from the freezer." She glanced behind her, motioned toward the kitchen. "Let me take the bread out now and defrost a few pieces in the microwave." Her expression softened, her voice dipped. "Would you like that?"

"No thanks. What I'd like are answers."

A two-second hesitation, followed by a raised brow and then a cautious "Answers?"

Will gave her a peck on the cheek and moved past her to the kitchen table where he and his sister had eaten their meals without uttering more than a few words. His father never minded the silence. In fact, Joe Callahan preferred quiet over what he labeled "nonsensical chatter," which encompassed anything from a typical school day to an upcoming football game, even a snowstorm forecast. The man wasn't interested in hearing from or about his children or anyone else, unless *he* initiated the conversation and then only wanted the "bullet

points,” not some drawn-out story stuffed with enthusiasm or emotion.

Will pushed aside memories of the dreaded mealtime, slid into a chair, and studied his mother. Over the years, he'd gotten very good at reading people, especially the ones whose words didn't match up with their actions. His mother knew exactly why he'd come and yet, she acted as though she didn't. He didn't miss the way she busied herself at the kitchen sink, fixing him a glass of iced tea, even though he hadn't asked for anything to drink, and removing the banana bread from the freezer. Again, despite his comment that he wanted nothing but answers.

Well, it looked like she was willing to provide anything *but* answers.

“I know what you're trying to do and it's not going to work.” He crossed a leg over his thigh, waited for her to face him. “You're going to tell me everything you said to Delaney and *then* you're going to tell me about the conversation you had with Melanie.”

She clutched the edge of the sink counter, blew out a slow breath. And then she turned, placed the glass of iced tea in front of him and sat across the table. The folded hands and raised brow said she did *not* appreciate his comments. “Can I not have an honest conversation with the woman I thought would be your wife?”

Oh, she was a cagey one. Of course, she could be talking about Delaney, or she could be referring to Melanie. “It depends on what you're saying. If you're revealing information that's none of your business, then I'd say you're overstepping, and you need to stop.”

The huff and cold laugh said she disagreed. “Overstepping? In what world am I overstepping? You’re making a fool of us, and I won’t sit by and do nothing.”

“You mean like you did last time when you had a chance to speak the truth and didn’t?” He rubbed his jaw, watched the color drain from her face. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

A quick intake of breath and then “I’m not sure I do.”

“When I confronted you about what was going on between Dad and Susannah Russell, you acted shocked, even offended. I remember the lecture on marriage being a commitment and how dare I suggest Dad had cheated on you. And when I told you I *knew* about the other woman before Melanie’s mother, you *still* denied it.” His gaze narrowed on her, studied the pinched lips, the flared nostrils and white knuckles that said “guilty.” Will blew out a slow breath, eased back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “Denying it didn’t matter though because he still left.”

“I was trying to keep this family together.” More nostril-flaring, a twitch of her jaw. “You have no idea what it’s like and no right to judge.”

Will ignored the anger in his mother’s words, focused on the truth buried inside. “Like I said, you knew, and you did nothing to make things right.”

She did not like that comment. “Make things right? For whom? Did you think I would sit by and let the Russells contaminate our family after what that woman and your father did? *I* was the one who was humiliated, while Susannah Russell acted so high and mighty with her teaching degree and her singing voice, and that silly laugh that made every man pant after her.” Her voice grew louder, angrier. “Was it



necessary to dress up for every occasion, with her hair fixed and her makeup in place as though she were going to a high-society function? The woman was nothing but a ball of fluff and lies and I felt sorry for her poor husband.” Her face flushed with hatred. “I couldn’t let you become a part of that family. Don’t you see? They would have destroyed you.”

Will dragged a hand over his face, tried to process the words and emotion his mother had just shared. “Are you saying you *never* wanted me to marry Melanie?”

If she’d only hesitated, it might have been easier to accept her answer. But she didn’t. No, she shook her head and spewed out enough venom to damage their relationship. “That girl was all wrong for you. I never thought you’d stay with her. You could have had anybody, but you chose Susannah Russell’s daughter. Why would you do that?” Those eyes filled with tears, her voice escalating with misery. “Why would you do that *to me*?”

Jealousy. Hatred. Animosity. Every one of those emotions lashed out at him, exposing his mother for who she was—a vindictive, bitter woman who refused to accept blame for her actions or the dissatisfaction in her life. Will stood, backed away. He had to get out before he said something he might later regret, like *I never want to see you again*. “Don’t go near Delaney or Melanie again, do you understand? Stay out of my business.”

“Will, I did what I had to because I love you.” A tear spilled, and she swiped it away. “A mother’s love is far-reaching and eternal, don’t you understand that?”

He blew out a breath, waited until he could collect his thoughts before he spoke. “A mother’s love does *not* try to destroy her son’s life, and that’s what you did.” One more

breath and then he continued. “Stay away from them and stay away from me.”

“You...you don’t mean that.”

She pushed back her chair, moved toward him, but he held up a hand to stop her. “If you want any chance to repair this relationship, you’ll stop filling Delaney’s head with how she can get a ring from me. It’s not going to happen. And Melanie? Don’t you go near her again. If you contact either one, we’re done.” All this time, he’d blamed Melanie and her family for pulling them apart. Who would have thought his mother had *never* wanted them to be together at all?

Harry was in the office of Harry's Folly when Delaney Hall came to see him. He thought she wanted to order a box of cannoli for her mother since the woman insisted they were the best she'd ever tasted. *Better than the ones I devoured in Rome.*

But Delaney wasn't here about cannoli.

"Harry? I hope you don't mind I took a chance that you'd be in." She stepped into his office, hesitated. "I have a predicament and it's rather personal. Word has it you'll be replacing Pop as the Godfather of Magdalena, and..."

Her voice trailed off and Harry filled in the rest. "And you've come to me for help with something?" He eyed the girl, took in the long blonde hair and the peaches-and-cream complexion. Blue-eyed. Fresh-faced. Who wouldn't want this woman as an insurance agent or a yoga teacher? But just because she knew how to win over a prospective client and teach yoga poses didn't mean she could win over Will Callahan.

And that's why she was here; he'd bet his best bottle of scotch on it. The rumors about a breakup had been swirling around town, but Harry's observations said those two were never together. Sure, Will might have enjoyed her company

and whatever else she offered, but Harry bet the guy wasn't picturing her on one of those family photo Christmas cards Greta loved to send. Nope, not sharing his name either, or much past "casual but not the one." So, now what? He guessed he'd listen to her and ask himself what Pop would do. How bad could he screw up?

"If you heard I might be replacing Pop, then you know I'm still in training." He smiled, motioned toward the chair opposite his desk. "Have a seat and tell me what's got you looking like you just lost your dog. I know that look because I had it too, but from what I remember, you have a cat." Damn, had her cat died? "Please tell me you did not lose your cat."

A shake of her blonde head, a hint of a smile. "No, Harry. Felicity is happy and still the princess." She slid into a chair, placed her tiny purse in her lap. "This is about me and Will."

No sense attaching Callahan to Will because everybody knew she'd been seeing Will Callahan for close to a year. People noticed when a guy who never stayed with the same woman for longer than a month or two has a regular. Does it mean he's going to put a ring on her finger? No, it does not, but apparently Delaney Hall thought it did. "You do know I didn't settle down until I was over fifty, right?"

The smile spread, made her eyes light up. "That's exactly why you're the perfect choice. You'll be honest and I *need* honesty right now. I also need a bit of help because Will and I have something special and I can't just let it go, not when we are so good together."

Good together? The boy might not have complained, and he might have bought her flowers and taken her away for a weekend, but did he lose his words *or* his logic when she was around? Not that Harry saw, and he would have seen it,

because “attraction and can’t-be-without-you” were hard to miss. Like the look on Will’s face when Harry messed up and mentioned the new girl in town, who happened to be his ex-fiancée. Yeah, that face said more than one of the guy’s spreadsheets. But had Harry ever seen that look on Will Callahan’s handsome mug when he was with Delaney or any of the other ones? Nope. And that’s why he knew the woman had an agenda and needed Harry’s help to make it work.

What would Pop do? He’d ask questions, he’d listen and lay out a plan so the one coming to him would realize the truth, good or bad. “Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on so I can piece it together? Did *he* end things, or did you push him too hard, and that made him end it? Or did you misread whatever he was offering as in ‘good for now,’ but not ‘good for long term’?” What was the point of playing games and pretending? She wanted to know what he thought, and he’d tell her.

“Would he talk about taking a trip to Napa Valley, or an Alaskan cruise if I were short term?” A tiny huff and a frown. “I do not appreciate those words, Harry. I am *not* a short-term sort of person.” She fluffed her long hair over her shoulder, added, “He also mentioned how much he’s always wanted to visit the Grand Canyon and spent a whole dinner telling me about the view and the colors...and whatever.”

Harry settled back in his chair, rubbed his jaw as he sifted through her words, matched them to her expression and what he knew about Will and his current situation, a.k.a. the return of Melanie Russell. What would Pop do right now? Would he ask questions and listen to the answers, poke through and try to uncover the meaning inside them? Hmm. The first thing he would do was listen *and* ask.

“When he mentioned wanting to see these places, were you included?”

“Excuse me?”

He didn’t miss the confusion on her face that said she had no idea what he meant. Sometimes a person had to have it spelled out. “Did Will say he wanted to take *you* to these places?”

“Well, he said he wanted to see them, and we were talking about places we’d never been. Of course, it was implied we’d go together.”

“Delaney, the guy’s an accountant. They deal in reality, not implied or inferred, or any other BS. So, did the man ever *say* he wanted you to go together?”

She bit her bottom lip, eyes bright. “Not exactly, but when I asked him where he’d like to go, he told me. Will knew my reason for asking meant it would be a joint vacation. How could he not know?”

What would Pop say? “He wouldn’t know because Will Callahan is a numbers guy, *not* a touchy-feely guy. He’s the kind who appreciates straight-up asking for what you want, not pretending, not posturing, not playing games.”

“You’re wrong, Harry. He might not have spoken the words, but I know he meant them, and if *she* hadn’t come back...”

Ahh...now they were getting somewhere. “You mean Melanie Russell.”

Those blue eyes sparked. “Yes. Since she’s been back, everything’s been different. Okay, so maybe I tried to rush things along, and maybe I involved his mother and shouldn’t have, and maybe I snooped around and—”

“Hold on. Snooped around? What are you talking about?” Either the woman was snooping in Will’s business—his life or his belongings—and had found something and confronted him *or* someone else had provided that information. Harry bet the mother was somehow involved. Damn pain-in-the-ass woman, more bitter than the dandelion tea Pop once convinced him to try.

“Oh, Harry, what have I done?” When the tears started, he reached in his back pocket, handed her his handkerchief.

“Please tell me Marjorie Callahan is not in the middle of this.” Of course, she was, he sensed it before the girl spoke.

A half nod, a tiny sniff. “I didn’t mean to intrude, but when I found the ring, I was so excited, believed he bought it for me. And then...” One sniff, two, more tears and lots of handkerchief dabbing.

“Are we talking about an engagement ring?” Pop had filled him in on the whole story of how Will and Melanie were engaged for a nanosecond before the parents destroyed it. A thousand bucks said Delaney found the old engagement ring.

“Yes, Will bought it for *her*. His mother told me all about it and when I confronted Will, he was not happy. He was so cold and once I started asking about Melanie, I couldn’t stop. *I had to know*. It was horrible and I should have just been quiet, but I couldn’t. I tried to get him to tell me he was over her, that he loved me, and *I* was his future. But he didn’t. He said he was sorry, and then he said it was over.” Big sobs into his handkerchief. “I am so sorry for the horrible mistake I made. I just want another chance to show him how much I love him, how much I regret pushing him too hard when he wasn’t ready.”

If Harry hadn't been caught up by the tears and seeming remorse in Delaney's words, he would have sensed the holes in the delivery, been more forceful in his questioning. But he was new to this whole godfather business and he'd never met a man who could tolerate a woman's tears. Most would do anything to stop them, and he was one of those men. Maybe that's what Delaney had counted on because she soaked his handkerchief as she vowed to do anything to make it up to Will.

"Tell me what I can do, Harry. Please, help me." And then she snuck in the other part of this equation, the one that said she was not as remorseful as she appeared. "Melanie Russell was his high school and college sweetheart and what happened to them is sad, but who's to say they would've actually gotten married? Or if they had, that they'd still be together?" Those blue eyes turned fierce, her words opening the possibility of doubt. "A woman who walks away from the man she supposedly loves, no matter the reason, is *not* a partner *or* a soulmate. I never would have done that. I would have stood by Will's side, no matter what."

Harry lifted his pen, fiddled with it. "It's always easy to say what you would and wouldn't do when you don't have to make a choice. But unless you're knee-deep in the stuff, you don't know."

She clutched the edge of his desk, leaned forward. "I *do* know, Harry. From the moment I first saw Will Callahan, I knew we were meant to be together, and the fact that I never heard about Melanie Russell means one of two things. Either Will was so furious and humiliated that he blocked her from his world, or she was inconsequential and he didn't think he needed to tell me. I'm going with the second, but I suppose it could be the first. Either way, *I'm* here now and he can think



we're done and maybe even wonder if there's still something between him and his ex, but it's not real. People change, and eight years is a long time to mesh fantasy with reality. I'll bet she's not the same person and I'll bet he isn't either. But I do know who he is now, and that's the person I love, and whether or not he's spoken the words, that's the person who loves me."

Harry drifted back to his life before Greta, to a time when he'd been footloose, self-absorbed, interested in nothing but the next pleasure. Was he still that same person? Hell no. He wasn't the same person he'd been at thirty, or forty, but by fifty he'd begun to turn into a human being. Could Delaney be on to something? Maybe Will *was* caught up in Melanie's hazel eyes and curves, and the dreams they'd shared, but was it real?

He'd always thought Delaney was a do-gooder, more vanilla than spice, and Will was only half committed to her. But maybe he needed closure with his old love interest before he could move on. Harry could help him with it. What was the worst that could happen?

He should have picked up his pen and begun to list the pros and cons from worst to best and if he'd done that, he would've kept his mouth shut. But Harry Blacksworth still ran roughshod from time to time and spat out whatever landed in his brain. And that's why he said, "Okay, I'm in. We'll get Will his closure and then we'll see if he changes his mind about you."

The woman jumped from her chair, ran to the other side of the desk and hugged Harry. "Thank you, thank you so much. I've got a few ideas and I'll send them to you." The smile she gave him lit up the entire room. "Oh Harry, you're going to make a wonderful Godfather of Magdalena."

When she left a few minutes later, a nagging discomfort settled in his belly, made him wish he hadn't eaten the fried calamari for lunch. Who was he kidding? The stomach issues had nothing to do with calamari. No, this one was on him and his big mouth that he should have kept shut. All he could do now was keep quiet and hope he wouldn't regret his words.

“Harry Blacksworth, what the heck did you do?” Harry turned to face Pop Benito standing a foot away, a bony finger pointed at him, brows pinched together, “annoyed” smearing his face. “This is a mess and you created it.”

Harry set down the golf magazine he’d been reading as he ate a bowl of penne with spinach and garbanzos. He swore Jeremy could go up against the premier chefs in Chicago with this dish. “Settle down, Pop. Is this about Loretta Shandley and the check I gave her for her kid’s braces?”

Pop removed his ball cap, unzipped his jacket and slid into the booth opposite Harry. “You *gave* it to her, or you loaned it to her?”

Harry forked a mix of penne and spinach, shrugged, avoiding the old man’s gaze. “It was sort of open-ended. She needed a down payment, or they wouldn’t start on her daughter’s braces. Have you seen that poor little girl? She needs help, and she can’t wait for Loretta to come up with the money.”

“I know that, just like I also know Loretta’s husband plopped down a hefty chunk for a pop-up camper last week.” Pause and then “*And* a vacation to Florida.”

Harry inched his gaze to Pop's, frowned. "Really? She didn't say anything about a camper or a vacation."

"Of course, she didn't because she thinks you're a bank." Pop tapped his fingers on the table, blew out a loud sigh. "When we talked about you taking over for me, that didn't mean you'd become the lending department, and worse that those loans would never be repaid."

Damn, he'd been played. "I thought I was helping her. She seemed so forlorn, and you know I can't stand tears."

The old man laughed. "You think they don't all have your number, Harry? That they don't talk about ways to get you to give them money like you're an ATM? Need a dress for the prom? Sure, just ask Harry and he'll pull out a catalogue and tell you to place an order. What about a juicy Delmonico steak because you've got a hankering for one? Harry's your guy and he'll probably fill up your freezer, too." Another scowl, more finger tapping. "Handing out money like you're a candy machine is not the answer. And it won't help these people. They'll just come back to you again and again *and* again."

Harry set down his fork, shoved his plate aside. All he'd wanted was a good bowl of penne with spinach and garbanzos and a half-hour to peruse the latest golf magazine. But Pop's visit had stolen his appetite for food and relaxation. "Then I suppose you won't be happy that I loaned Rebecca Franklin \$5000 for a car." He picked up his spoon, twirled it between his fingers. "But that *was* a loan, and I even got her to agree to start repaying me on the first of the month until the five grand is paid off." See what Pop thought about that! Harry knew how to negotiate a loan, damn if he didn't.

"Well, aren't you just a financial genius? I don't suppose you charged her interest and I'd be curious to hear what the

terms are. Is she paying \$500 a month? \$200? \$20? You see, it's all in the details, Harry, and if a person can't afford something, then they shouldn't buy it. And just because you don't want to see someone sad is not a reason to toss money at their problem." He leaned forward, those dark eyes burning with disappointment. "Did you hear me? *Their* problem."

Harry blew out a sigh, annoyed with himself for being such an easy target, and ticked at Pop for calling him on it. "How would you have handled it, Pop? Would you have let Rebecca drive that beat-up car, maybe break down on the way home? She has a three-year old, and what if the child is in the car with her? I couldn't do that to her. I know it's probably foolish, and I know it might not teach the right lesson, but I can't watch people get into trouble and do nothing if they ask for my help."

The tilt of the head and the pinched lips said a lecture was coming. "That's true. One of the reasons I chose you to be my successor was because of your big heart. The problem with that big heart is knowing when to open it and when to make tough choices. Teaching moments, like parents are supposed to do with their kids. Do you really think that giving your child everything instead of teaching them how to solve problems helps them? Goodness, they'll never move out of the house and if they do, you'll be paying the rent or mortgage. They'll be thirty or thirty-five with a wife and kids, and you'll be footing the bill. They'll take vacations, drive new cars with money you gave them, and don't forget the designer clothes and appliances, paid for with your credit card." One long sigh that wrapped around Harry's middle and squeezed. "All because you couldn't stand to see the disappointment and the doing without."

“When you say it like that, it all makes sense. Greta tells me I’m too soft with our kids, and if I don’t watch out, they won’t learn what she calls ‘life skills’ to navigate this world and live on their own. She said they’ll depend on us to make choices for them or get out of the bad choices they’ve made, and both will do harm.”

A tiny smile played about Pop’s lips. “Greta is one smart woman. You should listen to her more often.” He eyed Harry, the smile spreading. “Maybe I picked the wrong Blacksworth to be my successor. Maybe I should have asked Greta.”

*Was he serious?* Did the man believe that or was he just trying to get Harry to think next time before opening his wallet or handing out his credit card? He couldn’t tell and that bothered the hell out of him. “You really think Greta should carry on your legacy?” Of course, she was the better choice. Deep down there was still a lot of the old screwup inside him and he should have known that when Pop said he wanted him to be the next Godfather of Magdalena. Harry wasn’t built for it. He was too soft.... Too emotional... Too...

“She might be a better choice in the short term, but once you have a little seasoning on you, you’ll burst like a tomato in the hot sun, and out will come knowledge and compassion and the ability to make tough choices.”

Harry cleared his throat, fought the emotion threatening to steal his voice. “Thanks, Pop. Appreciate it.”

“Welcome.” Pop snagged a piece of bread from the basket, dipped it in olive oil, and took a bite. The man chewed for a full twenty seconds, long enough to make Harry fidget and wonder if this was the end of the lesson.

