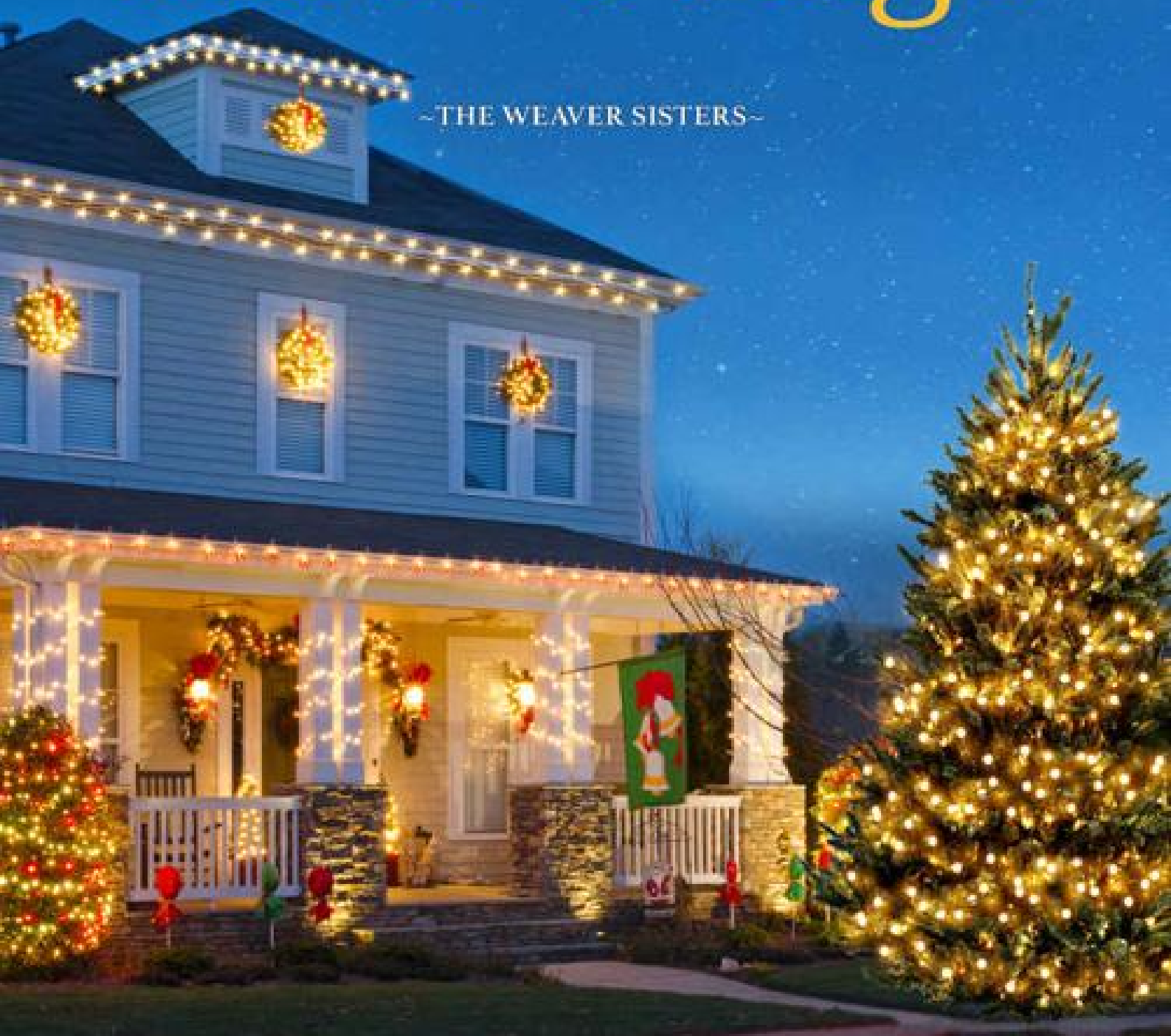


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NAN REINHARDT

*Christmas
in
River's Edge*

~THE WEAVER SISTERS~



Christmas in River's Edge

A Weaver Sisters Romance

Nan Reinhardt



Christmas in River's Edge

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Kindle Edition

The Tule Publishing, Inc.

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First Publication by Tule Publishing 2023

Cover design by Lee Hyat Designs

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ISBN: 978-1-961544-16-1

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Dedication

For my sisters, with whom I share not just an unbreakable bond, but a history. To Pam, you are my champion, my friend, my reminder of all that is good in the world, and to Kathi, in heaven, I know you're always looking out for me, cheering me on, and blessing me every day. To quote Jo March, "I could never love anyone as I love my sisters."

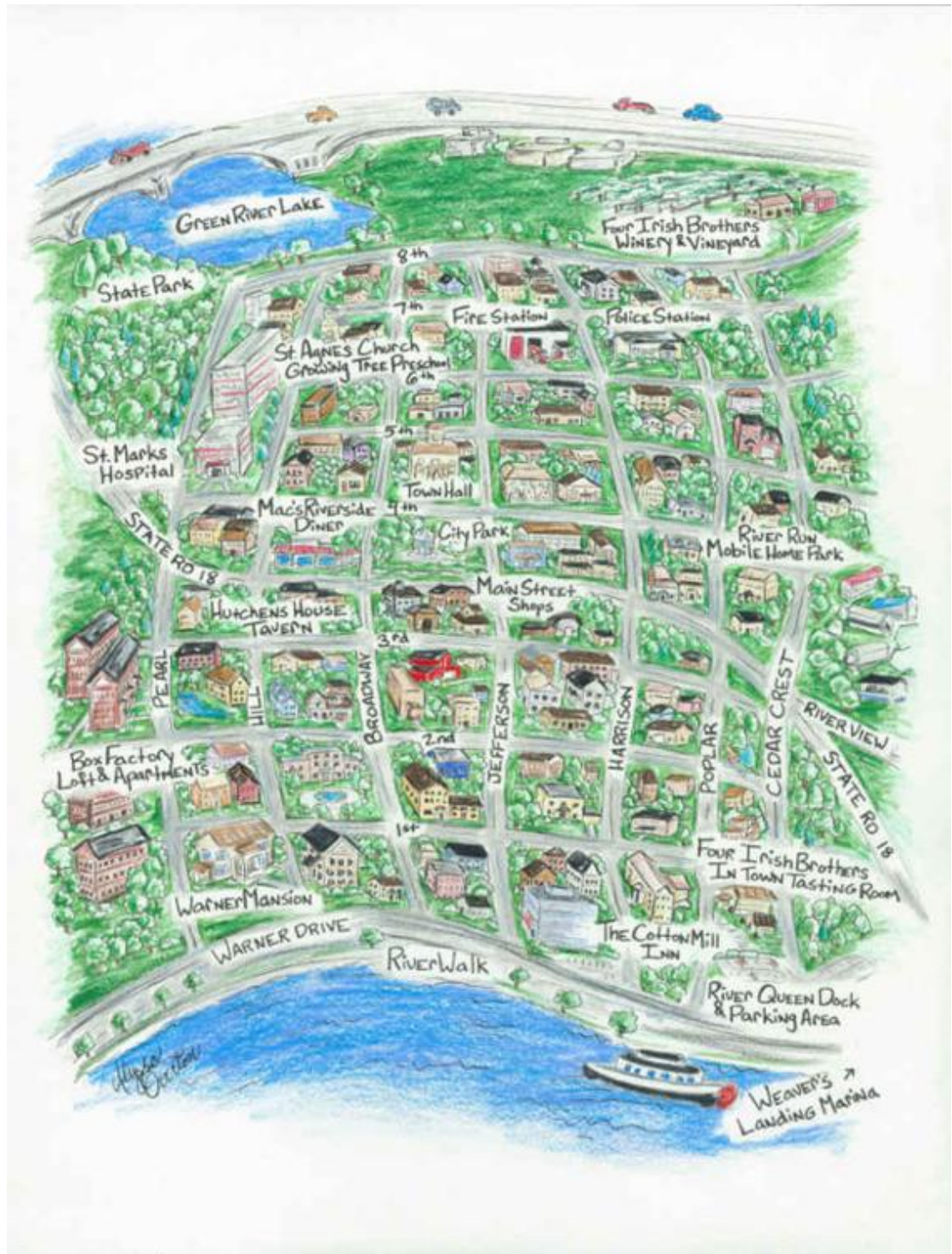


Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

River's Edge Map

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

[The Weaver Sisters series](#)

[More books by Nan Reinhardt](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

“I CAN’T BELIEVE this is our last Monday night supper together until Christmas.” Blinking back the tears that stung her eyes, Jennifer Weaver gazed at her two sisters. “Jo, I hate that you’re leaving right before Halloween Hoopla. It’s always so much fun to dress alike and confuse everyone.”

The Weaver sisters—Jasmine, Joanna, and Jennifer—were identical triplets, although they rarely dressed alike. Most of the folks in River’s Edge, Indiana, could tell them apart, but Halloween was the one time of the year they loved to try to fool their friends.

Jo’s contented smile warmed Jen’s heart, despite how much she wished her sister wasn’t moving to Durham, North Carolina, with her scientist boyfriend, Alex Briggs. “You and Jazz are going to have to do the disguise honors this year. Alex needs to get the boat to dry dock before it gets too cold, so our first stop is Pittsburgh to drop it off, and after that, we’re off to Duke. But I’ll expect pictures, so take plenty, okay?”

“You’re sure, *really* sure, this move is what you want?” Jazz’s golden-brown eyes sparkled with unshed tears too. This was farewell for a while, and even though the Weaver triplets had done plenty of good-byes, it never got easier.

Jo rose from her seat on the top step of Jen’s porch and gave each of her sisters a hearty hug before nabbing a slice of summer sausage and plopping back down. “I’ve never been surer of anything in my whole life,” she declared with a smile, then sobered. “I feel bad about leaving Dad in the lurch, but Xavier is home from the Navy, which thrills me no end because he’s back in the shop, using all that great mechanical knowledge he learned aboard ship. He can winterize an engine in no time flat.”

Jen smiled. “God, that kid grew up mighty fine those four years away. He took his shirt off the other day and I almost fainted. He looks so much like that guy from the *Bridgerton* series—Regé something. Remember him from the first season of that show?”

“He *is* a good-looking guy,” Jo agreed, as Jazz nodded, her eyes wide.

Jazz grinned. “There you go, Jenny. A new hot guy in town. Go for it.”

Jen chuckled. “Interesting idea, if I weren’t old enough to be his mother.”

“Older sister, maybe.” Jo giggled and took a sip of wine. “Could be he’s into cougars.”

The conversation had taken a ridiculous turn, which was fine with Jenny; it took her mind off Jo’s imminent departure, and the fact that she’d be down a confidant and Weaver’s Landing Marina would be minus one boat mechanic. Jo had been working hard all fall, winterizing and storing boats at the family business, trying to get as many done as possible before she left, but there would be a big hole in the works and in the family when she was gone. They would all miss her terribly. It was hard to feel bad, though, when they saw how Jo glowed simply at the mention of Alex Briggs. She was happy, and in Jenny’s opinion, no one deserved that happiness more than her six-minutes-older sister.

Jazz refilled all three wineglasses—the Four Irish Brothers pinot noir was going down pretty easily with the charcuterie board of fruit, meats, cheeses, olives, and the warm crusty bread. They’d nearly demolished it all in the time they’d been sitting on Jen’s porch, enjoying the crisp early October evening. “Jo and I are both in love, Jen, so now it’s your turn.”

Jen shrugged. “Oh, I’m pretty content here with Luke. He’s all I need.” The thought of her young son brought a smile to her lips. He was currently up at the marina, helping his grandfather and great-grandfather detail boats, but should be

home any minute since he needed to get showered and into bed. Tomorrow was a school day.

“Luke’s terrific, but he’s an eight-year-old kid,” Jazz scoffed. “You need a *man*, Jen.”

Jo’s dark-brown eyes lit up. “Alex’s brother, Four, is single, and he’s a really nice guy.”

Jazz giggled. “Even though I know that the guy’s name is actually Byron Briggs the Fourth, it still sounds weird to hear you guys call him *Four*. He is pretty hot, though.”

Jen narrowed her eyes. “I’m sure he is, but he lives in Pittsburgh. Not really into the whole long-distance thing.”

Jo quirked a brow. “Is that not working well for you and the good Dr. Dawson?”

A shiver traveled down Jenny’s spine at the thought of Gabriel Dawson, their geeky classmate who’d come back during the summer for their fifteenth high school reunion and blown every woman there away with how much he’d changed. His bristly crewcut had grown out to lush, longish dark hair that made her long to run her fingers through it, and his deep-brown eyes, no longer hidden behind thick-lensed glasses, gave him a bit of a mysterious and brooding Heathcliff air.

Gabe and Jen had hit it off over reunion weekend and had exchanged a few emails and texts since he’d returned to Williamsburg, Virginia, where he was an adjunct professor of Archaeology and Colonial History at William and Mary University. But that weekend had been rushed and as the seasons had transitioned, classes kept him occupied, while summer, with fall a close second, was the busiest time at Weaver’s Landing Marina, where Jenny worked as bookkeeper/webmaster. “Gabe and I aren’t a *thing*. Again, long distance. It was fun to get to know him again at the reunion, though. We realized that the last time he and I had spoken to each other was finals week senior year when he drilled me on history facts to get me through Mr. Cooper’s American history class.” She shook her head, remembering

teenaged and very nerdy Gabe sitting on the counter in the marina store, repeating dates and places while she restocked the spinner bait display.

“Too bad there was no chemistry back in the day,” Jazz observed wryly. “You could’ve avoided years of misery with Tuff.”

Jen only half smiled. Her life with her high school sweetheart and now ex-husband, Ryan “Tuff” Tuffington, hadn’t been *all* bad. At first, it had been kind of wonderful. Until it wasn’t anymore. She made a little dismissive sound. “Yeah, but then I wouldn’t have Lucas, and I’d be living far away from here.” Turning to Jo, she gave her sister wide eyes and teased, “Like you’re getting ready to do!”

The kid in question came through the front gate before Jo could respond, dragging his heels and looking beat down to his socks. Jenny’s heart turned mushy at Luke’s disheveled appearance, his chestnut hair awry, his sweatshirt damp and grubby. He was earning video game money helping out at the marina, and knowing her grandfather, Roy Weaver, she was certain he’d worked hard for it. “Hey, dude. Looks like you could use a shower and some food.”

“I’m wiped.” Luke dropped down on the step next to Jo. “Grandpa Mark isn’t so tough, but Grandpa-Great sure is.”

Jen chuckled. “Yeah, I remember. Grandpa Roy can be a real fierce boss.”

Jo ruffled Luke’s hair. “Detailing boats is hard work, kiddo. What did he have you on?”

Luke leaned his head against the porch post. “The shop vac.” He closed his eyes briefly. “Man, if I missed a tiny piece of anything, he made me go back and redo the whole carpet. Nine boats, Mom. *Nine*. My shoulders hurt.”

Jenny rose. “Shower first or food? We have some stuff left.” She tilted her head toward the charcuterie board on the low table in front of the settee.

Luke brightened up, but only slightly. “Any of that sausage left?”

Jazz held up the tray. “A few slices. Come get something to eat.”

Jen patted his back as he slipped past her to plop on the sofa next to his auntie Jazz and started picking at what was left on the board.

With an affectionate smile, Jenny sat back down, reached into the small cooler beside her, and handed her son a frosty bottle of water. “Here, babe, drink up. Then you can get a shower and fall into bed. Do you have any homework?”

His mouth full of sausage and cheese, he simply shook his head, and Jenny watched in amazement as her son finished off everything left on the tray, except the pickles, which he hated.

Lucas was built exactly like his father—tall for his age and sturdy, already showing signs of the burly man he would one day become. Jen felt a moment of regret that Tuff was missing out on so much of his son’s life, but she’d had no choice. She simply could no longer be near Tuff in Florida. He’d made Lucas’s and her lives miserable with his cruel rebukes, followed by weepy, drunken apologies, making promises and then never showing up to get Luke when it was his time to have his son. He’d made only half-hearted objections when she’d floated the idea of returning to River’s Edge to be near her family. Both she and Luke were so much happier here.

And now her family was changing again. Jenny gazed over at her son’s tousled head before turning her eyes on her sister, Jo, whose countenance reflected exactly how blissful she was to be going off to Durham, North Carolina, with her love. Even through the tinge of envy that Jen couldn’t deny, she was truly happy for Jo and for her other sister, Jazz, whose life had turned upside down for the better when she returned to River’s Edge on New Year’s Eve and renewed her relationship with her high school sweetheart, Eli Walker. Everyone was in love. Everyone but her.



PROFESSOR GABRIEL DAWSON fidgeted in the St. Mark's Emergency Room waiting area, anxious to get back to wherever his mom had been taken a half hour earlier. He rose and paced the length of the room, peering into the windows on the double swinging doors to the treatment rooms, wondering what would happen if he just stormed the place and demanded to see her.

“Gabe!” His sister, Christine, hurried toward him, her light-brown hair flying around her head like a halo. Clearly, she'd come straight from her job at Posey Pushers flower shop. A dark-green apron embroidered with the shop name covered her long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans, a bright orange flower drooped out of the apron's deep front pouch, and a piece of some kind of fern dangled in her hair above her ear. “What happened? What are you doing here? How did *you* get contacted before *me*?” She threw her arms around him, even as she peppered him with questions.

Gabe tugged her into his arms, relishing the warm hug from his sister. Round as a wren and only reaching his shoulder, she was one of his very favorite people. Just being in Chris's presence always had a magical calming effect. He held on a bit longer than he might have ordinarily, and when she pulled away, her green eyes were full of concern and more than a little fear. No doubt she wasn't used to her brother seeming in the least needy.

He plucked the fern from her hair, handed it to her, and led her over to a row of vinyl chairs by the window, where the afternoon sun shone through onto the immaculate tile floor. “I got to the house just as the ambulance arrived,” he explained. “I'm here to check out a dig down the river a ways—some workman found what they think might be a Shawnee settlement or encampment in the cliffs while they were digging foundations for the new condos that are going in about a few miles east of town. What makes it interesting is they're

finding both indigenous and Colonial artifacts all over the place up there and—”

Chris squeezed his arm—hard. “Gabe? Mom?”

Gabe’s heart fell. *Dammit*. He hadn’t meant to lose track, but the discovery in the cliffs above the Ohio River was the most exciting archaeological find he’d heard about in several years, and he already knew Mom was hurt, but okay—Chris didn’t. He shook his head and came back to the here-and-now. “Right. She’s been back there for about thirty minutes. She was cleaning the gutters on the back of the house, which I told her last night I would take care of when I got here today.”

Chris cringed. “*I* told her Jeremy and I would do it this weekend. So she fell off the ladder?”

“Yeah, and landed half on the deck and half in the roses she’d just trimmed back. Fortunately, she turned instead of landing flat on her back, but her leg is definitely broken and possibly also her arm.”

“Oh, God.” Chris sighed. “Gabe. What are we going to do with her? She’s only fifty-four, but she still doesn’t belong up on a twelve-foot ladder, scraping crap out of her gutters. Daddy always did that and—”

“And she’s determined to do everything the way Dad would have done it. Even if it means she breaks her neck in the process,” Gabe finished with a sigh.

“She’s going to have to move in with me while she heals,” Chris declared, already strategizing, which was her way. As the older of the two and the one who’d stayed in River’s Edge, she’d always been mature for her age. She chewed her lower lip. “Maybe we can move a bed into the dining room, although, dammit, I don’t have a shower on the first floor. We’ll simply have to—”

He touched her arm. “Sis, slow down. If she’s broken both her arm *and* her leg, I imagine they’ll put her into rehab for a while. Wait until we know what’s going on. Besides, Mom *is* the one who decides what she wants to do.” He grinned. “She

is a grown-up. We'll figure it out . . . all three of us . . . together.”

Dr. Lauren Mitchell-Lange shoved through the double doors just then, her face unreadable. “Chris!” She came over to where they sat and tugged Chris up into a hug. Gabe rose too. He didn't know Lauren well, although he'd graduated from River's Edge High with her brother-in-law, Ryker Lange, and knew her husband, Rye's younger brother, Max, slightly. He'd met her briefly when he was home for his fifteen-year high school reunion in June, and she seemed pleasant, although distracted and tired from doing her ER residency.

She released Chris and gave Gabe a nod and a smile. “Okay, here's what we know for sure. Claire has fractured her tibia and possibly crushed her shoulder. She's headed down to radiology so we can get some pictures of what we're dealing with. The tibia isn't a compound fracture. There's no bone sticking through the skin, but we think it may be comminuted and”—she paused when Chris held up one hand for her to slow down—“broken in at least three places,” she clarified.

Gabe's heart dropped to his socks. “Oh, God. She must be in agony.”

“We've given her a touch of pain med so she can get through the X-ray halfway comfortably,” Lauren assured him. “No signs of concussion—she's awake and clear. She assured us she didn't hit her head and she didn't land on her back, which could've been disastrous.” She gave them an encouraging smile. “All in all, she's been pretty lucky, given what could have happened in a fall from a twelve-foot extension ladder.”

Chris gripped Gabe's bicep so hard, he winced, but he simply slipped his arm away, put it around her, and pulled her close to him. She had to be at least as panicked as he was, but they both needed to hold it together. “So, are we looking at surgery?” he asked.

Lauren nodded. “Most likely for the shoulder and possibly for the leg. We'll know more when we see the X-rays. We've

got Sam Carlyle, our ortho surgeon, on standby.” She extended an arm. “Why don’t you guys come back and see her real quick? Then give me your cell numbers and go get some coffee or a late lunch. It’s going to be a while.”

“Will you do surgery right away?” Chris’s eyes shimmered with tears.

“Depends on what we see in the pictures,” Lauren hedged, and Gabe didn’t blame her. They really didn’t have enough information yet. She tipped her blonde head toward the swinging doors. “Come with me.”



GABE PULLED HIS Land Rover up to the curb on Primrose Lane, slightly down from Jenny Tuffington’s cottage, and peered through the darkness. She was home. There were lights on in the house, which, of course, there would be. It wasn’t that late—only about eight thirty. It *seemed* late, though, because he’d been at the hospital for hours. This was probably a terrible idea, but he wanted to see Jenny—*needed* to see her—although he had no idea why. It was instinct, almost as if the Rover had turned up Primrose Lane of its own volition with an exhausted Gabe at the wheel.

A deep breath later, he was out of the car and headed up the sidewalk, leaves crunching under his feet when he opened the wrought iron gate at Jenny’s front yard. The porch light was on, and as he came up the steps, he noticed an empty wine bottle on the settee table, along with three glasses. The cushions on the chairs and settee were crushed and creased, as though folks had been lounging in them. She must have had company earlier—three glasses. Perhaps her sisters. Maybe he should’ve called or texted first.

Well, he was here now, and there was no point in lurking on the shadowed porch. He pressed the doorbell just as the sound of another car spun him around. A sleek, low-slung Corvette came to a stop right in front of the gate, bass thumping from its interior. The person inside—it was

definitely a man's silhouette—sat for a moment, shaking his head to the beat of the blaring music before turning the car off.

Gabe watched with interest as the guy opened the car and hopped out, hip-checked the door shut, and then vaulted over the low gate . . . sort of. Unfortunately, he'd misjudged the height and caught the back of his denim jacket on one of the spikes across the top. "Dammit!" He turned, trying futilely to release the fabric, but he was in an awkward position. With another muttered oath, he slipped his arms out of the sleeves and, as he yanked the jacket free, Gabe heard the sound of ripping denim. That jacket was probably a goner.

As the man drew nearer, he looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place him—short brown hair, brawny shoulders, a baseball cap, and a belly that hung ever-so-slightly over his belt. Shrugging into his torn jacket, the guy clearly didn't even realize Gabe was on the porch until he was halfway up the steps. He stopped dead and scowled. "Who the hell are you?"

Gabe squared his shoulders. "I might ask you the same question."

The man lifted his chin and stepped onto the porch, his sneakers squeaking on the shiny wood floor. "This *is* Jennifer Tuffington's house, right?"

"Who wants to know?"

The guy glared at him. "I'm her husband. Who are you?"

Ah-ha, that's why he looks familiar. It was Ryan "Tuff" Tuffington, the uber-popular football hero in high school, who wouldn't have so much as glanced in nerdy Gabe Dawson's direction back then.

"*Ex-husband?*" Gabe reminded him with a dubious gaze. "I thought Jenny was divorced."

Tuff merely looked down his nose at Gabe, an expression he'd no doubt mastered in high school and perfected in the ensuing years. "Look, dude, I don't know who the hell—"

Suddenly, the front door swung open and there was Jenny, dressed in jeans and a WEAVER'S LANDING MARINA sweatshirt, her long hair swept up into a messy bun, and her brandy-colored eyes flashing. "What the hell's going on out here?"

Chapter Two

AFTER A LONG moment of shocked silence, during which the two rather rumped men on her porch glared at each other like a couple of junkyard dogs, Gabe finally spoke.

“Hi, Jenny. I hope it’s not too late to stop by.” His expression, although the tiniest bit sheepish, was warm enough for Jen to face her other unexpected arrival.

“Not at all, Gabe. It’s good to see you.” She gave him her best smile before turning to, of all people . . . “Tuff, what are you doing here?” The irritation was plain in her tone.

Tuff eyed Gabe suspiciously. “I’m here to see you—and my son.”

Jen held open the storm door, uncertain what to do. In the almost two years she’d been back in River’s Edge, her ex-husband had never once darkened her door. Despite a pretty clearly spelled-out arrangement, which stated that she had full custody of their son and Tuff had visitation rights, he’d actually only seen his son twice since she’d moved—both times it had been she who’d flown down to Florida to bring Lucas to his father. She’d stayed in a hotel, spending time with a couple of old friends who hadn’t abandoned her after her divorce, or else she lounged by the hotel pool, reading, while Ryan played father of the year and took Luke to Disney World and other Central Florida attractions.

Gabe, bless his heart, rescued her. “I can see you have a situation here. Why don’t I call you tomorrow?”

Disappointment filled her because, truthfully, he wasn’t the man she wanted to send away. “Wait a second, Gabe.” She jerked her head at Tuff. “Luke’s in the shower. Go on in and sit down. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Tuff gave Gabe what could only be described as a triumphant grin as he swaggered past Jen and into the house

with a “Later, loser,” to Gabe, who merely backed up slightly into the shadows.

Jenny pulled the heavy oak door closed as she stepped out onto the porch and offered Gabe a tired smile. “So sorry about that.”

He came closer, out of the shadow, and the porch light gleamed on his longish black hair that was slightly tousled, as if he’d been running his fingers through it. God, how had she forgotten how gorgeous he was with his dark-brown eyes and just exactly the right amount of scruff to be sexy? His beltless jeans rode low on his slim waist and his plaid flannel shirt, trendily French-tucked in front, looked so soft, she had to ball her hands into fists to keep from reaching out to stroke it.

“Not your fault,” he said. “You weren’t expecting me. Or *him*, I suspect.”

She shook her head. “No, I have no idea why he’s here.” She smiled up at him. “Or you, either, for that matter, although I’m very glad to see *you*.”

He grinned and his dimples—how had she missed those in high school?—creased his cheeks. “I took a shot. I’m actually here to check out a find up near Rising Sun, but I stopped at Mom’s house, and an ambulance had just shown up.”

Alarmed, she touched his arm. “Oh, God, what happened? Is your mom okay?”

He shrugged. “Well, she fell from a ladder—she was cleaning gutters and reached too far, apparently. Landed on the deck and the rosebushes. Broke her shoulder and her tibia. They rushed her into surgery and repaired the damage, and now she’s full of plates and screws. It’s going to be a long recovery, I think.”

“Oh gosh. I’m so sorry to hear that. How awful.” Jen couldn’t imagine the pain Claire Dawson was in. “Can I do anything?”

“She’s in a room and knocked out with pain meds right now. They sent Chris and me home. Told us to come back

tomorrow morning after nine.” His expression turned shy. “I don’t know why I’m here. I—I just wanted to see you.”

Instinct took over and Jen reached for him, drawing his lean frame to her in a hug that wasn’t intended to be anything more than comfort for a friend. But when he put his arms around her, her insides turned all melty, and she gave in to the urge to stroke the soft flannel of his shirt. Suddenly, she realized he was shivering, whether from the cool air or shock, she wasn’t sure. Rubbing her hands up and down his muscular back, she made a decision right then and there and tipped her head back to stare into his eyes. “Come on in. Are you hungry? I’ve got some vegetable soup I can heat up for you. Or at least a cup of coffee?”

He quirked one dark brow and tilted his head in the direction of the door. “Um, what about . . .?”

Jen narrowed her eyes. “He’s going to go upstairs, visit with his kid for a few minutes, and then he’s out of here.” She released him, despite how delicious it felt to be in his arms, and took his hand.

Gabe held back. “I should go. I don’t want to cause you any problems. Clearly, you weren’t expecting him, so something must be up.”

He was right, although that didn’t make letting him leave any more appealing. She sighed, and held onto his hand, which was sort of rough for a guy who spent his days in a classroom. Maybe it was from the archaeological dig he’d spent his summer working on in Virginia. Scraping around in the dirt, looking for artifacts, was no doubt hard on one’s hands. “You’re probably right. I didn’t even think. What *is* he doing *here* on a Tuesday night in the middle of football season?”

He squeezed her hand. “That would be the question of the hour.”

She glanced at the door, too aware of her ex-husband on the other side of it. “I should get in there. Be there when Luke comes down from his shower.”

Gabe pulled her closer to him and looked down at their clasped hands. “I’m going to be here for a while, I think. At least until we know what’s going to happen with Mom.” He pulled her even closer and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “Go on in and deal with”—he gave her a wry smile—“*him*. Text me later if you like.”

Jen closed her eyes as his lips touched her hairline, aching to simply grab him, drag him into her bed, and ravish him. It had been too long since she’d been this physically close to a handsome man, and the good professor was setting off all kinds of zings and pinwheels in her veins. The look of disappointment in his eyes told her chances were good he wouldn’t resist.

Suddenly, he peered down into her face. “You’ll be okay, right? I mean, he isn’t . . . he wouldn’t . . .” Color rose in his cheeks. “I’m sorry. You and he . . . not really any of my business. But . . . you’re *safe*, right?”

Jen smiled and ran her hand over his stubbled cheek and down the soft flannel covering his bicep, enjoying the firm muscles there. He worked out—either that or archaeology was more work than she knew. How did that scrawny, shy, bespectacled kid from high school turn into this warm, hunky man? How had she missed that this was who was lurking beneath that nerdy façade all those years ago? “Yes,” she reassured him. “I’m fine.”

He looked like he wanted to say more; instead, he merely touched her cheek and released her hand. “I’m a text away. I can be here in less than ten minutes.”

She reached up and kissed his cheek, wishing he’d just turn his head so that . . . But he didn’t. He smiled and headed down the steps and out the front gate, stopping to give her a wave before strolling to his car.

Jen crossed her arms over her breasts and shuddered at the thought of what was waiting for her inside. *One step at a time*, as Grandpa Roy would say. First, she needed to find out why Tuff had shown up on her doorstep. A feeling of dread washed

over her. Whatever had brought head coach Ryan Tuffington from Central Florida all the way to River's Edge in the middle of Eastman University's football season couldn't possibly be good.



THE HOUSE WAS dark as Gabe let himself in the front door with the key that had been on his key ring since he'd started latch-keying after school twenty-five years ago. He flipped on the foyer light and inhaled the scent of lemon furniture polish, books, coffee, and . . . something else. He followed his nose to the kitchen, where a sad-looking, crusty . . . *What the hell is this?*

The mess in the baking dish sitting on the drainboard looked like it might once have been a tuna casserole—potato chips, peas, noodles, nasty white sauce. He poked it with the fork that lay next to the dish. Ah yes, and tuna. The one-and-only dish Mom could make without totally destroying a kitchen. He glanced in the trash can under the sink—yup, empty tuna can, half a can of peas, and an empty mushroom soup can. She must have pulled it from the fridge to warm it up for lunch after the gutters were done.

The kitchen wasn't a total disaster, but there was a pile of dishes in the sink and the oven was still on. He tapped the control panel—yup, she was going to reheat the casserole. From the look of it, the fall from the ladder may well have saved her from food poisoning. *Ugh.* He scraped the dish, dumping the remains of the casserole down the garbage disposal, and then filled the pan with warm water.

Glancing around the kitchen, he wondered what was around to snack on. Mom might not be able to cook to save her soul, but she could bake like a champ. Plus, she always had great snack food around—cookies, chips, candy, cereal, even fruit and juice and always, always coffee. Her dual coffeemaker was an expensive machine that served either a pot or a single cup of coffee, and the basket sitting next to it had a variety of pods from French roast to Kona blend to decaf.

Mom knew coffee and made the best oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies in town.

He opened the freezer drawer at the bottom of her new fridge, which was also the latest model. Sure enough, several storage containers of cookies were stacked next to a variety of microwave meals. He opened the top one—peanut butter blossoms. *Oh, Mama, I'm home!* He grabbed a plate from the cupboard and put half a dozen frozen cookies on it. He'd zap them and make a cup of coffee—the perfect supper.

The microwave wasn't as grubby as usual; a quick swipe with a damp sponge, and it was ready for his cookies. He glanced around after he'd chosen a half-caff pod and started his coffee. The house was actually pretty tidy. The fridge was practically empty except for condiments and a few takeout containers that he was hesitant to explore. He pulled out a carton of half-and-half, opened it cautiously, and sniffed. It smelled fine. He checked the date. It was good until December. He examined the milk and the eggs—both had been purchased fairly recently.

As he doctored his coffee, he texted Chris. *“Back at Mom's. Place looks pretty decent.”*

Her answer came as he was doctoring his coffee with a teaspoon of sugar and a splash of cream. *“I gave her a gift certificate for McNair's House Cleaners for her b'day. She had them in on Friday, I think.”*

“Great idea. See you at the hospital in the a.m. Try to get some sleep.”

“You, too. May be late. Gotta get the kids on the bus. Jer's got an early truck coming in” was followed by a kissy face emoji. Chris's two children, Clara, eight, and Ben, six, along with her husband, Jeremy Kavanagh, who was the produce manager at the Kroger up on the hill, were the lights of her life. His niece and nephew were bright, sweet kids and reminded Gabe of Chris and himself when they were younger.

He sent back a heart emoji, even though he objected to emojis on principle—what was wrong with using actual words? Grabbing his plate of cookies, a paper towel, and his coffee, he debated clearing the books and papers off the breakfast nook table. Instead, he carried his makeshift meal past the dining room—that table was actually pretty clear except for a stack of mail—and headed to the den/library, which was his favorite room in his mom’s house.

The cozy room had been his dad’s study, and Mom had kept the heavy, brown leather club chairs and ottoman, and the big antique walnut desk. The walls lined with filled-to-overflowing bookshelves looked exactly as they always had. His father, a history professor at Warner College, had died of a sudden heart attack three years ago, and Gabe missed him every single day. He swallowed the lump in his throat with a sip of coffee, set his snack on the lamp table between the two club chairs, and swept a swath of newspapers off the seat onto the oriental rug.

As he settled into the worn leather chair, he could tell Mom had finally moved in, making pieces of the room her own, which warmed Gabe’s heart. For too long, she’d kept the room exactly as his father, Professor David Dawson, had left it, right down to a heavy-bottom glass with a trace of bourbon in it sitting on the desk blotter and the bottle of Evan Williams single-barrel Kentucky bourbon on a silver tray on the credenza behind the desk. The bottle and tray were still there, but the glass had finally been washed and placed on the tray with the others.

Recently, though, the blotter had been replaced, as had the Warner College mug that had always held an assortment of pens and pencils. In its place was a pottery vase with a bouquet of dried hydrangeas from the garden out back. His mom’s old, familiar flowered journal, a stack of library magazines, assorted papers, and her laptop took up space on the desktop.

Gabe nibbled on a warm cookie, letting the sensation of softened chocolate and peanut butter fill his senses and bring

memories of days spent in this room as a child. He'd learned his love of American history here, where his dad prepared his lessons on the antebellum South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. The shelves contained volumes on every possible era in American history, and Gabe had found his own passion in the books on Colonial America, the Founding Fathers, and the birth of a nation.

He rose and wandered slowly around the room, pulling out a book now and then, and tucking it back in place. At the credenza, he stopped and opened the bottle of Evan Williams, sniffing the familiar aroma of vanilla and caramel and oak. Turning up a short glass, he poured a finger's worth and tasted it. *Nope. Sorry, Dad.* Even though the liquor warmed him all the way down to his stomach, he just wasn't ever going to be a bourbon drinker, except maybe in eggnog at the holidays. Fortunately, it wasn't a requirement for a professor to enjoy Kentucky whiskey, although as a kid, Gabe had wanted nothing more than to emulate his father in everything.

Settling back into the chair and nabbing another cookie off the plate to clear away the taste of the whiskey, Gabe's thoughts turned to Jenny Weaver . . . Tuffington. He'd never get used to thinking of her as any name except Jenny Weaver. He'd had a mad crush on her in high school, but it had taken him too long to work up the courage to even speak to her, much less ask her out on a date. As a cheerleader, she'd always dated football and basketball stars, finally ending up going with Ryan Tuffington through most of junior and senior years.

What she saw in him, Gabe had never figured out. To him, Tuff was nothing more than a big gorilla who liked cute girls, sneaking beer, and playing football, in random order. He was at least twice Jenny's size and she always seemed so small and fragile next to Tuff's brawny frame. Gabe sipped his coffee, enjoying that warmth much more than the whiskey's, and laid his head back and closed his eyes.

She had always been friendly and kind, even turning to him for help when she was practically failing history class

senior year. He still recalled sitting on the counter in the marina shop going over and over dates and facts with her to get her ready for the final. God, that had been heaven. She'd been a decent student, although her first love was unquestionably working in her family's marina. He did remember she was an avid reader. She always had a stack of books if he ran into her at the library, and she loved to doodle. The margins of her history notebook were covered with delicate drawings of flowers, birds, rabbits, squirrels, and other woodland creatures.

Jenny's image, her big golden-brown eyes, long dark-brown hair, and sweet smile appeared in his thoughts, something that had happened a lot since their high school reunion weekend in June. He'd longed to kiss her—really kiss her—the night of the dance when he'd brought her home after they'd rescued Alex Briggs's yacht out on the river, but he'd chickened out, and that last time he'd seen her, the evening had ended just like tonight, with a peck on the cheek.

He was going to be home at least until the docs decided what would be best for Mom's recovery. Maybe he could take some leave, stay with Mom, and help her out. He could teach his classes online, at least through Thanksgiving, and do office hours through Zoom or GChat. He grabbed his phone and started thumbing thoughts into the Notes app. Hanging around would also allow him time to really check out the find at Rising Sun. And, he smiled, perhaps even spend some time with Jenny.

Chapter Three

JENNY STAYED ON the porch until Gabe's taillights disappeared as he turned the corner, her heart in her socks at the thought of what—who—awaited her inside. A deep breath later, she squared her shoulders and peered into the small beveled window before opening the front door.

Luke was sitting on the low trunk that served as a coffee table, talking and gesturing eagerly in front of his father, who sat forward on the sofa, all his attention on his son. When she pushed the door closed behind her and walked into the living room, Luke turned, grinning, his blue eyes—Tuff's eyes—shining. "Mom! Dad's here!"

"I know, sweetie." She raised a brow at Tuff. "You want some coffee?"

Tuff pulled Luke over onto his lap, where the boy settled with a smile. "You got any beer?"

"Nope." Jen resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. "Coffee, soft drink, juice, water." She had wine, too, but Tuff hated wine, so no point in offering that. "Tea? Milk?"

"I don't need anything, thanks." Tuff ruffled Luke's damp hair. "So old Grandpa Roy had you on shop vac detail, huh?"

Luke snuggled into Tuff's navy-blue, fuzzy half-zip, joy etched on his face. "Yup. That's hard work, Dad."

"Don't I know it, kid! I used to earn date money detailing boats at the marina, plus scrubbing docks and helping Roy store boats." He smiled down at Lucas. "You driving the tractor yet?"

Luke giggled and shook his head. "I already asked Grandpa Mark last week. He said I'm still too small."

"You earning date money? Got a girlfriend?" Tuff teased, and Jen's heart squeezed at the sound of her son's happy

laughter.

“Daa-aad,” Luke drew the word into two long syllables. “I’m not old enough to date. I’m only eight.”

“But you’re going to be nine in a few weeks. Your mom and I started dating when we were about nine, didn’t we, Jens?” Tuff looked up at her, offering the disarming grin that had always gotten him pretty much anything in the world he wanted. Even after everything that went down between them, he could still be charming.

She gazed at Ryan Tuffington for a moment, remembering when they were actually dating—high school and college. When he’d gotten a football scholarship to Indiana University, she’d followed him, cheering him from the stands at every game for four years. He graduated with a degree in Secondary Education, hoping to coach football and teach phys. ed. at River’s Edge High or Warner College. She graduated with a double major in Marketing and Digital Technology Management, ready to come home and bring Weaver’s Landing Marina into the digital age.

An offer from Eastman University for Ryan to be assistant football coach with the possibility of a promotion to head coach in five years sent all their plans south—to Florida. They got married a week after graduation and spent their honeymoon settling into a house near campus in a small college town just east of Tampa. Jenny found a job in a bank and supplemented that income with freelance web design projects, while Ryan was in heaven, shaping young players on the football field. It was never idyllic, but it had worked. Until it didn’t.

Jen shook her head. “We didn’t start dating until after we got into high school. I’m sure of this because my parents didn’t let any of us date until we turned sixteen and could drive.” She smiled down at Luke. “You’ve got plenty of time for girls, honey.”

Luke’s eyes gleamed. “My friend Zoey is a girl and she’s pretty nice.”

Tuff high-fived him. “That’s my boy.”

As much as she hated to break up this reunion, Luke needed to get into bed. Seven thirty A.M. and the school bus both came early. “Guys, it’s about bedtime.”

“Nooo . . . wait!” Luke curled closer to Tuff’s broad chest. “Can Daddy read to me tonight?”

Jenny eyed Ryan, who looked as expectant as Luke. “We’ve just started reading Harry Potter this fall. You up for a chapter?”

He set Luke on his feet and rose. “You kidding? I loved Harry Potter when I was a kid. Lead on.” He turned Luke toward the stairs with a hand on his shoulder.

Jenny met them at the end of the couch. “Got a hug for your old mom, kiddo?”

Obediently, Luke put his arms around her waist and pulled her close, his head nearly reaching the top of her chest. She was short, but he was getting tall; it was obvious he was going to be a big guy like his father and equally handsome. “G’ night, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you to the moon, sweetie.” Jenny returned the hug, holding on a second or two longer than usual before releasing him to his father.

Ryan looked on, affection in his gaze. “Lukie, did you know that the original title of the first Harry Potter book was actually *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, but they renamed it *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* for the American audience because *Sorcerer* sounded more exciting than *Philosopher*?”

Luke stared up at his dad. “What’s a philosopher?”

At the bottom of the stairs, Tuff glanced back at Jenny and winked. “Exactly. A philosopher is a thinker, mostly of big thoughts.” His voice faded as the two of them climbed the stairs.

“Brush your teeth,” Jenny called after them, watching as Ryan’s bulky frame completely hid Luke from her sight. *Stay downstairs*, she calmed the overzealous mom instinct that wanted to follow and listen to whatever Ryan was going to say to their son. *His time, not yours*. Still, she continued to watch as they disappeared where the stairs turned at the first landing before she headed to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. All her warning bells were going off, but she’d know soon enough what brought Ryan Tuffington back to River’s Edge.



“GOD, JENS, HE’S grown at least six inches since the last time I saw him. The videos and FaceTime don’t really show me how tall he’s getting.” Ryan’s voice jerked her away from her laptop where she was entering boat-storage contracts and amounts from the stack of envelopes next to her on the kitchen island.

She glanced up, finished typing, saved, and shut the laptop. “I can hardly keep him in pants.” She cocked her head toward the still-warm pot of coffee on the counter. “Coffee?”

He nodded, but when she started to get up, he held up one hand. “I can get it.” Grabbing a mug from the mug rack next to the coffeemaker, he poured a cup, added a spoonful of sugar, and then sat down.

“No cream?” Jenny was surprised. Ryan had always taken his coffee with lots of half-and-half.

He gave her a chagrined smile and patted his belly. “Trying to lose this gut, so I had to pick either sugar or cream. The cream was easier to let go.”

“Ah.” There was nothing more to say. Tuff *had* gained some weight since the last time she’d seen him earlier in the summer in Florida.

“I like your house. It’s cozy. Didn’t this used to be the Coles’ place?”

“It was, but Kate’s out at River Bend with Alzheimer’s.” She nodded at his stricken expression. “Yeah, for a couple of years now. Harley married Beck Lange last summer, and they bought that big brick place with the wraparound porch on Evergreen—the one up on the hill right before the Methodist church?” She pointed, although the house wasn’t visible from her kitchen.

“Becker Lange married Harley Cole?” Disbelief colored his words.

Didn’t his parents ever send him any news from River’s Edge?

“Yup.”

“Are you renting here?”

Jen lifted her chin. How she’d acquired this house wasn’t really any of her ex-husband’s business, but she explained briefly anyway. “I’m buying it from her on contract.”

He must have sensed the chill in her voice because, immediately, he grinned. “Beck Lange and Harley Cole—man! That’s a couple I never would’ve put together. Not in a million years.”

“They’re cute together. They just announced they’re pregnant. Beck’s strutting around like a rooster and Harley is glowing.”

“I hope I get to see them while I’m here.” He took a sip of coffee and drummed the fingers of his other hand on the granite countertop.

It was the perfect opening, so Jenny grabbed it. “Why *are* you here?”

“I miss my kid,” Tuff dissembled and he wasn’t meeting her eyes.

So, that’s crap. But she didn’t say those words out loud. “Okay, but it’s the middle of football season. According to Eastman’s online schedule, you’ve got a home game on Saturday.”

His eyes widened, and this time he did look at her—with a rather cocky grin. “You keep track of our schedule?”

She knit her brows. “No. I just now looked it up while you were with Luke. I’m trying to figure out why you’re here, Ryan.”

He took another sip of coffee. “Whoops, here we go. I’m *Ryan*, which means *Tuff*’s in trouble.”

“Are you? You tell me.” She rose, refilled her mug, added sugar, and then went to the fridge for the carton of half-and-half.

“Can’t I take a day or two to see my kid? You wouldn’t bring him down for homecoming weekend and—”

“Hold up. We’re super busy detailing and storing boats right now, as you well know, and Luke had a Scout camping trip already planned that weekend. I can’t pull him out of his activities on a moment’s notice. That camp cost money and he really wanted to go.”

“Who’d he go with?” Ryan’s tone turned suspicious. “That nerd from high school who was here earlier?”

Jenny opted to ignore the nerd comment. Gabe Dawson was none of Tuff’s business. “My dad took him, and they had a great time.”

Silently, Tuff stared at the countertop, tracing the pattern in the granite with one finger. “I miss him, Jens. I only want to spend some time with him.”

“We’re coming down after Christmas,” she reminded him. “What’s really going on, Ryan?”

“I’ve been suspended,” he blurted, and then closed his eyes and dropped his head back.

Jenny’s heart suddenly starting pounding so hard she could hear it in her ears. “*Suspended?*” she squeaked. “What on earth for?”

“It’s under investigation, but they’re accusing me of paying one of my recruits and his parents. They’re claiming I bought the parents a condo in Tampa so they could be close to their kid and watch him play. That I’ve been paying him and giving them money to keep him on the field.” He sighed. “And that I paid other students to take tests for him.”

“Good God, Ryan!” Her heart sank. “Did you?”

“There’s more.”

Jenny blinked. *More? What more could there be?*

He rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. “They’re accusing me of misappropriating Athletic Department funds to do it.”

“A-are you . . . are you *serious?*”

“I have a lawyer.” His voice shook and he sat there, looking as guilty as the night he’d confessed all his affairs to her. “They asked me to leave campus until the investigation is done, so my lawyer—Buck Swinton, from Tampa—got permission for me to leave the state and come home for a few weeks.”

“Buck Swinton? That slimy guy we used to see on TV ads and billboards? The ambulance chaser?”

“He’s good, Jenny. He thinks he can get me a plea bargain that will keep me out of prison.”

Jenny’s breath caught in her throat and she raked her hair back, pulling it up into a ponytail with the band that was always around her wrist. “*Prison? Plea bargain? Ryan, did you do these things?*”

He leaned toward her, his expression cold. “Is that who you think I am? Do you believe I’d steal from the university?”

She sat back, putting some distance between them. “What am I supposed to think when you talk about plea bargaining? Did you do this?”



“THEN HE GOT up and walked out.” Jenny yanked the paper sealing tape off a large box, revealing a stack of orange life vests. She’d placed the order back in July, and they’d finally arrived when boating season was nearly over. Ah well . . . they’d be here for next summer.

Jazz pulled out some vests and hung them on the empty hanger in the boating safety display near the front of the marina store, separating them carefully so that the tags weren’t wound together. “He never denied it? He just *left*?”

Jenny handed her another few vests. “Yeah. And I was too astounded to follow him. I let him go because I needed time to process.”