And then he spoke. “The next time someone asks for anything having to do with money, you send them to Christine

or Will Callahan. They'll work with them, come up with a plan and a budget and if the person can't figure out how to afford it, then maybe they shouldn't get it. If they do need a loan, there's ways to handle that as well but it won't be interest-free, pay-me-back-whenever or if ever. There will be terms and those terms will have consequences."

Harry gave him a puny nod, wished he'd thought it all through before he agreed to the loans that might end up becoming donations. "Is it ever okay to just give money to someone if they can't afford something?"

"Depends on what it is. Is it money for the heating bill? Is it groceries? Is it a trip to the spa?" Pop tore off another hunk of bread, dipped it in olive oil. "I've been around a long time, and I've seen everything. Don't think I learned my lesson the first time around because I gave away money I didn't have. A sad story, a few tears and a 'woe is me' did it every time. When Lucy found out what I'd been doing and how I'd even gone into our savings to help someone, she put a stop to it. Whew, she was not happy! She said life is hard and choices are harder, but everyone's got one. We could guide and set examples, but we would *not* be played for fools ever again. That's exactly what had happened to me *and* to her by association."

He smiled, his dark eyes sparkling beneath his glasses. "Lucy never wanted to be played for a fool. She was right about all of it. That's when I came up with plans for the people who asked me for money. They might think it's okay to ask *you* since you've got enough for everybody, but that is not the point and it's not going to help them make better choices." He dipped the bread in more olive oil, bit into it, chewed. Another fifteen seconds passed as his words settled in Harry's brain.

“I think I’ll have a conversation with Christine and ask her to meet with these people and set up repayments. What do you think about that?” Did he want to do it? Hell no, he did not, but Pop was right. Tossing money at people was not going to solve their problems or help them the next time they needed money. They’d come right back at him, and there would be another story, more tears, more promises.

“That’s a very good idea, and the first step toward growing into your position.”

“Thanks, Pop.” Harry reached for his plate, picked up a fork and stabbed penne and spinach, and he was inches from plopping it in his mouth when the man delivered the zinger.

“Now why don’t you tell me about your meeting with Delaney?”

The fork clattered onto Harry’s plate, splattered red sauce on his silk tie and white shirt. “Damn it, Pop!”

“What? Didn’t like that question, did you? Well, neither did I, or the answers you gave that girl.”

Crap, Harry should have known this whole impromptu visit had to do with Delaney Hall and his conversation with her. The whole “don’t give money away” was important, but it was only a warm-up for this conversation. Harry rubbed the back of his neck, tried to remember everything he’d said to Delaney when she came to see him three days ago. “Okay, I talked to her, and I thought I gave her some decent advice.” He *did* give her good advice, even if his jumbled-up stomach that day made him question a few areas. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is that you sent her on a hunt to get a ring on her finger by getting rid of the competition, a.k.a. Melanie.”



“Pop, she just asked me some questions. In fact, she did most of the talking. What she came up with sounded reasonable.”

Those words only made Pop’s scowl deepen. “Well, it isn’t reasonable, and from what I hear, she’s telling tales, stirring up the past and making Melanie look like a villain. I won’t have it, Harry, and you’re going to put a stop to it.”

Grandma Esther had taught Melanie cross-stitch patterns and told her the art of creating was in the details. *Count carefully, don't pull too tight, take your time.* She'd been right about that, and when it came time to learn how to knit, crochet, and needlepoint, once again, she'd repeated the same lesson. *Count carefully, don't pull too tight, take your time. Not much different from navigating life,* she'd say.

Melanie ran a finger along the pink stitches of a flower on an embroidered tablecloth. Why hadn't she kept up with any of the crafts her Grandma Esther had taught her? She studied the flowers, the petals and leaves so dainty. When was the last time she'd created anything aside from baking, and why hadn't she? The answers pinged her brain. She'd quit when she was fifteen and the reason had to do with her rush to grow up and only concentrate on achievements that would help her attain her "life goals."

Yes, Melanie *had* accomplished success in the medical field, but what had that done? Prompted new goals, so many of them. But what about happiness and a future she could embrace? No, she hadn't achieved that because she'd been too busy chasing after the next "best" and "must have"... And then there was the other truth. If a person barreled through one

experience to the next, they never had to stop and think about where they were. Or where they should be. They just kept going and it became exhausting. There was no recharging, no reassessing. Why do *that* when it would force her to take a hard look, maybe even admit she was heading down the wrong path, disillusioned, disappointed, dissatisfied.

*Who wanted to do that?*

Grandma Esther's passing had forced her to stop and spending hours in this house, going through her things, touching them, remembering... That was changing her perspective on what she valued and what she wanted: purpose, friendships, peace... Love.

Her ex-boyfriend and almost fiancé, Alec Laurence, had only asked her to open up and show him who she really was and give them a chance. *Open your heart and let's find out what we can be together.* But she hadn't been able to do that, and he'd carried the relationship all the way to a proposal, which she refused. That's when he admitted the truth. There was too much baggage between them, and until she addressed the reason behind it, she'd never find peace or happiness. *My gut tells me there's a guy behind your inability to share yourself,* he'd said, his blue eyes sad. *You're going to have to deal with it and him one of these days...*

Alec deserved someone who truly loved and accepted him for who he was, not because he was intelligent or had blue eyes or reminded her of someone else. If she were 100% honest, she'd admit she'd never be the person for him, but when he called one afternoon, she couldn't deny how good it was to hear from him...how normal and relaxed it felt. "Alec, how are you?"

His deep voice filled the line, calmed her. “I’m working too many hours, but you know how it goes.”

“I do, but I hope you’re taking time to eat a decent meal once in a while.” She pictured him in the hospital cafeteria, grabbing a sandwich, chicken tacos, or a burger.

Another laugh. “Nobody’s fixing me home-cooked meals if that’s what you’re wondering. I haven’t had bucatini Bolognese since...”

And there it was, hanging between them. He’d been about to say, *Since you left* or *Since we split*. “I’m sorry.”

The gentleness in his voice said he understood, and she didn’t miss the tiny bits of hopefulness buried in those words. “So, how’s it going with your grandma’s house? Are you getting through things?”

What he really wanted to know was if she were finding closure, which he believed was the reason she couldn’t commit to him. “It’s a slow go, but I’m piecing it all together.”

Several seconds and a quiet sigh filled the line before he spoke. “I know you weren’t ready for the next step and maybe I rushed things and...”

“Please don’t blame yourself. You were right about my issues and I’m working through them.” She pushed away images of Will Callahan; the blue eyes, the strong jaw, the confidence...

“Good. I’m glad.” There was the slightest hesitation as though he hoped she’d offer more and when she didn’t, he cleared his throat and asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

He knew there wasn’t, but it was his way of letting her know he was waiting for her. “Thanks, but this is something I

have to do myself.”

“Do you mind if I call now and again? I don’t want to bother or confuse you and I certainly don’t want to overstep, but I care about you, Melanie. You know that and I’m not going to pretend I don’t. I want to work things out, and if you think there’s a chance you can get this closure and we can move forward... I’ll do anything to get that.”

Melanie clutched her grandmother’s tablecloth, closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the man who deserved a real partner. “I can’t answer that right now because I don’t know.”

“I’ll take that over a flat-out no. I guess you’re not sure when you’ll be back?”

She clutched the tablecloth tighter. “No.”

Long pause and “Take as much time as you need. I’ll be here.”

There was no sense denying the disappointment in his voice or the hope, because both pulsed through the line. “Thank you. It was great talking to you.”

“Anything for you, Melanie.”



WHO WOULD’VE THOUGHT the man who’d been avoiding her would be the one to rescue her from her grandmother’s basement? When Melanie was a little girl, Grandma Esther would take her to the basement where they washed clothes, picked out canned vegetables from the fruit cellar, and sorted through the freezer chest for banana or zucchini breads, chicken, berries, even strawberry preserves. Melanie’s father once told her *You’ll never see her freezer empty. Doesn’t*

*matter if she's the only person in the house, your grandmother is going to make sure she's never hungry again.* She'd also taken it upon herself to make sure no one else ever went hungry either. There were perpetual deliveries of zucchini bread, chocolate chip cookies, chicken soup, spaghetti sauce, and the occasional tray of lasagna. It was the darned craving for zucchini bread that landed Melanie locked in the basement on a Saturday morning.

She'd been thinking about raking leaves but wanted to pull out a bread so it could thaw for an afternoon snack. If she hadn't been distracted, she might have stuck her cell phone in the pocket of her sweat pants, or left the basement door open, or at least slipped into sandals. But no, she'd already been on to the next three tasks for the day and that's why she forgot the cell phone, closed the basement door, and remained barefoot.

Melanie padded down the dimly lit steps to the freezer, rifled around the various compartments until she located four zucchini breads, wrapped in foil and labeled with Grandma Esther's precise handwriting. She grabbed one of the breads, made her way to the top of the stairs, and turned the knob. Nothing. One more turn. No luck. Melanie grabbed the knob and jiggled it several times. Oh, for goodness sake! She was locked in the basement!

How could she have forgotten to unlock the basement door this morning? Too many years in the city had made locking doors and windows second nature. Since she'd returned to Magdalena, she'd checked the locks every night to make sure they were secure—especially the basement door. Grandma Esther had a storm door in the basement that led outside and while there was a lock on it, Melanie had never trusted it. Her grandma had an old “scary” basement, nothing like the

modern ones in today's homes. This one smelled musty and damp, and it was dark, even with the lights on.

Now what? If she yelled, no one would hear her. The windows were closed, and Cash and Tess were heading to a pumpkin festival today and wouldn't be home until after dinner. No one else would be looking for her and it could be hours, maybe even a day before anyone realized she was in trouble. The T-shirt and sweatpants wouldn't keep her warm once the temperatures fell, and the bare feet? Such a bad idea. Were there any blankets or jackets in this basement? *Anything* to keep her warm? Melanie refused to think about spending the night in the creepy basement that had always made her jittery. There *had* to be a way out and she *was* going to find it.

She made her way to the bottom of the steps, spotted five bins stacked on a metal shelf. Thank goodness her grandmother believed in organization because each bin was labeled. Dishes, glasses, and platters. No blankets or jackets, no clothing of any kind. But then why would there be when there was enough closet room in the bedrooms to handle the storage? She hadn't been in the basement much aside from doing laundry, but she thought she'd seen a toolbox of sorts in the fruit cellar. If she could find a screwdriver, maybe she could take the doorknob apart, and if she found a hammer, she'd try to break down the door. That last notion sounded ridiculous and impossible, but so did the thought of remaining in the basement until tomorrow or the next day.

Melanie grabbed the flashlight resting on a shelf and padded to the fruit cellar, the cement cold beneath her feet. The fruit cellar was the size of Grandma Esther's hall closet, but she'd certainly stocked the shelves! Years ago, there had been jars of tomatoes, green beans, and peaches from her canning days, but they'd long been replaced with store-bought

cans of tomato products, beans, fruit, condiments, cleaning and paper products. There were three mayonnaise jars, four bottles of ketchup, and six boxes of pasta. Grandma Esther had always loved to bargain shop and use her coupons!

Melanie spotted a red bucket with a hammer poking out of it. There were also two different type screwdrivers, a measuring tape, and a box of nails. At least she had a few tools to try and get the door open, and if she got stuck for the night? There was zucchini bread and hadn't she seen a tray of lasagna in the freezer? Plus, there was a jar of pickles and a few other twist-off jars on the shelves.

She wasn't going to starve, but what if she had to go to the bathroom? Ugh, she would not think about that right now because once that possibility kicked in, she would obsess over it. The basement had the old-school pull chains instead of light switches because her grandmother had never felt it was necessary to "modernize," as she called it. Melanie took small steps, aiming the flashlight in the dark corners where the overhead lights didn't reach. *Please do not let there be mice down here. Please do not let me see any sort of bug. And please...* Melanie stopped, listened to the faint rustling. *Oh, no. Oh, no.*

*A mouse!* There was at least one down here and everybody knew there was *never* just one. A whole family of mice could live in this place. Hadn't her father once said mice can make themselves so small they can slip through a crack? Melanie swung the flashlight toward the rafters, bounced the light to the floor, homed in on the cobwebs. Where there were cobwebs there were spiders.

If she sat on the basement steps near the door, she could listen for outside noises and maybe... *Who was she kidding?*



This house was not in the center of town, near traffic and the everyday business of people coming and going. Cash and Tess were her only hope and that meant she had several hours to wait. Once they got home, there would be baths and putting the children to bed and they'd be tired. Melanie might be stuck right here with the cobwebs and the spiders and the mice she couldn't see, and the cold and the night, and...

She reached inside the red bucket and removed two screwdrivers, then shone the flashlight on the doorknob. She'd need a Phillips head screwdriver for this job, and hopefully, it would work. And it might have if she'd had the right size screwdriver. She tossed the screwdriver in the bucket, reached for the hammer. *Whack! Whack, whack, whack!* The wood splintered, caved in, leaving razor-sharp edges where the door had imploded. Encouraged by her efforts, Melanie continued pounding on the section of door where she'd created a small hole. If she pushed her hand through the weakened section of the door, she might be able to reach the knob and unlock the door. But there was no way she could do it without injuring herself. Still, maybe she could minimize the injury...

Melanie yanked off her T-shirt, wrapped her hand and wrist in the shirt, and pushed through the splintered door. A shard of wood tore through the material and pierced her index and middle finger. "Ouch!" Melanie inched her hand toward the lock, but she needed more room to access it, and pushed harder, fighting the pain of fresh wounds. And then her arm got stuck and she couldn't move it. If she could make the hole a little larger, maybe a few more whacks with the hammer would do it. She grabbed for it, missed and sent the hammer tumbling end over end down the basement steps.

Slivers of panic shot through her as the need to get "unstuck" smothered logic and blocked out years of

emergency room training. Melanie made one more attempt to move her hand toward the knob, but a jolt of pain stopped her. She couldn't sit down on the top step, and she couldn't reach the doorknob. There was no way out until someone found her. Tears would serve no purpose, and they were foolish and nothing but a distraction, but that didn't stop them from coming, or pouring out stronger as she realized she was all alone.

Will had avoided Melanie for two days. That's how long it took him to come up with a plausible excuse to see her again, one that did not include the *real* reason for his visit. He wanted to hear more about what her life had been like these last eight years. After she shared, he'd head home, pour a scotch and compare their lives because no matter how much he denied it, he bet they hadn't been that different. In fact, they were too much alike.

And *that* was a problem.

Maybe she did have a point. There was too much unfinished business between them that they needed to discuss. It would have to be a businesslike approach, emotion aside, no *what-ifs*, no, *I wish*. No, *if onlys*. Timelines would work, failed relationships, avoidance tactics. All of these could prove helpful. And then, he supposed they would have to talk about their lives in the early days after the breakup. How had she handled it? Through denial? A big pretend? He would have to admit what he'd done as well. Would he really have to tell her he'd avoided everything and everyone who reminded him of her and what they'd shared? He did *not* want to do that. She still had that inquisitive nature about her, and she wouldn't let it go with a simple *Oh, so that's what you did* or *Isn't that*

*interesting?* No, she'd want to dig around, rip off the bandage *and* the scab and hunt for answers. Hell, *he* didn't even want to find the answers, but she would. Melanie wasn't going to let it go until she had them all lined up and organized for assessment and commentary.

*Isn't this interesting that you haven't had a dark chocolate-covered strawberry in eight years?*

*No chocolate chip cookies either?*

*Now why is that? But you do like chocolate?*

*How about the women you've dated? Do any of them have dark hair and hazel eyes, 5 foot 9?*

*No comment.*

If he tossed out the "no comment," it was as good as saying *Guilty. You've got me.*

But maybe there would be some sort of revelation on her part, and she'd share similar stories. She was certainly eating chocolate chip cookies because he'd listened to the sighs and moans and watched those lips as she savored each bite.

Had she been teasing him?

Tormenting him?

Had she been showing him *he* didn't affect *her*?

Was she pulling a reversal on him? Maybe she devoured dark chocolate-covered strawberries *and* chocolate chip cookies, *and* maybe she dated guys who looked like him.

He did *not* want to do this, but there was only one way to find answers that could lead to a way out of the self-imposed hell he'd lived in for the past eight years.

He wanted a normal life. He did not want to analyze and obsess and pretend and live in his own torment for the next forty years. It had to stop, and Melanie was the only one who could stop it. They might wish they were in different states or different universes, but the truth had plagued him since the chocolate chip cookie episode. If they were going to have a chance to move on, they had to talk about the past. She'd tried to tell him that and he'd refused, but she'd been right.

And he was ready to admit it.

Will pulled into her driveway, hopped out and headed toward the front door, rang the bell and waited. No answer, but Genevieve was in the driveway, so chances were Melanie was somewhere inside. He called her cell, thought he heard the ring, but the call went to voicemail. He tried the door, surprised to find it open and stepped inside. The sobbing hit him first, followed by the gasps coming from the kitchen area. "Melanie?" Will tried to keep the panic from his voice, failed. "Where are you?"

The crying stopped, followed by a pounding and a hysterical "Will! Will! Help!"

He ran into the kitchen, spotted the half-demolished section of basement door, and Melanie's hand sticking through it, blood smeared on what looked like a shirt. "I'm here." He touched her fingers, said in a gentle voice, "I'll get you out."

"Help me. Please, Will." A sniff and another sob. "I don't want to be stuck like this all night. I tried to get out and I can't..."

"I know. I know." He homed in on the blood smearing her hand. "Give me a minute to figure out the best way to attack this." There'd never been a time when he wished he possessed handyman skills like his old man, until now.

“All I could find was a hammer, so I started pounding at the door, but it splintered. And then I thought if I could just reach the knob.” A sob and a pathetic “But I couldn’t.”

“I’m going to open the door and then we’ll figure out what to do.”

“Okay.”

Will unlocked the door, blew out a long breath. “I’m going to open it now. Just an inch at a time.”

“I’m ready.” Another sniff and then “An inch at a time... I can do this.”

He grabbed the knob, eased the old door open. Melanie met his gaze, her eyes bright, face pale and tear-streaked, nose red and swollen. He forced a smile, held it in place so she would not see how much finding her like this bothered him. “I think we might have to cut a section of the door to get you out. And we’ll have to take a trip to the emergency room so they can disengage you from the rest of the door with minimal damage.” He’d realized an emergency room visit would be involved the second he spotted her hand poking through the door, smeared in blood.

“But how are you going to get me out of here?”

How, indeed? “Cash is out of town, so I’ll call Nate.”

“Nate Desantro?”

“Yes, Nate.” The man might be busy, but he’d never turn away a person in need of help. And they needed his help right now because Will had no idea how to cut a hole in this door and Melanie was bleeding and afraid and her color didn’t look good. His gaze shifted to her pink bra, and he blinked. He’d been so afraid for her that his brain hadn’t registered she wasn’t wearing a shirt. How had he—

“If you’re going to call Nate, can you find me a shirt or something to cover up?”

A nod, a clearing of his throat as heat swirled to his cheeks. “Of course. I think we’ll need something that goes over your head and buttons on the side...” He studied her hand and arm, determined not to look at the swell of flesh peeking from the lacy bra.

“Why don’t you see if you can find an old T-shirt and we can cut it up?”

Her breathing had evened, and she hadn’t sniffed or spilled tears since he opened the door. His ridiculous heart thumped faster, pleased that he might be the cause. His brain called him foolish. Melanie would act this way for anyone on the other side of the door. “Let’s get you a chair to sit down, then I’ll call Nate and find a T-shirt.” His gaze slid to her bare feet, inched back to her tear-stained face. “Once we do all of that, we’ll clean you up.”

“Thank you, Will. Thank you so much for your help.”

“Sure.” He carried a chair from the kitchen table, positioned it so she could sit. “I’ll be right back.” He darted up the stairs, located her bedroom—the one with the unmade bed and pile of clothes on the floor. Melanie had never quite understood the use of a closet, a drawer or a shelf. He snagged a T-shirt from the floor, inspected it for stains, brought it to his nose and sniffed. Pure citrus, tangy and sweet. A tank top rested on a chair and he grabbed it, flung it over his arm. Will was three steps from the door when he spotted the red bra and panties at the foot of the bed. He’d always loved her in red...