“He’s at his parents’ house, right?”

“I assume.” Jenny continued taking vests from the box. “Damn him, anyway. Luke was so happy to see him. He did bedtime with him, they read Harry Potter, and I heard Tuff up there singing ‘If I Had a Boat’ to him.”

“The old Lyle Lovett song?”

“Yes.” Jenny sighed. “When he came downstairs, it was like . . . like when he used to put Luke to bed when he was little. Tuff seemed so glad to be with his kid, you know?”

“Then he dropped the bomb?”

“When I asked him what he was doing home on Monday night in the middle of football season, he tried to put me off by saying he only missed Luke. But I’m not stupid.” She gazed at Jazz. “Do you think he did this? I mean, is he truly capable of —” She stopped short as she spotted Jo and Alex headed for the front door. “I’m not going to mention this to Jo right now. They’re leaving this morning, and she’d feel like she had to stay and be supportive when there’s really nothing she can do.”

Jazz nodded. “I won’t say anything.”

“We brought bon voyage doughnuts from Paula’s!” Jo singsonged, as she and her fiancé entered the store. “Is the

coffee on?”

A moment of sadness washed over Jenny, but Jo’s joy lit up the whole shop, so she held out her arms and her sister walked into the embrace. Jazz dropped the life vests she’d been sorting back into the box and joined them. “Sister pledge!”

“Born together, besties forever, from womb to tomb,” they chanted in unison, their foreheads touching.

“Well, that’s about the cutest thing I’ve seen all summer.” Alex set the doughnuts, along with a smaller bakery bag on the counter by the register, his smile as blissful as Jo’s. “You three knock me out. No kidding.”

“Coffee’s on!” The triplets’ mother appeared in the doorway that led back to the marina repair shop and Parts department with a thermal carafe and a short pile of paper plates, napkins, and cardboard cups. “I can’t believe our farewell party is only doughnuts and coffee in the store. Jo, you should have at least let me do a big breakfast this morning.”

Jo hurried over to take the carafe and bring it to the counter Jazz had cleared off earlier in anticipation of this celebration. “I love you, Mom, but this is better. A long goodbye will only make me weepy, and besides, we’ll be back at Christmas with Alex’s whole family in tow.”

Their mom sighed. “Well, Dad and Grandpa and Gram are on their way down here.” She looked around. “Where’s Rich?” she asked, referring to Alex’s best buddy/boat pilot/first mate, who traveled with him on his yacht, the *Carpe Diem*.

Alex craned his neck to peer out the side window toward the elegant yacht at the end of the line of slips. “He’s coming up now.”

Jenny set out nine cups and started pouring, swallowing the lump in her throat. She was not going to cry. Honestly, she probably *was* going to cry, but she was going to make an effort to keep her sorrow at Jo’s departure under control. This was

good-bye, but it was also the start of a wonderful new life for Jo with a man she clearly loved and who adored her. Her sister deserved every moment of happiness, and Jenny wasn't about to be a Debbie Downer this morning. Which was another reason she chose to keep her ex-husband's sudden appearance under her hat.

"I'm going to run back for half-and-half and sugar and spoons," she said, turning away so Jo wouldn't see the tears shimmering in her eyes.

"I got 'em," Gram announced, coming in from the repair shop with Dad and Grandpa Roy on her heels.

Everyone's cup was filled and doughnuts were selected and plated, except for Alex, whose type 1 diabetes meant he was eating one of Paula's special low-carb, sugar-free sweets from the extra bag they'd brought. Dad raised his coffee cup. "To Jo and Alex, and a successful journey upriver to Pittsburgh and dry dock."

Everyone touched their cups and sipped the warm brew. Then Grandpa Roy added, "And to Jo's new life in Durham. Sweetheart, may you find everything your heart desires there and to the scientist here"—he nodded at Alex—"we're all very happy to welcome you to the Weaver family."

Again, with a unison, "Hear, hear," they all touched cups and sipped again.

Jenny caught her lower lip between her teeth to keep it from trembling. Life without Jo would be strange and different, but adulting meant that they wouldn't be together forever—at least, not physically. However, the three sisters were connected in such an elemental way, their bond couldn't be broken by mere miles between them. They would text and call and FaceTime. Staying in close touch was so much easier these days.

After Jo got to Durham and Jenny figured out what exactly was going on with Tuff, she'd have Jazz over for wine and a long video chat with their sister. The knot in her stomach

tightened. She couldn't think about Tuff now. Taking another bite of apple cider doughnut, she shoved him to the back of her mind, focusing on Jo and the journey she was about to embark on, both literally and figuratively.

“Oh, Jo.” She pulled her sister into an impulsive hug. “I’m going to miss you like crazy, but I couldn’t be happier for you.”

Jo pressed her cheek to Jenny’s. “You’re up next, sis,” she whispered. “Better get busy finding the love of your life.”

Her sister’s words brought Gabe Dawson’s handsome face unbidden to her mind.

If only . . .

Chapter Four

CLAIRE DAWSON, WHO was sitting up in bed when Gabe arrived at the hospital the next morning, gave her son a sheepish smile. “I guess I should’ve waited for you, huh?”

Gabe pressed a kiss to her dark curly hair that was threaded with silver. “Ya think?”

“I was doing great until I got to the deck.” She didn’t look bad at all for a fifty-four-year-old woman who had casts on both her left shoulder and her left lower leg.

Christine appeared in the doorway, bearing two cups from Holly Flaherty’s Tea Leaf kiosk in the hospital lobby. “Gabe, talk to her. Tell her she can’t do this stuff anymore.”

“She’s an adult, Chris. I’m not going to tell her anything.” Gabe accepted one of the cups, opened the lid, and sniffed. *Ah, Earl Grey. Bergamot. Nothing like it.* He smiled his appreciation for the tea.

Their mom nodded in his direction. “Thank you.”

He tossed her a not-so-fast scowl. “Except for this.”

Claire looked at him over the top of the rimless reading glasses perched on her nose.

He returned the sternest look he could muster. “Not even *I* would get on a twelve-foot ladder without someone nearby to spot me, and I’m the youngest one in this room.” He put up one hand to stop her automatic protest. “How many times did Dad tell us that? He never got on that stupid extension ladder or let one of us get up that high unless someone else was there.”

Chris pulled a chair up to the other side of the bed. “He’s right, Mama. We both told you we’d be there to help you and it’s—”

“No!” Claire took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, then plopped the readers back on her nose. “You both said you’d do it *for* me. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of my own home. I’m not a feeble old woman.”

Gabe dropped down onto the chair across the bed from his sister. “We’re not saying that, Mom, but there are some jobs that nobody, no matter what their age, should do alone. Gutter cleaning falls in that category—as you now know.”

Claire raked her curls off her forehead and sighed. “I admit, it was a stupid move,” she finally confessed. “I’m sorry.”

Chris patted her arm below the cast that almost reached her mother’s wrist. “We don’t mean to treat you like a senior citizen, honestly, or a kid. We only want you to be safe.” She winked. “Just like you want us to be safe.”

“Well, I’m your mother. It’s my job to want you to be safe.”

Gabe chuckled. “Right back atcha, Mom.” He took a sip of tea. Chris had remembered the sugar—two teaspoons—it was warm and sweet and delicious. “So has anyone been in to tell you what’s going to happen?”

“A patient advocate was in earlier.” Claire took a bite of the English muffin from the breakfast tray on the over-bed table. “Frankly, I don’t have a lot of choices. The orthopedic guy is going to keep me in here for a few days, then transfer me to River Bend Rehab until I can manage on my own. Thank God, it’s all on my left side. I can still write and use a fork without dribbling food all over myself.”

“There will probably be some PT too.” Gabe’s mind was racing. Mom was going to have to stay in rehab until the doctors were comfortable sending her home, but managing on her own with two casts was going to be damn difficult.

He was already planning to stay here through the holidays and do the rest of his classes online. But coming back to town for a weekend in June had left him longing to return home.

When his pal, Josh, a professor at Warner College had sent him that message about the new find upriver at Rising Sun, he immediately spoke to his department head about taking some time off to check it out. Also, he couldn't deny that Jenny Weaver—thinking of her as Jenny *Tuffington* made his eye twitch—was another reason to consider returning for a while. And now, Mom . . .

Claire eyed him with suspicion. “What’s going on in that professor head of yours, Gabriel James? You better not be thinking you’re going to take time away from your classes and nurse me through this because no . . . just no.”

Christine raised one hand. “Mom, I was thinking maybe you could come and stay with Jeremy and me and the kids while you heal. Jeremy says we can move a hospital bed into the dining room and—”

Claire’s eyes grew wider and Gabe could only imagine what was going on in her head. Chris and Jeremy’s house tended toward chaos with two working parents and two kids under the age of ten. “Oh, honey, thank you, but that’s the last thing you and Jeremy need with the holidays coming on. Be a little hard for you to do your annual open house with me in a hospital bed in your dining room.”

Chris waved away Mom’s concern. “We can skip the open house this year.”

“No,” Claire declared. “I love your holiday open house and I intend to be there.” She gazed from Chris to Gabe and back again. “Look, you two. I love you to pieces, but this is *my* injury, *my* life, and *my* choices. So, here’s how it’s gonna go down.”

Go down. Gabe bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud. Nothing and nobody kept his mom from doing whatever she damn well pleased. Apparently, not even broken bones. He shot a warning glance at his sister, who’d already opened her mouth. “How’s it gonna go down, Mom?”

“I’m going to do whatever the docs tell me to do, including spending time in rehab if that’s what they recommend, so I can heal and get strong by Thanksgiving. Christine, you live your life and bring me some flowers from Sandy’s when you and the kids come to visit.” She turned to Gabe. “Gabriel, if you’re here to check out that new find in Rising Sun you told me about, by all means, stay at my house. That way, I won’t have to stop the mail and someone will be there to keep an eye on things. But”—she wagged her finger at him—“*don’t* let *me* be reason you take time off teaching. Do it for you, ’cause stopping the mail is no big deal and I can have the neighbors check on the house.” Once again, Claire looked from brother to sister, her expression dead serious. “Are we all straight here?”

Gabe nodded his head while Chris hesitated, but finally agreed too. “Okay,” he said. “What can we do for you *today*, Mom?”

“Go finish cleaning my gutters.” She chuckled, jerking a thumb toward Christine. “Take your sister with you. Because you know, the whole ‘*Don’t be alone while you’re on a ladder*’ thing is important.”

“Mom, I was going to stay here and keep you company,” Chris objected. “The kids are at school, Jeremy’s at the store, and Sandy gave me the day off.”

Claire laughed. “Go spot your brother while he finishes my gutters. After that, come back, and if you don’t mind, would you please bring my iPad and my phone with you? Oh, and maybe a meatloaf sandwich from Mac’s? Last night was Monday night meat loaf, so he’ll have sandwiches today. Lotsa mayo, please.”

Gabe pushed up out of the chair. “We’re on it, Mom. You get some rest. I’ll be back tonight.”



EIGHT THIRTY P.M. and Jenny’s day had finally wound down enough for her to take a glass of Four Irish Brothers pinot noir

out to the front porch and enjoy an unusually warm October evening. Her days of porch-sitting would become fewer as the weather cooled off. Leaves were beginning to fall, and she scowled at the carpet of color on her pocket-handkerchief-sized yard. She'd have to get the rake out at some point and get them cleaned up before the predicted rain arrived on Saturday. Or maybe Holly and Aidan's son, Mateo, could come by and run the mower over them. Hadn't she read online that it was better to mulch them?

"Mom?" A small voice at the screen door startled her and she swung around in the wicker rocker, grateful she'd already set her glass of wine on the table next to her. Otherwise, she'd be wearing it.

"What are you doing out of bed, kiddo?" She held out her arms and Luke pushed open the door and rushed into them. "Oof." She settled him on her lap. "You're getting so big, pretty soon, you won't fit on my lap anymore."

Luke snuggled his sturdy frame into her embrace, resting his head on her shoulder, his breath warm on her neck. "I can't sleep."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes, but my mind is too busy."

"What's in there, bud?"

Luke sighed deeply. "Is Dad okay?"

Jenny's chest tightened. Had he heard Tuff talking last night? "Why do you ask?"

Fidgeting with the ties on her hoodie, Luke sighed. "He told me he was here for a few weeks, but that's not right. He should be coaching down in Florida, shouldn't he?"

Jenny chewed her lower lip, debating how much an almost-nine-year-old kid could process. "Dad's on a little vacation from school right now."

"Who's coaching?"

“His assistants are handling it while your dad takes some time off.” She sucked at dissembling, despite years of living with Tuff, who was the master of the quick-and-dirty story.

“He said we were going to go to the high school on Saturday and throw the football. He says I’m a-agile? He says I should be fast. He wants to teach me to be a . . . a running back?” He tipped his head to look at her. “What’s a running back?”

“It’s a position in football, honey.”

“Do I have to go? I’m supposed to sell popcorn at Deke’s on Saturday with Ali and a couple other kids from Scouts, and later, Grandpa is going to pay me and Jake and Paulie to start scrubbing the docks.” He sat up and gave her a pleading look. “I almost have enough dollars saved up for Mario Kart.”

“I’ll talk to your dad. You committed to do those other things on Saturday, so you need to do them.”

Luke dropped his hands into his lap. “Dad wants me to learn football. Mom, I don’t want to play football.” He sounded so downcast, Jenny’s heart hurt.

“Football is your dad’s life, Lucas, but it doesn’t have to be yours. We’ll talk to him.”

“Okay.” He settled back against her and closed his eyes as she pushed her foot against the floor of the porch and started the rocking chair’s soothing movement.

Jenny tugged him closer and kissed his sweet-smelling hair. “Don’t fall asleep here, sweetie. You are too big for me to carry up to bed.” But she continued to rock and hold him, relishing the mom-cuddles time that was becoming more and more infrequent as her son matured.

In no time, Luke’s breathing slowed. He’d fallen asleep, but Jenny was too comfortable and too tired to try to wake him. A few minutes more, then she’d lead him up to bed. Right now, though, the sounds of autumn—rustling leaves, an owl’s lonely hooting somewhere down the street—the scent of

her neighbor's wood-burning fireplace, and her son snuggled close in her arms left her feeling perfectly content.

Headlights came up the street from the corner and, peering into the darkness, Jenny recognized Gabe Dawson's old Land Rover as it stopped in front of the house. Her heart beat a little bit faster as his tall, lean form stepped out of the driver's door.

He glanced up and apparently realized she had a sleeping child on her lap because, rather than slamming his door shut, he clicked it closed quietly. He slipped through the gate, snicked it to, and ambled up the steps, stopping at the top. His dark gaze swept over the scene before him, sending a shiver through her. "Hi," he whispered, his eyes focused on Luke.

"How's your mom?" Jenny kept her voice quiet, even though Luke had passed the point of being awakened by mere conversation. When the kid finally fell asleep, he was gone for the night.

Gabe leaned against the porch column, his arms crossed over his chest covering up the faded image of Indiana Jones on his sweatshirt, but Jenny had seen it and it made her smile. "She's doing okay. Probably be in the hospital for a few more days, before they send her to River Bend for some rehab." He smiled and, wow, the dimples through his scruff about knocked her out of her chair. "She doesn't let much get her down. By next week, she'll be cleaning up leaves around the rehab and bossing doctors and nurses." He chuckled. "All from a wheelchair."

"Does this mean you're heading back to Virginia?" She tried to keep the disappointment out of her tone, but it crept in, even though she was pleased his mom was doing well.

He extended both palms in a questioning gesture and shook his head, causing his black hair to flop over his brow. "Not immediately. I'm here for a while. Mom's going to need some help when she gets home. Plus, there's been a find up near Rising Sun, and Josh Yates, a prof friend at Warner, has invited me to check out the dig." His dark-brown eyes sparkled in the porch light.

Her heart was pounding so hard, she was surprised Luke's head wasn't bouncing. "What about the rest of the semester?"

"I'll do classes online; office hours can be Zoomed or my TA can handle them. I'll go to Virginia for finals the first of December, check on my condo, and then be back here for Christmas."

"What about—" Jenny couldn't think of a graceful way to ask about his personal life in Virginia, so she snapped her mouth shut and looked away from his penetrating gaze.

"What?" He came up to the porch from his spot on the top step and perched on the settee across from her.

Heat rose up her neck. "Nothing." She met his eyes. "I need to get this kid up to bed."

"Want me to carry him up?"

"Could you? That would be great, thanks. Otherwise, I'll have to wake him up enough to make him walk." She loosened her hold as Gabe slid his hands under Luke's knees and back and lifted him from her lap as easily as if he were a bag of feathers. The man's lean form was deceptive—he was really strong. The back of his hand brushed her chest, causing another storm of sensation when, suddenly, his fingers got wrapped up in the ties of her hoodie. He stopped, hovering over her, his coffee-scented breath warm on her cheek and she ached to turn her lips to his.

Gently, reluctantly, she untangled them so he could step back and allow her to stand, but the connection had happened. He felt it too. She could see it in his eyes and in the slight upturn to the corner of his mouth. She pulled her gaze from his and tilted her head toward the door, then slipped past him to hold it open while he passed.

"Up?" He lifted his chin in the direction of the walnut staircase.

She nodded and led the way, too aware of how right it felt for this incredibly handsome man to participate in a rather intimate parenting moment with her. Up in Luke's room, she

straightened the *Star Wars* comforter on the bed and stood back as Gabe laid her son ever so carefully down, pulled the covers up, and picked up Luke's well-loved stuffed beaver that was lying on the pillow nearby.

"Who's this?"

"Wally."

Gabe grinned. "As in Wally and the Beav from that old TV show?"

Jenny drew in a breath. "Yes." She kept her tone soft. "He watches old TV shows with my grandparents. They got him hooked on *Leave It To Beaver* and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* and a bunch of others."

"Cute." He placed Wally under the blankets with Luke.

Luke mumbled, clutched Wally to his chest, and rolled over on his side.

Jenny lingered a few seconds, long enough to drop a kiss on her son's tousled hair and run a hand down over his blanket-covered calf and foot. "Love you, love you," she murmured and followed Gabe out into the hallway, turning off the light on the dresser as they passed by.

Downstairs, she offered Gabe a glass of pinot and they settled on the porch opposite one another, with Gabe on the settee again, while she returned to the rocking chair. She'd seriously considered sitting on the settee next to him, but chickened out at the last minute. It had been so long since she'd been in the dating world that she no longer knew what was appropriate anymore.

He sipped his wine and nodded appreciatively. "Those Flahertys have sure mastered pinot, haven't they? Are they growing the grapes or importing them?"

Jenny took a drink from her own glass. "No clue. I'm not much of a wine connoisseur. I just know what I like."

Gabe nodded. "Frankly, I'm not a big wine drinker. When I drink, which isn't very often, I generally drink beer,

sometimes rum, but I'm learning a new appreciation for wine. I have a colleague—well, um . . . a friend—who's big into Spanish wines and California reds, and she's trying to teach me." He held the glass up to the porch light and peered at her through it. "I'm learning."

She. Jenny caught the pronoun that he'd tossed into the conversation so blithely as well as the way he'd corrected the description. Her heart dropped. Apparently, he was already involved with someone in Virginia, despite the interest he'd seemed to show when he was home for the reunion this past summer. And why would that be a surprise? He was a thirty-four-year-old college professor who'd been away from River's Edge for years. Of course he has a life back in Virginia. Inwardly, she swallowed her disappointment. It didn't matter. There was no point in looking for anything beyond casual friendship with the delectable Dr. Dawson since he'd be gone again in a few weeks anyway.

Chapter Five

“**MOM!**” LUKE’S VOICE echoed in the vast boat-storage barn where Jenny was back in the corner, tossing mothballs under the trailers to keep critters out of the boats and barn. One whiff of mothballs was enough to send raccoons, possums, foxes, mice, and other unwanted creatures running back to the woods east of the marina.

She straightened, peering through the dim light. “I’m back here, honey.”

“Mom, Mommy! Look!” Luke wove his way through the boats, his shoes crunching on the gravel floor.

Jenny’s heart sank when she met him in the center aisle. The kid was carrying a ball of curly brown fluff. A puppy. *Holy sh—A puppy?* Jen bit her cheek to keep from moaning out loud. She didn’t know the story. Maybe Luke was watching it for a friend, although the light in her son’s eyes told her that was probably wishful thinking on her part. “It’s a puppy,” she said inanely.

Luke pressed the tiny critter to his cheek. “It’s mine!”

“Is it?” Jenny tried not to shriek, but the words came out squeaky as she set the box of mothballs on the ground and pulled off her disposable gloves to take the tiny bundle of fur from Luke’s hands. She held it up to examine it. “Honey, where did you get a dog?”

“Daddy got her for me in Cincinnati.” Luke was practically vibrating with excitement, bouncing on his toes in front of her as she examined the puppy, who couldn’t have been more than a few weeks old. “He’s a—a Cavapoo. I’m naming him Harry Potter.” His brow furrowed beneath the fringe of hair that had fallen across his forehead. “I think he looks like a Harry, don’t you?”

“You and Daddy went to Cincinnati today?” The puppy sat still as a mouse in Jenny’s hands, its eyes huge, clearly frightened. Tuff had said they were going hiking in the state park when he picked Luke up this morning. He hadn’t mentioned driving to Cincy—and he sure as shootin’ didn’t mention buying their son a dog. “Where *is* Daddy?” She peered toward the big open doorway, hoping to spy Tuff’s little sports car, but saw only the empty parking lot and the bright midafternoon sun. He’d damn well better not have dropped Luke off with a puppy and driven off with no explanation.

“He had to go pick up Grammy and Grandad for a show at the casino, so he dropped me off ’cause we saw your car was here.”

Typical. Create an impossible situation where she could potentially be the bad guy and then simply disappear. Damn. Damn. *Damn*. She should call the sonuvabitch right now and chew him a new one, but the bewitched expression on Luke’s face stopped her from taking her phone from her pocket.

The puppy made a tiny whining sound, and Luke reached for him. “He’s kinda scared right now. He peed in Daddy’s car, but only on the floor mat, so it’s okay. He didn’t get mad.” Luke stared up at Jenny, his own blue eyes as huge as the puppy’s. “We need to go get him some food and a bed. Oh, and a collar and leash.” He shifted the dog to rest in the elbow of one arm and dug in his jacket pocket, producing a fifty-dollar bill. “Daddy gave me this to get stuff for him.” He shoved the cash back in his pocket and cuddled the puppy against his shoulder. “Are you hungry, Harry?”

Jenny sighed as Luke continued murmuring to the puppy, who was cute, no question about that. But she knew nothing about dogs. The Weavers had always been cat people—Evinrude and Mercury were the current marina cats. They kept the mouse population to a minimum and enjoyed treats from fishermen who came in with a full catch after a day on the river. The two gray tabbies slept in baskets back in the Parts department and wandered around the property at will, never

venturing up to the road or into the woods. They seemed to know instinctively where danger lurked. Or at least which side their bread was buttered on since Jenny kept their bowls filled with water and dry food.

Inwardly still cursing Tuff, she picked up the box of mothballs and her abandoned gloves and put a hand on Luke's shoulder. "Come on, kiddo. Let's go see Miss Bea and Miss Pearl. They'll know what we need."



THEY ARRIVED AT Happy Pets, the pet shop tucked into the bottom floor of the old brick building at the corner of Harrison and 4th Streets, with only a few minutes to spare before closing. Pearl Douglas's parents had opened Happy Pets in the late fifties, and when they retired to Arizona some fifteen years ago, they passed the business to Pearl and her wife Bea. Pearl and Bea had immediately made changes, opening up the storefront by replacing the small picture window with one twice as large, which allowed the eastern light to flow in and brighten the whole shop. They repainted the faded gray wall a soft buttery yellow, had a new sign made, added bright pendant lights to the high ceiling, and replaced all the aquariums along the back wall.

Bea welcomed them with a warm smile. "Hello there." She eyed Luke from behind the heavy wooden counter, which she and Pearl had refinished, but hadn't replaced, in order to keep some of the old-fashioned vibe that made the store a favorite of pet owners in River's Edge. "Who have you got there, young man?"

Luke held up a very sleepy puppy. "This is Harry Potter. He's a Cavapoo."

"What a cutie." Bea took the dog, examined it closely, then tucked it up onto her shoulder. "How old is he?"

"He's nine weeks old," Luke declared and brought out the fifty his dad had given him. "We're here for supplies."

“Does he have any papers on him?” Bea led the way to the doggie aisle, where Luke immediately started rooting through a rack of collars. She stopped him and pointed. “No, look here, hon—these are his size.”

Jenny shrugged. “I have no idea if he has papers. His dad got him for him in Cincinnati this afternoon. I’m just grateful you’re open on Sundays.”

Bea looked askance. “Tuff’s back in town?”

With a short shake of her head, Jenny said, “Luke, you find a collar and a leash for Harry while Miss Bea shows me what kind of food he needs.”

“Puppy chow,” Luke offered as he sorted the collars with great seriousness, holding up one after another. “Not pink. Harry would never wear pink, even if he was a puppy.”

The two women edged over to the pet food section, where Jenny released a huge, disgusted sigh.

Bea’s smile was knowing, but she kept her voice low. “Is it safe to assume Tuff didn’t discuss this . . . *acquisition* with you?”

Jenny closed her eyes for a second. “He didn’t even have the balls to come in with Luke. Just dropped him at the marina, puppy in hand.”

“That was low.”

Jenny snorted. “But typical.”

Without responding, Bea handed Harry to her and reached for a bag of food. “Here’s a good starter chow for him.” She held it up. “You’re going to need a crate—it’s the only way to potty train a puppy, in my opinion. I’ve got a couple of used ones in the back—you can borrow one of ’em for now.” She peered across the shop at Luke. “How ya doin’, kid?”

“I found green! My favorite color.” He shook a narrow, lime-green nylon collar above his head. “I’m going to see if you have a leash to match.”

Bea put the food on the counter and headed to the back room while Jenny snuggled a snoozing Harry against her sweatshirt and went back over to help Luke.

“Mom, don’t we need a bed for him?” He fingered a plaid sherpa-lined dog bed.

Jenny placed a hand on his head. “No, I think we can put a folded blanket or towel in the crate that Miss Bea is going to loan us. Harry will have to sleep in a crate until he gets potty trained.”

“Here we go.” Bea came out of the back carrying a small blue crate and a pair of heavy-looking clay dishes. “I found a couple old dog dishes too. They’re weighty, so he won’t be able to knock them around so easily.” She set everything on the counter. “I like the green, Luke. It’ll go good with his brown fur.” She held the nylon leash up to the sleeping puppy’s back. “See?”

“Thanks so much, Bea.” Jenny’s sense of being overwhelmed had begun to subside somewhat. *A puppy. That rat.* She’d been composing a fierce text to Tuff in her head all the way to Happy Pets, but feeling the warm little critter snuffling at the hood of her sweatshirt, along with Bea’s kindness, seemed to ease some of the anger. Not all of it, by any stretch, but it was probably better to calm down before she spoke to her ex, anyway.

“Can’t believe this boy doesn’t have papers or early vaccination forms—I’d check with Tuff. You’ll want him to have a thorough vet check as soon as possible.” Bea fished a business card from a holder on the counter and handed it to Jenny. “John Price. Best in the area, and you don’t want him around other dogs until he has all his shots.” She rang up the sale, and with a shake of her head at Jenny, who had dug out her credit card, accepted the fifty from a proud Luke, and gave him change, along with an eight-by-ten form. “Pearl is starting a new beginners’ obedience class in two weeks.” She lifted her chin. “Let’s get you and Harry signed up. In the meantime”—she reached under the counter and brought out a couple of

pamphlets—“here’s some information about housebreaking and such. Luke, you and Mom read through these. You’re going to have to teach Harry Potter not to go potty in the house.”

Jenny handed the puppy back to her son, whose eyes shone with pure joy. That expression was the only thing saving Ryan Tuffington from having his butt kicked across the Ohio River. She watched as Bea stepped from behind the counter and explained to Luke how to fit the adjustable collar around the dog’s neck, demonstrating the quick release buckle and showing him the two-finger rule for fitting. “You should always be able to fit two fingers between the collar and Harry’s neck and you’ll have to pay close attention as he grows.”

“I’m glad I picked one that gets bigger.” Luke slid a couple of fingers under the collar, testing the fit.

“This one will last for a few months, but you’ll need to save up for a new one for when he’s full grown.”

Luke nodded his shaggy head. “I’ve got other dollars in my box at home. I’ll put my change from today in there too.” He allowed Bea to show him how to clip the leash on Harry’s collar. “Can I try to see if he’ll walk with me?”

“We can take him outside to see if he’ll potty, but it’s best to start leash training inside your house with a very loose leash. One of the pamphlets I gave your mom is about leash training.” Bea led them to the front door, holding it open as Jenny and Luke slipped through, and helped Luke as he set Harry on the sidewalk. The poor exhausted thing simply sat down on his haunches, gazing up at them with pitiful puppy eyes as if to say, *Please just let me go to bed.*

Luke crouched a few feet away from her. “Come here, Harry. Come to me.”

Bea held the leash very loosely and tossed a smile at Jenny, who was putting the carrier and supplies in the back of the car. Harry tipped his round head back, and with a pleading

look at Bea, rose and trotted right to Luke, pressing his head into his hand like a cat seeking affection. Jenny was surprised that he didn't seem to notice the collar. Then, much to Luke's pleasure, he trotted over to the grassy verge by the sidewalk and squatted.

Bea unclipped the leash and removed the collar, and handed them both to Jenny. "It's best to start slow, getting him accustomed to the collar and leash. He's got a lot to get used to, and so do you two. Let him settle in, and later, we can start with the collar and leash and the rest of his training." Bea opened the back door and Luke got in with Harry, cuddling him close and murmuring to him. "This breed is smart and they want to please you, so training shouldn't be too hard if you stay consistent."

Jenny gave Bea a quick hug. "Thanks so much, Bea. I really appreciate it."

Bea offered an encouraging smile. "It was a lousy thing for Tuff to do, Jenny, but that boy is already in love. It's going to be okay."

Jenny glanced at her son in the back seat as, with a sigh, she opened the driver's door. "From your lips to God's ears, Bea."



"OH, JEN! WHAT a crappy, crappy thing to do." Jazz didn't even bother with *hello* as her face appeared on Jenny's phone screen. Her disgusted expression matched Jenny's state of mind. "So typically Tuff, huh?"

Jenny had texted her sisters as soon as she and Luke had gotten the puppy fed and settled into his crate for the night. She found a certain fiendish pleasure in digging an old Eastman College sherpa-lined half-zip sweatshirt of Tuff's out of a bag intended for the church shelter, cutting the zipper out of it, and lining Harry's crate with it. The puppy bunched the fabric into a pile, curled up amidst the folds, and promptly fell asleep. Luke was in the shower, singing, and Jen had made

herself a cup of tea, which she was enjoying with a doughnut left over from the box her dad had brought to the marina that morning.

“A *puppy*? Seriously?” Jo’s welcome visage was on the other half of the phone screen, while Jenny herself was in a tiny square at the top. Jo’s fiancé, Alex, popped in over her shoulder and the two of them settled onto the sofa in the salon of his yacht. Apparently, it hadn’t hit dry dock yet.

“You got a puppy?” He grinned and waved. “What kind?”

“Hey, Alex.” Jenny lifted her chin in greeting. “It’s a Cavapoo, and I’m currently trying to devise some sort of evil revenge for Tuff.”

“No kidding!” Jo agreed, and envy streaked through Jenny as Jo leaned back against Alex’s broad chest and he rested his chin on her dark hair. “What the hell is a Cavapoo, and why on earth would Tuff get Luke a puppy without talking to you first?”

Jenny sipped her tea. “It’s a cross between a miniature poodle and Cavalier King Charles spaniel. Ask me anything about them. Luke and I have been googling like crazy since we got home from Bea and Pearl’s. And yes, why Tuff would do such a thing to me is the question of the hour.”

“That big jerk.” Jazz scowled, then brightened. “Go get it so we can see what it looks like.”

“It’s a *he* and his name is Harry Potter. What else?” Jenny couldn’t stop her lips from curving up. “He is a cutie. Look them up because he’s asleep in his crate right now, and I don’t want to disturb him. He’s the brown curly type.”

“Trust Luke to bring Harry Potter into it.” Jazz laughed and looked over her shoulder to speak to someone out of view. “Jenny got a puppy.”

“*Jenny* did not get a puppy!” Jenny rebuked. “Jenny had a puppy dumped on her by a man who is going to be in severe pain the next time she sees him.”

Jazz's fiancé, Eli Walker, appeared behind her, a smile wreathing his handsome, stubbled face. "Ha! Hey, Jen. You got a dog? That's cool."

"No, *I* didn't get a dog. Tuff got Luke a puppy in Cincinnati today without a word to me, and I'm going to kill him. I just need you guys to help me figure out a way to get rid of the body after I've done it."

Jazz laughed. "Oh, come on, sis. It'll be okay. We'll help you with the puppy. I'll bet Lukie is over the moon."

"He is." Jenny sighed. "And in typical Luke fashion, he's on his iPad, learning everything he can about training a puppy."

"It'll be fine. They can grow up together," Jo offered from her cozy position in Alex's arms. "Boris is amazing." She referred to Alex's sheltie, whom she had fallen almost as much in love with as his master. "I can't believe we never had a dog as kids."

Jazz giggled. "We never had a dog because Mom is not a dog fan and Dad was fine with cats. We got our dog time at Gram and Grandpa's." She snapped her fingers. "There you go, Jen. Grandpa will help you and Luke with the puppy. He'll be way into it."

Jenny nodded. "He will. I'm going to have to take him in to work with me since Luke's in school. The information that Bea gave us says they need to go out pretty frequently at first."

"They do when they're small, but look"—Alex held up his phone—"says here Cavapoos are smart dogs and it's their nature to want to please you. You're already ahead of the game."

"Thanks, Alex," Jenny murmured as she noticed a text notification at the top of her screen, then another. "Shoot. Tuff's texting me, the big chicken." Her phone pinged a third time. "Oh, oh, and Gabe just texted."

Jazz chuckled. "Sounds like you've got stuff to deal with, from the ridiculous to the sublime. We'll let you go."

“Wait! Gabe Dawson?” Eli had plopped down on the couch close to Jazz so he could peer into her phone screen too. “Are you two”—he leered and winked—“a *thing*?”

Even though her heart beat a little faster seeing Gabe’s name in her message notifications, Jenny doubted it was anything other than kindness that had prompted his “*How was your day?*” text. “We’re friends, Eli.” She really hated saying it out loud because she was pretty sure she’d like her friendship with the handsome professor to be more.

Jo snickered. “Well, ignore Tuff for tonight and go text-flirt with the good Dr. Dawson.”

Jazz grinned. “Excellent advice. Or send Tuff an angry emoji text and let him stew—he deserves it.”

How she loved her sisters, and the guys they loved were pretty great too. She tried not to feel like an outsider, a literal fifth wheel in their circle. Eli and Alex were terrific, and they teased and treated her like their own sister, but Jazz and Jo had entered a world that Jenny wasn’t part of anymore. Did *they* feel as though they were on the outside with their noses pressed against the glass when she married Tuff and moved away to Florida? Her heart ached a little bit, despite being glad for her sisters’ joy in their newfound loves.

Would it ever be her turn again? Did she even want it to be?

Chapter Six

GABE JUMPED AS the jangle of an old-fashioned telephone ring drew his reluctant attention from his laptop screen, where he'd been reading Josh's notes about the archaeological find upriver in Rising Sun. Not for the first time, he wished he'd chosen a ringtone that was a little less clanging, but this was the first one he'd come to that was easy to hear. Glancing at the clock above the fireplace, he searched for his phone, which he was fairly certain he'd left on the coffee table. Who would call him at ten thirty at night? Unless . . . lord, what if Mom had some sort of complication at the hospital?

Nope, the device wasn't under the stack of papers he'd left there; neither was it on the lamp table. Where was the damn thing? He stood for a second, listening, then followed the sound to the wing chair. Tossing aside the colorful throw pillow, he reached down into the cushions and pulled his phone out too late to catch the call. Notifications told him he'd not only missed a call from Jenny, but a text as well. When she hadn't answered his text earlier, he'd gotten caught up in the information Josh had sent him, figuring he'd talk to Jenny at some point. Hell, he wasn't even sure why he'd texted her, except that she'd been on his mind all day.

The text from fifteen minutes ago apologized for not responding immediately and said she had quite a story for him. She hadn't left a voicemail, but clearly, she was awake, so he tapped her number. Her quiet voice sent a shiver of sensation through him, even though she sounded rather tired and maybe even a little low.

He pulled his mind from Josh's notes and photos and focused entirely on the woman on the phone. "Hey, you. Sorry I missed your call. I couldn't find my phone."

She chuckled, a warm, intimate sound. "You having an absent-minded-professor moment there, Dr. Dawson?"

He settled into the wing chair, tugging the ottoman closer so he could put his bare feet on it. “I confess to being that, upon occasion. How are you tonight?”

She sighed. “I’m . . . um . . . kerfuffled, as my gram would say.”

“What’s up?”

“Tuff got Luke a puppy.”

Gabe waited for a few seconds, expecting the story to continue, but when she didn’t add anything else, he said, “Um . . . that’s . . . *nice*? Have you been looking for a puppy?”

Jenny’s sigh was not just long, it sounded exhausted. “Luke has been asking for one now and again, but I told him we’d have to wait until he was old enough to take full responsibility for it.”

“I’m guessing that’s not his current age of . . .” He waited for her to fill in the number, although he thought the boy looked to be about eight or ten. Gabe knew very little about children, but he enjoyed his colleagues’ kids when he was around them, which wasn’t very often.

“Eight,” Jenny supplied. “I was hoping we could put it off until he was at least ten. But Tuff took the choice out of my hands.”

“So you’re keeping it?” Gabe’s logical mind went immediately to ways to rehome a puppy, although he was guessing that once a kid fell in love, the dog would be staying.

“I guess so. We went by the pet store and picked up some things for him and got some information to sign Luke and Harry up for obedience classes in a few weeks.”

“Harry?” Gabe chuckled, quickly adding, “No wait, let me guess . . . our magical Hogwarts wizard?”

Jenny’s light laugh made him wish they were in the same room instead of talking on the phone. He wanted to see her whiskey-colored eyes light up and wait for the little curve of a dimple to show as she smiled. “Got it in one.”

“Wizards are great, and apparently, this puppy is a boy.”

“Yup, and thankfully, a sleeping little boy right now. I think the trip from Cincy did him in. It sure did Luke. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, even though he was certain he’d be awake all night thinking about Harry.”

“Is he in bed with him?” Gabe had never had a dog and was clueless as to how you adapted a puppy to a new home.

“God, no. He’s in a crate in the kitchen. He ate a little puppy chow, had a drink of water, did his business outside, and knocked off as soon as Luke shut the crate door.” There was a rustling sound and Gabe imagined her settling onto her plaid sofa, stretching, maybe pulling that fuzzy red blanket over her legs, before realizing he was missing part of what she was saying. “. . . worrying whether he’d cry all night. I’ve heard puppies do that when they’re first taken away from their mothers.”

He blinked, shaking his head to get the images of her he’d conjured out of his head. He didn’t do stuff like that—create fantasies about women. Well, that wasn’t entirely true, but he hadn’t invented one about Jenny Weaver since graduation fifteen years ago. A lot of water had passed under the bridge since then.

He’d dated occasionally during college and plenty, really, since he’d been at William and Mary. He’d even been in a couple of pretty serious long-term relationships, but he couldn’t seem to make himself take that last step with either of those women. The last woman he’d dated for about a year and a half, Naomi, a French professor, told him he had *commitment issues* after she’d finally proposed to him and he’d asked, innocently enough, what was wrong with the way things were. He’d thought they were doing just fine. *You are a commitment-phobe, Gabriel Dawson, and it’s cruel to make women believe you’re all in when you haven’t been in at all!*

He’d sat in a chair as she gathered up the few personal items she’d left in his apartment over the months they’d been together—shampoo, a toothbrush, a makeup bag, a couple of

nighties, a sweater, a four-pack of vanilla yogurt, and a bottle of wine—and shoved them into the capacious bag that she carried everywhere. He hadn't said a word as she gave him a long, hard stare before storming out. What was left to say? Frankly, he was too aware of the blessed quiet after she'd left. Naomi was a talker, which normally didn't bother him, but upon occasion, he'd wished she'd simply given him the highlights of her day instead of every excruciating detail. He'd even begun ignoring her phone calls now and again because he knew he'd be in for way more than he ever wanted to know. That probably should have been a clue that he and Naomi weren't meant to be.

Why did he now long to stay on the phone with Jenny, hear all about Harry Potter and the rest of her day? She'd charmed him so much describing the puppy's curly brown fur, he'd even grabbed his iPad so he could look up the breed while she shared her day. Gleaning information from a Cavapoo website, he peppered her with questions to keep her on the phone and to prevent himself from asking something inane, like, *What are you wearing?* That wasn't where they were—not yet, anyway. He chewed his lower lip, once again picturing Jenny, who had become even more beautiful in the years since he'd tutored her for the history final. But attracted as he was to his former high school crush, he didn't know whether she had any interest in him beyond friendship.

Despite having known several women over the years, he still didn't have a clue how to read them. Jenny had been kind and welcoming back in June at the reunion and they'd exchanged texts since then—friendly, chatty texts about goings-on in River's Edge or pictures of Luke scrubbing the docks or photos of his own work at Jamestown or even a quick picture of the autumn trees in Williamsburg. Nothing even faintly romantic or suggestive—the kind of sisterly texts he'd exchange with Chris. But they'd been enough to keep him from calling Naomi or seeking out any other female companionship. Now that he was here and planning to stay, at least for a while, maybe . . .

He stopped overthinking as she asked about his mom and if he'd been out to the dig yet. He hadn't, but he was anxious to get out there. It was the end of October, and who knew how much longer the weather would hold? Josh was planning a trip out at the end of the week, but Gabe really wanted to go before then. "Would you be interested in doing a drive-by with me maybe tomorrow or the next day?" He surprised himself with the question.

Judging from Jenny catching a little breath, he'd surprised her too. And that pleased him. "Would it be okay? I've never seen an archaeological dig before; well, except at the Barnhardt Settlement. You used to work there summers, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did." Gabe's memories of working at the living history museum just north and west of River's Edge were warm ones. "It's where I learned to love history. My dad spent his summers off from teaching working there and started taking Chris and me with him from the time we could walk. I had a ball. Chris hated it."

"I always envied you those summers up there when we were in high school. I was swabbing docks and selling ice and bait and fishing licenses, while you were getting to pretend you lived in 1817. Not so much jealous of the history part, more the playacting."

"Did you?" Gabe was surprised to hear her admission. "Honestly, I didn't realize you even knew I existed back then." Dammit, he hadn't meant to say that out loud. Her silence made him cringe. "I mean, you were always so popular. A cheerleader, dating athletes, and I was, well, pretty much a nerd."

Nothing except Jenny's breathing on the other end of the call. Heat crept up his neck as he gave it another go, no doubt just digging himself a deeper hole. "I-I sorta watched you and your sisters from afar. Until senior year, when Mr. Caldwell assigned me to be your tutor." Crap. Now he was just coming across as some kind of perve. "I mean . . . you were . . . I . . ."

She finally rescued him with a warm laugh. “Of course I knew you existed. You and all the other brainiacs intimidated the hell out of me.”

He let out a low sigh of relief. “I can’t imagine why. All I wanted was to be able to make a three-point shot like Conor Flaherty, instead of galumphing around gym class like some awkward giraffe. Oh, and date a cheerleader.”

“You were our valedictorian, Gabe. Basketball wasn’t your wheelhouse.”

“Neither were girls.” He chuckled. “I wanted to ask you out so very badly, but I just couldn’t work up the courage.”



“REALLY?” JENNY’S HEART thumped as she drained the dregs of her tea. Another cup sounded good, but she’d have to get up and walk to the kitchen, and she was too comfy there on the sofa, cuddled up under the fuzzy red blanket. Besides, Harry was in the kitchen and the last thing Jenny wanted to do was disturb the puppy. “Yet you took *Jo* to prom.”

He snorted a laugh. “An act of charity on her part. I’d asked Gwen Carlson to go with me and she’d said yes. Rented the tux, bought the corsage—all the right things, you know? Two days before the dance, she told me she’d gotten a better offer—Brent Foster, star baseball player. Jo was standing at her locker and heard the whole thing before I skulked away. Next class break, she stopped me and asked me if I’d go with her since she didn’t have a date.”

Jenny had heard the story completely differently—that Gabe had graciously asked Jo to go at the last minute after he discovered she didn’t have a date. Jo even joked that her sisters might have paid him to take her. She never revealed what she knew about Gwen tossing Gabe over for Brent. And what a crummy thing was that for Gwen to do? Jenny had seen Gwen, now married and frazzled, with three kids and an overweight, blustering husband, eyeing Gabe at the pub the

night before the reunion. *Sorry about you, Gwennie. You had your chance.*

Jen chuckled. “She said you spent most of the night telling her about the native people along the river.”

Gabe moaned. “Oh, God, I did, didn’t I? Poor Jo.”

“She loved it. Thought it was fascinating.” Jenny stretched and tugged the blanket tighter. “Speaking of fascinating, tell me about the dig upriver. What is it?”

“Sure you’re interested? As I recall, history wasn’t your favorite subject.”

“It was remembering the dates that killed me,” Jenny admitted. “But I’ve developed a whole new appreciation for it since I’ve been home, and Luke and I have made a couple trips to the Barnhardt Settlement. Wow, that’s some place. I still can’t believe you worked there all those summers. What did you do?”

“Everything. From just being a kid playing old-fashioned games while people passed through to working in the fields and helping reconstruct cabins and other buildings. My last gig there was as the assistant to the blacksmith—hot, sweaty work, but I sure learned a lot about life in early nineteenth-century Indiana.” Gabe’s enthusiasm was palpable, even over the phone.

“And the dig now?” Jenny stifled a yawn. She was truly interested, but it had been a long, exhausting day.

Gabe must have heard the yawn. “You know, it’s late, and you’re probably going to be up early with Harry. Like I said, I’m going to go out to the dig tomorrow morning—just a drive-by, well, a hike-by—Josh was able to get the county to close the gravel road up to the site since there are no other houses around there and Beakins Construction is being great about letting him be onsite until we see what’s up there. Any chance you could take a break from work and ride along?”

Jenny considered the next day’s schedule. There was nothing urgent since the marina was going into its slow time.

Just some boats to put into storage. She could help Grandpa with those after lunch, and Gram could handle the store, which would be going onto reduced hours soon, anyway. “I can take some time after I get Luke on the bus. Around nine thirty or so?”

“Sounds great. I’ll pick you up. Dress warm, wear boots,” Gabe instructed, a smile in his voice. “I-I’m glad you called, Jenny.”

A little shiver of pleasure skimmed through her at his words. “Me too, Gabe. Good night.”

She hugged the phone to her chest before tossing back the red throw, hopping up, and doing a little happy dance right there in the living room. She’d forgotten that feeling, that rush of fluttery breathlessness when the deep burr of a special man’s voice sounded in your ear. It had been so long . . . so very long since she’d even been interested in a man, and she rightly blamed Ryan Tuffington for putting her off men and relationships. So much easier and safer to close her heart. But here was Gabe, knocking on her heart’s door, and she was tempted, very tempted, because Dr. Dawson was not only gorgeous, he was kind and intelligent and fascinating.

He was also only here for a few weeks, which made him safe and fun. No fear of getting too involved because the good professor would be back in Virginia before either of them had a chance to actually develop any truly strong feelings for each other.

She tiptoed to the kitchen and bent down to peer into the crate at the sleeping puppy. Harry snuffled in his sleep and burrowed deeper into the fleece. Ah, good, still sleeping. She backed out, silent as a cat, and went back into the living room, turning out lights as she passed them.

Upstairs, she changed into her jammies, washed her face and brushed her teeth, but grabbed her robe and her pillow and took them downstairs, deciding that it was probably best to sleep on the sofa in order to hear the puppy if he started whining. Sliding back under the fuzzy throw, she picked up

her phone and flipped through her photos until she found two she'd taken the night of their fifteenth reunion a few months ago—one of Gabe at the meet-and-greet at the tavern. She'd taken that one from a distance under the pretext of simply getting shots of the event. And a selfie of her and Gabe standing on Alex Briggs's huge lovely yacht the night of the reunion.

Gabe looked delicious in both shots—tall, muscular, his black hair a little long, but combed back to show his lean jaw and sculpted cheekbones. Carefully groomed scruff and his dark, soulful eyes gave him a piratical appearance that had turned the head of every woman at the reunion. Jen had heard the whispered comments that followed him through the tavern at the meet-and-greet.

Who is that?

Surely that's not Gabe Dawson!

God, he's McDreamy.

I'll take me some of that.

And he had been completely oblivious, or at least it had appeared so to Jenny as the two of them sat, tucked away in a back booth, catching up over a couple of beers. The server kept bringing drinks over to Gabe, who took a sip of each and smiled uncomfortably at whoever had sent it, but never drank more of any of them. By the time he left, after being there only about an hour, there were at least six glasses on the table between them, and he'd joked that they looked like a couple of lushes. The next night at the reunion, when he'd practically begged her to take him with her to help out a stranded boater, she realized how shy he still was, despite being a college professor, looking like a *GQ* model, and no doubt beating back women in Virginia with a stick.