He cursed under his breath, pulled out his phone and called Nate. If the man found it strange that Will was the one calling for help with his ex-fiancée, he didn’t show it. Nate was a

straight-up poker player who didn't believe in gossip or asking someone to do something he wouldn't do himself. Will bounded down the steps as though he and the woman who needed his help were not at odds, were not ex-anything. "What do you think of one of these?" He held up the pink T-shirt and the black tank top. "The tank top will be easier to put on and I could cut it at the shoulder and then tie it."

"That's one of my favorite tank tops."

He eyed her, spotted the tiny smile. Good. She'd relaxed enough to joke. A promising sign. "Sorry. I think it's the best solution considering you're probably going to walk into the ER with a piece of door hanging on your arm."

"Talk about arm candy."

"Yeah, but trust me, all heads will turn."

"Lucky me." She glanced at the tank top. "We better get that on me before Nate arrives. The man is very punctual, and this could be awkward."

*But you don't find it awkward being here with me, half-dressed and stuck to a door?* He wanted to ask her that question, but he wouldn't. Truth was he'd been too worried about her and getting her out of this predicament to let awkwardness overtake him. *Was that a good thing or a bad thing?*

Maybe it depended on what the goal was?

"There's a sewing basket in the living room," Melanie said, slicing through his thoughts on awkwardness or lack thereof. "It's got a burgundy-and-cream design on it. Open it and you'll find sewing scissors. If you bring them in here, we can cut the tank top and get me dressed before Nate pulls in the drive."



“Sure thing.” No mention of being half-dressed in front of him. Okay then, he’d take that as long as he didn’t have to think about what he was doing or why. Or how he’d been the one who almost panicked when he saw her blood-smeared hand sticking through the door. Not good. And after he’d opened the door and seen she was safe, he should not have looked at her in that pink bra as though he’d never seen a woman in one before...never—

“Will? Hurry, Nate will be here soon.”

“Just a minute.” He found the sewing basket, removed the scissors and cut the two-inch shoulder band. “All set.” Will rushed back to the basement door, eased the tank top over her head and tied a knot at the shoulder. “This should do it.” He worked the fabric in place, careful not to touch her skin. She’d always had the softest skin...the silkiest hair... He cleared his throat, blocked out the memories. “Now if we can get Nate to cut the area so you can fit in the car?” He offered a smile, shook his head. “I’ll bet you’ll be the first person walking into the ER attached to a door.”

“Hopefully the last.” Those hazel eyes shimmered, her voice cracked. “Thank you. I know how much you don’t want to be doing this, but I truly appreciate it.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. Of course, I want to help you.” He *did* want to help her, and he couldn’t stand to see her like this—in pain, scared, uncertain. “What were you doing in the basement anyway?” He pointed to the bread wrapped in foil. “After Grandma Esther’s goodies?”

“Guilty. I started thinking about her banana and zucchini breads and thought about making some. But I wanted to check the freezer first to see if she had any left...” She blew out a long sigh. “I left my phone on the table, sandals by my chair,

because I thought I'd only be a minute. However..." She shuddered. "You know how much I hate that basement."

"I remember." Melanie had once told him that her grandmother's basement could be the scene from a horror movie, and when she told her grandma, the woman had laughed and said *There are scarier things than a musty old basement with cobwebs*. She'd been right about that.

"So, why were you stopping by? I didn't think I'd hear from you again."

The confusion in her voice matched her expression, made him spill the truth. "I was thinking about what you said, and I realized you might've been right." He did not want to do this, and yet, he had to... "I think it's time that we—"

The rest of his thoughts were cut off by a knock on the front door followed by Nate Desantro's deep "Will? It's me, Nate."

"In the kitchen!" He forced a smile, said in a soft voice, "He'll get you out of here." Nate Desantro was a take-charge, own-the-room kind of guy who didn't back down from a problem or a situation.

Nate entered the kitchen, moved toward the basement door, and nodded at Melanie. "Looks like you've got yourself into an interesting predicament."

The woman actually smiled. "A bit of an understatement, wouldn't you say?"

A shake of his dark head, a gentle rumble of laughter said he agreed. Nate set his tools on the floor next to the door and examined her hand and the point of entry and exit. "Hmm."

One sound that meant the man was thinking and assessing, figuring out a plan.

“I really appreciate you coming.” Will didn’t need to tell the man he had no idea how to extract Melanie from the door, because everyone knew about his lack of carpentry skills or expertise with power tools. “I would have called Cash but he’s not home.”

The man shot him a look. “If you’d called him, he’d have to tell you a few stories, add on a joke or two, and it would be dinnertime before he figured a way to get Melanie out of here. Leave the fancy words and the smiles to Cash and let me do the heavy lifting.”

A person might believe those words if he didn’t know that Nate and Cash were best friends. They loved to tease and posture but you never saw it coming from Nate and that’s what made you second guess yourself and wonder if he were serious. Like now. “Well, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Another rumble of laughter as those dark eyes sparkled. “Don’t tell pretty boy I said that, or he’ll come after me with everything he’s got.”

“From what Cash tells me, you and he are best friends.” Curiosity laced Melanie’s words. “He says he welcomes the jokes because then he can come up with his own prank except you won’t think it’s funny.”

The dark look said she was right. “That guy is such a pain in the butt.”

Melanie’s smile spread, inched to her eyes. “Can you get me out of here, Nate?”

The man the whole town trusted rubbed his stubbled jaw. “I’ve got a plan. I’m going to cut through the door around your arm. Will, I want you to hold the door as steady as you can, and Melanie, keep your eyes on Will. Don’t look at the saw.

It's going to get a little loud and there will be sawdust. I'll get as close as I can, and then you can take the section of door with you to the ER."

"Uh...sure." Will stood next to Melanie and gripped the door with both hands. His gaze slid to Melanie's, held it, as they waited for Nate to begin.

An emergency room probably made most people skittish or light-headed, even fearful. Not Melanie. This environment soothed her with its familiarity, and it didn't matter that there weren't life-flight scenarios or patients in the hallway awaiting care. It was still an emergency room and *that* Melanie understood.

What had panicked her earlier wasn't the blood or the pain from the slivers of wood embedded in her flesh. It was being alone and trapped, not knowing how long she'd have to wait for someone to help her. Who would have believed Will would be the one to find her or that he'd contact Nate Desantro for assistance? Nate was fierce and intimidating and yet Will hadn't hesitated to elicit his help.

Melanie closed her eyes and blew out a long breath. They'd spent three hours in the ER, which included waiting, examining, and detaching her from the piece of door. No easy task when it involved splinters of wood as sharp as porcupine needles. Will stayed with her, positioned so he could not see what the doctor was doing, gaze narrowed on her free hand, breathing measured. The paleness beneath his tan said this was not his comfort area, and if he glanced at her bloodied hand and forearm, especially the index finger where she needed

stitches? It wouldn't be good, and he might end up on the floor.

That's what made his presence even more meaningful and special. He'd never been able to tolerate blood, needles, *or* stitches. Not even pierced ears. She'd only asked him for help one time when she couldn't latch the hoop of her earring and he'd turned squeamish and pale. How was it that a guy who'd been a football star, taken hits and sprained body parts, suffered bruises and a dislocated shoulder, was unable to tolerate a tiny hole in her ear?

"If you ever get tired of city life, we could always use an ER nurse in Magdalena." The doctor spoke as he tended to her hand, his voice gentle. "It's not Pittsburgh, but sometimes people need a change, or they've had enough and want something different." He'd glanced at her, his voice gentle. "This town has a lot to offer."

He shared his own story of how he'd been a surgeon in Chicago, moved to Philadelphia, married a nurse, started a family... And then they both decided they needed a change. They wanted quiet and balance. A friend told him about the tiny town of Magdalena, New York, located in the Catskills. *One visit and we never looked back. It's been twenty-six years and we've never regretted our choice.*

Melanie thought of the doctor's words as he placed stitches in her index finger, wrapped her hand and wrist.

*I'm ordering a pain med and an antibiotic. Call my office and we'll fit you in for a follow-up.*

*Thank you.*

*Of course.* And then he shook Will's hand and said, *Nice to see you again, Will. Try to keep her out of the basement.*

Will didn't smile at the doctor's words, acted as though he intended to do just that. He drove her back to Grandma Esther's, settled her on the couch and tucked a blanket around her. "I'm heading to the pharmacy to get your prescriptions. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Mind if I take a peek in your fridge to see what you've got there?"

"Are you saying you've developed culinary skills?" That would be a shocker since the Will Callahan she knew struggled to scramble eggs.

"No, but I *am* saying I'm very familiar with the prepared food section at Sal's Market." A faint smile and then "I'll see you in a bit."

Melanie settled against the pillow, listened to Will rustling in the kitchen, opening and closing the refrigerator, no doubt poking around the pantry. He'd shown her such kindness... such caring... Those thoughts stayed with her as she drifted to sleep, cocooned by the warmth of the blanket and the sound of Will in the kitchen. The rhythmic creaking of Grandma Esther's rocker awakened her an hour or so later. She squinted at Will as he eased the rocker back and forth, dark head bent over a book.

Peace. Calmness. Contentment.

If she'd made a different choice, they'd be married... maybe they'd have a child...maybe...

Will glanced up, smiled. "You're awake."

She rubbed her eyes, stifled a yawn. "I was out."

“Exhaustion will do that to you.” The smile spread, his voice dipped. “You needed the rest.”

“I guess I did.” She tried to sit up, careful not to put weight on her bandaged hand. “Ouch.”

“Hold on a sec.” Will closed his book, eased out of the rocker. “Let me help you.” He leaned toward her. “Put your good arm around my neck and I’ll pull you up.”

Big sigh. “I’m not an invalid. I can—”

“Arm around my neck. Dr. Olivant wants you to take it easy and that means ‘take it easy.’”

A mumble and another sigh as she eased her arm around his neck, her fingers brushing his hair, settling on his warm skin. “Okay. You win.” Will lifted her into a sitting position, so close she could smell his woody scent, so close...

“Let’s get this extra pillow behind your back. It will make it easier to sit.”

She was about to remind him she knew how to take care of injured people, but the pillow did help, and he was right; she had to take it easy for a day or two before she could start on a full recovery. “Would you mind getting me something to drink?”

“Sure. I found three types of tea, coffee, and water. Or I could make you hot chocolate, but you’ll have to tell me how much syrup to put in the milk because...I’m more of an open-the-packet-and-dump-it-in kind of guy.”

“You don’t say?” From what she remembered, Will Callahan was a microwave-order-in-eat-out kind of guy.

His smile lit up his blue eyes, made them sparkle. “I did learn how to make decent scrambled eggs and toast. Lightly



toasted, not burned. Cheese in the eggs, splash of water and take them off the burner while they're still light and fluffy. But, since that's my only claim in the culinary department, Sal's market has you covered for everything else." The smile spread as he raised a hand, began ticking off food items. "Spaghetti and meatballs, chicken Florentine, white chicken chili...roisserie chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes. Not the kind in a box or bag, but Ava swears they *are* homemade, *and* delicious."

"My, my... Who would have thought you'd inquire about homemade versus boxed or bagged?"

Pink swirled beneath the tan on his cheeks, and he shrugged. "I didn't think you'd be too keen on the processed stuff, so..."

"Thank you, Will. You've been very kind."

He stared at her as though he were about to say something important. And then he shrugged again and said, "I'm just glad it wasn't Cash who found you. If what Nate said about him is true, you'd still be trapped by that door." The laugh said he knew that wasn't true, but maybe it made it easier for him to accept her gratitude.

"Cash is a character, but as Lily says, he certainly is nice to look at."

Those blue eyes narrowed as though he were trying to tell if *she* were the one joking now. "From what I hear, those looks couldn't bail him out of a particular situation he had with Tess years ago."

His expression had shifted, turned serious. Was there a question buried in there somewhere? *One that had to do with them?* "That's what Tess told me, but now? They're

committed and no matter what happens, nothing's going to tear them apart.”

“Agreed. They're lucky.” He cleared his throat, shoved his hands in his pockets and said, “About dinner? It's 8 o'clock and you need to eat something. Why don't I fix a plate and you try to eat a little?”

“As long as there's mashed potatoes, then yes. And green tea.” She bit her lower lip, hesitated a second. “Can you help me to the bathroom, please.”

“Of course.” Will helped her to the bathroom, waited outside the door, and when she was finished, helped her back to the couch. Then he headed to the kitchen and fifteen minutes later delivered two plates of mashed potatoes, rotisserie chicken, green beans, and chocolate mousse—eaten on Grandma Esther's ancient TV trays. Will sat in the rocker across from Melanie and dug into his food, occasionally stopping to chat and sip his beer.

They talked about the town, the people—new additions and old timers—and what constituted a decent beer. The conversation was relaxed, comfortable, and Melanie didn't feel the need to rework every thought before it left her brain like she'd been doing. Maybe it was the aftermath of the accident or the pain pill that stripped the caution from her thoughts, or maybe it was simply spending time with him that made her forget why they weren't together.

“It's getting late, and we need to get you to bed.”

“Oh. Sure.” Melanie placed her mug on the coffee table, eased the blanket aside. “Thanks again for everything.” They'd spent hours together and not once had he snapped or tossed out criticisms. Will had been kind, gentle, concerned—

like the old Will. Except he wasn't the old Will, and they weren't together any longer.

"I plan to stay tonight to keep an eye on you and make sure you don't need anything." He must have seen the confusion on her face because he added, "I made up your grandmother's bed." A shake of his head and then "Do you think that's the original mattress? It's about three inches thick."

Melanie ignored his comment about the mattress, homed in on the other part—the one where he informed her he planned to stay the night. "You don't need to stay. I can get around and make my way to the bathroom and—" she lifted her arm, let him see she could move it back and forth "—and get in and out of bed. I don't plan to take any more pain pills tonight and I'm not going to do something foolish."

The raised brow said that last comment was debatable, and the slash of lips said he wasn't going to accept what she'd said. "I'm staying, Melanie. The pain could get worse, and you might need something. If you do, I want to be here. Besides, who else is going to help you? Cash and Tess have kids and they would be the next choice."

Cash and Tess were the first *and* second choice and Will Callahan was not even an option. Until he was. Should she tell him what a bad idea it was to have him sleeping in the next room, with his car parked out front, fodder for all sorts of stories? Should she tell him—

"If you're worried about what people might say, I already texted Cash and told him what's going on. And I moved my car near their barn, so no worries some busybody will spot it and start circulating tales around town."

"Do you really think this is a good idea?"

He eyed her a second too long, and when he spoke there was no missing the frustration in his voice. "Probably not."

Cash Casherdon had a comment about everything, even when he shouldn't. Like now. He'd stopped over a few minutes ago with a container of chili, a box from Barbara's Boutique & Bakery, and a boatload of questions. "Before I forget, Harry Blacksworth is sending dinner for two. Guess he thinks you and Melanie will be sharing it." A scowl, a burn from those whiskey-colored eyes. "Why don't you tell me what the hell's going on and why you've set up house here? And why that perfect hair doesn't look so perfect." His gaze slid to Will's wrinkled shirt. "I think this is the first time I've ever seen you looking like you just rolled out of bed, even if you're wearing a dry-clean-only shirt."

Will didn't like anyone questioning his actions or his integrity. "If you're here, then you already know what happened."

The man the town called "settled but still dangerous" rubbed his jaw, the scowl deepening. "I know what happened that landed her in the ER. What I *don't* know is what happened after she got home." Pause and a snarl. "With you."

"What are you implying?"

Cash crossed his muscled arms over his chest, glared. "What am I implying? I'll tell you. You two have history and

that's a problem."

"She was hurt, and I helped her. End of story." Except it wasn't the end of the story because deep down Will knew it was more like the beginning or the continuation of the story and that bothered him. There were too many variables, too much bad blood, too much damn emotion. What was he supposed to do with all of that? "She was going to call you, but you weren't available."

The laugh said he could try another story and another fool who might believe that was all there was to it. "So, you just so happened to be strolling by to see the woman you've been avoiding? The one you have a history with... The one who walks back into town after she broke your engagement? And helping her yesterday was a goodwill gesture, nothing personal?"

"Sounds about right."

Another laugh, this one harsh, annoyed. "Not buying it. What's really going on and this is your last chance to tell me the truth because I *will* find out and when I do, you'll be on my list." A deep sigh, a soft "You do not want to be on my list, you should know that."

The guy loved to toss out words meant to intimidate, but people didn't cross Cash Casherdon because there was just enough of a wild streak left from the old days that the man might make good on a threat. "I came by yesterday to talk about her offer."

"And?"

"And I wanted to tell her I thought about it, and I agree."

"Stop with the nonsense that says nothing. Start talking and start talking now. What offer and what the hell is going

on?”

“She said she can’t move on unless we have closure, and she thinks I can give that to her.” It was Will’s turn to scowl, let out a deep breath. “She said there’s too much *unfinished business* between us. Eight years is a long time to be stuck, but she thinks if we can get the closure, we’ll be able to move on.”

Cash studied Will as if trying to extract the meaning inside the words. “Move on with or without you?”

This was the point where Will should protect himself, and lie, but he couldn’t. “Hell if I know.” That was the truth. He didn’t know...but there was a tiny piece of him that wondered...maybe, a tinier piece that hoped...

“Okay then.” Cash opened the box from Barbara’s Boutique & Bakery, snagged a chocolate éclair. “I hear these are your favorites. Mine, too, and since Lily packed the box, I get first dibs.” He bit into it, winked, and headed out the door leaving Will alone with too many questions.

He thought about what Cash said for the rest of the day. The guy was way off base with his accusations and inferences, and what was with the tough-guy threats? Will had stepped in and helped Melanie like any normal person would do. If Cash or Tess had been available there would have been no need for him to take Melanie to the emergency room, fix her food, get her settled, or put her to bed. The Casherdons would have tag-teamed the care and if they needed help, they would have reached out to friends. No doubt Christine Desantro would have been on the list, maybe Gina Reed and Ava Carlisle.

But the Casherdons hadn’t been around and that left Will. Was he happy about it? Did he want to see Melanie in pain, and worse, want to admit that he *liked* being around her? Maybe a bit too much? Absolutely not. This whole situation

uncovered emotions he did not want to think about... He'd been ready to discuss the past so they could achieve closure, but damn if she didn't go and get hurt. How was he going to keep his head straight when he had to look at her in pain? Imagine her stuck in that basement alone and scared, worried no one would show up for hours?

He'd checked on her three times since arriving at work, and after the last call Melanie told him Tess had offered to fill in and be "on call" if she needed help.

"She brought me lunch a little while ago. Thanks for everything, Will."

"Sure. No Problem." Maybe she really didn't need or want his help. Maybe all she wanted were answers so she could be done with him. He fiddled with his pen, kept his voice even, erased the emotion that threatened to sneak through. "So, I guess you're all set? You don't need me to stop by or...? No grocery runs? No snacks? No visits?"

Long pause and then a soft "I didn't say that. Harry's sending dinner and you know it will be enough for five people. Do you want to join me?"

Now there was a question with a whole lot of other questions tucked inside. He should say *No, absolutely not. Why would I do that? I'll only come if we're going to talk about closure and whatever else is necessary. I'm not coming to see you for any other reason...* But when he opened his mouth, the truth slipped out. "Sure, that would be great."

Will would like to say he'd maintained emotional distance when he saw her that evening, kept his feelings buried deep, but that would be so far from the truth, anyone could see it, especially Melanie. It had been so long since he'd been with someone who intrigued, challenged, *and* entertained him.



Melanie did all of this and more. There was no denying the attraction, physical and otherwise, even in her oversized T-shirt, pink sweatpants, and fluffy slippers. No makeup, hair pulled in a ponytail, beautiful, vulnerable. *Perfect.*

They sat at the kitchen table sharing a bottle of wine, mushroom ravioli, braciolo, and a salad. Melanie had forgone the pain pills, said she'd rather enjoy a glass of cabernet. Wine had always made her chatty, and maybe the fact that she had eight years' worth of information stored up to share with him, made her extra chatty. No way was he going to turn away from whatever she wanted to share. Will wanted to hear it all. "So, tell me about working in the ER. Do you really love it?" For a guy who grew lightheaded at the sight of oozing blood, stitches, or a nasty cut, it was hard to picture *loving* those situations.