She chewed her lower lip and pulled the cover up to her chin. Had he ever been married? Engaged? In the several conversations they'd had, she'd never asked and he'd never offered. Despite his offhand mention of a wine-loving female

colleague/friend, he seemed very available, which was somewhat disconcerting. Jenny had closed off that part of her life after the divorce, devoting herself to Lucas and the family business. She was—she searched for the term—*wary*. That was the word. She was wary and unable to imagine life with a man again. Tuff had scorched her heart and she wasn't sure she'd ever completely heal. But a little holiday fun with a charming, handsome guy who was basically just passing through?

Maybe. She yawned and closed her eyes. *Maybe.*

Chapter Seven

AS FAR AS Jenny could tell, the site was mostly a huge dug-out place in the side of the cliffs, but the delight in Gabe's expression as he paced the outer rim of it told her it was much more.

He knelt down by one section, peering into the earth. "Jenny, come look!" He pointed to a rather large chunk of something covered in dirt, very gently brushing at it with his gloved fingers, but not picking it up. "Look at the basket-weave pattern on this and the colors! That's Shawnee."

Despite the sun, she shivered in the late October breeze as she bent down to peer at the half-buried shard. "That's actually woven clay, isn't it?"

"Yep. They were gifted potters." He rose and led her toward a large white tent that had been erected on the edge of the dig. "We'll leave it there for the team to find and catalogue. Let's go see what else they've found." He held back the tent flap and Jenny went in ahead of him, aware of how he had to duck his head to enter.

Four long tables, covered in what looked like butcher paper, were set up in rows that nearly filled the canvas structure, while, in one corner, a couple of chairs were set around an empty card table. So far, only one table was full of shards of pottery, pieces of dirty metal, and . . . was that a fork? Jenny pointed. "A fork? Native Americans used forks?"

Gabe picked up the three-tined tarnished utensil. "No. But this is definitely from the late eighteenth century, as are some coins they found and other pieces of pewter that Josh has already taken back to the university. Here, this is a shard of porcelain, definitely British, and out there"—he jerked his head toward the dig—"they've found evidence of a stone fireplace and a foundation. That's what makes this so

intriguing. It appears that settlers were living side by side with a Shawnee tribe.”

Jenny stuffed her gloved hands into her coat pockets, mostly because she was dying to pick up the bits and pieces on the table, but she was afraid of disturbing anything. Each piece had a number written under it. What if she put something back down in the wrong spot? The table did interest her, though. A broken pottery jug sat nestled against a little glass bottle that might have held medicine, while a round metal plate took its place next to a—“Good grief, what is *that*?”

Gabe glanced up from the other end of the table, where he was closely examining something that looked like an ancient beaded leather pouch. Smiling, he ambled down to where she pointed. “Looks like braided hair and leather.” He leaned in closer. “The indigenous people sometimes cut off their hair and put it with someone who died to protect them on the journey to the next life.” He squinted in the dim light. “Oh, my God, it’s *blond* hair and *black* hair braided together like in a bracelet, maybe?” He didn’t touch it. Instead, he pulled a pair of reading glasses from the inside pocket of his jacket and bent down to gaze more closely at the artifact.

“Do you think some little girls might have made a friendship bracelet out of their hair?” Fascinated, Jenny pressed closer to Gabe, their heads nearly touching as she created a story for the object. “Maybe they played together and were friends, and then the father of the white girl decided he needed to move his family upriver. You know, go West? So she cut a lock of her hair and a lock of the native girl’s hair and made this for her to remember her by.” She straightened and so did Gabe. “What if there’s another one exactly like it somewhere out West, and she wore it always and remembered her kindred spirit back on the Ohio?” She closed her eyes for a second, imagining two young girls as different as night and day and yet bound together in friendship. When she looked up, Gabe was smiling at her. “What?”

He nodded his head, a piece of dark hair falling over his forehead. “You’re a storyteller, Jenny Weaver. Have you ever

thought about being a writer?”

Heat rose from Jenny’s collar, and she was certain her cheeks were scarlet. “I’m no writer, even though I did make up stories for my sisters all the time when we were kids. My gram has always said I have an overactive imagination.”

Gabe placed one hand on her shoulder. “You have a fantastic imagination. You just wrote a children’s book. Right here in this cold, muddy tent.”

“Not really. I was only thinking about what this could be.” She pointed to the fragile piece on the table, then inexplicably shuddered at the thought of two young girls who were now long gone.

“Come on, let’s go. It’s cold, and Josh’s team will be out here soon.” Gabe led her away from the table and out into the sunshine again, making sure to close the flap and secure it with the Velcro fastenings. He held out his hand, and they clambered over the rocky path down to the road with her fingers snug in his grip. When they got to the car, he turned on the heat in the old Rover. “I can’t believe how cold it is for the end of October.”

Jenny rubbed her hands over her arms. “It’ll be Christmas before you know it.”

“Halloween tomorrow, though, then Thanksgiving, *then* Christmas.” Gabe reached behind him to grab a plaid wool throw. “Here, wrap up in this. Sometimes it takes the old girl a few minutes to warm up.”

“Thanks.” She allowed him to open up the blanket and arrange it around her shoulders, enjoying the simple act of someone taking care of her for a change. His breath on her cheek as he snugged the throw sent a frisson of sensation through her—all she had to do was turn her face toward him . . . The atmosphere in the old Land Rover warmed up and not merely because he’d cranked up the heater.

Suddenly, his hands stilled and he canted his head, a question in his dark-brown eyes and his lips mere inches from

her own. “Jenny, I-I . . .” The scents of coffee and cinnamon accompanied his whisper, and it was as if time had stopped for a moment and in the whole world, there were only the two of them. The car windows were beginning to steam up, and Jenny’s heart was about to pound out of her chest.

There was really only one thing to do—she framed his face with her palms and kissed him full on the mouth.



AT FIRST, GABE was too startled to react and he just sat there, lips closed, eyes open. Her lips were warm, despite the chill in the car, and the kiss became deeper. Although this was a fantasy come true, he wasn’t prepared for the rush of feeling. Somehow between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, Gabe had managed to keep the low embers of his feelings for Jenny Weaver banked. Now they were back and building into a bonfire. Suddenly, Dr. Gabriel Dawson was eighteen again, awkward, turned on, and unsure what to do next. His teeth bumped against hers and she pulled back, her sherry-colored eyes huge and her breath uneven. “Gabe, I’m sor—”

He touched a finger to her lips. “Shh. Let’s try that again.” This time, *he* initiated the kiss, soft and gentle at first, then building in urgency. He touched his tongue to the seam of her lips and she welcomed him in. His heart nearly burst—this was Jenny! *Jenny!* His hands shook and he tugged her closer with the blanket as their tongues thrust and parried. Heat shimmered between them, and he longed to touch her, slip his hands under her coat, under the WEAVER’S LANDING sweatshirt, and find all her curves and soft skin.

Her fingers danced over his shoulders and then slid down the front of his jacket to pull him even nearer. He leaned in until the console dug into his ribs. His elbow slipped, hitting the horn button on the steering wheel, and he made a muffled sound against her mouth at the blast.

She backed away. “Damn, are you hurt?”

He closed his eyes, too aware of the effect she was having on him. “No.” He shook his head and met her concerned gaze. God, she was beautiful—her kiss-swollen lips, her amazing, expressive eyes, her hair tousled where he’d tugged the knit cap from her head. He knew, in that instant, he’d do anything for her. He smoothed the strands and cupped her cheek. “It’s been a long time since I’ve made out in this car.”

Her lips curved upward in a shy smile. “Yeah? When was the last time?”

He swallowed hard, trying to get his emotions and his body back into control. “Never, come to think of it.” He glanced down ruefully at the console. “How do people do this?”

Jenny grinned and tilted her head toward the back of the car, which currently was minus the back bench seat because he’d taken over a dozen paper bags full of leaves from his mom’s yard to the composting station at the park the previous day. “Um . . . backseats were popular back in the day.” She turned her head. “But yours seems to be missing.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, it’s in my mom’s garage at the moment.” He gazed at her wistfully. “We do have two houses available and no parents to interrupt us.”

She touched his cheek, and he wondered if the stubble that had grown out in the past couple of days was a turnoff. He hoped not. “That’s true. Sadly, speaking of parents, I promised mine I’d be back before lunch. Dad has parts coming in and there are more boats to get into storage. Snow’s in the air, I think, even though it’s only Halloween.”

Impulsively, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers again—one last touch of her mouth before he took her back. A few hot minutes later, he settled back into his seat, glad that she’d reacted with the same passion he’d felt from her earlier.

She loosened her scarf and fanned herself with it. “Where did you learn to kiss like that, Dr. Dawson?”

The awkwardness, the uncertainty, disappeared. He straightened in his seat. The clumsy eighteen-year-old slipped away and he was a grown-up again. Unable to contain his delight at her flushed face, he grinned. “History wasn’t the only subject I worked hard at in college.”

Her laugh rang out in the confined space of the Rover. “I had no idea they offered a degree in kissing at IU.”

“Well, that was actually part of my graduate work.” He pulled his seat belt across his chest and snapped it. “Buckle up, Jenny Weaver, and I’ll take you back to the twenty-first century.”

They rode back to her house in comfortable silence, although he was very conscious of her, the scent of her perfume—a gentle mix of citrus and flowers—wafting toward him as she raked her fingers through her long hair. When they got back to her house, she didn’t hop out right away. Instead, she turned to him.

“Are you going to be passing out candy at your mom’s tomorrow night?”

His stomach dropped. “Oh crap, am I supposed to do that?”

She chuckled. “It’s not mandatory. Turn off the porch light and no one will come to your door.” Inspiration showed in her expression. “As a matter of fact, why don’t you come over and help me? Tuff is taking Luke out treat-or-treating, so I’ll be on my own.”

He jumped on the invitation. “What time? What can I bring?”

“Be here around six and just bring yourself.”

“Is this a costume thing?”

She smiled. “I usually dress up—this year I’m going to be Princess Leia.”

“The slave costume? The gold bikini?” Despite the fact that he was teasing, his mouth watered at the thought.

“Hardly.” She smirked. “Sorry, professor, it’s the white robes with the heavy belt and the hood. Luke is going to be an Ewok. I worked for a month on his costume. Sewing that fuzzy fabric is hard! He looks darling, though.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’ll be a beautiful Princess Leia, even completely covered.” He gripped the steering wheel to keep from reaching over to kiss her. “We can always revisit the gold bikini in warmer weather.”

She offered him an arch look. “Yeah, well, don’t hold your breath, bud. I think I’m past bikinis, especially gold ones.”

“I would argue that.”

She smiled. “Thanks for showing me the dig. May I go again sometime?”

His heart soared. “Of course. Maybe Luke would find it interesting.”

“I’m sure of it.” She unbuckled her seat belt, leaned over, and dropped a light kiss on his cheek. “See you tomorrow night.” Then she scooted out of the car, bolted through the gate, and disappeared into the house.



“WHY DO YOU want your dad’s old, beat-up leather jacket?” Gabe’s mom glanced up at him as he pushed her wheelchair down the hall in River Bend Rehabilitation Center the next morning. She’d just finished her first session with the physical therapist, and Gabe had been pleased with how well she’d done. “It’s in the attic, in that green trunk with all his other old army stuff.”

Should he confess he was trying to impress a woman on Halloween? It felt incredibly high school, although, really, how was it any different from putting on a suit and tie for a date? “I’m going to help Jenny Weaver pass out candy tonight, and we’re dressing up.”

She was quiet as he wheeled the chair into her suite and helped her get comfortable in the recliner next to the bed.

When he plopped down in the wheelchair opposite her, she gave him a knowing smile. “There’s also Dad’s old canvas messenger bag and a holster and belt if you need them. You’ll have to improvise the gun and the whip.”

He grinned. “You think you know who I’m going to be, don’t you?”

His mom chuffed a laugh. “Of course I do. You may be well into your thirties, sweetie, but you’re still my son, and I know you better than anyone.” She reached out and patted his knee. “Come by and show me, or at least have Jenny take a picture of you and text it to me, okay?”

He nodded. “I will.”

A few seconds of silence and then, “You want to tell me what’s up with her?”

Gabe stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles, staring at his suede desert boots. Those would probably work with the rest of his costume for tonight. Chewing his lower lip, he considered the question. “Honestly, Mom, I have no idea.”

“You’ve had a crush on her since eighth grade.” His mom’s smile was kind. “I remember when the history teacher asked you to tutor her senior year. You spent more time primping in the bathroom on those days than Chris ever did.”

He shrugged. “That sure served me, didn’t it? She tolerated those tutoring sessions enough to get a decent grade on the final. All she could focus on was what time Ryan Tuffington was going to show up.”

Mom pursed her lips and looked at him over the top of her glasses. “He’s out of her life now, though, isn’t he?”

Gabe’s heart squeezed. “Not entirely. They have a kid together, so he’ll always be there.”

“Are you still in love with her? After all these years? Is she what has kept you from making a commitment to Naomi and the other one? Daria?”

Heat filled Gabe's cheeks at the probing questions. Fact was, he probably *was* still in love with Jenny Weaver. The kisses they'd shared yesterday had made his heart pound and his body heat up and tighten like no other woman's had.

"You know she's not that little cheerleader you crushed on in high school anymore." His mother's eyes narrowed behind the rimless lenses. "And you're not an awkward, timid teenage boy with raging hormones."

"She sure makes me feel like one," Gabe admitted, meeting his mother's frank gaze.

"A lot of water has passed under both your bridges since high school, Gabriel. And you have a life—a good life—in Virginia. Hers is here with her child and her family business."

He caught his breath. This wasn't like his adventurous mother, who always encouraged him to *go for it*. It was *she* who'd pushed him to pursue a double major in history and archaeology when he waffled about going for his PhD, telling him that teaching high school history would never be enough. *She* was the one who encouraged him to take the trips to Egypt, to the ruins in Brazil, and the castles in the south of France during his summer breaks. Caution was never his mother's advice, and yet... "Are you telling me you don't think I should try to see what's possible with Jenny?"

"You're only going to be here a few weeks."

"I don't know that for sure." Gabe rose and paced the large, sunny room, staring out the window at the leafless trees in the courtyard. Winter was truly on its way, and Christmas *was* less than two months away. "Maybe I'll stay, sign on to Josh's dig, teach a few classes up at Warner." He was processing out loud, which was never a good thing to do in front of his mother.

"Gabriel, you've finally started teaching after years of going all over the world, digging in the dirt, and she's recently out of what I understand was a difficult marriage. She may not be ready for another relationship. I'd hate to see either of you

get hurt.” She held up her hands defensively. “I know, I know. You are both adults and I wouldn’t dream of telling you how to handle your love life. Have I ever? Just be careful, okay?”

With a long look at his mother’s furrowed brow, Gabe finally stooped down to drop a kiss on her forehead and lied through his teeth. “I got this, Mom. Jenny is just a friend.”

Chapter Eight

“**D**AMMIT, RYAN.” JENNY scowled at her ex in the mirror as she wrapped a braid around her head in a coronet à la Princess Leia. “Luke and I already decided what he was going to be for Halloween. Now he’s up there, changing from the Ewok costume I spent a month making to the Harry Potter one you brought him!”

“You gotta admit, I make a great Hagrid.” Grinning, Tuff came up behind her, all hairy and burly in the costume he’d found for himself at the same pricey costume shop where he’d bought Luke’s wand, cape, and round glasses. He’d even managed to find a Gryffindor striped tie and a Hogwarts scarf. Thankfully, the disarming smile that had never failed to cool off her anger when they were married no longer worked.

“I can’t believe you think that grin will still work on me, Ryan.”

“Uh-oh, *Ryan*, again.” He imitated her tone. “That’s how I know you’re pissed. I’m *Ryan* instead of Tuff.”

She pinned the other braid around her head and glared. “You bet I’m pissed. I told you three weeks ago who he was going to be. Why would you do this?”

“I didn’t want to be any of the *Star Wars* characters”—he pushed his lower lip through the heavy beard in a pout—“and he loves Harry Potter. Plus, admit it, this Hagrid costume rocks.” He held open the dark-brown long coat, exposing the rest of the outfit, which was clearly expensive, before wagging his head to show off the huge fake beard and crazy-wild hair. “He’s going to have fun. That’s what Halloween is all about.”

The whole discussion had taken place in hushed tones to keep Luke from overhearing, despite the fact that Jenny wanted to scream at Tuff and tell him to buzz off. Shoving the

last pin into her hair, she turned around. “You’ve got to stop trying to buy his affection. He loves you, okay? You’re his dad. Just be a dad. Stop trying to be his buddy or his playmate.”

Tuff winked. “Dads are boring.”

She glared at him. “They don’t have to be.” As she brushed past him to head up the stairs, he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“You look hot, baby. Way hotter than the real Princess Leia.” He pulled her closer and the fuzzy beard touched her cheek.

She put one hand against his chest. “Do not even go there.” She wrenched away, turned her back on him, and headed up the stairs. “I’ll get Luke,” she called over her shoulder.

Luke was in front of the vanity in the bathroom, struggling with the striped tie. He stopped when she appeared in the doorway. “I can’t do the tie.”

“Let me.” She stood behind him and worked on the strip of fabric. “Watch now, it’s cross over, then through, around again, tuck it in, and give it a tug, and voilà.” She produced a perfect Windsor knot in the striped tie, before picking up the scarf and wrapping it jauntily around his neck. “Now, hold on”—she opened a drawer in the vanity and plucked out a lip liner—“we need to make Harry’s scar, right?”

Luke’s gap-toothed grin tugged at her heart. “Oh yeah!”

Carefully, she marked his temple with the signature lightning bolt scar and brushed his dark hair back to reveal it.

“That looks awesome, Mom.” Luke plopped the round glasses on his nose and turned into the very picture of the young wizard. He smiled at her in the mirror, then sobered, glancing at the Ewok costume abandoned on the bathroom floor. “Are you mad at me for changing?”

Jenny wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back to her chest, dropping a kiss on the top of his silky hair. “Not a

bit. You make a wonderful Harry Potter.”

He turned serious. “I can be an Ewok in the parade on Saturday. I’m going to walk with Ali, and she’s gonna be a Jedi and her little brother is Grogu.”

“Perfect.” Jenny hugged him and swallowed the anger at Tuff. What was the point, anyway?

“Luke, are you coming down here? All the good candy will be gone if we don’t get out there,” Tuff called from the bottom of the stairs.

“Coming!” Luke headed for the door, but stopped and turned. “You look really pretty, Mom.”

Jenny sighed. “Thank you, sweetheart.” She reached behind her. “Here, don’t forget your wand.” She followed him downstairs, gathering up the fabric pumpkin bag she’d made for him, too, and making sure he had his puffer jacket on under the cape—it was chilly out there.

“Where’s *my* bag?” Tuff sulked under the beard.

Jenny frowned. “You can beg treats off your eight-year-old son, you big baby.”

He shrugged. “No problem. No doubt there will be *adult* treats at Clyde and Gloria’s and other houses along the way.” He made a ferocious face at Luke and, in a passable imitation of Hagrid, growled, “Come on, ’arry, let’s go get some treats.”

As they opened the front door, her heart did a little leap. Gabe’s Range Rover was pulling up in front of the house.

Tuff stopped midstep. “What’s *he* doing here?”

“He’s going to help Mom pass out candy.” Luke scurried down the steps, meeting Gabe at the picket gate. “Hey, Dr. Dawson.”

“Hiya, Harry.” Gabe grinned. “Have you seen Luke Tuffington anywhere? I brought him something and—”

Luke giggled and took off his glasses. “It’s me!”

Gabe put one hand on his chest and faked aghast damn well. “It *is* you. Well, I thought for sure you were Harry Potter himself.”

“Look! My dad is Hagrid!”

Gabe’s gaze raked over Tuff. “So he is.” He turned back to Luke. “If you can guess who I am, I have a treat for you.”

Luke eyed him up and down, then walked a slow circle around him, which gave Jenny the perfect opportunity to stare at him herself. *Whew*. “I know! You’re Indiana Jones. Mom and I just watched it the other night.”

Standing there looking killer in a worn leather jacket over a khaki shirt and dark-brown pants, Gabe shoved the sable-colored fedora back on his head and chuckled. “You aced it, kid.” He took a couple of packages of Skittles from his jacket pocket and dropped them in Luke’s bag.

“Thanks!” Luke pointed to the pistol at Gabe’s waist. “Is that a real gun?”

Gabe pulled it out. “Nope, it’s a toy from when I was your age, but the holster is regular army and so is the bag. They were my dad’s.” He pointed to the canvas messenger bag slung across his chest. “The whip I borrowed from the kid next door to my mom.”

“It’s awesome.” Luke touched the looped leather whip hanging from Gabe’s belt. “Does it make that cracking noise if you swish it?”

“I don’t know. We can give it a—”

“Luke, we gotta get going.” Tuff swept down the steps, his long coat flowing behind him.

“Oh, okay.” Luke gave Gabe a sunny smile. “Thanks for the Skittles, Indy.”

“Have fun, Harry.” Gabe waved as Tuff hurried Luke out the front gate without so much as a glance at Gabe, and allowed it to slam shut behind him.

Gabe sauntered up the steps, stopping on the top one and giving her a nod and a bow. “Your Highness.”

Jenny sucked in a breath. “Hello, Indy. You look fine.”

He came up onto the porch. “What happened to your Ewok?” He glanced next door where Luke and Tuff were already ringing the doorbell. “Never mind. I think I can guess.”

She extended her hand toward the tableau she’d created earlier, with the wicker porch furniture around the outdoor heater, an insulated carafe of mulled cider, two thick mugs, and a plate of cheeses and crackers. A large bowl of treats sat on a small table where trick-or-treaters could help themselves. “Have a seat.” Leading the way, she settled in the corner of the settee, allowing plenty of room for him to join her. “Indiana Jones. I love it. Perfect for you.”

He glanced down at his get-up and shrugged. “Easy choice.” He stepped over to the settee, sat down next to her, and put one finger under her chin to raise her face to his. “You look incredible.” He dropped a quick kiss on her nose just as the gate opened and two of the Flaherty wives—Sam and Megan—came through.

“Hey, Jens!” Sam was dressed in bell-bottom jeans and a flowy top and wore strings of colorful beads hanging around her neck, dangly peace symbol earrings, and a bright scarf tied around her long auburn hair. She held up two fingers in a *V*. “Peace, baby.” Her three kids, adorable in *Star Wars* costumes, ran up the steps to *ooh* and *ah* over Jenny as Princess Leia.

Meghan, dressed in a severe pants suit with her hair up in a bun that was held in place with a yellow #2 pencil, and wearing oversized black glasses, came up with her little Finn, dressed up as, of all things, an Ewok, in tow. She waved at Gabe. “Indy! Why aren’t you Han Solo? We seem to have a theme going here this year.”

Gabe rose and offered his hand to Jenny so she could stand up too. The touch of his fingers sent zings of electricity

through her. “Had I but known. Hi, Meg. Sam.” He nodded to both women. “I get the hippie, Sam, but Meg?”

“I’m an accountant.” Meg released Finn’s hand and did a slow turn in front of them.

Gabe’s laugh was warm and candid. “Ah, so we both decided to be true to type this year.”

Sam eyed him, then gave Jenny a raised brow. She could only imagine what was going through her friend’s mind. Sam was an incorrigible matchmaker, but she merely chuckled. “You and Indy sure make archaeology look smokin’, Gabe.”

Before he could respond, Sam’s son, four-year-old Griffin, pointed to the holster on Gabe’s hip. “Is that real?”

“Nope, it’s a toy.” Gabe crossed over and knelt so he was at eye level with the boy, who looked exactly like a baby version of his dad, Conor. “Crazy about your ears, Grogu.”

Griff giggled and held out his bag. “Trick or treat.”

Jenny watched Gabe tease and interact with the little ones as he dropped candy into each bag. Why was this man not married and a father? His rapport with kids was heartwarming and so genuine. Thank heaven he wasn’t married, though. He wouldn’t be here if he were. When she glanced up, she caught both Sam and Meg looking at her curiously. With a little shake of her head, she scooted over to the steps and held out her phone. “I want a picture of me and the kids.”

Meghan took the phone. “Come on, kiddos. Let’s get a picture with Princess Leia.”

Nine-year-old Ali, dressed as a Jedi, exactly as Luke had said earlier, reached for Jenny’s hand. “You’re so beautiful, Miss Jenny.”