Melanie's hazel eyes sparkled, her full lips pulled into a wide smile. "It was very exciting and it kept me engaged, so yes, I did love it. I felt like I was really helping people and the constant motion kept me from spending too much time focusing on issues I didn't want to think about." Her brows pinched together, the smile shifted to a frown. "I only took a vacation when I was guilted into it and even then, it had to be a nonstop trip with no down time." She rubbed her forehead, stared at the half-empty plate of mushroom ravioli. "And then I just kind of burned out. The therapist said I was running from things and until I dealt with my issues, it would only get worse. Of course, I refused to acknowledge that because I was superwoman, and nothing was going to stop me." Her gaze shifted to his, eyes bright with tears. "And I was not going to get derailed by a past I didn't want to address."

Yeah, he knew all about that. "I might not have been in a 9-1-1 situation, but I do know about burnout and moving so

fast that you never stop to take a breath and ask how your life's become so screwed up.”

A nod, a quiet “Sounds about right.”

Will grabbed his glass and polished off the rest of his wine. They were getting too personal too fast, and he needed to slow it down. He should have known that where Melanie was involved, he'd never been able to keep it casual *or* slow. But he wasn't a kid anymore and they'd both waited eight years for answers. Will tossed out the first thought that skittered through his brain. “How about a question-and-answer session? Just say the first thing that lands in your brain.”

“Why don't you eat chocolate chip cookies?”

Boy, she must have been waiting with that question since the day he turned down those cookies. “Well, here goes, but I'm not saying it made sense. Chocolate chip cookies? Not happening. I could down three triple chocolate brownies, no problem, but I did not want a reminder of sharing chocolate chip cookies with you.” His voice dipped, turned hoarse. “After finals...in bed...” He dragged a hand through his hair, blew out a loud sigh. “You are damn impossible to erase.”

“I took the opposite approach. Stuffed myself with dark chocolate-covered strawberries and chocolate chip cookies until I was numb. I dated guys with dark hair and blue eyes who were intelligent and quick-witted.” She shook her head, said in a soft voice, “And for what? It never worked. It doesn't work if you're imagining the person you're with is the one you want to forget. Is that the definition of insanity?”

“I think it's the definition of desperate for survival and unwilling to admit that maybe there *is* no substitute. Maybe we were always going to be a part of one another's life and we just had to deal with it, get past it, and move on.” Isn't that

what he'd told himself for too many years? Deal with it, get over it, move on?

“And were you able to do that?”

He slid his gaze to hers. “No. It's been a massive fail. Of course, do you think I'd ever admit it to myself, let alone anyone else? No way. I was going to erase you as though you'd never happened even though I knew it wouldn't work and was foolish to try.”

“I know. We all deal with our pain in different ways.”

“Pain? Sure, but I carried a lot of anger inside for too many years. Anger fuels a lot of things, and it can make you numb. If you're numb you don't feel the gnawing disappointment that tells you things didn't work out the way you believed they would and trusting *anyone* is foolish.”

She massaged her temples as though she were trying to fend off a headache. “I'm sorry I hurt you. I have so many regrets, but the biggest one is you.”

He didn't miss the sadness in her voice or the brightness in those hazel eyes that said the tears could start any second. Will didn't want her to be sad or to cry, and he certainly didn't want to hurt her. “Me, too.” They'd agreed to talk about the past, not as a punishment but as an attempt to gain much-needed closure.

“What did you do with the ring? I've wondered that for so long...”

“The ring.” Will shook his head, let the truth spill out. “Well, first I went back to the jeweler to see if he'd buy it back. And of course, he refused. Stupid kid that I was, I thought he might take pity on me when he heard about the broken engagement. Nope.” Will let out a long breath,

remembered the old man's shrewd gaze and the words that went with it. *Bad luck, kid. Sorry to hear it but you've still got to pay.* "It took me a year to pay off the damn thing and every once in a while I'd pull it out, look at it..." He slid his gaze to hers, shrugged. "Curse you, but then I stopped thinking about it and left it in the drawer. What was the point of looking at it when it would only remind me of the moment you put it on your finger and the day you returned it?"

"It was the most beautiful ring I've ever seen." She cleared her throat twice and her voice wobbled when she spoke. "Can we move on?"

"Sure. Boyfriends?" Yeah, he'd wondered about this one for a long time.

"There were a few. Nothing ever serious—" she took two more sips of wine "—until this last one. I tried, I really did, and I almost got there but...I couldn't do it." Another sip of wine, more truths. "He asked me to marry him, but I had to turn him down." Her lips pulled into a sad smile. "He's a good man and he deserves someone who can love him with an open heart, but I couldn't do that."

Relief spread through him as he processed her words. She hadn't been able to say yes, and yet another completely irrational part of his brain filled with envy. Another man had gotten close enough to ask her to share a life together. That had never happened to him, no matter how much he wanted to pretend. It hadn't and it wouldn't, not yet, maybe not ever. Closure. Answers. That's what they both needed.

"Girlfriends?"

"A few." *More than a few. Too many.*

“You’re supposed to be telling the truth, right?” The raised eyebrow said someone had filled her in on his dating life.

“Fair point. After you, life became a blur and all I wanted to do was block out *everything* about you. I refused to see a woman with dark hair or hazel eyes. Anyone over 5’5” was off limits, too. No quick wit either. That didn’t leave many desirable options, so I had to make do with the available choices.” That response did *not* make her happy.

“Had to make do? I’ve heard about some of those choices.” Disappointment filtered through her voice, shifted to her face. “Everybody knew about them in high school and then to think you...” She blinked, blinked again. “Not my business. Sorry.”

“It was a very difficult time, one I’m not proud of.....but I have to own it.” He reached across the table, clutched her hand. “Just like I had to finally own that until you and I reach some sort of closure, we’ll never be through.”

Melanie and Will sat on a bench in the park, finishing off an éclair as the crisp air swirled about them. There'd been a heavy frost the other night and some said the first snowfall wasn't far away. Melanie hadn't come to Magdalena prepared for snow or freezing temperatures, but then she hadn't planned to stay this long. In a few weeks, Thanksgiving would be here and then Christmas...

If someone had asked her a year ago where or with whom she'd spend her holidays this year, she'd never have mentioned Magdalena or Will Callahan as a possibility. But after the last few days, she'd begun to wonder. She and Will had spent quite a bit of time together, talking and eating since the night they'd shared Harry Blacksworth's mushroom ravioli in Grandma Esther's kitchen. It was the talking that gave her hope, made her believe that with patience and time, they could share so much more than a meal. Melanie cleared her throat, grabbed the first thought that landed in her brain. "Do you ever get tired of being an accountant and think about doing something else?"

"No, I don't. I like the challenge and there's always a new one. My boss plans to retire and once he does, he wants me to take over. That's huge." Will wiped a dab of frosting from his

finger, smiled at her. “There’s so much opportunity there and I’ve also been working with Christine Blacksworth these past few years. She’s something else. Have you met her yet?”

There was no mistaking the admiration in his words. “Not yet, but Tess has invited me to one of their girls’ nights. She’s trying to coordinate with everyone.”

“You’ll like Christine. She’s total class, pearls, cashmere, and high society.” He laughed, slid her a look. “Doesn’t matter that Nate prefers flannel to cashmere or that Christine can’t cook.

Somehow, they just fit, which makes them perfect for each other.”

That comment sounded like Will believed love and happiness still existed. They’d done a little surface talk on those subjects, but nothing indicating whether they thought it could happen to them, and definitely not with each other. The more time they spent together, the more they talked about anything from nonsensical to serious, and the easier it became to share real feelings. “I look forward to meeting her.”

“Why wait for the girls’ night to meet her?” He paused as if considering the ramifications of what he was about to say and then continued. “You could swing by my office tomorrow, we’ll grab lunch at Lina’s and then head to Christine’s.”

“Sure.” It was Melanie’s turn to pause and attempt to figure out the nuances of accepting his invitation. Was it really about lunch and meeting Christine? Or was it the beginning of something, say a rekindling of their relationship? Before she could contemplate these questions, Will changed the subject.

“So, I’ve been meaning to ask...do you miss the ER? Sorting through your grandmother’s belongings and

wandering around Magdalena aren't exactly what you're used to..."

"True, but I'm ready for a slower pace. I'm not sure what that would look like, but I want to explore other possibilities."

He looked away, fixed his gaze on the box of goodies from Barbara's Boutique & Bakery. "Would that be a change in location as well, or do you plan to stay in Pittsburgh?"

Melanie studied the strong hand resting on the bakery box. "City life has its benefits. You never have to worry about running out of restaurants, and it's not all pizza and wings either. Plus, just about every place delivers."

A laugh, and then "Yes, you have to consider access to food delivery. Very important when selecting your future home."

*We'll live in the city, try different foods, go to concerts and ball games...* That's what they'd said when they were planning their future. "I can tell you where to order the best pasta dishes and which restaurant makes the roasted red-pepper hummus and fresh-baked bread." She pictured him biting into a piece of sourdough bread slathered in butter. "You'd love the bakeries."

"I'm sure I would." His voice shifted, drew her in. "I guess it's all about knowing what you're looking for and then going after it."

She glanced from his hand to his face, caught him staring at her lips. "I guess it is."

He leaned in, so close. Finally, he was going to—

Will pulled back, cleared his throat and mumbled something about old habits and getting caught up in the past.

And then the moment was gone.





THERE WAS no sense pretending she hadn't wanted Will to kiss her, but he'd pulled back so fast, it was obvious he hadn't felt the same. Shocked? Embarrassed? Disturbed? Maybe all of those, but who knew when the man did such a good job hiding his emotions? Melanie peeled another apple, tossed it in a mixing bowl. Since arriving home after the awkward encounter with Will at the park, she'd been rummaging through her grandmother's recipes, making a list of must-bake items, starting with Grandma Esther's famous apple cake. Next up she'd make pumpkin chocolate chip bread, then applesauce.

Anything to keep her busy and not think about the kiss that almost happened.

When her phone rang, she grabbed it, hoping it would be Will. They needed to talk about what didn't happen and why.

But it wasn't Will.

"Hello, Melanie."

She almost didn't recognize the hesitant, doubt-filled voice on the other end of the line. Where had the self-assured, ever-cheerful tone gone? "Mom?"

A double throat clearing and then "I need to speak with you." Her voice cracked, wobbled. "I..I am so sorry for the harm I've caused you, for all of the pain you suffered because of me."

Melanie clutched the phone, stared at the apples in the mixing bowl. Why was her mother really calling? Was there an angle buried in there somewhere? Susannah Russell never

apologized or expressed remorse about *anything*. “What do you want?”

“I want to apologize, and I also want to explain.”

“Explain? You don’t need to explain anything.” Anger burst through her as she recalled the way her mother manipulated people and situations for her benefit. What did she want this time?

“Melanie, please—”

“Save it. I know what you did, and it was all about saving yourself.”

A sniff, a pause and several seconds later, her mother spoke. “You’re right. I thought you were young and Will Callahan was an impulse you’d get over once you graduated college and started your life. I never thought it would cause you such harm.”

“You never thought? Of course you didn’t because you only cared about yourself. We *loved* each other. We had a plan for a life together and you made me choose, made me question his integrity, pitted us against each other until there was nothing left.”

“I am so sorry. Please, what can I do to make it up to you?” A sniff, a desperate plea. “What can I do to help?”

“Help? You can’t do anything.”

“I’ll talk to him... I’ll tell him what I did, explain how much you cared but I coerced you to side with us.”

As if that would matter. “Don’t you see it’s too late? It only mattered when I had a chance to stand beside him and didn’t.”

“There’s something else I need to tell you. I love your father; I’ve always loved him.”

That was too much. “Save it for someone who’s going to believe your lies, because I don’t.”

“Your father has a quiet strength about him that most people don’t recognize at first. They mistake it for shyness, but that’s not true. He’s thinking about the questions people ask and isn’t going to offer words that sound good yet mean nothing. He’s going to assess, analyze and consider the person he’s talking to so he can be as honest as he can without telling them what to do. I didn’t understand this for too many years because I wanted to be seen, to be adored, receive red roses and champagne...and excitement. Yes, I grew bored with the routine of loving your father.”

“I do not want to hear any more. Please stop.” Of course, when had Susannah Russell ever listened to what another person wanted?

“I swear on your life, I was only with Joe Callahan, never anyone else and never after that day at the hotel.”

Melanie closed her eyes, blinked to keep the tears from falling. “Well, isn’t that just wonderful?”

“I will never forgive myself for what I did to your father. I didn’t realize how much I loved him and his steadiness and constant support until he threatened to leave me. You never heard about that, but the day after Will told him what he’d seen, your father said he wanted a divorce. There were no tears, no anger...there was nothing. In that moment, I understood that I had tossed away the best person I’d ever known, the only one I would ever truly love. I begged him for a chance, begged him to open his heart and let me show him my love, my dedication, my commitment.”

“And?” *Could this bizarre tale possibly be true?*

Another sniff, a long pause before she continued, “He gave me an ultimatum. Leave Magdalena, never see Joe Callahan again, and *maybe* he could eventually forgive me.”

“It was Dad’s idea to leave town?”

“He couldn’t face the humiliation of people finding out what had happened and while I didn’t want to give up my home or a job I loved, I could *not* lose your father. Even knowing it might not work out, I had to try. Whatever he wanted. After we moved it was his idea to renew our vows and start again. He forgave me, *truly* forgave me and I never thought that would happen. You might look at us and think we’re pretending with each other, but our love is real.”

“And he just moved on from what you did?” *How did a person do that?*

“He said he had to because he loved me and if we were going to have a chance, he had to let that go. It wasn’t easy, and it took a counselor and quite a few arguments, but we got through it. Our greatest regret is what happened with you and Will.”

“Grandma Esther’s letter said Dad already knew about you and Mr. Callahan, even if he pretended he didn’t. Why couldn’t you both just admit it and let Will and me go on with our lives? Why couldn’t you give us a chance to find our own happiness?” The knowledge that her father had been behind the move made it almost worse. In the past she’d been able to blame her mother for everything, store the anger and resentment and despise the actions. But for her father to be the one who *made* the decision to move and condone the lies that led to her breakup? That was unconscionable.

“I was desperate to save our marriage and he didn’t want to hear the Callahan name, especially that one wanted to marry our daughter. Melanie, if you can’t forgive me, please forgive your father. He loves you and he regrets his decision every single day.”

Will blew out a long breath, attacked the plate of blueberry pancakes Phyllis had placed in front of him a few seconds ago. Had he really almost kissed her? *What* had he been thinking? Oh, right. He *hadn't* been thinking. No, but he sure had been feeling...

And if he'd kissed her? *Then what?* He wasn't fool enough to believe it would have stopped there... Oh no, they would have headed back to his place—much closer from the park than her grandmother's—and then...

Right, and then he would have kissed her long and slow, touched her until she moaned his name, tasted that delicious skin he remembered too well... And when he buried himself deep inside her, she'd wrap her legs around his waist and they'd move together, caught in the white-hot pleasure of need and desire until they found their release.

It would not be calm or quiet and it certainly would not involve conversation, and probably not a bed. Not the first time. Maybe they would have made it to the couch or maybe not. But then what? She was still leaving, and he was still never going to trust her. She'd made a few references about small-town living and missing Magdalena but that didn't mean she'd consider staying. Did it? The Melanie he knew would

have told him what was on her mind *and* in her heart, so there was no guesswork involved. Nothing to speculate or question. Just honest answers, like it should be when you were in a relationship.

But Melanie and Will *weren't* in a relationship. They shared a past, and they were heading toward closure so they could both move on with their lives. Period. End of the tragic story of Melanie Russell and Will Callahan. And if he'd kissed her that closure would have exploded into a million pieces and landed them somewhere between a disaster and a half-hope, opening all the old wounds.

He couldn't do it. He *wouldn't* do it. Visions of Melanie's naked skin and full lips flitted through his brain, shot to his crotch. He wouldn't do it...unless...she knew the rules. It could only be about the sex. No sharing, no opening up, no "forever and always." Just sex. White-hot. Sizzling.

Sex with Melanie.

*Could* he do it?

Will stuffed a forkful of blueberry pancake in his mouth, chewed hard. He was not going to have a relationship with her, not again, so she could peck away at his vulnerabilities, see inside—

"Slow down, Will." Harry Blacksworth stood before him, dressed in a navy suit and burgundy tie, his expression a mix of curiosity and humor. "You're eating too fast, and you'll either end up with indigestion or choke and I'm not good at that resuscitation stuff. Mind if I have a seat?" Will continued to chew, motioned toward the other side of the booth.

"So...would you like a cup of coffee or a plate of pancakes? No bacon." If he tried to change the subject to

Harry's dietary restrictions, maybe the guy would give him a break and not ask any personal questions. But Will should have known better because the twinkle in Harry's blue eyes and the laugh said he knew exactly what Will was trying to do.

"Sure, I think I will have a cup of coffee, but I promised Greta I'd add oatmeal to the mix, so I guess I'll go with that and a few blueberries." He let out a sigh, shook his head. "I think Phyllis and Greta have been talking again. A guy can't sneak anything into his food choices with a wife like Greta who has a friend like Phyllis."

Will shrugged, forked another piece of blueberry pancake. "You should be happy she wants to keep you around. Some wives might push all the non-heart-healthy foods. Fast track to being a widow."

That comment made Harry howl. "Good one. Speaking of people caring about each other, what's going on with you and Melanie Russell?"

"That was real smooth, Harry." Will glanced at the counter, spotted Phyllis eyeing them as though waiting for the right moment to deliver Harry's coffee. When she spotted Will watching her, she grinned and reached for the coffee pot.

"I've been thinking about the two of you but wanted to let things settle in, see how everything played out. Word has it you two have been seeing quite a bit of each other: the bakery... the park...her grandmother's house...walks around town...this diner..." He raised a brow, those blue eyes narrowing. "But you don't look like you've found paradise. In fact, you look miserable."

"Hmm. Sounds like you're turning into a real investigator."



“I like to call it observation. And when I see two people together, I start to look at the body language, make a mental note of the facial expressions, the laughs...the tiny smiles. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” He tapped his fingers on the table, waited for a reply and when Will remained silent, continued. “Sure you do, because if you notice the days I eat bacon and don’t need a notepad to take an order in this place, then you dialed in the looks, the tone, the body language.”

Damn, Harry certainly was persistent *and* observant. “Is there a point to this, Harry?”

“You know there is. You and Melanie Russell have a thing for each other and no matter how much you want to deny or pretend you don’t, the sizzle’s still there.” He leaned back against the booth, eyed Will. “The only question is when are you going to do something about it?”

Phyllis took that exact moment to interrupt them with Harry’s coffee and a refill for Will. She snapped her gum, shook her head and settled her gaze on Will. “Is he badgering you? Just say the word and I’ll give his wife a call and she’ll settle him down real quick.” Phyllis slid Harry a look. “Won’t she?”

Harry muttered something under his breath, pointed a finger at Phyllis. “I wonder what your husband would say if he knew you weren’t wearing those fancy support shoes he bought you?” Harry glanced at the scuffed tennis shoes on Phyllis’s feet. “I heard he drove to Renova to get them and then he made an appointment with the podiatrist that you cancelled.”

Oh, Phyllis did not like that. She huffed and scowled and shot him a look that said *I won’t forget this*. Apparently, Harry

wasn't the only person in this place who knew how to control a situation. Phyllis placed a hand on her hip, the scowl deepening. "Harry Blacksworth, don't you dare. Those shoes hurt my feet and I'm too busy to visit a foot doctor and—"

"Excuses, Phyllis. That's exactly what those are, and I don't think Lester would want to hear them. I'll stay quiet but you need to see that podiatrist. If you don't want to drive, I'll take you." He sipped his coffee, winked at her. "Now how about you let me and Will have a conversation and bring me a bowl of your Greta Blacksworth's approved steel-cut oatmeal with blueberries?"