GABE COULDN’T DISAGREE—JENNY did look beautiful in her long white robes, with her shiny brown hair in the braided coronet that was Leia’s signature look. He pulled out his own phone

and snapped a couple of photos of the *Star Wars* entourage, then waved Megan and Sam over and went down to the sidewalk so he could take a picture of the three friends together. “If I did social media, this one would go on Instagram tonight.” He shot them from a couple of different angles as they mugged for his camera.

“Text it to me. I’ll post it,” Meg said, catching Finn as he started to open the top of the jack-o’-lantern sitting on the table by the door. “No, sweetie, that’s hot.”

Sam held her hand out for his phone. “Here, get up there with Jen and I’ll take one of the two of you. Indiana Jones and Princess Leia—they probably belonged together all along. And I’ll put my number and Meg’s in your phone, so you can text us these pics.”

“Except that Leia was long gone from another galaxy before Indy was born. Remember the crawler at the start of all the *Star Wars* films?” Gabe ran up the steps to stand next to Jenny.

“Do *not* quote *Star Wars* to me. We get enough of that nerdy crap from Brendan. He’s already got Maggie watching the original films and she’s barely two,” Sam teased as she lined up the shot. “Closer. Put your arm around her, Indy.”

“It’s never too early to introduce a kid to *Star Wars*. They’re classics,” Gabe said as he obligingly draped his arm around Jenny’s shoulders and drew her against his taller form. She fit perfectly and his body tightened at the warmth of her through their layers of clothing. He looked down and caught her gazing up at him, her smile sweet and intimate, her sherry-brown eyes sparkling in the porch lights. When she slipped her arm around his waist, he swallowed hard, resisting the urge to kiss those plump pink lips. Maybe even pick her up and carry her inside. What did Princess Leia wear under those robes, anyway? More clothes? Sexy, skimpy underwear? Or possibly —

“Want to try one looking at the *camera*, you two?” Sam’s sardonic tone brought him back to the chilly October night.

She nodded when they both looked forward. “There we go.”

“Mommy, we gotta keep going.” Ali tugged at her mom’s tie-dyed top. “Come on.”

With thank-yous and good-byes wafting through the crisp air, the Flahertys left, but that didn’t mean he was alone again with Jenny because a continuous stream of costumed kids and adults came through the gate for the next two hours. At one point, Jenny went down and propped the wooden gate open with a flowerpot, so it was easier to access. They barely had time to take a seat and grab a cracker or a slice of cheese, let alone have a sip of cider, before another troupe of trick-or-treaters turned up.

The night seemed to be a roaring success for River’s Edge, and Gabe would have put money on the fact that damn near every child in town had passed through Jenny’s gate and received a treat. If he’d thought for one moment this was going to be an opportunity to spend time alone with her, he was sadly mistaken, for just as it seemed they’d run out of costumed kids, Hagrid and Harry returned.

Luke flew up the porch stairs, carrying a pumpkin bag that was bulging with treats, while Tuff came along at a more leisurely pace, lingering to move the flowerpot and shut the gate. It took him an awful long time to get the latch closed, and when he turned around, his stilted walk told Gabe he’d had a few treats himself. Apparently, old Clyde Schwimmer was still passing out mulled cider spiked with cinnamon whiskey to the parents of trick-or-treaters.

Luke was wired, chattering a mile a minute about all the places they’d been, who they’d encountered, the costumes other kids had worn, and how Matt Santos and Aidan Flaherty had worn top hats and tails and tap-danced their way down Main Street. “Mom, their feet made this clicking sound. You know how?”

Jenny had pulled Luke onto the settee between them and Gabe caught the scent of little boy sweat and sugar wafting from him and his bag of goodies. She smoothed the kid’s dark

hair away from his damp forehead, her focus fully on her son. “No. Tell me how.”

“Little pieces of metal on the bottom of their shoes. Matt showed me. It was so cool! I want to learn how to tap-dance.”

“*Pfft.*” Tuff snorted as he swayed up the steps. “Aidan Flaherty’s a ham and he’s raisin’ that kid to be jus’ like him. You need to play football, Lukie, get a scholarship to a good school. Dancin’s for”—he grabbed the pillar next to the steps, and leaned against it—“the guys who couldn’t make the team.” He closed his eyes.

Luke’s face fell and the settee moved slightly as Jenny stiffened her spine, then pressed a kiss to Luke’s forehead. “We can talk to Aidan after the holidays, honey. Maybe he and Matt can teach you.” She took the bag full of candy from the boy’s lap and set it next to her on the porch floor. “Why don’t you head up and get out of your costume and into your jammies?” She handed him a short bottle of water from the small cooler under the settee table. “Take this and drink it, brush your teeth, wash your face.” She gave him a little push. “I’ll be up in a few minutes to tuck you in.”

Tuff opened one eye. “I can tuck ’im in.”

Jenny gave the kid a little nudge. “Say your good nights, sweetie.”

Luke startled Gabe by standing up, launching himself at him, and giving him a hug. Even though Chris’s kids hugged him every time he saw them, Luke’s little arms snugged tight around Gabe’s neck for mere seconds moved him inexplicably. This was different. This was Jenny’s son. His heart swelled as he returned the hug. “Good night, Harry. Happy Halloween.”

Luke stepped back and grinned. “Good night, Indy. Thanks for helping Mom tonight.”

“My pleasure.”

Luke moved on to his dad, putting his arms around his father’s thick waist and holding on. “Thanks for taking me trick-or-treating, Dad. You were a good Hagrid.”

Tuff hauled himself off the pillar and managed to hug his son without tipping over and crushing the poor kid. Somehow, he was even able to fall back into his character, lowering his voice gruffly. "I had fun, 'arry. See you on Saturday, okay?"

Luke's nanosecond-long frown told Gabe that whatever Tuff had planned two days hence, the kid wasn't looking forward to it. "Sure, Dad. Good night."

Her lips pressed tight together and her hands clenched in her lap, Jenny waited until Luke's tread on the stairs inside had disappeared before she dealt with Tuff. In the meantime, the man had dropped into the wicker rocking chair, his head thrown back. The ridiculous beard and wig had gone cockeyed and was covering his nose and one eye.

She popped to her feet and took a sip of cider before going over to stand in front of Tuff, her spine straight, her hands on her hips, and looking very regal. "Ryan." She paused, while Gabe debated whether he should stay or go. If he knew how Tuff was going to behave, he'd get up and go in the house while she handled her ex, but Ryan Tuffington was a big guy and Jenny was small, if fierce. He watched and waited.

Jenny prodded Tuff's shin. "Ryan. Get up and go home."

The dude didn't even open his eyes. "In jus' a sec."

She prodded him again, this time with a full-on kick in the shins. "Now, Ryan."

"Ow!" Tuff sat up, tugged off the beard and wig, and blinked at her. "What the hell, Jen? That hurt." He pulled himself out of the chair with a real effort.

Jenny held out her hands. "Give me your keys."

Tuff stuffed the hair into his coat pocket, where it peeked out, looking like a half-mad tribble. "No."

She held her ground. "Your keys, Ryan. You're not driving home."

"It's jus' a few blocks." Tuff walked stiffly to the steps. "I'll be fine."

Jenny stepped in front of him. “Your keys, or I call Ryker Lange the minute you get behind the wheel.”

That sobered him up enough to give her a bleary grin. “What will the neighbors think if my car’s parked in front of your house all night?”

She snorted. “Probably that you were too sloshed to drive home, which you are.”

Gabe couldn’t stand it another minute. This wasn’t his rodeo, but Tuff was in no shape to take himself home, and it was obvious Jenny was nearing the end of her tether. “I’ll drive him home and walk back while you get Luke tucked in.” He crossed the porch and took Tuff’s arm. “Give me your keys, old pal.”

Tuff’s eyes widened as he opened his mouth to object, but then snapped it shut, and without another word, he shrugged and handed over his car keys, allowing Gabe to lead him down the steps and settle him into the passenger seat of the ’Vette.

Before he slid into the driver’s seat, Gabe gave Jenny a wink and a thumbs-up over the roof of the car. “I’ll be back.”

Chapter Nine

GABE SCANNED THE houses along West Evergreen for the Tuffingtons' roomy Queen Ann home. It had a tower. That much he remembered from years ago. Ah, there it was, looking as elegant as it always had when Gabe had ridden his bike past it as a ten-year-old. He stopped in front and turned off the car. "You're home."

Tuff, who'd spent the short ride with his cheek pressed against the passenger door window, merely grunted.

Gabe yanked the keys from the ignition and dangled them in front of Tuff. "Dude, go sleep it off."

Suddenly, Tuff pulled himself upright in the seat and swiped a hand across his mouth. "I'm not that sloshed."

"Could've fooled me . . . and your ex-wife and son."

Tuff smoothed his fingers over his short, almost buzz cut, and Gabe noticed that his brown hair was thinning right at the crown. "Jus' a couple cups of cider at Clyde's. Oh, and Doc Boggs had mulled wine . . . *that* was pretty tasty."

"Whatever. You're home." Gabe reached for his door handle.

Tuff held up one hand, and Gabe was struck by how big it was—the guy was perfect for the role of Hagrid. "Wait. I wanna ask you somethin'."

Curious, but wary, Gabe set the keys on the console and gazed wordlessly at the man next to him, waiting.

Tuff blinked. "What's up with you and Jen?"

How predictable. Gabe sighed. "Not open for discussion. See you around."

"No, no . . ." Tuff laid his head against the seat back. "Wait. You're right. None of my business. Jen's a free agent

now.” His face fell. “I screwed up.”

Gabe didn’t say anything. What could he say except, *You sure did, buddy*, and what was the point of that? He really didn’t want to have a discussion about Jenny with her ex-husband. “I gotta go. You gonna get inside, okay? It’s cold out here.”

“I lied to her.” Tuff screwed up his face in a painful expression, and Gabe prayed he wasn’t going to start crying. No way was he equipped to do therapy with a former high school football hero, particularly not the ex-husband of the woman he was currently falling in—

Gabe sucked in a breath, stopping the thought before it could fully form. Not the time to dissect his own feelings about Jenny Weaver. “Look, go inside,” he repeated. “Get some sleep.”

“I’m not on suspension. I’m *done* at Eastman. Keepin’ it on the down-low—they’re gonna pay out my contract, but they don’t want me back.” Tuff’s voice was low and rough. “I’m not going to jail or anything, but I’m pretty much done with coaching college ball.”

Gabe leaned one elbow on the steering wheel and rubbed his forehead. *Well, crap*. What the hell was he supposed to do with *this* information? “So, now what?” He wasn’t even sure if that was the right question, but he was floundering here and longing to escape back to Jenny’s.

“Dunno. Need to be near Luke. Gotta find a job here, I guess. Contract’s up at the end of May. Maybe teaching, but shit.” Tuff sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Don’t wanna teach.”

Gabe ransacked his mind for something intelligent to say—this was so far out of his wheelhouse, it wasn’t even funny. But Tuff was gazing at him, his expression going from dejected to flat tragic. Finally, he grasped at something he’d seen on the bulletin boards in Deke’s Market. “Trudy Morrow is looking for barn help.”

Tuff's brows came together in a *V*. "*What?*"

"I remember you used to ride horses when we were kids. Trudy opened a boarding stable and a riding school out at her place. She needs help." He shrugged. "You know horses and you need a job."

"Trudy Morrow's boarding?"

"That's my understanding."

Tuff's eyes narrowed. "So you think I should shovel horse crap?"

"It's a job."

"Think I might be a little overqualified, Professor?"

"Your call." Gabe opened his door. "Night, Ryan." Slipping out of the seat, he shut the driver's door behind him, leaving Tuff to his own devices.



THE EIGHT-BLOCK WALK back to Jenny's was chilly, and Gabe was looking forward to a cup of something hot and some time alone with her. But when he arrived, the porch light was off and he saw only one light on inside as he peered in the glass at the top of the door. He wasn't sure he should ring the bell—what if it woke up Luke? Biting his lower lip, he debated, then simply tried the knob. The heavy wood door opened with nary a squeak, and Gabe stepped into the small foyer. "Hello?" He kept his voice low, so as not to disturb either Luke or the new puppy.

Tiptoeing into the living room, where a fire crackled in the fireplace and a soft lamp made a shadow on the ceiling, he thought he heard the puppy snuffling. When he peeked over the back of the sofa that sat square in front of the fireplace, his beautiful Princess Leia was curled up there, the puppy cuddled against her chest. Both were fast asleep.

Jenny's expression was one of perfect peace, which surprised him, given how her evening had ended. He was loath

to wake her, but on the other hand, she probably didn't want to sleep on the sofa all night in her Princess Leia robes with a dog in her arms. He stroked a gentle finger down her cheek and she merely murmured and burrowed deeper into the cushions.

"Hey," he whispered, and bent lower over the back of the sofa, inhaling the scent of her—clean and floral with a hint of something else warm he couldn't define. Probably puppy, come to think of it. "Jenny."

She turned her head and blinked at him. "Gabe?"

"Hello, Your Highness." He touched her nose. "You probably need to get up to bed."

"What time is it?" She looked around the dim room and suddenly seemed aware that she had the puppy curved against her. "Harry was whining in his crate, so I thought maybe I could make him feel safer." Jenny sat up, even though she was obviously still very drowsy.

"It's a little after ten."

"How'd it go with Ryan?"

"He's home and, hopefully, sleeping it off."

"Was he crappy to you?"

He reached for the puppy and cuddled it against his shoulder. "Not at all."

"What did he have to say?"

"Nothing much." Gabe wasn't about to share any of what Tuff had told him—that was something the two of them had to discuss, and it was probably best if he stayed out of their broken marriage. "It was a pretty quiet ride."

She rose and rubbed the back of her neck. "I'm so sorry you had to do that." She gave him a small, slow smile. "You're a very kind man, Gabe Dawson."

"You're easy to be kind to, Jennifer Weaver." He touched his cheek to Harry's soft curly fur. "Shall I put him back in his

crate?”

Jenny yawned and nodded, padding after him as he took the puppy to the kitchen and carefully set him in the crate. Harry whined and opened his eyes. Jenny scrunched up her nose. “That’s the reason I got him out in the first place. Argh.” She knelt down to pet the dog and quiet him.

Gabe thought for a moment. Hadn’t his colleague, Jean-Michel, told him that puppies like lullabies? “Do you have a smart speaker, like, you know, Alexa?”

Just as Jenny pointed to the pie safe in her breakfast nook, a pleasant female voice came from that general direction. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Oh, okay.” Gabe chuckled. “Alexa, play lullabies.”

Low, soft music began to emanate from the smart speaker and within seconds, Harry had stopped whining to listen. Jenny rearranged the fuzzy material inside the crate and continued to stroke the puppy until he began to relax. After a few minutes, she eased the door on the crate closed, and with a finger to her lips, tiptoed out of the kitchen with Gabe following close behind her.

When they got to the hallway, she leaned against the newel post and raked her fingers through her hair, dislodging the coronet of braids. With a sigh, she tugged the pins out, shoved them in the pocket of her white robe, and began to undo the braids.

Gabe couldn’t resist. “Here, let me.” With an inquisitive expression on her face, she dropped her hands and turned her back to him. He unwound her hair, careful not to tug too hard, and combed his fingers through the dark, silky strands to separate them. Lord almighty, it took everything he had not to wrap her lush hair around his hand, pull her back against him, and press his lips to the delicate skin of her neck. She tipped her head back, clearly enjoying the experience, so he threaded his fingers higher and gently massaged her scalp.

“Mmm, that’s heavenly.” Jenny’s eyes closed. “Anyone ever tell you that you have magical fingers?”

Gabe continued the quiet pressure, feeling her relax even as his own muscles began to tighten—some more than others. “Not lately.” His voice came out raspy, and he was too aware of the effect touching her so intimately was having on his senses. Surely, if he slipped one arm around her, tugged her back against him, she would feel what was happening and would turn in his arms and—

Suddenly, she yawned. An enormous, jaw-cracking yawn. As much as he wanted to sweep her up into his arms and carry her up the stairs in true romance-hero fashion, it was clear he wasn’t going to be making love to Jenny Weaver tonight.

With a final whisk through her hair and a quick kiss on the top of her head, he turned her toward the steps. “Go to bed. I’ll turn off the fire and lock the door on my way out.”

She took one step up before rotating to face him. They were nearly on eye level. “But, Gabe, I meant for us to have some wine and raid Luke’s chocolate stash and—”

He put one finger to her lips. “Shhh. You’re practically asleep on your feet. I’ll see you soon.”

She framed his face in her small hands and kissed his lips—a kiss filled with intention and maybe . . . promise? “Thank you,” she said, and kissed him again, quicker, lighter. “I feel like all I’ve said to you tonight is thank you. You’re a good person, Gabe.”

Gabe touched his forehead to hers, all the while fighting the impulse to abandon all gentlemanliness and just make love to her right there on the stairs. “Get some sleep,” he whispered, and went in for one more kiss. “Good night, Jenny Weaver.”



“I HAVE NO idea what the man is thinking. He’s a complete mystery. One minute, he’s kissing me, then he’s gone for days

on end. And the way he says my name—*Jenny Weaver*, all husky and deep—God, it’s the sexiest thing you ever heard.” Jenny eyed the painting that Jazz was hanging in the front room of the Amy K. Sweetman Center for the Arts. “Up a hair on the right. No, your other right. There, you’ve got it.”

“He’s been gone since graduation, Jens. To him, you’re still Jennifer Weaver, too-cool cheerleader, unattainable, out of his league.” Jazz backed up and cocked her head. “I think it’s perfect there, don’t you?”

“I like it. Whose is it?” Jenny stepped closer to examine the watercolor of the Warner mansion dressed up in snowy holiday garb. “Harper Gaines?”

“She’s Dot and Mary Higgins’s niece.” Jazz held up another piece—this one a photograph of Main Street all ready for the holidays, with twinkle lights and garland around every lamppost and storefronts decorated for Christmas. “It’s Annabelle’s—don’t you love it?”

“It’s gorgeous. I didn’t know she was a photographer.” Jenny gazed at the framed photo over Jazz’s shoulder.

“She’s taking a class up at the college. I think she’s got a great eye.” Jazz glanced around the large room. “I’m so glad Mom came up with this idea to do a ‘Holidays in River’s Edge’ exhibit. I got so many different pieces for it.” She set down Annabelle’s photograph and reached into a nearby box, pulling the tissue off a small teapot. “Look at this pottery tea set. It’s got holly and ivy on it. I love it!”

Jenny nodded. “It’s pretty and festive.” She wandered to the window, feeling the November chill emanating from the glass. “I can’t believe Christmas is only six weeks away. It was just Halloween.”

“And you never told me how that went. Luke was an adorable little Ewok in the parade.”

Jenny considered dumping the whole story about Tuff and the costume mess and Gabe having to drive a sloshed Tuff home and the disappointing end to the evening, but it had been

too long since she'd had a private moment with her sister. She didn't want to waste it complaining about Tuff, who seemed to have disappeared beyond a couple of phone calls since Halloween. He hadn't turned up for his visitations with Luke in over two weeks, and all she got were texts saying he'd be *in touch*, whatever that meant.

As for Gabe, he hadn't totally disappeared, but he was so wrapped up in the dig up at Rising Sun and tag-teaming his mother with his sister, Christine, that he had little time for anything beyond the occasional quick, late-night phone call. It wasn't as if he was deliberately avoiding her, but he felt distant. She was hoping Jazz could shed some light. After all, her sister had more dating experience than she herself had, which wasn't hard to do. Jenny had married her high school sweetheart at twenty-two. She'd only ever slept with one man in her entire adult life. Not that Jazz had had that many boyfriends, but she had dated in DC and even sorta almost lived with a guy before she came home and fell back in love with Eli Walker.

"Here's the thing, though"—Jenny backed up to Jazz's statement about high school—"I was never those things, too-cool, unattainable."

Jazz's *are-you-kidding-me* glance was a bit irritating. "To *him* you were. He crushed on you all through high school, and you were too nuts about Tuff to see any other guy. It's been fifteen years, though. Gabe has a life back in Virginia. Maybe there's a woman he's involved with, and even if he's not, he's got a solid career teaching *and* he spends every summer traveling around the world, working on digs. He's not good husband or stepfather material, sis."

Jenny lifted her chin defiantly. "What makes you think that's what I'm looking for? Maybe I'd like to have a quick holiday fling with a hot guy—find out what *that's* like."

"Pfft." Jazz brushed the idea away with a wave of a tiny teacup. "You so are *not* the flinging type."

Jenny scowled. “I can fling.” She paced the airy space, admiring a mobile hung with red-and-green, shiny, hand-blown glass balls. “And he doesn’t kiss like a guy who’s involved with someone else.”

“Forgive me, sis, but I’m sure all the women Tuff cheated on you with thought the same thing about him.” Jazz continued unwrapping pieces of the tea set without looking up.

Wow. Low blow. Perhaps Jazz *wasn’t* the one to talk to about her love life. And Jo was so wrapped up in her new life with Alex and settling into their condo in Durham, she probably wouldn’t be much help either. Jenny blinked at the sudden stinging in her eyes.

Jazz looked up from her task and then set the box aside and walked over to Jenny. “Oh honey, I’m sorry. That was a crappy thing to say.”

“It was.” Jenny swallowed hard, but let herself be drawn into her sister’s embrace. “I want to be in love again, Jazz—grown-up love, the forever kind, like you and Eli or Mom and Dad. And I’m so damned attracted to Gabe.”

Jazz chuckled and pressed a kiss to Jenny’s cheek before releasing her. “Who wouldn’t be? The man’s gorgeous.”

“He is, but it’s not only that. He’s sweet and smart and funny and so good with Luke.”

“He may be all those things, but, honey, he’s also temporary.” Jazz went back to the box she was unpacking.

Jenny perched on the low sill of the tall window that faced the street. “I know, and I don’t want Luke to get too attached to him for that very reason. He’s had enough of men disappearing. Tuff’s in the wind again. He’s canceled four days with Luke in the last two-and-a-half weeks.”

“I saw him at Mac’s night before last.” Jazz arranged the tea service on a small gate-leg table near the fireplace. “I went in to pick up carryout for me and Eli. He was sitting with Trudy Morrow, of all people, and they were pretty focused on their conversation. He didn’t even glance my way.”

“Trudy? Really?” Jenny tapped her index finger against her lips. “That’s interesting. Is she divorced yet?”

Jazz shrugged. “No clue. That ass hat left her way back in January. But she’s pretty much run her stable alone all these years, anyway. I know she’s taken on several boarders and plans to open a riding school as soon as Jack’s crew gets her indoor arena done. She came in a couple months ago and asked if I could recommend someone to design flyers for her. I gave her Harper Gaines’s name—she’s a darn good artist.”

“Why would *Tuff* be having dinner with her?”

Jazz smiled. “He used to ride, remember? All those sweaty nights sitting in the stands at the county fair, watching him rodeo. Seems like I remember he was pretty good.”

“He was supposed to pick up Luke tonight and have him for the weekend, but he texted he couldn’t make it. Something’s up.” Jenny shrugged and rose. “I need to get back to work. Inventory in Parts. You know how much fun that is.”

Jazz laughed as she followed her out to the foyer, watching as Jenny shrugged into her coat and tugged on her gloves. “It’s getting cold early this year.”

“Almost Thanksgiving. I wonder if Gabe might like to come for dinner at Mom and Dad’s. Jo and Alex won’t be here until Christmas, but you and Eli will be there.” Jenny’s heart thumped at the thought, but then she sobered. “Nah, he’ll go to his sister’s. Plus, he said his mom was getting out of rehab next Tuesday.”

“Why don’t you ask him, anyway? What’s the worst he can say?” Jazz gave her a quick hug.

“*No?*” Jenny lifted one shoulder.

Jazz grinned as Jenny opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. “You’ve lived through *no* before. Take a chance.”

Chapter Ten

JENNY SAUNTERED DOWN the sidewalk toward Mac's, waving to Dot Higgins, who was busy creating a beautiful display of quilts in holiday fabrics for the window of Seams Pieceful, the quilt store she owned with her sister Mary. Clyde Schwimmer had put the old aluminum tree back in the window of Antiques and Uniques, complete with the rotating color wheel, and had arranged a selection of vintage toys on a sparkly bed of cotton snow beneath the tree. When she arrived at Mac's Riverside Diner to pick up her carryout order, Mac's partner, Carly Hayes, was at a back booth, sorting through a box of holiday decorations.

"Is it me, or is everyone in town in a hurry for Christmas this year?" Jenny asked of no one in particular as the heavy glass door eased closed behind her. "It's not even Thanksgiving yet." The lunch crowd had pretty much dissipated, even though several tables were occupied with diners still lingering over their meals.

"Hey, Jenny!" Carly grinned. "I think the cold snap has put us all in the holiday spirit. We're supposed to get snow this weekend." She held up some colorful stockings. "I'm so ready for Christmas."