One more snap of her gum, another huff and Phyllis marched away in her scuffed sneakers, muttering something about Harry and his big mouth. The man didn't seem bothered by her comment. In fact, he acted like he enjoyed the sparring. "Phyllis is a good one. Honest, no-nonsense with an opinion about everything. Her husband's a lucky man." He rubbed his jaw, settled his gaze on Will. "As I was saying, the whole town knows you and the Russell girl have unfinished business. No different than Tess and Cash and quite a few other couples who never thought they'd end up together. They took the jump, so...what's stopping you?"

"It's not that simple."

"Where a woman's concerned, it never is. I denied how I felt about Greta until I almost lost her. Foolish, pig-headed, so sure I didn't need anyone, especially a feisty German woman with two kids who thought she could give me the business *and* keep me in line." Those blue eyes turned bright, his voice shifted with emotion. "Then she ended up pregnant and I was scared to death. What did I know about being a father? I was just going to screw things up again, but Greta never gave up

on me. I told myself I had everything—money, women, lots of women... But you know what?” He cleared his throat, said in a quiet voice, “None of them were Greta. And I think you know *exactly* what I mean. If you don’t do something soon, you’ll lose her for good this time.”



MELANIE SAT across from Will in a back booth of Harry’s Folly. The man himself had seated them, made the not-so-subtle comment about *privacy* and Will hadn’t missed the sparkle in his eyes when he said it. Harry was up to his old tricks and the smile said he was pretty sure he’d convinced Will to change his mind about Melanie and relationships. Not exactly, though spending time with Harry made him realize he shouldn’t ignore the obvious—the attraction was still there—hot, deep, undeniable and it was past time to do something about it.

“This place makes the best shrimp risotto I’ve ever tasted.” Melanie scooped a forkful of risotto, sighed. “Even the restaurants in Pittsburgh can’t compare with this dish.”

Will sipped his wine, tried to ignore the red lips, the slender neck... “I’m sure Harry will take that as a huge compliment.”

When she smiled at him, her face lit up, made her even more beautiful. Tonight, she wore a V-neck emerald sweater and black slacks that accentuated her curves. The high-heeled boots made her almost as tall as him. And the gold hoops were a—

“Will? Where did you go?” She laughed, tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I think I lost you for a few seconds.”

“Just thinking.” He grabbed his wine, took a healthy swallow. *Just thinking about being with you later tonight, relearning every inch of you...tasting you...*

“Well, don’t think too hard or you’ll miss the deliciousness of Harry’s Veal Scallopini.”

Will stabbed a bite of veal, held it up. “Actually, Jeremy’s the chef. Not sure if you remember him, but his father was the police chief before Ben Reed took over.”

“I think I do... Tall... Thin... Flat top?”

“That’s Jeremy. He’s filled out some and still has a flat top. The kid loves his hair.” Will recalled the meeting he had with Jeremy recently about getting his finances in order. It had been Harry’s idea and turned out to be a solid opportunity to teach the guy the basics of finance and how to stay out of debt. “He’s seeing Pop’s granddaughter. Seems pretty serious and everybody expects he’ll pop the question one day soon, but... It hasn’t happened yet. Maybe that’s why Harry asked me to meet with him and offer a budget and a little long-term planning.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

A shrug, a half-smile. “You know I love my numbers. I understand them a lot better than...” He stopped before he added relationships to the sentence, but apparently the word hadn’t been necessary because Melanie already knew it.

“I remember.”

Her voice struck him like a caress, coaxed him to offer more. Hope? Not happening. Will plopped the veal in his mouth, chewed until his jaw hurt. “Still no issues with your hand?”

She held up her right hand, moved her fingers, flexed her wrist. “Almost as good as new.” More wrist flexion and a four-finger tap on the table. “I’ve been doing exercises and except for a tiny scar, you’d never know.” Her hazel eyes turned bright; her voice dipped. “It’s almost as if that day never happened, but I’m glad it did.” That voice that used to share dreams with him in the blackness of night continued, “And I’m so very thankful you were there.”

It was the way she looked at him and the sigh that accompanied her words that made Will desperate for the dinner to be over. As he barreled through the veal dish, all he could think about was getting back to her place, undressing her, touching and tasting her... But damn Harry Blacksworth had to bring out another bottle of wine that he said was one of his favorites and then came the dessert menu. Did they really have to hear about *every* single item on the list when what Will wanted for dessert was sitting across from him?

Apparently, Harry thought so and had to recommend not one, but two items.

Melanie’s gaze had slid from the gelato to Will’s mouth as she murmured something about “mouthwatering” and “irresistibly delicious.” Talk about sizzle and heat. He hadn’t been this aroused in a long time, and they weren’t even touching! He couldn’t wait to get her out of here, alone. He might not make it to her house before he pulled her to him and devoured that beautiful mouth...

He wanted her and the way she’d been watching him, homing in on his hands and mouth—no doubt remembering what he could do with both—said she wanted him, too. When Harry delivered the crème Brulée, Will finished it in three bites, asked for the check and helped Melanie into her coat

before Harry could offer them after-dinner drinks. They were done eating, done drinking, done with everything but what came next—a night of long-awaited exploration.

Will and Melanie were on their way out when Harry caught up with them, hugged Melanie and leaned in to shake Will's hand. "There was enough heat coming from that table, I thought I'd need a fire extinguisher." A soft laugh and then, "Anticipation, my boy. It's all about anticipation. She's a keeper. Don't blow it."

He straightened and nodded at Melanie. "I hope to see you again soon. Next time get the penne pasta with spinach and garbanzo beans. It's my personal favorite, and one of the many reasons I married my wife." His lips pulled into a wide smile. "Not the only reason, but...it did make me open my eyes. It's the little things that often do that, don't you think so, Will?"

Will shook his head, opened the door for Melanie. "Good night, Harry."

If the weather had cooperated instead of pummeling them with rain, Will and Melanie would have begun their “reunion” the second they were outside. A deep kiss, bodies pressed against each other, sighs, and a promise of much more. But the downpour forced him to leave her under the canopy while he ran toward the car and brought it to the doorway—but not before he framed her face with his hands and planted a quick kiss on her lips. She tasted like chocolate and wine, and he wanted more... He pulled away, said in a rough voice, “Wait for me.”

A psychologist might have questioned his choice of words as a subliminal desire for a deeper association with Melanie, a.k.a. a relationship. Will tossed the notion aside, attributing his words to a literal meaning. Tonight was about connection and reconnection, enjoying the now and each other, not looking at tomorrow or next month. Just now. *Finally.*

They didn’t talk much on the drive home other than to comment on the difficult visibility and the high water on the roads. When he pulled into the driveway, Melanie unbuckled her seatbelt, turned to him, her voice soft, hesitant. “Maybe you should come in until the rain lets up a bit.”

He ignored his racing heart, kept his voice even as he turned off the car. “Sure. Visibility is rough, and it could be much better an hour from now.” *Hopefully, everything will be much better an hour from now.*

A faint smile, a soft “Okay then, let’s head inside.”

“Wait for me.” That damn phrase shot out of his mouth again as he raced to her side of the car, opened the door and clasped her hand. They ran to the front door where Melanie fitted the key into the lock and seconds later, they stood in her grandmother’s tiny foyer, dripping wet. Melanie kicked off her boots, untied her coat and was about to slip out of it when Will caught her hands, brought them to his lips. “You’re cold.” He kissed her knuckles, didn’t miss the quick intake of breath or the way her lips parted. *She wants this...she wants me...* He shrugged out of his jacket, tossed it on the coat rack in the corner, slipped off his shoes. “Let’s warm you up.” Will led her to the couch, waiting until she sat and then eased onto it beside her, close enough to touch. “Would you like the afghan?”

A shake of her head, a husky “That’s not what I want.”

Her gaze slid to his lips, roamed his body from his chest to his thighs, inched back up to settle on his lips. Will sucked in a breath, forced himself to calm down. Harry Blacksworth had been onto something with his ridiculous comment about anticipation. The bottle of wine, the extra desserts, the time that could not pass fast enough had all led up to this moment. Will touched her cheek, traced a finger along her jaw. “Melanie...I...”

“Will.” She leaned toward him, placed her hands on his shoulders. “Oh, Will.” Her mouth covered his, possessive, desperate, all-consuming.



Her tiny moans snuffed out logic and common sense, made him think of nothing but need and white-hot pleasure. It had been so long since he'd felt alive... So long since he'd wanted anyone like this. *It had always been Melanie.* He returned the kiss with all the need and desire he'd kept buried deep inside for so long. A kiss would never be enough, not with her. Will remembered the silkiness of her hair, the softness of her skin, the taste of her lips. They'd been perfect together—in and out of bed—and pretending that weren't true was useless and foolish.

And unnecessary.

Melanie planted tiny kisses along his jaw and neck, unbuttoned his shirt and eased it open. "I love the feel of your skin."

"Tell me more," he whispered as he ran his tongue along the flesh poking from the V-neck of her sweater. Those moans and sighs undid him... He loved her touch...loved the way she said his name as she clung to him...loved...*her.* He pushed that last piece away, concentrated on the sensations pulsing through him. He wanted her and after all this time, they were finally—

"Will?" Her hands stilled on his belt buckle. "I need to say this before I can't think straight."

He trailed kisses along her collarbone. "You don't need to say anything. Just feel." Another kiss and then he slid a hand under her sweater, toyed with the thin bra strap. "All I want to know is if we're going to stay on the couch, or would you prefer your bedroom? Or—" he reached behind her, unclasped the bra. "Are we going to save the bedroom for next time?" In another ten seconds he'd ease her onto the couch and make the decision for her. And then—

She caught his hand, her voice firm. “Will. Look at me.”

*Focus.* He blinked, lifted his head. “What’s wrong? I thought you... You don’t want this?” Those hazel eyes turned bright, the lips he wanted to taste again trembled.

“Of course, I do, but...we’re not kids anymore.”

His gaze slid to her lips, remembered what she could do with them. “No, we certainly aren’t.”

“We can’t pretend this won’t change everything.”

“Agreed.” If he’d been paying more attention to her words and less to her voice and the shape of her lips, he’d have understood what she meant. Instead, desire took over and massaged her words so what he heard was that there would be no more need to pretend the physical attraction didn’t still exist, and there’d definitely be no reason *not* to act on it—whenever, wherever. *That’s* what he heard as a rush of desire shot through him, sending a visual of countless nights, afternoons, *and* mornings filled with pleasure...so much pleasure.

“Does this mean you’ll trust me again? Open your heart and give us another chance?”

Those hazel eyes grew brighter, and her voice shifted with hope. He blinked, blinked again, tried to separate desire from logic. Failed. *What was she really asking?* Did they have a future together? Could they go on as though the past tragedy hadn’t happened?

“Say something.” She touched his jaw like she used to when he’d gone silent.

*You can talk to me and share,* she used to say. *I love you and I will never leave you. I love you.* But she *had* left. Why would this time be any different? Will pulled away, dragged a

hand through his hair. *If you let her in, she will destroy you and this time you won't recover.* “What are you asking?”

She stared at him for so long he didn't think she'd answer and when she did, he could barely hear her. “I'm asking for another chance.”

“Another chance?” Her words shot through him, singed his soul, and dragged out all the memories of what had happened when he'd given his heart to her. Not again. Never again. “I'm sorry. I can't do that.”

“Then what are we doing?” She pulled away, accusation and hurt smothering her words.

“We're enjoying each other.” He clasped her hand, gentled his voice. “Like we used to, but this time we're older, a lot wiser, and not bogged down by anyone's expectations.”

She untangled her hand from his. “Does that include expectations from each other?”

Where was she going with that question? Will considered her words, tried to analyze what they meant but he couldn't because he'd never quite been able to figure out this woman's thought processes. His inability to do so had entranced as well as frustrated him. Right now, frustration had taken over. Why couldn't she understand what he was trying to tell her? “Look, why can't we just enjoy being together? I'm tired of denying the sizzle between us every time we're in the same room.” He offered up the smile that used to make her crazy, in a very good way, and reached out to trace a flower design on the arm of her sweater. “I think you are, too.” Oh, she didn't like that comment and the pinched lips and harsh breathing said she had a few thoughts for him and they did not include sizzle unless she were breathing fire at him.

“So, this is just about a hookup?”

“Don’t say that.” It was more about satisfying a hunger that had been plaguing him for eight years. A hookup was impersonal, usually unplanned, at least that’s how he saw it. What he wanted to do with Melanie was very personal and he’d been thinking about it for a long time...probably years...

“Why not call it that? You aren’t going to give us another chance. You just want to have sex with me.” She stood, crossed her arms over her chest. “Nice play, Will. Very enticing. I’m sure those lines do the trick every time.”

“Stop it.” He wished just once he didn’t have to explain himself to her. Why did she always have to question and dig until she ferreted out the truth? She wanted the truth? Sure, he’d give it to her, but she might not like it. “I came here tonight because I figured it was time to stop playing games. There’s still this thing between us and it’s real whether you want to admit it or not.” He waited for her to deny what he’d said and when she didn’t he added the rest, the part she probably *didn’t* want to hear. “But as for picking up where we left off and starting over, having a night or two together turn into anything more? I’m not your guy.”

“Get out.” Melanie pointed toward the door, hissed. “Get out now and stay away from me.”



MELANIE HADN’T SEEN Will in two days. Had she really expected him to forgive her and give them another chance? Open up and pick up where they’d been years ago...only better? Yes, part of her *had* wished for that, hoped and wondered, but now she knew. He might want her, and he

probably would have slept with her if she hadn't said anything about trust and another chance. But to trust her? To give her his heart again? No, that was not going to happen, and it was time to accept it.

There'd always been life before the breakup and life after. The life after had been consumed with regret, sadness and a refusal to acknowledge he'd never be a part of her world again. Well, it wasn't happening and while she wanted his forgiveness, that probably wasn't going to happen either. Still, she'd accomplished what she'd come to Magdalena to do: apologized, attempted to make amends, practically begged his forgiveness and admitted how wrong she'd been.

What happened now was not on her. Grandma Esther had once said *you can't control another person's actions. You can only control your own.* It was time to move on because to remain in this limbo would only make her continue to destroy any possibility of a decent future.

A future that did not include Will Callahan, no matter how much she may have secretly hoped it would.

Tess stopped over a few times, noticed Melanie's quietness. *Are you okay?* she'd asked. *Not yet, but I will be.* It hadn't been necessary to add Will's name to the reason for her subdued state because Tess knew all about heartache and had no doubt surmised an ex-fiancé was involved.

If Melanie were going to look at her future without the existence of the only man she'd ever truly loved, then it was at least good to know he didn't feel the same way about her. And if by some unlikely chance he *did* feel the same, he wasn't going to risk getting hurt again. There was a certain comfort and peace in that knowledge. Now she could continue to sort through her grandma's belongings and decide what she wanted

to do with the rest of her life. Tess had mentioned several times that she'd love to have Melanie as a neighbor. *Wouldn't it be great if we were just a yard away? You've got such a sense of humor and Cash does love knowing there's a nurse next door. Would you consider buying your grandmother's house?*

Oh, yes, she'd thought about it, but that was when she'd also hoped Will might be a part of her life. Deep in her soul, she'd pictured them in a remodeled version of this house, with a swing set in the backyard, a flower pollinator garden with zinnias, cosmos, bee balm, and a life filled with joy and promise. But that was never going to happen, at least not with Will Callahan. Could she live in this house and remain in Magdalena knowing that one day she'd walk into Lina's Café or Barbara's Boutique & Bakery, maybe the park, and see Will with another woman. And if she tormented herself further, the woman wore a wedding ring, her belly swollen with his child...

It was too much and while he would no doubt eventually marry and have children, she did not have to witness it. City life had lost its sparkle years ago. The rush and excitement of the emergency room had dimmed, and after weeks of quiet she realized she wanted a slower pace. *Needed* a slower pace. There were many opportunities and not just in her profession, but in her choice of a place to settle down. Small-town living might appear boring and lackluster and at first it might not appear as though it offered much, but why did a person always need more when they could open their eyes and realize they had enough?

Renova was a short distance away and past that was another town, a bit larger with a hospital that had just added a new pediatric ward. Maybe she'd drive there tomorrow and

check out the town. If she liked it, she could contact the hospital about job openings. Why not? It was worth a look, wasn't it? The upside of working so much and playing so little meant that she still had a sizable savings and time to figure out where she wanted to be. One place she couldn't live was in Grandma Esther's house and the sooner she finished her work here, the sooner her father could sell the house.

Once Melanie realized Magdalena and Will Callahan would not be part of her future, she began to organize Grandma Esther's house with the intent to donate, clean up, and gift her belongings. She'd contacted Mimi Pendergrass and asked if the Bleeding Hearts Society might need furniture, household items, pots and pans, blankets and sheets as well as clothing. *We'll take whatever you have to offer*, Mimi had said. *There are always those who can use a hand during a difficult time.*

Melanie had just delivered a box of books to the library—in *her* car since she'd had Cash return Will's yesterday—and was about to load up more bags for the Bleeding Hearts Society. This time, she'd offered up Grandma Esther's clothing items: shoes and coats, boots and sweaters... *This is so kind of you*, Mimi had said when she'd begun making drop-offs to the group. *Your grandmother would be so happy and if you ever want to attend one of our meetings, you're always welcome.* Her blue eyes had misted, and she'd clasped Melanie's hands. *For however long you're here. We sure are going to miss you.*

Melanie would miss these people too. Friends she hadn't known she had or had inherited from her grandmother's good deeds. In Pittsburgh, there were work friends and the neighbors on either side of her who said hello and occasionally picked up her packages when she wasn't home. But other than

that? She didn't have conversations with the grocery store clerk or dry cleaner, and never the delivery person. What was the name of the stylist who cut her hair? Tina? Tawny?

Conversations were casual, surface talk not meant to elicit curiosity *or* emotion. Don't ask personal questions and others won't ask personal questions about you. That had been her philosophy, yet it had done nothing but alienate her from the city that could be brimming with potential friendships as well as acquaintances. Would it have been so horrible to ask about the magnetic photo of the little boy on her hair stylist's mirror? Or how old the schnauzer next door was when it was obvious the owner adored the dog? Alec had tried to introduce her to friends in his neighborhood, even wanted to take her to the small town in Ohio where he'd grown up...but she'd refused. Too busy. Too soon. Too personal.

She would miss Tess and Cash, Harry and Pop, Mimi and...everyone.

Especially Will Callahan.

Melanie had loaded three bags of Grandma Esther's belongings when the man who'd haunted her for eight years pulled into her driveway, hopped out and strode toward her, his expression grim.

"Going somewhere?"

"What are you doing here?"

Will Callahan ignored the question, pointed to the backseat of her car. "What's all this?"

"I'm donating some of my grandmother's belongings to the Bleeding Hearts Society. Mimi said they can always use the donations."



The brackets around his mouth deepened, his jaw twitched as though he didn't like that answer. "I hear you've been unloading the place. I thought you were going to take your time?" That blue gaze narrowed on her, the tone accusing. "Honor your grandmother?"

The man had avoided her for days and now he showed up and thought he had the right to question her? "I *am* honoring her in a way I think she'd want. I've donated books to the library, I'm delivering clothes and household items to the Bleeding Hearts Society as well as anything else that might help someone. Mimi has the names of two families who could use a bedroom set, so..." She fisted her hands on her hips, stared at him. "I've accomplished what I set out to do, which is honor my grandmother and have closure with you." Melanie didn't try to hide the annoyance surging through her. "And I see no point in staying longer than necessary."

"You think we have closure?" He moved toward her, stopped when he was a touch away. "You think we're done?"

Melanie stepped back, out of reach. "I think we've been done; I just needed to understand it."

He muttered a curse under his breath, rubbed the back of his neck. "I have something to say to you and I prefer not to spit it out in the driveway."

She glanced at the Casherdons' log cabin, then back at Will. "Whatever you have to say, you can say right here. Nobody's listening."

A shake of his head, a scowl of frustration. "I would prefer not to do this in the driveway, okay? Please?"

What was a few more minutes with the man? Soon enough she'd never see him again, and then she could truly start

healing. Melanie headed toward the front steps, opened the door, and said, “You’ve got five minutes.”

“I want to apologize for my behavior the other night.” The man who’d torched her hope of another chance shifted from one foot to the other, hands buried in his pockets. “It was unacceptable and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” He was not getting off with a simple apology. “For speaking the truth?”