Tall, handsome Mac Mackenzie peered through the kitchen pass-through. "We got twelve turkeys back here that say Thanksgiving comes first, milady, so don't get ahead of yourself. Hey, Jenny, your order's ready. I didn't want to bag the soup until I saw you coming. Gotta make sure it stays hot."

He came around and set a large, double-handled brown paper bag on the counter next to the register. "How are things at the marina?"

Jenny pulled out her credit card. "Going well, Mac, thanks. We're pretty much done storing boats and looking forward to a

long winter's nap, as the story goes.”

“Your mom and dad were in for dinner a couple nights ago, and he said he’d already gone to winter hours.”

Jenny nodded. “Yeah, winter’s our slowest time. We make up for it from April to the first of November, though.” She slid her hand into the handles of the bag and started to lift it off the counter when cold air suddenly struck her back. The door had opened and, as she turned, there was Gabe, rosy-cheeked, tall and lean in jeans, a flannel shirt, and a puffy vest. A slow smile crossed his face as their eyes met, and Jenny didn’t even realize she’d let go of the bag handles until Mac grabbed it before it hit the stool next to her. “Careful now. There’s soup in there.”

Gabe’s smile lit up the room. “Hey there, Jenny.” His deep voice caressed the simple greeting.

Her stomach lurched, the chatter and clatter in the diner became background, and for a few seconds, it was as if time had stopped. There were only the two of them and the electricity crackling between them. She blinked and heat rose to her cheeks as she became aware that she hadn’t said a word, and Gabe wasn’t the only one waiting for her to respond. The diner had quieted, and all eyes were on the two of them. Finally, she managed to croak out, “Hi. How ya doing?”

He sauntered over to the counter, bringing the crisp scent of outdoors with him. “Good. Good. Working the dig with Josh and tag-teaming Mom with Chris.” He put one hand on her shoulder. “It’s great to see you. Want to sit down and eat together?”

She did—more than she could say, but she had lunch for her parents and her grandparents too. She offered a little regretful smile and tilted her head toward the bag on the counter. “I’d love to, but I can’t. I’ve got food for the whole crew.” At his disappointed expression, she said, “Would you like to bring your lunch to the marina and eat with us?”

Gabe glanced behind her at Mac, then around the room. Jenny had the feeling that the other diners were waiting with bated breath as well, and she thought she heard a general sigh of relief when his smile grew larger. “Sure. Let me order something and we can go down in my car—it’s right outside.”

“Great.” Jenny sat down on the nearest stool while Gabe ordered, aware of, but ignoring, the fact that her own vehicle was parked outside the Art Center. She’d get it later. As he ordered, she caught Sandy Thomas, the florist from Posey Pushers, wagging her brows. Jenny frowned and gave a slight shake of her head, but all she got was Sandy’s knowing smile. *Yeesh*. She and Gabe would be a hot topic at the flower shop today, and most likely up and down Main Street.

Janet Knowles, who owned the Yarn Basket, rose from her seat across from Sandy and walked over to stand behind Jenny. “Gabe, how’s your mom doing?”

“She’s doing better, thanks, Janet.” Gabe tucked his credit card back in his wallet and turned, answering Janet while his warm gaze focused on Jenny. “Determined to be home by Thanksgiving. She sure appreciated that knitting thing you brought her. It’s keeping her from going stir-crazy.”

“Crochet,” Janet corrected, putting her hands on Jenny’s shoulders and giving them a light squeeze. “We sure miss her at Tuesday night K & C. Give her our best and tell her we’re keeping her chair warm.”

Jenny tipped her head. “K & C?”

“Knit and Crochet. We make winter scarves and hats and mittens for the mitten tree at St. Agnes every Christmas. Claire’s specialty is crocheting baby blankets. She can whip one out in no time, and every single one is more beautiful than the one before.” Janet peered down. “Love to have you join us sometime, Jenny.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think so.” Jenny chuckled. “I can sew, but I don’t knit or crochet. I tried knitting, but my stitches were too tight.”

“We can work on that if you’re ever interested.” Janet patted Gabe’s arm. “Tell Claire I’ll be by the rehab tomorrow, okay?” She moved away, then turned around with what could only be described as a sly smile. “You two enjoy your lunch.”

Once again, heat rose up Jenny’s neck and into her cheeks. She tugged her hair out of her collar and unzipped her jacket partway. For Pete’s sake, she was a grown woman with a child. It was ridiculous to be blushing like an eighth grader. Thankfully, Gabe only ordered soup and bread, so they were able to scoot out before Judge Harry Evans or Noah Barker, who were finishing lunch at the center table, could tease her. Noah wouldn’t dare make a crack, since he and Dot Higgins had been seen holding hands all over town for at least the last year, but Harry would have no compunction.

“Why are you so red?” Gabe asked, as they buckled up and he started the Rover.

Jenny closed her eyes for a second before giving him a bright smile. “It was kinda warm in the diner, didn’t you think?” She pressed her cold fingers against her cheeks. She’d always been a blusher and she hated that about herself. Both Jazz and Jo could bluster their way through any embarrassing situation, but Jenny got flustered and tended to shrink into herself when things got awkward.

Gabe backed out of the diagonal spot and headed toward the marina before giving her a quick side-eye. “Think Sandy and Janet might be wondering what’s up between us?”

Jenny nearly choked on her next breath. The man was more insightful and straightforward than she ever imagined he would be. Considering the only time they’d shared since Halloween was late at night on the phone, it was a leading question. She fidgeted for a few seconds because she sucked at dissembling or even flirting and yet, she didn’t want to let this opportunity go. They were nearly to the marina. She swallowed hard. “Um . . . is there? Something between us, I mean?”

Gabe pulled into the parking lot and parked in a spot near the back door, then turned off the car, unbuckled his seat belt, and shifted toward her. “I sure hope so.” The earnest look in his dark eyes sent pinwheels rocketing through her veins.

“Gabe, I-I . . .” *Dammit*. She wanted to hurl herself into his arms and kiss him stupid, but something other than the two bags of food in her lap kept her in her seat. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she just go for it? Ride their wicked attraction *hell bent for election*, as Gram would say, until he went back to Virginia? What would be so wrong with spending time in a kind, fun, hot-as-a-pistol man’s arms with no expectations, no complications? To think of nothing but her own pleasure for a little while? She could do that, couldn’t she?

He ran a gentle finger down her cheek. “I know you’re wary, Jenny Weaver, and that’s okay. You can trust me.”



GRATEFUL SHE’D ALLOWED him to drive her back to the marina, and doubly thankful that she was sitting in his front seat again, Gabe tucked a silky strand of Jenny’s hair that had fallen from the clip behind her ear. He was glad she’d kept her hair long and, more than anything, he wanted to rake his fingers through it, wrap it around his hand, tug her head back, and kiss her until her lips were swollen and crimson. But he didn’t because she was staring at the bags in her lap and her cheeks were pink and she was stuttering. Had he blown it again? Memories came rushing back—his awkward attempt to ask her out all those years ago and how she’d stared at him, confusion in those beautiful brandy-colored eyes. She’d merely shaken her head and said, “But I’m dating Tuff,” in a tone that he heard as, *Are you stupid? Why would I ever want to go out with a nerd like you?*

Immediately, he shoved the memory away, along with the teenaged boy who’d heard the words as a rejection of who he was, and not merely a reminder that she was already spoken

for. He slipped one finger under her chin and gently brought her face up. “Jenny, talk to me.”

Her eyes were wide and were those tears shimmering in their golden-brown depths? Had he misread her the past few weeks? He gazed at her. No, she was as attracted as he was—no doubt about that part. “What is it?” His voice was husky.

Her teeth worried her lower lip and he noticed she’d never had the tiny chip in her front tooth fixed. It was still there, adorable and sexy, and he remembered the night it had happened. Junior year, basketball sectionals—Jenny was at the top of a pyramid of cheerleaders as she always was because she was the smallest. Up at the top of the stands, he’d been reading during the game, but when the whole gym gasped in horror, he looked up. Jenny was lying on the floor with blood on her lips and a crowd forming around her. Apparently, as they ended the routine, she’d lost her balance and tumbled to the gym floor. He’d watched, his heart in his throat, as her sisters helped her up and led her away.

She never returned as the game continued, so he’d left the bleachers and went out into the wide hallway to sit on the steps near the girls’ bathroom, where he could hear the Weaver sisters fussing over Jenny. They came out a few minutes later with Jenny holding a wet paper towel to her lips, and he tucked himself back against the wall so they wouldn’t see him loitering there. But he’d breathed a sigh of relief that she seemed to be okay.

Blinking the old memory away, he touched the tip of her cold nose. “Did I get it wrong?”

She smiled and put one hand on his cheek, making him very aware that he hadn’t shaved in several days. “No, you didn’t. Not at all.” One hand gripping the handles of the bags, she leaned into him and kissed him, and her lips were cool, but warmed up fast as he tipped his head to respond.

They kept the contact—only their lips touching—for a few seconds before she pulled away. “I’m scared, Gabe, and I’m confused, and I’m worried I don’t know how to do this

anymore. It's been so long and honestly, the only person I've ever"—she sighed—"ever dated or even *been with* in my whole life is Tuff. I don't know how to have a . . . a fling. I don't know how to be casual about it."

His heart pounded and he could hear the rushing beats in his ears. "What makes you think *I* want to be casual?"

Her brow furrowed. "What else can we be? You're going to be gone after the holidays, back to your real life—teaching and going on digs all over the world, and I'll be here, raising my son, working in my family business. As attracted to you as I am—and oh, Gabe, I am so *very* attracted to you—I belong here. I know that as surely as I know you are full of wanderlust." Her lips curved up in a teasing smile and she leaned in again. Her breath danced over his lips and he shivered. "On the other hand, just because I've never had a fling doesn't mean I'm not willing to give it a try."

Longing filled the space between them and all clear thought left him as she kissed him again. All the words, the reassurances he wanted to give her, vanished with the press of her mouth to his. And when she touched her tongue to the seam of his lips, seeking entry, he opened to her and his fingers moved of their own free will into her hair. He bound the length of it around his hand and rose over the console to deepen the contact, heedless of the bags of food on her lap.

Suddenly, she backed away, clutching the sacks and breathing hard. "Wait, I almost dropped our lunch."

Gabe released her and plopped back down into the driver's seat, noticing, as he did, that Jenny's father was peering through the window of the shop door. He took several deep breaths to get his body and mind back in control. Anything he wanted to say to her would have to wait. "There's your dad. He looks hungry."

She unbuckled her seat belt. "Gabe, I-I'm sorry. I think I said more than I should have. Feel free to erase the last five minutes, okay?"

His head was spinning. One minute she was scared, the next she wanted a fling, and then the next she wanted to dismiss the heat that had just happened between them. He needed time, he needed to breathe, but whatever he said next would determine where they went from here. She was putting the ball in his court, something that had never happened to him with any other woman. Usually, he let relationships run their course until the woman got frustrated and left. It was an easy, lazy, and probably a kinda crappy way to do things, but he'd never had a romantic relationship he was willing to fight for. Until now. "Jenny, I don't want merely a holiday fling with you, and I know this could get very complicated. To be honest, I mostly avoid complicated, but if you're willing, I think I'd like to give it a try."

"Gabe—" she started, but he shook his head.

"Not now. Our soup is gonna get cold, and I need to think, and so do you. We're not done, I promise you that, but we need a quiet place to talk, uninterrupted." He opened his car door. "Hold tight. I'll come around and get the bags and we'll go in and have lunch with your family."

Chapter Eleven

“**I** LIKE THAT young man.” Gram’s pronouncement from the doorway of the Parts department drew Jenny’s attention away from the carton of spark plugs she was counting. “I always have.”

She held up one hand, finished counting, and jotted 56 in the column of her inventory sheet. “So do I, Gram.”

“I can practically see the electricity between you two, so why does it feel like you’re a couple of wary squirrels dancing around each other?” Gram sat on the leather stool by the Parts counter and Jenny was struck, not for the first time, that her grandmother was aging. Not dramatically, but a couple of years ago, Gram would’ve plopped down on the floor next to her, pulled out a carton of spark plugs, and started counting too. This time, she settled onto the stool, stretching her back and rubbing her shoulder.

“Gram, are you okay?” Jenny rose in one smooth move and went over to replace Gram’s hand with her own and massage gently. “You hurting?”

“Slept funny last night.” Gram waved away her concern. “Now what about young Dr. Dawson?”

Jenny sighed and continued the massage for another minute or two before she hopped onto the stool next to Gram’s and swiveled so their blue-jeaned knees bumped. “Here’s the thing, Gram—as much as I’m attracted to him, our lives are just too far apart. He’s an adjunct professor in Virginia and when he’s not teaching, he’s out on digs. The man’s been all over the world. I’m a divorced mom who came home to the nest, and frankly, I don’t have any interest in following another man to another college. Been there, done that. Got the scars to prove it.”

“Has he asked you to do that?”

Jenny scoffed. “No. We haven’t had more than an hour to call our own since he blew into town. Between his mom needing him, my ex showing up, the archaeological dig he was telling you about at lunch the other day, and my job here and Luke . . . Well, suffice to say, he may be a world-class kisser, but that’s all I’ve had a chance to discover. Even if I thought he might be interested, talk of the future, of what we *could* be, isn’t even on the table.”

Gram pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I thought you said Tuff wasn’t around lately.”

“Yeah, and now there’s that.” Jenny threw her hands up in despair. “He was in my face right up until Halloween, which he royally screwed up. Now it’s almost Thanksgiving, and he’s been by to get Luke exactly *once* and didn’t even come in, only honked, and you know how I hate that.”

The words had no more left her lips than the man in question appeared at the Parts window. “I do know you hate that,” her ex-husband said, “and I’m sorry. I’ll come up to the door next time.”

Jenny gasped. “How long have you been here?”

Tuff’s smile was tired but, surprisingly, not smirky as he stood there with his hands down at his sides. “Long enough to learn that old Gabe Dawson has apparently picked up some new skills since he was president of the history club. And that I’m still on your shit list for Halloween. I’m sorry, Jens.” He glanced at Gram. “Hi, Lila. Do you mind if I talk to Jen for a few minutes?”

When Gram raised one brow, Jenny lifted her chin to let her know it was fine to go. But Gram narrowed her eyes at Tuff as she passed him. “I’ll be out in the shop if you need me, Jenny.”

Tuff came around into the Parts department and placed two cardboard cups from The Tea Leaf on the counter before pulling a white bag from his coat pocket. “Earl Grey for me,

Lady Grey for you, two sugars, and”—he opened the bag —“turkey cookies, since Thanksgiving is three days away.”

Jenny opened the cup of tea and sniffed appreciatively. Holly Flaherty had the best selection of teas in town, and it was exactly what she needed after a long morning of counting spark plugs, cam modules, fuses, and davits. “Thanks, Tuff. But a cookie? Why do I feel a bribe coming on?” She kept her voice light and teasing, but there was truth behind the question.

Tuff winced, but settled on the stool Gram had vacated and nibbled one of the frosted turkey cookies. “I need to ask you for a big favor.” He held up the cookie when she gave him a guarded look. “No, not to ask you to wait for your next support payment. I have it with me *and* some extra cash for Christmas.”

Jenny couldn’t keep the surprise off her face. “Thanks.” Then she asked, “What’s the favor?”

“Can I have Luke for Thanksgiving Day? Mom and Dad are driving up to Indy to see my grandparents—they moved into a condo in a big fancy retirement village up there last month. Golf course, indoor pool, all kinds of activities—and they’re dying to see him. The center is putting on a big turkey dinner for the residents and their families.” He put up one hand to stop her instinctive rejection. “We’ll be gone overnight—there’s a guesthouse on the premises that Mom rented for us. I promise I’ll have him back on Friday afternoon. I have to be at work on Saturday, anyway.”

Jenny gazed at her ex. Something was different about him. What was it? Still burly, he was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, with a heavy Carhartt barn jacket over it and thick-soled boots on his feet. But his face didn’t look quite so puffy as it had on Halloween and his eyes—those blue, blue eyes she’d fallen into for so many years—were bright and clear. Not watery or bloodshot. “You got a job?”

He nodded. “I’m cleaning stalls at Trudy Morrow’s.”

“You’re shoveling horse poop?”

He grinned. “Yup. And grooming horses and feeding and haying them. I’ve even been working some of the young ones in the round pen. She’s got four of her own, plus she’s picked up five boarders since Old Man Travis closed down his operation last month, and she took on a couple of his two-year-old geldings as well. C’mere.” He led her to the window. “Traded the ’Vette in on that beauty, so I could help Trudy transport the ones that came from Travis’s.”

A well-used, red F-350 dually sat in the parking lot, huge, dusty, and so not something Tuff would drive that Jenny had to blink twice at her ex and again at the truck. “That’s yours? You sold the ’Vette?”

“Yup. That’s also how I got this”—he handed her a check and a folded stack of bills—“extra Christmas cash.” He went back to the Parts window and reached across for his tea and calmly downed the rest of his cookie.

Jenny was too stunned to even move, let alone speak. “But . . . but what about—” she finally managed as she shoved the check and bills into her jeans pocket.

“Eastman?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not going back, Jenny.” He started to hang his head, but suddenly lifted his gaze to meet her eyes straight on. “I wasn’t suspended. I got fired. They’re paying out the rest of my contract, but I’m done in college athletics.”

“Oh, Ryan, I-I . . .”

“Look, I’m sorry I lied to you. I should’ve been up front from the very start. I should have been a lot of things, but I’m trying now, Jen. I’m trying to be a man who’s worthy of you and the kind of dad that Luke can look up to and be proud of. I haven’t had a drink in three weeks and two days. Frankly, since I started at Trudy’s, I’m so damn tired at the end of the day, I just fall into bed, but it’s a good kind of tired, you

know? The kind that says I've accomplished something worthwhile."

Jenny hardly knew what to say, but she didn't have a chance as Tuff rushed on.

"I'm staying in River's Edge, the house in Florida is for sale, and I thought we could start a college fund for Luke with some of the equity. I moved out of Mom and Dad's last week and right now, I'm renting the apartment above Trudy's garage. But Jenny . . ." He clomped back to her, his boots heavy on the tile floor. "I want us to be a family again."

Jenny's heart pounded, then sank. He was talking so fast and furious, she could hardly take it all in. "Ryan. What are you talking about?"

"Us. You and me and Luke." He sounded so reasonable that Jenny wondered if she was imagining his words, which were impossible. "And hey, I thought I'd see if Luke wants to take riding lessons. God, I'd forgotten how much I love being around horses—riding, working them—hell, even shoveling out their stalls. It's peaceful, good, honest work."

She raked her hair back with her fingers and stepped away from his hulking heat. "Ryan, we're divorced."

He sobered, but only for a moment, then chuckled. "We can get married again. I'm a different man, Jenny, I promise. No more drinking. No more women. You and me and Luke. Like it always should have been."

Jenny squared her shoulders. It wasn't that she was having a difficult time resisting Tuff—that ship had sailed at least three affairs ago. No, it was only that she didn't want to be in a constant war with him, and he'd just handed her a lot to process. She wanted an amicable relationship with her ex, particularly if he was going to be staying in River's Edge.

Taking a deep breath, she went back to his original question. "You can have Luke for Thanksgiving. He'll have fun being the kid of the hour with your parents and grandparents. Why don't you come get him on Wednesday

night and take him out to see the horses? He loves them, and that's probably something the two of you could do together that he would truly enjoy."

Tuff's jaw dropped and he stared past her for a moment down the hall that led to the repair shop. His fingers spread and curled at his sides—a sign she knew well. It meant he was preparing an argument—not physical. No, Tuff was never violent. This was his all-too-familiar *preparing-to-cajole-Jenny* posture. She moved behind the counter, picked up her tea, and waited, sipping as he stood there, silent.

Shock of all shocks, he said nothing, simply sipped his tea and sighed. "That's a good idea. Can you have him packed and ready to go about six on Wednesday? I'll come by and get him and we'll head out to the farm for the night. A couple of bachelors." He turned toward the door, stopped, and spun back around. "Thanks, Jenny. I appreciate this. My grandparents will be so happy to see him."

Floored at the change in him, she merely nodded.

Cold air entered the hallway as he opened the door, raising goose bumps on Jenny's arms under her sweatshirt. He turned, his expression expectant, like he was prepared to say something she was fairly sure she didn't want to hear. He surprised her again. "Oh, hey, Trudy named the farm Windstar after the horse I won the state fair championship rodeo on senior year. He's still with her; an old man, but good for lessons." He offered a small smile and left.



THANKSGIVING WAS ONLY two days away, and Gabe was at loose ends. His mom needed another week in the rehab, which was disappointing to Chris and Jeremy, who'd hoped to take her to Jeremy's parents' in Lexington for the long holiday weekend. Since the rehab *was* willing to give her an eight-hour pass on Thanksgiving Day, Gabe insisted that his sister and her family go ahead to the Kavanaghs', and he'd make a meal for Claire. What could be so hard about roasting a turkey? And no, Chris

did *not* need to leave a list of instructions. He could google all he needed to know on Thanksgiving morning before he picked up his mom.

He'd fit in a trip to Deke's Market for a small frozen turkey, a box of stuffing, and a pumpkin pie, along with some broccoli and a couple of potatoes. He was ready.

Wednesday night, he pulled the thirteen-pound turkey out of the freezer, took one look at the label, and immediately texted Jenny.

"Help! How do I thaw this turkey before tomorrow?"

Her reply came back with a couple of surprised-face emojis. *"You didn't take it out of the freezer and put it in the fridge a couple of days ago?"*

"Was I supposed to? I was going to google all this Thanksgiving prep tonight."

"Do you cook at all?"

The question stopped him for a moment. In all their nighttime texting and phone calls, they'd talked about everything under the sun, except food, which was odd because in his experience, women really liked to talk about food. To him, it was simply fuel and he was as happy with a PB&J as he was with a gourmet meal. Clearly, he should've given this meal more thought in between teaching online classes, doing Zoom office hours, going up to the dig, visiting his mom, and having his nightly conversations with Jenny.

His phone rang, vibrating in his hand, and the shrill sound made him wince as he glanced at the screen. *Jenny*. "No, I don't cook," he responded to her last text question instead of saying *hello*.

Her chuckle warmed him across satellites and the few blocks between their houses. "What else do you have besides a frozen turkey?"

He walked out to the kitchen. "A box of instant stuffing, two potatoes, some broccoli, and"—he pulled out the freezer

drawer—“oh, damn, a *frozen* pumpkin pie.” He shoved the drawer shut with his knee, not even bothering to take out the pie. “I’m screwed, aren’t I?”

Jenny was quiet long enough that he figured the news couldn’t possibly be good. But she surprised him. “Why don’t you and your mom join me at my parents’? Since Luke’s in Indy with Tuff, Harry and I are on our own until Friday. It’ll be Mom and Dad and my grandparents and Jazz and Eli and probably Xavier, Dad’s new boat mechanic. Mom’s always done orphans Thanksgiving. Whoever needs a family that day is welcome. Do you think Claire can handle it?”

Gabe gazed at the frozen turkey on the counter and the pitiful box of instant stuffing. He was certain his mom would love the fellowship at the Weavers as much as he’d enjoyed his lunch with them the other day at the marina. Plus, it was a chance to be with Jenny. He grinned. “You sure your mom will be okay with two more mouths to feed?”

“Mom will be overjoyed,” she assured him. “She asks about Claire all the time.”

“Okay, then.” His heart soared. “Can I bring something? I don’t know what that would be . . .” He wandered over to his mom’s wine rack, where several bottles rested on their sides. “Mom has wine here. A couple of pinot noirs and a Four Irish Brothers sparkling Traminette.”

“Bring wine if you like. That would be wonderful. We’re eating at one thirty.”

“Perfect, thank you. We’ll be there.” A little satisfied silence fell before Gabe said softly, “I’ll be glad for a chance to see you. It feels like we can’t seem to land in the same space at the same time alone.”

“I’m all alone now . . . Well, except for Harry, who’s sleeping peacefully on the rug in front of the fireplace.” Her voice took on a new, seductive tone that was unfamiliar and intoxicating.

He took a deep breath. “I can be there in ten minutes.”



IT ACTUALLY TOOK fifteen because he grabbed a three-minute shower, pulled on clean clothes from the inside out, and ransacked the duffel he'd stashed in the closet, hoping against hope he'd find some protection tucked inside. No luck. He wasn't surprised. Carrying around little foil packets for *just in case* when he traveled wasn't how he rolled, and nothing in town was open this late the night before Thanksgiving. They'd figure it out, and maybe he was getting too anticipatory, anyway. Touching Jenny, kissing her, learning her soft skin and curves had been part of every fantasy since he was seventeen, but he didn't want to blow it by being overzealous or misreading her intentions.