Those blue eyes sparked. “It wasn’t... I don’t know... When I’m around you, sometimes I can’t think.”

“So, you just spout out whatever lands in your head? Like, let’s have sex but forget a relationship?” She was done trying to figure him out or wishing he’d give them another chance. “I think you said *exactly* what you meant.”

“No, I didn’t.” Frustration seeped into his words, pinched his brows together and turned his lips into a frown. “Sure, I thought I’d come back to your place, and we’d end up in bed. We’d have the physical part without the relationship. That’s what I told myself I wanted.” He blew out a sigh, shook his head. “But even as I tried to convince myself it’s what I wanted; I knew it would never be enough.”

Melanie took in the tired lines around his eyes, the paleness beneath the tan... “What are you saying?”

He dragged a hand over his face, his blue gaze settling on her. “The only time my world felt right was when I was with you.” Pause and a ragged “In a *relationship* with you.”

“Well, you certainly didn’t lead me to believe that.”

“I know. After how I treated you the other night, I’m the one who doesn’t deserve another chance, but I’m asking for one. Will you give us a chance to see how good we can be together?” He cleared his throat, held out a hand. “I promise I’ll open up, share, and everything else I need to do—” those lips she’d kissed so many times pulled into a faint smile “—and I’ll even agree to buy a box of dark chocolate-covered strawberries and share them with you.” The smile spread, his eyes sparkled. “Ditto for the chocolate chip cookies.”

This was the point where she wanted to throw her arms around him and cry—tears of joy, hope, and love. But she didn’t. “I have one more question and I want you to think hard before you answer.”

His smile faltered, his voice turned husky. “Ask me anything.”

“Do you forgive me, and can you truly let what happened between us go?”

Will took a step closer. “If we’re going to have a shot together, I have to... So, yes to both. I’ll do anything for another chance to get back to where we were.”

That’s when Melanie threw her arms around his neck and clung to him as the tears came—big tears that made her entire body tremble. Will was there for her, stroking her back, whispering the only words that mattered. “I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere.”

She sniffed, swiped her eyes and pulled back to study the face she'd never been able to forget. "I have waited so long to hear you say those words."

He wiped a tear with his thumb, leaned in to place the softest kiss on her mouth. "Maybe closure isn't about letting go of each other. Maybe closure is about coming together."

"I think it's always been about getting back to us."

Will framed her face with his hands, his eyes bright. "To us," he murmured, brushing his mouth over hers. "We have so much time to make up." Another kiss, and then a soft "Let's go to bed."

In the few moments when she'd allowed herself to imagine what a second chance with Will would look like, nothing compared to the surge of emotion swirling through her, capturing her heart. Filled with such joy and hope. "I can't guarantee I'll let you out of the bedroom before morning."

The smile shifted, his voice turned huskier. "I'm counting on it. What if my car's in the driveway tomorrow morning?" He raised a brow, added, "Is that going to be a problem? I don't want Cash pounding on the door looking for me so he can warn me not to do something stupid again."

"Something tells me you'll set him straight if he does."

"Yes, I will." They made their way up the steps, reached the landing before Will pulled her close, his hands easing beneath her sweatshirt. "It's been so damn long."

"Too long. I want to feel you against me...want to touch you..."

They should go slow, relearn one another's body...the strokes and touches, the kissing and tasting, the absolute *pleasure* of anticipation. But it was too much. When they

kissed their way to the bed, Will lifted her sweatshirt over her head, unzipped her jeans and eased them down her legs.

“You are so beautiful.” He drew in a sharp breath, his gaze darting from her red bra to her matching lace panties. “And so tempting.” One more sharp breath before he cleared his throat and said, “I’ve always loved you in red. We’ll go slow *next* time.”

“Or the time after that.” Melanie unbuttoned his shirt, stroked his bare chest, worked her way to his belt buckle and then his jeans. “Oh, Will, I will never get enough of you.”

There was no talking after that, only touching, remembering, immersing themselves in pleasure and sensation. Their lovemaking turned fierce, possessive, desperate, filled with moans, sighs, and earth-shattering climaxes.

It was perfect.

“I’ve missed this.” Will lay on his back, Melanie’s head resting on his chest as he stroked her hair, trailed a hand to her hip. “I don’t mean the actual sex part, though that was mind-blowing. I’m talking about the closeness I’ve only ever felt when I’m with you.”

“I know.” She understood exactly what he meant because she felt it too.

“I wish we could go back and erase what happened, but all we can do now is move forward, make sure nothing comes between us again.”

Melanie blinked back tears as his words settled in her soul. “Nothing will come between us again. No matter what.”

“Trust and truth will keep us together.”

If she weren't more interested in touching Will's body, she might have questioned that statement. *What exactly do you mean? What will you do if you question that trust with me? How will you get past it? We have to be able to get past it because we can't ever let this happen again. Right?* But she didn't because a naked Will Callahan in her bed was too much to ignore *or* refuse.

But she should have questioned him and saved herself a lot of heartache.

The next three days were surreal, a blend of fantasy and every dream she'd ever imagined. They woke up next to each other in the morning, shared breakfast, ate dinner together, talked about dreams, plans, and their future. Melanie would move back to Magdalena and find a slower-paced position at the hospital. She'd have a personal life and would not let her job consume her as it had these last eight years. No more running from the past *or* herself. Now, there was only running *to* Will and their future.

The nights were filled with lovemaking and sheer joy. Life was perfect. Will was perfect.

And then everything changed, and Melanie's world wasn't so perfect anymore.



IF ONLY WILL HADN'T BEEN TIED up with previous commitments, he would have witnessed what did and didn't happen at Grandma Esther's that night. *I'm getting used to waking up next to you*, he'd said that morning, his voice still smothered in sleep. *I'm not sure how late I'll be tonight, so I'll stay at my place.*

Melanie had almost told him it didn't matter what time he finished up, that she'd wait up for him, keep his side of the bed warm. Make him a snack if he wanted... But she remained quiet because everything was still so new and she wanted to give him space, even if he acted like he didn't want it.

He'd sifted a lock of hair between his fingers, smiled. *I'll see you tomorrow night?*

*Of course.* She missed him already.

*So, presentation prep isn't the only reason I won't be here.* He'd blushed and shared the rest of the story. *I promised my mother I'd have dinner with her. She says I've been ignoring her.*

*Sure. I understand.* Of course, she didn't understand.

*Next time, you're coming with me. Let me get through this so I can set her straight about us.* He'd kissed her temple, murmured, *I was thinking I could move some of my suits to the spare bedroom this weekend...and shoes...shirts...a few ties.*

*Oh, so moving in?* Her pulse tripled.

He'd smiled. *Well, hopefully.*

She ran a hand along his chest. *Absolutely.*

*And I guess we should talk about where we want to live. We could buy this place, you could move in with me, or we could build something.*

They were moving fast, but they had eight years to make up, and what did it matter when she knew she wanted to be with him? Wasn't he the real reason she'd rejected every other guy who'd tried to work his way into her heart? Yes, no denying that.

*So, what do you think?*



*I kind of like the idea of fixing up this place.*

*Cash and Tess are great neighbors to have, and he's got the knowledge and the contacts to fix any household issues. He'd laughed. That could prove useful because we both know I don't possess those skills.*

*She'd rested a hand on his thigh, sighed. You, Will Callahan, possess other very valuable skills.*

*Another laugh and then Thank you for noticing.*

*You make it very difficult not to notice.*

His smile covered her, made her feel cherished...loved? It was too soon to mention marriage, but it would come, Melanie was certain of it. She thought of Will and how she'd never imagined this scenario when she arrived in Magdalena. Secretly hoped? Dreamed? Yes, but to live it? This was true and boundless joy.

When the doorbell rang at 6:15 p.m. that evening, she thought for a second it might be Will with a change of dinner plans. The desire to be together wasn't just one-sided and maybe he'd rescheduled with his mother—and the next dinner would include Melanie.

But it wasn't Will who stood on her doorstep with a bouquet of sunflowers and carnations in his hand. "Alec?"

"Hello Beautiful. May I come in?"

The man who'd once claimed life without her in it was like a summer without sunshine smiled and offered her the bouquet of flowers. "I missed you."

"But..." Alec Laurence was handsome, intelligent, kind and any woman would be grateful to have him as a partner. Any woman but Melanie. Oh, she'd tried to convince herself he could be *the one*...he could be *enough*. But she'd been the one who was lacking and since coming to Magdalena, she'd gained clarity and a vision about the life she wanted and who she wanted in it.

*Will.*

"I know you said you needed time, but..." A dull blush crept beneath his tan. "I wanted to see you."

"Alec...I..."

He raised a hand to stop her. "I understand you came here for closure, but we shared something special—at least I thought we did. I wanted to remind you that when you're through here you've got a life back in Pittsburgh." He moved toward her, clasped her hand. "Hopefully, with me."

A tiny part of her wished she could have committed to Alec, given him what he deserved. She hadn't been able to do

that, and the reason was obvious: she'd never stopped loving Will. They had another chance now and she was not going to give that up, no matter how difficult the journey or the man. Melanie bit her bottom lip, forced out the words Alec needed to hear. "You know I will always have feelings for you, but you really should have called."

A deep breath, followed by a quiet "I see. So, you and the guy? I'm guessing you got your closure, but it wasn't what I'd hoped."

Melanie shook her head. "You are such a good person, and you'll make the right woman a perfect partner. But I'm not that person."

His gaze turned bright, his handsome face sad. "I've only ever wanted you to be happy and I'd hoped I could be part of that happiness. I hope this guy realizes how special you are." When Melanie nodded, Alec cleared his throat, squeezed her hand before releasing it and stepped back. "I guess I didn't think this part through... And it's too late to head back tonight, so can you recommend a place to stay in town?"

He'd opened his heart to her yet again, driven all this way to see her, and she'd rejected what he'd offered. The least she could do was give him a place to stay and feed him. "You can stay here. There's a spare bedroom and I made beef stroganoff tonight. Are you hungry?"

A nod, a half-smile. "Sure. If you think it won't be an issue."

"No, of course not." *He meant Will.* Why would there be an issue? Tomorrow, she'd fill him in on Alec's surprise visit and she might even add that the two would have liked one another—under different circumstances, of course. "Why don't you grab your bag and I'll heat up the stroganoff?"

“Sounds great. I am pretty hungry.”

And just like that, the awkwardness disappeared, and they were friends again—talking and laughing about hospital antics and people they knew. Melanie told Alec she wouldn't be returning to Pittsburgh other than to formally resign and pack up her apartment. *I want to buy this house*, she'd said. He hadn't asked for details, had only commented with a single question. *So, it's serious then?*

Yes, it was serious, but she would not humiliate him by gushing about Will Callahan and the love she'd never quite been able to let go. Hours later, they said good night and she crawled into bed, wearing one of Will's T-shirts. She wanted to call him and tell him about Alec but not tonight, not when he'd been busy with his mother and preparing for a presentation. Tomorrow would be soon enough. What were a few more hours when they had a lifetime to talk and share?



WILL SHOULD BE at the office crunching numbers but that was impossible. How could he look at numbers when he hadn't seen the woman he loved in almost twenty-four hours? Lily had smiled when he picked up the dark chocolate-covered strawberries and chocolate chip cookies from the bakery. She'd even made a comment about *happily-ever-after* with *his one-and-only* in a sing-song voice that implied she knew the ending to their story and would be happy to share it. He'd thought about brushing off her words or ignoring her comments, but he couldn't because he loved Melanie, and he wasn't afraid to show it *or* to say it.

*Stay tuned*, he'd said. *You might get to see another happily-ever-after*. Oh, she'd loved that comment, had

practically squealed.

*You and Melanie are perfect for each other, I just know it. Uncle Harry knows it, too.*

*Harry?* Of course he'd comment. The man had been poking around in Will's business since Melanie came back to town. Maybe the guy *was* ready to be the Godfather of Magdalena. Will thought about Lily's comments and Harry's potential new role as he pulled into Melanie's driveway, parked behind a sedan with Pennsylvania license plates. Had Melanie's father driven in late last night? Maybe he wanted a face-to-face with them about buying the house or maybe he wanted a face-to-face with Will.

*Big sigh.* Will had to deal with the Russells sooner or later and he'd rather get it over with and move on so Melanie's parents understood he *was* going to have a life with their daughter. Will lifted the bakery boxes from his car, made his way to the front door. He really needed to find a way to set boundaries between work and after-work time. It had never been a problem before Melanie returned to town. But now? Now it was a problem. He thought of those very capable hands, the long legs, the irresistible smile. A problem, yes... but a truly delicious one.

What would Melanie say when he handed her the boxes of strawberries and cookies? One peek inside and she'd understand how much he wanted a life with her.

How much he *loved* her.

Tonight, he'd take her to Harry's Folly where they'd share a bottle of wine, shrimp risotto, chicken marsala, and crême Brulée, and then he'd take her to bed and ask her to spend the rest of her life with him. Maybe destiny *had* always planned for Melanie to wear his engagement ring again.

The door opened before he had a chance to ring the bell, but the man on the other side was *not* Melanie's father. This man was a few years older and a few inches taller than Will; wet hair slicked back, T-shirt, jeans. Bare feet.

"Can I help you?"

"Who are you?" Who was this guy and what was he doing *here* at 10:00 in the morning? Will's gaze shifted from the wet hair to the bare feet...looking as though he'd just finished a shower...which meant he'd spent the night...which meant...

"Alec Laurence. And you are...?"

"Will Callahan."

They stared at each other, assessing, analyzing, adding and subtracting qualities as though trying to figure out where Melanie fit in. Then the man nodded, dark brows pinched together. "So, you're the guy."

"So, you're the ex-boyfriend." It had to be him, but what was he doing here, and why was he—

"I could say the same about you. The ex-boyfriend part, I mean."

"You could, but that's not exactly accurate. Melanie and I are figuring things out...getting closer."

The man raised a brow. "And yet, I'm the one who spent the night here." A shrug, a twitch of his lips. "You might want to rework your definition of getting closer."

He would not listen to this jerk and his lies. "Why are you even here?"

"Why? Because I missed her." The man's gaze narrowed, the brackets around his mouth deepened. "She's special and

she deserves a man who can give her what she needs... Commit to her... Love her..."

"She does." What did this guy know about what Melanie needed? It was Will's turn to stare, try to reason out what the situation looked like with what he *knew* in his heart. Melanie would *never* cheat on him. She would never betray him. She was not like her mother...

"She *thinks* you're the guy, but are you?" The man sliced through Will's thoughts, challenged him. "You see, from what I've determined, you were the only thing standing in my way."

"What's your point?"

"You're going to hurt her again. And when you do, I'll be there for her, steady, loyal, determined...and this time she'll choose *me*."

"We'll see about that."

"I guess we will. Ever think she's still deciding? I mean, she spent years holding out for you, but maybe the reality just isn't measuring up." He rubbed his jaw, studied Will as though he could see inside his brain to his soul and found him deficient in both areas. "Anyway, she's in the shower right now. You know how she loves her morning showers." The man's lips pulled into a slow smile. "I could get her if you like...?"

Okay, the jerk was definitely goading him, and it was working! Will had to get out of here before he did something stupid, like punch the guy. But a small part of him was annoyed and not happy that Melanie had put them in a situation like this. An ex-boyfriend had no business "sleeping over" at his former girlfriend's house, no matter what the excuse. Melanie should know that and the fact that she didn't

meant they weren't "in sync" with what was and wasn't okay in the ex territory. Were they going to have to write out a step-by-step plan on what created acceptable behavior with exes? He was certain she wouldn't be happy if Delaney appeared at his front door, looking all cozy and comfortable.

"So, do you want me to get her for you?" The voice dipped, the smile spread. "Happy to do it."

Implying he was happy to intrude on Melanie while she was taking a shower and see her naked. Will was too smart to fall for the guy's obvious attempts to torment him, but the guy was talking about Melanie...the only woman Will had ever loved, the one who'd broken his heart and healed it...the one who had too much power over him.

Will tried to control his anger, failed. How could Melanie put their relationship in a position where it could be threatened? Everything was new and fragile, and it had been so damn difficult to open up and trust her again. How could she risk everything for some guy she said she didn't care about?

Unless she *did* still care about him on some level.

Or she didn't care about Will as much as she said she did.

Or maybe she just didn't understand how hard it had been to give her another chance.

The possibilities made him question and second-guess everything, and for a guy who lived in absolutes, that was not a good place to be. It created havoc and ripped apart streams of logic and known quantities, like how he and Melanie belonged together, how they loved each other...

Or not.



He shoved the boxes at Melanie's ex. "Here, tell her to enjoy them."

"Sure. Nice to finally meet you, Will." Alec Laurence squared his shoulders, studied him as though he already knew Will's next move. "You've been haunting my relationship with Melanie for too long, but I have a feeling that's about to end." Pause and a matter of fact, "You're part of the past, her *closure* as she calls it, but I plan to be part of her future." He opened the boxes, nodded. "Thanks for the goodies. Melanie loves chocolate-covered strawberries." A soft laugh. "She can eat a whole box if she's not careful."

That damn comment about the strawberries was what convinced Will maybe Melanie wasn't as committed as he'd thought she was...maybe the doctor ex-boyfriend still had a shot. Will made it to the car when he heard her voice.

"Will! Will!"

He turned to find Melanie rushing toward him, in jeans and a sweatshirt, wet hair hanging from her shoulders. The wet hair reminded him of the comments the ex had made about the shower, and that infuriated him. It had been eight years since anyone had such a hold on him, his moods, his future—and it was *not* a good feeling.

"Don't leave."

"Three's a crowd, and I'm obviously the intruder." He'd been a fool to believe her yet again.

"Alec showed up last night. I didn't know he was coming."

He should just stay quiet, but he couldn't. "That's awfully convenient, considering I told you I couldn't see you last night." Did Alec Laurence really think he still had a shot with Melanie? Why hadn't she told the guy there was *no* chance

because *Will* was part of her future? Why hadn't she made sure he understood exactly what she and Will meant to each other?

And why had the guy slept there instead of getting a place at the Heart Sent?

Why? *Damn it, why?*

"Talk to me, Will."

"He's trying to win you back. You do know that, don't you?" The rush of color to her face gave him his answer. "Of course, you know."

"I told him it's not going to happen, and he understands."

"Really?" Will shook his head, blew out a loud sigh. "I'm not so sure about that. In fact, I think he's waiting for us to fall apart so he can sweep in and convince you to change your mind about him."

"No, it's not like that at all."

"It's not? So, I didn't see him hanging out at your house like he belonged there? No shoes, no socks, wet hair?"

"Stop it. You know better."

"You mean I *should* have known better." He dragged a hand through his hair, wished for once life with Melanie could be clear-cut and without ambiguities or doubt. Was the doctor ex lying? If so, why would he do that other than to cause problems between Will and Melanie? "I always seem to walk in on situations that make no sense and then people tell me it's not what I think or it's not what I saw. In fact, it wasn't real, but a figment of my overactive imagination." He scowled. "Do I look like I have an overactive imagination? People have said a lot of things about me, but that's not one of them. So, what's going on here? Is this another story like the one about our

parents? I didn't really see your ex looking way too casual in your house, and you weren't really taking a shower?" He eyed her wet hair. "And he didn't tell me he was waiting for me to screw up so he could get another shot with you?"

"Why would he say that when I told him it wasn't going to happen?"

She really did look confused and annoyed, but the annoyance was aimed at him! "I don't know, maybe because he's in love with you?"

"Don't you trust me?" She fisted her hands on her hips, waited for him to answer. When he hesitated, she frowned. "You don't, do you?"

Anger and jealousy made a guy lose common sense and any hope of rational thinking. "You want the truth? Sure, I'll give you the truth. At this moment in our relationship after everything we've been through, I trust you—" his gaze narrowed on the wet hair, dipped to her slippers "—but not 100%."

"Did you honestly just say that?" Those hazel eyes singed him. "If I'm not in the 100% category, what percent am I? 50%? 65%? 93%? Or did I fall back to 20%? And how do I get to 100%?" A big scowl and a snarl. "Or won't I *ever* get there?"

He wished he were at work, perusing financials instead of putting on a display in her driveway. No doubt the doctor ex was enjoying the show. The knowledge that the jerk could be witnessing this argument made Will spit out words he'd later regret. "It's going to take time."

"How convenient for you to adjust your commitment level *after* we've slept together." She advanced on him, jabbed a

finger against his chest. “I’ll tell you what? If you want to think I slept with him last night, go ahead. Maybe we showered together, too, like you and I did the other morning and—”

“Stop it.”

“Why? You want to believe the worst and no matter what I say, you aren’t going to trust me 100%, right? Why trust me at all? Why not turn me into a villain so you can have an excuse to *never* get close to me again. That’s what this is all about. Getting close and trusting each other, and that means 100%. But that’s not going to happen because you’re too afraid. Fine, at least I found out before we went any further in our relationship.”

“What are you saying?” He clenched his jaw so hard, his teeth hurt.

“I’m saying relationships are about trust and honesty, and hard work. They’re about being there for the other person, caring for and about them, no matter what. You’re not interested in doing that, not all-in, no matter how much you say you are. You, Will Callahan, are about convenience and being there until it gets difficult or messy. Above all, you’re going to protect yourself and make sure no one ever hurts you again—especially me. Well, I’m not interested in that.” She took another step back, held up a hand. “Goodbye, Will. I hope you find someone you can trust 100% because anything less just isn’t worth it.”

And then she turned and walked out of his life.

**L**ooks like Melanie and Will are done for good this time.

*It only took eight years, but it finally happened.*

*There's too much baggage between them and they'll never get past it.*

*It's all about trust and if you don't trust your partner...*

*You're good as done.*

*I can't say I'd be happy if the woman I loved invited her ex to her house for a sleepover.*

*That's not what happened, and you know it, so stop embellishing.*

*Who knows what really happened?*

*She's not talking, and neither is he.*

*Well, somebody sure is talking or you wouldn't even know this much. Who is it?*

*Nobody in particular, it's just what's buzzing around. I heard it at Lina's Café, and more spilled out in the produce section of Sal's Market. People stopped talking when they spotted Cash Casherdon coming our way... You know how that boy doesn't like gossip.*

*Why would he when he was the topic for so many years?*

*I know... I never thought he and Tess would get back together, not after what happened.*

*Such a tragedy, but they got through it.*

*Look at him now. A devoted husband and father, and an important part of our community. Who would have ever thought?*

*Not me.*

*Me neither, though he's still got a pinch of reckless about him.*

*And that smile? Nobody can ever say no to that.*

*Why would they want to...?*

*True. Now Will Callahan? He's a challenge.*

*He's such a smart young man, but he's made some missteps in the romance area.*

*Meaning?*

*I'm just saying...a person's got to open their eyes and know when to call it quits. And he should call it quits with Melanie Russell—for good.*

*Just because you want Will to get back with Delaney doesn't mean it's going to happen.*

*A sniff, a huff and then *It could*. I think they're good together.*

*Says you.*

There were two sides in the town: the ones who wanted Will and Melanie to get back together and the other side, the ones who wanted them to call it quits for good. The side that

wanted them together was divided into two categories—the Melanie supporters versus the Will supporters.

Only one person spoke up and said both parties had a lot to learn if they were going to make it and this person wanted them to succeed. Who would have ever believed Harry Blacksworth would be a champion *and* a counselor of relationships?

Will had heard too much, especially from his mother, who once again reminded him what a “horrible” fit Melanie was for him. *Delaney would never do that to you. She only wants to love you, share in your dreams, make you happy.* Right. Delaney. She’d stopped by his office last night, invited him to her house for a late dinner and drinks. *And maybe some quiet time. I think you need that.*

Sure, what he needed was a cave and a memory eraser, so he didn’t have to hear about *her*, didn’t have to remember how things used to be...how they were supposed to be...

Delaney still didn’t get it, no matter how many times he tried to spell it out in a kind way. *You know we’re never going to happen, right?*

Those eyes had teared up, the shoulders slumped, and she’d rushed to the other side of the desk, gripped his hand. *It could happen. Just give us a chance.*

*If it were going to happen with us, it would have. Don’t you see that?*

*She’s out of the picture.* Desperation clung to her words, smeared her expression. *That’s why you could never commit to me or our future. She was always there but not anymore...*

*It doesn’t matter. It’s not going to happen with us, and I want you to accept that. I want you to move on.* He’d squeezed

her hand, forced a smile. *You deserve better. Find a guy who's right for you, because I'm not him.*

There'd been a few more pleas, several tears, and finally, resignation. *You really aren't going to give us a chance... Ever? Are you?*

*No, I'm sorry.* That conversation might as well have been written up in the *Magdalena Press* because Delaney made sure she told her friends and coworkers...her family, who in turn spilled the story with a retelling that included Delaney telling Will she deserved better and refused his pleas for another chance.

It didn't matter what anyone else thought. Will knew what he'd said, even if Delaney didn't want to accept it.



WILL HADN'T SLEPT in three days. How could he sleep when the whole scene played through his head over and over right up to the point where Melanie had turned and walked away—out of his life. There'd been no need to say they were over because it was all there in the spaces between the words, the looks she gave him, filled with disbelief and disappointment. And then she'd walked back into the house where Alec the doctor ex-boyfriend waited for her—no doubt ready with sympathy, open arms and a pledge to never hurt her.

If Will had it to do over again—and he'd wished for that too many times—what would he have done differently? First, he wouldn't have let jealousy devour him, and he would have tried hard not to draw conclusions or make assumptions. He'd never done that in his business life, but he'd certainly permitted both to rule his personal life—especially where



Melanie Russell was concerned. Will pinched the bridge of his nose, tried to focus on the spreadsheet in front of him and managed to funnel his attention on the columns in front of him. When the door to his office opened, he didn't realize someone had entered until the man spoke.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Cash Casherdon reached his desk in four strides, a “ticked off” expression plastering his face.

“I’m busy.”

The guy didn't care about boundaries or intruding or anything that didn't have to do with whomever he was trying to protect. “Too bad. Get un-busy.” He scowled, crossed his arms over his chest, stared. “I’m starting to think she’s way too good for you.”

Will tossed his pencil on the desk, dragged a hand over his face. He was so not in the mood for Cash's sarcasm. “You think the doctor ex is a better choice?”

Cash muttered a curse under his breath, blew out a loud sigh. “Hell yes, I do, but that's not really the point, is it? For some ridiculous and unbelievable reason, Melanie wants you. Of course, I wanted to talk her out of the foolishness, but Tess said I had to mind my own business because apparently, I've been a fool a time or two.” Those whiskey-colored eyes burned him. “At least I came around and woke up before I lost the best thing that ever happened to me. But you?” A laugh, a shake of his head. “You just love to create catastrophes and blow up everything when things could be good.”

The guy didn't know what he was talking about, and he definitely hadn't heard the whole story. Well, fine, Will would enlighten him and then see what he thought. “Did she tell you

the ex stayed overnight—at her house—no doubt a wall away from her bed? Did she tell you *that*?”

“She did. I let her know that wasn’t her best move, especially when she’s trying to show you how much you can trust her. Can’t fault the guy for not giving up on her though. That takes guts.”

“Would you still say that if you found Tess in that situation or would you throw a punch and then boot him out?” Cash might be a husband and a father, but the man still had enough “wildcat” in him to use his fists first, ask questions later.

“You’re right, I’d be more inclined to throw a left hook first, maybe follow it up with a right. But I’ve got a temper; you’re supposed to be the steady one, aren’t you?” Laughter snaked across the desk, squeezed Will’s chest. “*The accountant*. Right, maybe I should rethink having you do my taxes since your logic is about as sensible as a two-year-old’s.”

“No problem, let me know what you want me to do.”

“I want you to stop being a jerk and figure a way out of this mess.” Cash took a step closer, leaned forward, splayed his hands on top of the desk. “You’re only going to get so many shots. I don’t care who started it, or what should or shouldn’t have happened, or how she should have known better. I thought you two belonged together. I thought you were heading toward a future. The whole marriage, baby, dog and a car seat or two. But maybe you’re not, because maybe you just like to be miserable. I know all about that, trust me.”

“Is there a point to this lecture?”

Cash straightened, cut him a look that said Will might be on the receiving end of a left hook if he didn’t straighten up.

“Yeah, there’s a point. It’s pretty simple. Get your act together and make it right with Melanie.”

He turned and headed for the door, had his hand on the knob when Will spoke. “What if it’s too late?”

Cash swung around, spat out, “If it were too late, she would have left with the doctor. That doesn’t mean he’s out of the picture. This doctor isn’t giving up.” He pointed a finger at Will. “He told her he set you up to see how committed you were...how willing you were to fight for the relationship...to see how much you loved her. And guess what? You failed.” A frown, a big sigh. “Does that mean you don’t care or aren’t committed or any of that other BS the guy said? No, it means you’re too damn scared to be honest with yourself *and* with her. She owns your friggin’ oxygen and she can hurt you and you don’t like it. Well, guess what, buddy? That’s love and that’s life. Figure it out or you’re going to lose her and this time, you won’t get her back.”

Will was deep in the review of a depreciation schedule when his secretary poked her head in his office and made her way toward him. He'd seen that same expression on her face the time she scheduled Mr. Hensley's first wife at the same time as wife number two. Not good. "What's wrong, Janice?" If this were another mess-up, he'd have to talk to her about paying attention to first *and* last names. But when she spoke, the concern wasn't about a mess-up she'd made—it was about him.

"You have a phone call, Will. The man said he needs to talk to you."

Will held in the sigh, told himself Janice was doing her best. "And? Did the man have a name?"

She fanned herself, spoke in an almost whisper. "It's your father."

Will had spent years hiding his emotions, practicing facial expressions, tone, body language. But he hadn't been prepared for this phone call. He gripped his pencil, blew out a soft breath. "Did he say what he wanted?"

The headshake came first, followed by "Only that he needed to speak with you, and that it was urgent."

*Urgent?* He'd heard from his old man once in eight years. He'd called four years ago, asking for a meeting so they could talk about what happened. Of course, Will told him what to do with his talks... There'd been nothing since then, until now. Was the guy sick? Dying? Broke?

“Will, I know it's none of my business and I certainly understand how you feel about your father, but...something's wrong.” Those brown eyes grew wide. “I could tell.”

Janice didn't reach his shoulder and her shoes looked like they belonged to a ten-year-old, even though she was fifty-two. Most of the time she did anything Will asked. She treated him like she was his mother...a kind mother who didn't ask for favors unless she really needed one—or thought *he* did. “Get a number and tell him I'll get back to him.” *Or not.*

“Will, please?”

Big sigh. “Okay, if he's still on the line, put him through.”

“Will do.” And then she disappeared from his office, closing the door behind her.

A minute later, his phone lit up and Will reached for the receiver. “Hello.”

“Hello, son. Been a long time.”

*Not long enough.* His old man's voice had a raspy quality to it, probably from cigarettes or alcohol, maybe both. “Do you need something?”

“I know you never wanted to hear from me again, but I promised I'd get in touch with you, try to make things right.”

“How do you intend to do that? And who did you make the promise to, and...” Will clamped his mouth shut. He didn't

care what promises his old man had made or what he planned to do. Nothing mattered but what he didn't do.

Silence filled the line, made Will wonder if the guy had hung up. And then he spoke. "I got a call from Harry Blacksworth. I used to think the guy was full of hot air and arrogance with his fancy suits, big cars, and wads of cash, but he's decent...and he cares about people." Pause and a rough "He cares about you."

"Why would Harry call you?" Why *would* Harry call Joe Callahan?

"Harry told me I'd made my choices and screwed up my life, and that was on me. But you were my son and if you didn't wake up, you were going to end up just like me; miserable, bitter, disillusioned." He coughed, the hoarseness in his voice deepening. "I can't let that happen."

"So, what did he want you to do? Tell me how to live a good life? Make better choices? Be a decent person?" Will rubbed his left temple, closed his eyes and wished he hadn't accepted this phone call. "You failed on all of those."

"I did, no denying it. And all the apologies I could offer aren't going to change the fact that I was a terrible father. It's hard to be a decent one when you can't find anything to be grateful about, so you shut down and refuse to change. I did that with you kids and your mother and I am sorry about that."

"Okay then. Is that why you called?"

"No, I called to tell you Harry says you and Melanie Russell belong together."

"Not sure she'd agree with you."

"Maybe she just needs a little convincing." Another cough, a clearing of his throat. "At least that's what Harry says."

“The man’s a dreamer who doesn’t like to give up even when he should.”

“Maybe so, I can’t say either way, but I don’t want you to end up like me—in love with one woman...married to another...”

“Did you really just admit you never loved Mom?” Will fisted his hand on the desk, tried to block out those words.

“I loved your mother in my own way, but she was *not* the love of my life. The woman who owned my heart and will always own it didn’t want me, refused to marry me... She said I was too reckless and wild, and I’d get bored with her. She wanted stability and someone who would stay.” A deep sigh and then “Ward Russell gave her that.”

“Ward Russell? Are you saying you and Melanie’s mother were together before either of you were married?”

When his father spoke, there was no denying the pain in his words or the mounds of regret. “Oh yes, we were together. I wanted to marry her, but she wouldn’t have it. I was the bad boy in town. Susannah didn’t even want anyone to know we were seeing each other so we had to sneak around. When I asked her to marry me, she flat-out refused. It broke my damn heart and then one night your mother walked into O’Reilly’s Bar & Grille, and the next thing I know she’s pregnant and we’re walking down the aisle. It happened so fast, I never saw it coming. I resented having to marry her, especially when she’d told me there was nothing to worry about in that department.” Big sigh. “Until there was.”

“Mom trapped you?”

“I wouldn’t say exactly trapped, but she led me to believe certain things were not an issue.”

*She'd trapped him.* "You must have really resented having me."

"Resented?" Surprise covered his words, sifted through the line. "Of course not. I loved you...I love you. Your mother had certain ideas about family and what she would and wouldn't accept. Somehow, she figured out how I felt about Susannah, and she could never let that go."

Will thought of the years of arguments, distance, and so much silence from his father. "So, you still love Susannah Russell?"

Long pause and then "I never stopped loving her and I will *never* stop loving her, but she loves her husband. For a brief moment we reunited, but it was never going to lead to anything, not for Susannah. I thought it might give us a second chance, but she was so remorseful, and when she told me she'd do anything for her husband's forgiveness, that's when I knew it had never been about me. She really loved him and maybe it took almost losing him for her to realize that."

"She wasn't your first affair. There was another one."

"There was. The woman could almost pass for Susannah if you looked at her a certain way. But she wasn't, because nobody's Susannah."

Will wanted to hang up the phone but he couldn't because in some twisted way he understood what his father meant about loving one woman forever. "I'm sorry."

"I couldn't stay in town and then Susannah left, and I didn't have anything to give you and your mother. Your sister was already gone... Your mother didn't want a divorce, but she didn't want me either. I realized the best thing I could do for everybody was to disappear."



“Where’d you go?”

“I moved to the outskirts of Pittsburgh for a while, got a job driving a truck in the area. It was thirty miles from Susannah, just in case she changed her mind. But once I saw them together, I knew she wouldn’t. That’s when I packed up and headed out. I’ve spent some time in Ohio and Tennessee. I’ve been in Texas for three years.”

Will had often wondered where his father might be, but he’d never pictured him broken-hearted over a woman. “Like I said, I’m sorry things didn’t line up the way you wanted.”

“It just wasn’t meant to be but that doesn’t mean I regret any of it, except for what happened with you and Melanie. *That* I do regret. Harry says she still cares about you. If there’s half a chance that could be true, you’ve got to fight for her. Beat the odds and show her you two were meant to be together.”



“So, what’s this surprise Harry left at your house and when do we get to see it?” Cash lifted the lid on the roaster pan, grabbed the turkey baster. “You never know with that guy, and he’s got me curious.” Cash drizzled juices over the plump bird. “He loves to keep us guessing.”

Harry Blacksworth certainly had Melanie guessing. *Leave your door open because I want to drop something off before your dinner. It’s a Thanksgiving surprise, so don’t ask questions.* He’d rubbed his jaw, blue eyes bright, his voice filled with true kindness. *I hope you like it, but if not, maybe just give it a chance, okay?* She’d wondered about those comments since yesterday when he’d stopped over with a

container of wedding soup and two cannoli. *You're really leaving, huh?*

*It's time, Harry. Dad said there's been an offer on the house and he's thinking of taking it.*

*Wow, that was fast.*

*Some guy's looking at it as an investment property. Who knows?* She hadn't wanted to inquire, because even the perfect family wouldn't be the right one... Not when she'd once believed she would be living in it with Will and their family.

*Yeah, who knows? So, leave your door unlocked when you head over to Cash and Tess's and I'll make sure the surprise is waiting for you when you head back before dinner to pick it up.*

*Thank you, Harry, even though it really isn't necessary.*

*Oh, but it is definitely necessary.* He'd hugged her tight, whispered, *Be happy.*

"I guess I'll head over to the house to pick up the surprise Harry left there." She glanced at the rooster clock on the kitchen wall. "I should be back in a few minutes and then I can help with the rest of the meal."

"Take your time. The bird's almost done, and the potatoes are on the stove...cranberry sauce, stuffing, all on schedule. Ah, the green bean casserole needs to bake another twenty-five minutes." His voice shifted, filled with emotion. "Thanksgiving isn't Thanksgiving without a green bean casserole smothered with fried onions."

Tess told her that Cash insisted on the green-bean-casserole tradition his Aunt Ramona had started for him when he came to live with her. *Tradition is important to him*, she'd said. *Especially with parents like his who didn't have time for*

*anything but each other.* “I’ll bet Harry’s sending over some special dessert to add to the pumpkin pies and pumpkin roll Miriam Desantro made for the meal.”

Cash closed the oven, tossed the red mitt on the counter. “I’ll never turn down anything from Harry, and it looks like I’ll have to add advice to the list since word has it, he’s been spreading it all over town.”

“He’s certainly been a busy man, hasn’t he?” Harry had contacted her father, visited Melanie a few times with food and a remark or three about forgiveness, second chances, and how finding your meant-to-be person can be a challenge. *But when you do find that person, you hang on tight for the roller coaster ride because there won’t be anything like it in the heart department.* He’d winked, blue eyes bright. *I can guarantee that one.*

“Good old Harry. Maybe he’s sending along a bottle of his finest wine with that dessert.” Cash laughed. “Or a bottle of his fancy scotch.”

“Maybe.”

“Can’t wait to find out.”

“Okay, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

A nod and then a gentle “No rush, just make sure you’re back before it’s time to mash the potatoes.” He made a face. “Not my favorite task.”

“Happy to take the job. See you soon.” Melanie made her way to the foyer, shrugged into her jacket and tossed a scarf around her neck. In three days, she’d leave Magdalena and drive back to Pittsburgh where she’d hand in her resignation and consider the next step. Alec had offered to help pack up the apartment, but she’d declined. He was a wonderful man,

but she could not give him hope they'd ever share a future together.

No one would fill that hole in her heart for a long time—if ever.

The late afternoon air filled her lungs as she walked across the lawn to her grandmother's. Cash said they might see flurries tonight. Fresh snow. New beginnings. She opened the front door and stepped inside, curious to discover Harry's surprise. He'd mentioned something about leaving it in the kitchen for her. Chocolate cheesecake? Cannoli? Tiramisu or —

“Will?” Life had offered so many surprises since she'd landed in Magdalena, and finding Will Callahan at her grandmother's kitchen table was more confusing and unexpected than all the others. “What are you doing here?”

A swirl of pink crept from his neck to his cheeks. “Surprise.”

“Was this your idea or Harry’s?” Why would either of them think this was a good idea? In three days, she’d be gone and then she’d never see him again, and she could finally accept that. But she didn’t need visual reminders of the man who’d owned her heart for too many years, and she certainly didn’t want to notice the way the blue in his sweater matched his eyes, or the faint scent of his cologne, or anything else about him. “Well?”

A shrug, the blush turning three shades deeper. “It was a joint effort. I asked for help, and he agreed.”

“*You* asked for help?”

“Harry’s gotten to be quite the advice giver. I see why Pop wants him to take over as Godfather of this town.” A throat clearing and then “Would you like a drink?” He pointed to the bottle of scotch on the table. “Or there’s wine. Cabernet. And of course water...” He shook his head, pinched the bridge of his nose. “I sound like an idiot. There’s scotch, wine, and whatever else you have in this house. Harry brought the alcohol.”

“I don’t want anything but answers. Why are you here, and what are you and Harry up to...?”

“I went to Harry because I needed to talk to you and...”

“You couldn’t pick up the phone?”

Those blue eyes turned bright. “I didn’t think you’d take my call and showing up at your door seemed equally dicey.”

“I see. So, you decided to ambush me with an elaborate scheme to get me here?” Melanie crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ve already been the subject of too many conversations, and don’t appreciate the two of you conspiring with some grand plan to achieve who knows what?” A huff and a scowl. “What do you want?”

He ignored the question and surprised her with information she’d never expected. “Harry offered my mother a job baking for his restaurant.”

“What?” Melanie was still annoyed with Will and Harry, but this news intrigued her.

His lips pulled into an almost smile, his voice dipped. “He said he loved her cream puffs and he’s never seen anybody with a knack for getting the meringue on a coconut cream pie just right.”

Melanie could not resist asking about the woman who’d spent most of her life making herself and everyone else miserable. “I can’t picture Harry allowing her in his kitchen, no matter how tasty her meringue.”

“That’s where it gets interesting. From what I hear, and of course, my mother hasn’t mentioned a word about this part, but he sat down and told her she had real talent, but her miserable disposition was ruining it. Harry told her she could spend the rest of her life complaining about what she didn’t

have and what everyone else *did* have, or she could start to make her own way—with her own skills. It was all about attitude. And if she could change hers—no gossiping, no bad-mouthing, no walking around with her own rain cloud—then he'd give her a chance. Good money, too.”

“I'm having a hard time visualizing *any* of this. What did she say?”

Those blue eyes sparkled. “She said yes. She's been there five days, and she doesn't call me every ten minutes. She hasn't complained about how miserable life is or how she got a bad deal...she hasn't even tried to tell me what my life should look like, and *that* is a huge win for me.”

“I can't believe it. Harry never mentioned anything about it.”

“He wouldn't. He didn't tell me either, my mother did. Once I heard, I tracked Harry down and tried to figure out his angle, but he said there wasn't one. Harry said it was about giving somebody a chance to do right, and he thought I deserved a break, too.” This time when he smiled, it was a real smile. “I told him I definitely appreciated that.”

“I'm happy for you.”

His gaze narrowed on her for half a second before he lifted his glass, took a healthy swallow. “He also gave her an early Christmas present. A makeover.”

Melanie could not hold in the smile or the laughter that followed. “A makeover? Your mother's hairstyle hasn't changed since the first time I met her. And I don't think I've ever seen her in any colors other than blue, black, brown, or white.

“Oh, she’s got a whole new ‘color palette’ now. Harry had somebody work with her, even sent her to the salon for hair and makeup, nails, the whole bit. It’s a very sweet gesture, and she’s so darned excited.”

“You mean she’s finally turning into a human being?”

He leaned back in his chair, rubbed his jaw as if contemplating her question. “Yes, I think she is. I told her if she doesn’t watch out the men are going to start clamoring around for dates.”

Melanie moved toward the kitchen table, pulled out a chair and sat down. “What did she say about that?”

“Nothing. She said, ‘we’ll see.’ Then she blushed and I didn’t miss her smile. When she says ‘we’ll see,’ that means she’s open to the possibility. Can you imagine?”

No, she could not. “If she can leave you alone and let other people live their lives, then we all owe Harry a lot. And maybe he *is* ready to be Godfather.”

“He’s ready. I understand Miriam Desantro plans to invite her to Harry’s house for the annual baking event she and Cash’s Aunt Ramona started a few years back. Invitation only and you have to know your stuff to get an invitation.”

“I’m guessing Harry’s behind that as well?”

“The guy wouldn’t say, but no doubt he is.” His voice shifted to a serious tone. “I’m sure you haven’t heard, but he also contacted my father who called to talk to me.”

“You talked to your father?” He shrugged as if it were no big deal, but they both knew it was a huge deal.

“I did. Hard to believe but we had a decent conversation.” He eyed her, cleared his throat. “He had a few things to say



about making good choices and how the wrong choice can destroy you.”

“How did Harry even know where he was?”

The raised brow and laugh said she had underestimated Harry Blacksworth. “Harry knows a lot of people and he’s got an investigator friend who lives here in town. Lester Conroy. Lester’s married to Phyllis at the diner. When Harry sets his mind to something, nobody’s going to stop him.”

“But the other things he’s doing... Like with your mother and the makeover and giving her a chance... He doesn’t have to do that. He’s just a good person.”

Will toyed with his glass, shifted his gaze to hers. “He said he knows what it’s like to be left behind where no one ever expects you to do the right thing. So, when somebody gives you a chance, no matter what, you are not going to disappoint them. I get it.”

Had his voice dipped just now? “Well, I’ll make sure to give him my vote of confidence before I leave.”

A throat clearing, a sip of scotch. “About that... I hear you’re heading out in three days.”

“Would the same source be Harry Blacksworth, or did you come upon your information elsewhere?”

“Harry keeps me posted when there’s something he thinks I should know.”

“I see.” She didn’t know how she felt about that comment. Should she be angry or annoyed, or...

“There really are desserts in the fridge. Pumpkin cheesecake, cannoli, key lime pie.” He paused, added, “And

your favorite wine, because Harry's all about adding the special touches."

"And where exactly do you fit in, Will? Are you one of the special touches?"

"I guess that depends. I know you're leaving, and I know I screwed up, but there are a few things I need to tell you."

"Haven't we been through everything already?" She would not let herself hope again.

"There's never been anyone like you and I can pretend and avoid my feelings, but it doesn't make them any less true. I'm not asking you to give me another chance or even to forgive me, because I'm not sure I deserve it. Someone recently told me that I keep blowing up our relationship because I'm afraid of the control you have over me. It makes me too vulnerable... too fragile. He was right. Everything he said about what I've done and why is dead on."

"Would that person happen to be Cash?"

A nod, a quiet "It was. Of course, he tried to tell me *before* your ex showed up, but why would I listen, right? Everything was going great with us, and I could tell you I was all in and I thought I was... But there was a small piece that just could not do it. When I saw that guy standing there, I shut down. He spotted it and I don't blame him for setting me up to act like a jerk. If I thought someone was going to hurt the woman I loved, I probably would have done worse. And if the bonus was the potential to get another shot with her? Who could refuse that?"

Melanie clenched her hands in her lap, sat very still. This was the most vulnerable and open she'd ever seen him. She glanced at the bottle, noted there was no more than an inch or

two gone, so unless he'd started drinking at home, this was the *real* Will Callahan talking. "Why now, Will? You've had so many opportunities to show me what was really in your heart and even when you told me you had, you weren't 100% in."

"You're right. I thought I was and all those years when you were living a separate life, I insulated myself from caring about anyone because *I knew* I was never going to be over you. Then you showed up and it scared the hell out of me. All those feelings came back, and it was too much. I didn't know what to do with them, so I just avoided them...and then..."

"And then we slept together?"

A shrug, a clearing of his throat. "It wasn't just that. I *wanted* to be with you, and I wanted a life with you, but I didn't know how to do it. When you hide behind rules and assumptions, sometimes you lose your way because it's easier to just put things in a column, add and subtract. But the day I came to see you when your ex was here, and you tried to tell me what was real and what wasn't? I refused to believe you. I would know, wouldn't I? I'd been duped once, and I was *not* going to be duped again so why not burn it all down? But when you walked back into the house and closed the door, that was rough. That's when I understood you weren't coming back and that was on me, because this time *I* was the one who didn't trust or believe."

He dragged a hand over his face, and when his gaze met hers, she didn't miss the brightness in those blue eyes. "I am so sorry for every time and every way I hurt you. I love you, Melanie, and no matter what happens between us, I will always love you." He blew out a ragged breath. "You deserve happiness and I hope you find it. Just don't settle for someone

who can't commit 100% because you're too good for anything less."

Had he really just admitted he'd never stopped loving her? And that no matter what happened between them, he would always love her? Yes, he'd said that, too. Tiny wisps of hope fluttered in Melanie's heart, settled in her soul. "I do deserve 100% commitment from the person I give my heart to...no hiding from feelings or fear. But I'm not sure if you're saying *you* could be that person, or if you just want me to know I'm worth it."

"I...I..." He opened his mouth, closed it. "I have no right to ask for another chance, but if you give me one, I promise I will spend the rest of my life showing you how much I love you... How good we are together." He held her gaze, eased a hand across the table. "From this moment until I take my last breath."

Everything she'd ever hoped for was a touch away. "It won't be easy..."

He inched his hand closer. "Nothing worthwhile ever is."

"We're still going to disagree and argue..." Her gaze landed on his ring finger, pictured a gold band on it.

His voice gentled. "No doubt."

"But if we understand it's going to happen and we vow that no matter what, we won't shut each other out..." She placed her hand on the table, eased it toward Will's.

"Then...?"

Melanie focused on the space separating their hands. "Then we have to decide if we're worth the risk." She glanced up at him, blinked back tears. "I've been living half a life for too long."

A nod, a soft “Me, too.” His lips pulled into a smile. “So...?”

She slid her hand closer, stopped when their fingers were almost touching. “So, you’re worth the risk. I love you, Will, no matter how many times I wished I didn’t.”

The smile faded, the blue gaze narrowed. “That’s not exactly a glowing testimony.”

“Oh, but it is.” She captured his hand and entwined her fingers with his. “It’s an I-will-love-you-forever testimony.”

“Oh.” The smile shifted, the blue eyes sparkled, and his voice dipped with emotion. “I like the ‘I-will-love-you-forever’ part. A lot.”

“You should.” She lifted his hand to her lips, kissed each knuckle. Could her heart be any happier, her soul bursting with more joy than—

“I have a small confession.”

Those words suffocated thoughts of joy and happiness, replaced them with caution and dread. Melanie released his hand, straightened and clutched the edge of the table. “What is it?”

The tiniest hesitation before he spoke. “I bought your grandmother’s house.” Pink splashed his cheeks, crept to his forehead. “I know it was presumptuous, but I couldn’t let go of our plan to live here.” Pause and a quiet “When I spoke with your father about the idea, he was supportive, even encouraging, and that gave me hope that maybe you would be too.”

“You spoke with my father about buying the house for us even though we...?”

The pink covering his cheeks shifted to red. “I was desperate, and I had to try, even if you said no.”

He’d risked his pride and his impenetrable vulnerability for her. Because he *loved* her. Because he wanted a life with her and didn’t care if everyone knew it. *And* he’d spoken with her father. He’d done that for her—because William Joseph Callahan truly loved her. Melanie pushed back her chair, moved to the other side of the table, and eased onto Will’s lap. “I don’t think I’ve ever loved you as much as I do right now.” She brushed her lips over his, once, twice, whispered, “Thank you for not giving up on us.”

“I will never give up on us.”

She trailed kisses along his jaw, sighed. “I’d like to show you how grateful I am, but the Casherdons are expecting me for Thanksgiving dinner, and I promised Cash I’d help with the mashed potatoes.” She pulled back, held his gaze. “I should have been back twenty minutes ago.”

Will fingered the opening of her shirt, raised a brow. “You think Cash had no idea what your surprise is?”

“No, how could he, unless...”

“Unless he and Harry concocted this scheme. I thought it was clever and I was all for it, but I’ll bet they were working together on this one.”

She bet he was right. “Cash is a real softy, but don’t ever tell him I said that.”

“I’m not a fool. After what he and Harry did, I owe them.”

“Maybe you can offer them a lifetime of tax advice?”

He grinned. “For this chance?” Will cupped her chin, eyes bright. “I’d do anything.”

“Then why don’t we get our desserts and head over to Cash and Tess’s? Something tells me they’ll be expecting you.”

“Sure, as long as I can skip the desserts. I’d rather enjoy mine later.” He captured her mouth in a long, slow kiss leaving no doubt *she* was the only dessert he wanted.

“I do love the sound of that,” she murmured against his lips. “Maybe this can be a new tradition for us? Thanksgiving dessert in bed?”

“You do know I meant *you’re* the dessert?”

Melanie pulled away, laughed. “Of course, I know that, but why deprive ourselves of pumpkin pie or pumpkin cheesecake when we can have them in bed? Naked?” Her voice dipped, her smile spread. “Feeding each other?”



HARRY BLACKSWORTH’S name and his good deeds swirled through town, filling people with hope and wonder. Who would have ever thought all those years ago when his brother landed in their town loved by some, despised by others, that one day the younger Blacksworth brother, the one no one had ever depended upon, would become a respected citizen of the community?

Of course, Harry refused to admit to any of it other than to say he *helped someone reason his way out of a predicament*.

Or *they just needed time and a little distance and maybe a possibility or two to find their way*.

But the charity? The time and patience? The caring and love? That was all Harry. He’d become the new Godfather of

Magdalena, a kind soul with a generous spirit, buckets of compassion, and a hearty laugh, all wrapped up in his designer duds.

Will and Melanie would be forever grateful for Harry's "intervention." And while Harry insisted the couple would have eventually come around and found their way back to each other, they weren't so certain how long it would have taken, or *if* that would have really happened.

*If not for Harry.*

How did a person thank the man who'd helped them open their eyes and hearts to each other? Pop said it was all about paying it forward, and that's exactly what they intended to do. They'd already signed up to help kids make ornaments at the Christmas workshop in early December, and Melanie had joined the Bleeding Hearts Society and was organizing the bake sale. Will offered to wrap presents for the Christmas drive and they'd also donated quite a few items on the "wish lists." Paying it forward and giving back... She and Will continued to add to that list...

In two more weeks, Grandma Esther's house would officially belong to them, but they'd already begun making plans to remodel and expand it. Finally, they weren't afraid to hope and dream and say the words that had lived in their hearts for so long—*I love you*. Life was good. Almost perfect. And when they exchanged vows in Harry and Greta's living room three days after Christmas, it would indeed be perfect.

Will clasped her hand as they headed up Harry's driveway. The forecast predicted seven inches of snow tonight. "Careful." He smiled and squeezed her hand, oblivious to the snowflakes landing on his hair and shoulders. Melanie clutched the gift bag in her right hand, made her way up the



steps and rang the doorbell. Some referred to the Blacksworth residence as a mini mansion, but Harry called it home. When he opened the door, ketchup stain on his silk tie, yellow mustard smearing the right cuff of his dress shirt, he laughed, muttered something about *the best hot dogs are the messiest*.

“How is the engaged couple? Good to see you! Come on in.” He welcomed them with a big hug, careful to avoid the areas of his clothing that contained food stains, laughed again. “Just wait until you have a kid or two; you’ll never take yourself seriously again.”

Melanie darted a glance at Will, caught him watching her, his blue eyes bright with emotion. *Children. Their children.* She smiled at him, glanced at Harry, “Thanks for the warning.”

“Best job in the whole world. Best place to be in the whole world is with the kids. And I say that as someone who’s been everywhere.” He took their coats, hung them over his arm and pointed toward the living room. “Come on in while Greta fixes a few goodies.” He winked at them. “I’ll tell you, Will, your mother sure is shining. That pumpkin roll she made is going to give Ramona some serious competition, and speaking of your mother and Ramona? I thought they’d fight like two alley cats, but your mother’s calmed down quite a bit, said she’s excited to work with Ramona. Who would have ever thought she’d say that? But I guess when you find happiness in your life, you settle down.”

Will nodded, his voice shifted. “I can attest to that.”

Harry eyed them, nodded his approval. “I’m sure you can.” He leaned in, whispered in a not-so-quiet voice, “Did you hear your mother went to dinner with the guy who owns Carmelo’s Bakery in Renova? She said they were going to talk about

cinnamon rolls and yeast breads.” His laughter spun through the room. “Sure, I’ll buy that. At least for the first meeting, but after that...” He blew out a sigh, shook his head. “I’ll bet those two will have a lot more in common than their cinnamon rolls and yeast breads.”

Melanie had seen Will’s mother twice since Thanksgiving evening—the night she and Will recommitted to each other. The woman had apologized three times, commented on how happy Melanie had made her son, and she even sent her home with a container of beef vegetable soup and a dozen lemon squares—one of Melanie’s favorites. “Harry, thank you again for letting us have our wedding in your home. We’re truly grateful.”

“Sure, who doesn’t love a happily-ever-after?” He pointed to his chest. “This guy sure does, so does Pop and don’t kid yourself, but Cash does as well. You go ahead and get all squared away with Mimi, figure out the vows and whatnot, and I’ll take care of the food.”

“Harry, that’s not necessary.”

“Listen, Will, Pop had his way of doing things and I have my way. This is my gift to both of you. You just decide what kind of cake you want or if you want those fancy cupcakes, or...whatever, because...” He lowered his voice and this time it was whisper-soft. “Your mother wants to do the baking for that.”

Who would have thought that a few months after Melanie returned to Magdalena, Marjorie Callahan would be making her wedding cake? “Thank you so much, Harry.” Melanie hugged him, not caring if she got ketchup *or* mustard on her sweater.

“Of course. Now, what’s in the bag?” His gaze narrowed on the red-and-white-striped gift bag. “Something for my wife?”

“Actually, it’s for you.” She offered him the gift bag, watched as he unwrapped the gift from the tissue paper. “What the...” He held up the wooden ornament engraved with *Harry Blacksworth, Godfather of Magdalena*. He sniffed, cleared his throat and swiped his eyes. “Godfather of Magdalena,” he murmured. “This is one of the finest gifts I’ve ever received.”

Will eased an arm around Melanie, pulled her close. “And you, Harry Blacksworth, have given us the best gift ever.” Will turned to Melanie, placed a soft kiss on her mouth. “Thank you for never giving up on me. I love you.”

She stroked his cheek, whispered, “I love you, William Callahan. Today and always.” One more kiss and then a loud voice broke through the kiss.

“You’ve got all night for that. Let’s go find Greta and see about that food. She’s going to want to hear about the wedding, the house you’re renovating, and how many kids you plan to have... Okay, she’ll never ask that last question, but I will!” He winked at them. “And the dog? What kind and when? That, I definitely want to know.”

As they followed Harry toward the kitchen, Melanie realized that life was about a series of choices and a journey that led a person down some very difficult paths... But for her and Will, no matter how far apart they’d grown or how many miles had separated them...they were always meant to come back to each other...to share a life of hope, love, and joy.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Campisi is the bestselling author of 50 emotion-packed, romantic women's fiction novels that center around hope, redemption, and second chances. Set in small towns, these books take readers through the lives of the characters as they encounter, misfortune, disappointment, and challenges to find hope, friendship and, in some cases, love. Growing up in a small town gives Mary a real sense of how people pull together to help others find their true destiny. Her stories will make you laugh *and* cry, but in the end, you'll feel like you want to live in these towns, meet the residents for coffee or share a meal.

Mary's Truth in Lies series, also known as the *A Family Affair* books, takes place in the Catskill Mountains and centers around the discovery of a man's secret family that prompts the question, *Which family is the real one?* The continued success of this series is driven by readers wanting more and she's created an equally compelling one with the Reunion Gap series.

Mary should have known she'd become a writer when at age thirteen she began changing the ending to all of the books she read. It took several years and a number of jobs, including registered nurse, receptionist in a swanky hair salon, accounts payable clerk, and practice manager in an OB/GYN office, for her to rediscover writing. Enter a mouse-less computer, a floppy disk, and a dream large enough to fill a zip drive. The rest of the story lives on in every book she writes.

When she's not working on her craft or following the lives of five adult children, Mary's digging in the dirt with her flowers and herbs, cooking, reading, walking her rescue lab, Henry, or, on the perfect day, riding off into the sunset with her very own hero/husband on his Ultra Limited aka Harley.

*Don't want to miss out on what's happening with my books? Sign up for my newsletter at <http://www.marycampisi.com> to stay informed.*



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Titles marked with \* are available on [marycampisi.com](http://marycampisi.com).

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