He pulled up in front of her house and sat in the car for another minute or two, staring at the blue-painted Craftsman-style cottage. When he opened his eyes, he noticed that she'd already started putting up outside Christmas lights—they weren't turned on yet, but twinkle lights were wound around the porch pillars, wreaths hung in all the windows, the wrought iron fence had a lighted green garland draped across the top, and even the coach lights on either side of the front door were decorated with red bows. The house was homey and welcoming, yet he was gripping the steering wheel and practically hyperventilating. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the headrest. He had to chill a little or he was going to make a fool of himself and then she'd . . . He shut off the thought before it could complete itself. This was Jenny. It would be fine. She would be wonderful. They would be wonderful together.

When she opened the door, gorgeous in snug dark-brown pants and a cream-colored V-necked sweater that emphasized her petite curves, her smile nearly buckled his knees. "Hi." She held open the door, granting him access to the warm cottage, where a gas log fire and low lights created a romantic ambiance that, even a couple of weeks ago, would have made him nervous as heck. But all the uneasiness melted away with her smile and the invitation in her whiskey-colored eyes. This

was where he belonged, at least for tonight. She closed the door and locked it, both the knob and the dead bolt. “No interruptions tonight, okay?”

He nodded, hung his dad’s worn leather jacket—for reasons he couldn’t explain, he’d been wearing it since Halloween—on the coatrack, and almost as an afterthought, removed his phone from his jeans pocket and shoved it into the inside pocket of the coat. *No interruptions*. “It smells good in here.” He followed her to the sofa, appreciating the graceful, easy swing of her hips.

“Yeast rolls and apple pie.”

“Where’s Harry?” He glanced around, but the puppy was nowhere to be seen.

“In his crate.” She raised one brow and her lips curved in the hint of a smile. “Did you need him?”

“No.” His voice was thick, husky with longing as he reached for her. “I need you.”

Chapter Twelve

THE SUN WARMED Jenny's face and she rolled over onto her back, stretching like a lazy cat in the beams streaming in through the window. She felt amazing. Better than she had in months, maybe years. The incredible dream she'd had last night left her sated and inexpressibly happy. Suddenly, her eyes flew open. *It was no dream!* And neither was the gorgeous man sitting on the edge of the bed next to her, his waffle-weave Henley unbuttoned to reveal the soft dark mat of hair on his tanned chest.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Dimples creased Gabe's stubbled cheek.

"You're still here."

Immediately, his expression sobered. "Not okay?"

She was too aware that she was clad only in Gabe's plaid flannel shirt under the rumple of bedsheets. "*Very* okay." She glanced around. "How did I get up here? The last thing I remember is you and me on the sofa . . . and . . ." She flushed with heat, aware that a red blush was spreading up her neck and into her cheeks. Even in thirteen years of marriage, she'd never had a night like the one they'd shared—passionate, raw, intoxicating. She'd only ever been with Ryan, who had been more concerned with his own gratification than hers and unwilling to experiment or play. Gabe's remarkable skills had left her gasping and longing for more of something she'd never known before in her life. He'd explored every inch of her, inspiring her to do the same to him, and opening up a whole new world of pleasure.

"I carried you." His dark, sultry eyes sent a shiver down her spine as memories of the previous night returned full force. How they flooded back, making her heart race and sensation bubble up in her core.

She pressed her palms to her hot cheeks. “We . . . we . . .” The words were stuck in her throat.

He stroked his thumb across her lower lip. “Yeah.” His voice was husky. “Creatively, but, yeah, we did.” Passion flared in his eyes, and he pressed his forehead to hers. “You are my fantasy, Jenny Weaver. Always have been.”

Feeling like an inexperienced girl, she was afraid to even breathe, frightened that, if she did, he’d disappear, and the magic she remembered from the night before would vanish with him. How foolish to be embarrassed with a man who now knew every inch of her, a man whose lean body she’d discovered at length last night, yet she couldn’t seem to look him in the eye.

“I’ll be better prepared next time, so we can . . . you know . . .” He flushed, too, and his brow furrowed. “I mean, assuming you want a next time.” He lifted her chin to stare into her eyes.

Jenny could have sworn she felt her heart stop and then restart at his touch. She was already hungry for him again, for his hands on her skin, his lips on hers. “I do,” she whispered fervently, and ran her fingers through his thick, black hair before drawing his face down to hers. “Oh, I do,” she repeated after a long, hungry kiss. “Gabe, I-I had no idea.” She brought his lips down to hers again, putting into the caress all the things she wanted to say, but couldn’t find the words to express.

He placed his hands on either side of her, and as he pressed her back against the pillow, it was as if she could hear the acceleration of his heartbeat. He burrowed his face into the V of the plaid flannel shirt, kissing beneath her chin, touching his tongue to her throat, working his way lower when suddenly a high, sharp bark drew both their attentions to the bedroom door.

Gabe sat up. “Harry, how did you get up the stairs?”

Jenny turned her head on the pillow and scowled at the puppy, hating the loss of Gabe's warm breath on her skin. Harry didn't seem to care. He simply scooted into the room on his stubby legs and plopped down at Gabe's bare feet. Good lord, even the man's feet were sexy—nails perfectly trimmed, and the faintest tan lines showing where he'd worn sandals over the summer. With a sigh, she sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "The real question is, Harry, how did you get out of your crate?"

"I let him out a little while ago." Gabe picked up the dog and held him aloft. "He was whining, so I went down and took him outside to do his business, gave him a bit of kibble, and left him in the kitchen to eat. He must have gotten past the gate thingy." He offered a rueful smile. "I put it up. Apparently, it didn't stay."

Jenny glanced at the clock and gasped. "Lord, it's nearly eleven! I told Mom I'd be there at noon to help her get ready." She swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Yeah, I need a shower before I collect my mom from River Bend." Gabe rose and extended the hand that wasn't full of puppy. "C'mon. We'll revisit this"—he lifted his chin toward her with a smoldering look—"later tonight." He set Harry back down on the floor, tugged her to her feet, kissed her quite thoroughly, and headed for the door.

"Wait!" She couldn't bear the thought of him leaving. "Your shirt."

"I'll get it later." He gazed at her, longing in his expression. "If I stay another second, you and I will not be making it to Thanksgiving dinner. Although"—one dark brow rose—"I'm open to texting everyone. Letting them know why we won't be there . . ."

She closed her eyes and dropped her head back, clutching the open sides of his shirt around her as Harry Potter scampered around her ankles. "Go." She tipped her head toward the hallway. "Go before I decide to take you up on that offer."

He winked. “See you in a couple hours.”

Jenny stood still until she heard the front door close and the rumble of Gabe’s Rover, then she picked up Harry and took him downstairs. The flannel shirt brushed against her skin as she walked, bringing Gabe’s magical touch back to her mind. Was this what Jazz shared with Eli? What Jo had with Alex? This fluttery sensation in her belly was new. This ache to be with him from the moment he walked out the door, unfamiliar. This euphoric sense of completeness being with him last night, foreign.

How had she missed this overwhelming longing with Ryan? Had their marriage not been a marriage at all? Merely a convenience? A habit? And what was she supposed to do with all these feelings—this . . . *okay, Jenny, own it.* This falling in love? Because as surely as Thanksgiving would give way to Christmas, she was falling in love with Gabe Dawson. The realization, along with the sure and certain knowledge that he felt exactly the same, sent a warm tingle through her. She ignored the little nudge in the back of her mind, reminding her that he lived far away and his lifestyle was not conducive to a family or children or staying in a small river town. Right now, she only wanted to bask in the pleasure.

Harry snuffled against her shoulder, and his curly fur tickling her chin brought her back to the kitchen and reality. Setting the dog on the floor, she snugged the baby gate in the doorway. “Okay, Harry, you stay in here while I get a shower. You can come with me today if you promise to behave yourself.” The puppy gave a quick bark and spun in a circle before slipping on the glossy wood floor and sliding a few feet on his bottom. *Goofy dog.*



“JEN, THIS CRITTER is darling.” Jazz took Harry from his crate, which Jenny had brought in after she’d carried in a pie, three Ziploc bags of yeast rolls, and a small container of food for the puppy.

“I didn’t feel right about leaving him home alone.” Jenny shrugged out of her coat and hung it on a hook in the mudroom. She’d dressed with special care after Gabe had left, choosing a new, blue cotton corduroy shirtdress that she’d picked up on sale the last time she’d gone to Cincinnati with Jo. She’d combined the full-skirted dress with a wide, brown leather belt snugged around her waist and a pair of tall, brown leather boots with heels high enough she almost felt leggy. Her hair was pulled up in a messy bun, and she’d even used a bit of mascara and blush instead of eschewing makeup, as usual.

Cuddling the puppy, Jazz gave her the once-over. “You look fabulous. I assume this is for the good Dr. Dawson. Mom said he and Claire are joining us.”

“Thanks.” She ignored her sister’s query as she came into the warm, delicious-smelling kitchen. Grabbing one of the colorful aprons that her mother kept on a peg inside the pantry door, she looped it over her head. “Mom, what can I do?”

Her mom gave her a smile. “Look at you, all fancy. I love that dress.”

“Well, it’s the holiday.” Jenny hugged her mom, then her grandmother, who was arranging fresh cut-up veggies on a glass tray. “Hi, Gram.”

“That dog *is* adorable.” Gram wrinkled her nose at Jazz, who held Harry on her shoulder and was stroking his soft fur, much to the pup’s delight.

Jenny sighed. “Yeah, he’s already stolen Luke’s heart and mine.”

“He’s not the only one, is he?” Jazz plopped down on a stool, still cuddling Harry. “You have that look about you.”

“What look is that?” Jenny dissembled, even though she knew exactly what Jazz was talking about. She’d seen it in the mirror not half an hour ago.

“That *I’m falling madly in love* glow, sis. Did you see Gabe last night?”

“I did.” She didn’t even pretend to be coy. “And this morning.”

Jazz’s eyes widened and she held up one hand. “Oh, my God, I need details, but wait. I’m going to take Harry out to join the men first.” She scooted through the dining room, past the long, elegantly set farmhouse table, and into the living room, where she passed Harry off to Eli.

Jenny chuckled, watching her from the kitchen doorway, merely offering a slight lift of her shoulders when Jazz returned, practically panting with anticipation.

“Tell me everything.”

“Do you really imagine I’m going to share intimate details of my night with Gabe?” Jenny opened a cupboard and pulled out a couple of cookie sheets to warm up her rolls. “Especially here? In front of Mom and Gram and a houseful of men just two rooms away?”

Jazz waved away her concern. “The guys are busy with the dog—”

“And there’s nothing you can reveal that will shock your mom or me,” Gram inserted with a grin. “We’ve both been around a long time.”

Her mom turned away from the stove, where potatoes boiled and steamed. “Jenny, I don’t think I’ve seen a look like this on your face in . . . well, *ever*. Even on your wedding day, you were so full of apprehension, but today, you look . . . happy.”

Jenny scanned the three faces, so full of love, and her heart expanded. “I *am* happy.” She leaned back against the countertop, careful to avoid a ceramic casserole of stuffing and a bowl of cranberry sauce. “Gabe is . . . amazing. I only wish”—she blinked back the sudden sting against her eyelids—“that I’d seen that fifteen years ago. Because now, it’s too late.”

Gram snorted. “For Pete’s sake, you were both entirely different people fifteen years ago.”

Jazz frowned. “Besides, it doesn’t seem *too late* to me. He’s here, you’re here. You clearly enjoy each other’s, ahem, company. What’s the problem?”

Jenny’s shoulders drooped and she gazed at her hands for a moment, wishing inanely that she’d had time to do her nails before she arrived. “His life is in Virginia and all over the world. You should see his face when he talks about the digs he’s been on, and how excited he is about the discovery over near Rising Sun. He’s not interested in settling down here with a ready-made family.”

“How do you know that? Have you asked him?” Jazz’s questions were perfectly reasonable.

Suddenly, it occurred to her with a flash of blinding light why a future with Gabe seemed so impossible, and she straightened, squaring her shoulders. It wasn’t about him. It was her. As much as she wanted him, she wouldn’t follow him to Virginia and spend her life waiting for him while he went out digging up the past. She’d done that once before and lost herself in the process. “I *don’t* know, and of course I haven’t asked him.” She sighed. “Here’s the thing, though. I’m only beginning to find out who Jenny is again. Gabe is . . . He’s incredible and I’m pretty crazy about him, and it feels so wonderful, so good. I have to do what’s right for *me*, though, and for Luke.” She shrugged. “And even for Tuff, because he has skin in this game, too, now that’s he’s back in River’s Edge to stay.”

Her mother came over to put an arm around her. “Honey, honey, whoa up here. Back up. Your gram is right. You and Gabe need to get to know each other—who you are *now*. So many things have changed in both your lives.” A quick shoulder squeeze and Mom was back in front of the stove, sticking a long-handled fork into the pot of potatoes. “Why not chill and just enjoy your time with him over the holidays?”



EVEN THOUGH THERE were still at least four hours of Thanksgiving left, Jenny had turned on her holiday decorations and the house was lit up for Christmas. The white lights around the porch pillars twinkled, as did the lighted wreaths in every window and the white lights on the greenery draped over the fence. Even the red bows on the coach lights on either side of the door shone with glitter. Despite the wintry weather, Jenny's heavy front door was open a crack, which Gabe interpreted as an invitation for him to walk in, so he did, calling as he shut and locked it behind him, "It's me."

"In here with Harry." Her voice carried from the back of the house.

He hung up his leather jacket and scarf, following the scent of something wonderful to her brightly lit kitchen. He had no idea how he could possibly be hungry after the enormous Thanksgiving feast he'd enjoyed at the Weavers' earlier. The day had been great for both him and his mom. Claire had managed to be in the thick of everything, despite the casts on her leg and arm, chattering and helping in the kitchen with Lynn, Lila, Jazz, and Jenny as they got the meal ready.

Thanksgiving tradition in the Weaver household was that the women cooked, then the men took over the kitchen to clean up, a concept foreign to Claire, who'd scraped and stacked the plates around her at the table, until Lila let the brake off the wheelchair and pushed her into the living room with the rest of the womenfolk. The guys had joked and laughed as they worked, clearly at ease with one another in the homey kitchen. Roy had handed Gabe an electric knife and set him to cleaning off the partially carved turkey while the others rinsed dishes, loaded the dishwasher, and filled storage dishes and Ziplocs with leftovers.

The good-natured camaraderie reminded Gabe of his childhood and holiday meals with his parents and Chris and assorted aunts, uncles, and cousins. The memory was bittersweet. He'd missed more Thanksgivings than he'd attended in the last ten years or so. So many holidays, he was at a dig or hunkered down in museums and libraries around the

world, doing research in preparation for the next dig. As an adjunct at William and Mary, he had more freedom to wander, and he took full advantage, traveling all over the Americas, mostly, but also to Europe and Africa and Asia.

The warmth in the Weavers' busy kitchen, the laughter, the voices, reminded him of what he never knew he'd been missing. Later, seeing Jenny perched on the arm of the sofa with her head tipped toward his mom's as they shared a story made him yearn for something he'd always believed he didn't want or need. A family. A home. The empty place inside him that he'd covered up with digs or research or half-hearted relationships was *filling* up the more time he was back in River's Edge.

The teakettle whistled on the stove as he got to the baby gate and Jenny was pulling a plate out of the microwave. His heart lurched when she turned and smiled. *She's so beautiful.* "I'm warming up pie and making us a cup of tea." She cut another slice of pie and popped it in the microwave to warm before she shut off the burner under the kettle. "Step over the gate. Harry's out of his crate."

He ambled to the table near the window—an old-fashioned, yellow Formica job with four matching upholstered chairs that reminded him of his grandmother's kitchen, causing more poignant memories to wash over him. He and Chris at their grandmother's table, eating tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, beating Grandpa at Scrabble and losing to him at poker, piles of homemade noodles drying on cut-up brown paper bags . . .

He noticed a large sketchbook, graphite and charcoal drawing pencils, and a box of watercolors taking up space on the tabletop. Had they been there when he came downstairs this morning? If so, he'd been so focused on getting Harry out to do his business and going back up to Jenny that he hadn't noticed.

"Sorry for the mess. You can just set that stuff over on top of the pie safe," Jenny suggested, as she poured boiling water

over a strainer full of loose tea into a brown ceramic teapot.

He started to pick up the palette of watercolors and set it and the pad and pencils aside, but the drawing on the pad caught his attention, and instead, he reached over to the wall and switched on the low-hanging light above the table. It was a sketch of two little girls—one dark-haired and one blonde. One in a buckskin beaded dress, the other in calico with an apron over it. Both were barefoot. They were playing a game with a web of string between them, their faces full of joy. Underneath was printed—*Aponi and Clarissa had been friends since they were babies.*

He flipped the page back one and found more images, small pencil sketches of the girls, a log house, a teepee, a wagon, a fire, and costumes, both native and Colonial. And they were good . . . very, very good. Another page back were brief notes in a tidy script, *Trail of Tears, hair jewelry, Shawnee, Tecumseh . . .*

When he looked up, Jenny was watching him, her expression cautious. “Oh, God, sorry, Jenny. I-I wasn’t snooping . . .” He smiled and pointed to the sketch pad. “You’re writing the story.”

She lifted one shoulder slightly. “I thought I’d give it a shot.”

He leaned over the table and examined the sketchbook more closely. “Amazing! I remember you used to sketch and doodle all over your history notes, but I had no idea you were such an artist.”

She brought a tray with two mugs, the teapot, and two slices of pie to the table. “I’ve always loved to draw and play with watercolors. And I’ve kept a journal since I was ten or so. In Florida, I designed and maintained websites for several local businesses, but I played with writing a novel. Sadly, it always ended up being about a foolish and tragic woman with a faithless husband.” She rolled her eyes. “I never thought about writing a children’s story until the other day at the dig.”

He stared at her for a moment. How did he not know this about her? Of course he didn't. They had traveled in different circles in high school, and the opportunity to learn Jenny Weaver never really presented itself. As he pulled a chair out for her and sat opposite her, bringing the sketchbook toward him. The discovery only made him want to know more. "This is so cool." He reached for her hand. "Tell me the story."

Chapter Thirteen

“**M**OM! MOM! THERE’S Dad. Can I go pet the horse?” Gabe noted that Luke practically vibrated as he pointed up Warner Drive by the River Walk. Sure enough, there was Tuff, dressed in livery and a top hat, sitting on the driver’s seat of a carriage that was decked out in white twinkle lights.

Jenny, Gabe, and Luke had attended the tree lighting together with Chris, her family, and Claire, who was bundled up in her wheelchair. Luke had played a small part as an older elf in a skit that Harley Lange had put on with her nursery school kids. He hadn’t been sure at first, but after he found out Matt Santos was going to be in the show, too, he’d hopped onboard. Jenny had told him earlier that Matt and Aidan had taken him on as a student, and the kid had been soft-shoeing and tapping all over the house. Gabe, who hadn’t been to the town Christmas tree lighting in years, was surprised at how much he enjoyed the whole affair, particularly when elfin Luke managed a simple soft shoe with Santa, played by Mac Mackenzie, during the program. The light in the kid’s eyes when he’d tugged on Luke’s peaky cap and congratulated him on being a stellar dancing elf had warmed Gabe’s heart.

River’s Edge was well into the holiday spirit, with the tree lighting on the square, hot chocolate stands, Christmas music, and lights everywhere. Not a single lamppost was spared garland and twinkle lights, and all the shops, restaurants, and nearby homes were bedecked for the holidays. Gabe was enchanted. Although he did spend at least one day every year in old Williamsburg with colleagues, soaking up the Colonial Christmas, he usually flew home to River’s Edge a couple days before Christmas Eve. He was gone again by December twenty-seventh, preferring to use the time away from classes for research. He enjoyed his family, especially since his niece and nephew were born, but he was always itchy to get back to whatever project currently captured his interest.

It was different this year. Sharing the festivities with Jenny and Luke created a lightness he'd never known before. Outside of the time he was spending with Josh at Rising Sun, he was content—euphoric, really—to simply be a part of his hometown, his family, and Jenny's. The whole town was out on this crisp starry night, and he'd enjoyed catching up with old friends, stopping by the Flahertys' booth for a cup of mulled wine and a chat, eating Paula's frosted sugar cookies, and just walking with Jenny's mittened hand snug in his.

Jenny glanced up at him. "Shall we go pet the horse?"

"Sure." He turned back to Clara and Ben, who were following behind with Chris and Jeremy and Claire. "You two want to go for a carriage ride?"

The kids clamored their yesses, and he even got a very grateful smile from his sister and brother-in-law, who wheeled his mom over to a bench for a break.

"Dad!" Luke led the way to the carriage with authority, and Gabe didn't blame the boy for his slightly cocky attitude. His dad was the one driving the carriage, which was pretty cool if you were eight years old.

Tuff's brow furrowed as the three kids approached with him and Jenny trailing behind, hand in hand. When they got up by the horse, Tuff jumped down, and Gabe also noted that the beer belly had flattened some since Halloween and that the other man's eyes were clear under the brim of the top hat. "Hey, Tuff." Gabe extended his hand and, after a second's hesitation, Tuff shook it briefly. "How much for a ride? Did we need a reservation?"

Tuff kept an eye on the kids as they gathered around the big draft horse. "Sixty for half an hour, but you gotta go right now. I've got a reservation at eight thirty."

Gabe nodded. "Okay, you guys, hop in."

The kids piled in, boys on one seat and Clara on the other as they tugged plaid blankets over their knees.

Gabe pointed at Clara. “Sorry, kiddo, go sit with the boys. This seat”—he patted the front-facing leather seat—“is for Jenny and me. Ben, Luke, scoot over. Make room for Clara.” He handed Jenny in before dropping into the seat next to her. “Hand over one of those robes, you guys.”

Tuff stood, unsmiling, outside the carriage as they settled in. “Sixty bucks.” His expression said he wanted to say much more, but he merely waited, his phone with a credit card reader attached in his hand.

Gabe pulled out his money clip and peeled off some bills that included a generous tip. Tuff gave the money a short perusal, then he shoved it in his coat pocket.

“Dad, can I ride up there with you?” Luke asked, his eyes shining with eagerness.

“Sorry, Lukie. Insurance says I’m the only one who can ride up top.” He leaned in and touched Luke’s cap. “Even elves have to stay inside the carriage.” Tuff clambered up to the driver’s seat, his long caped coat flowing over the low back of the seat. “Everybody set?”

A chorus of assent and they were on their way, the horse *clip-clopping* up Warner Drive. The kids kept up a constant stream of chatter and waving to passersby, while Gabe slipped his hand under the robe to twine his fingers with Jenny’s. Her smile was one of perfect happiness and contentment that he felt all the way down to his socks. *So this is it?* What he’d been avoiding all these years. What Naomi had wanted, but he couldn’t seem to give her. Had he been afraid—or simply aware in some soul-deep part of him—that Jenny would be waiting one day?

“Trudy’s really expanding her business. I think that’s wonderful,” Jenny observed loud enough that Tuff turned his head. “When did she get the carriage?”

“’Bout a week ago.” Tuff scooted around enough to answer her and yet still watch the horse’s path up Pearl Street, past the Box Factory condos and lofts. “Drove up to Indy to

get it and old Ransom here. We thought maybe Justin Dykeman could use a little competition.” He puffed up a little, his gaze focused entirely on Jenny.

As they passed Third Street, they noticed Justin’s lighted carriage down a couple of blocks, rolling along with a full load and Gabe chuckled. “Looks like there’s enough business for both of you.”

Tuff merely grunted and turned to face forward for the rest of the ride, responding only to the kids’ myriad of questions. Gabe didn’t care whether he spoke to him and Jenny or not. After all, Jenny’s hand was gripped in his, not Tuff’s. His muscles tightened as he thought about the two nights they’d shared. He wanted more, even though she’d told him she wasn’t comfortable having him stay overnight while Luke was home. In spite of how he ached for her, he didn’t argue. He was happy to be with her whenever it worked. No doubt there would be times when Luke would be with Tuff. They’d figure it out. And that attitude—the easy, *this will work out* feeling she wrought in him—convinced him even more they were meant to be.

After the ride ended, Tuff hopped down and handed the kids out of the carriage while Jenny folded the plaid robes that had kept them all toasty warm. “I’ll take care of that,” he said shortly and, with a hard look at Gabe, he offered his hand to her to step down.

When he didn’t release her immediately, all of Gabe’s instincts went on point, another new sensation. He couldn’t remember a time he’d felt this protective of a woman.

Tuff continued to hang on to Jenny, clearly ignoring Gabe’s huff of frustration. “You want to bring Luke out to the farm tomorrow or Sunday?” he asked, swinging their hands between them like they were a couple of teenagers on a date. “I can lead him on Jasper, start getting him comfortable in the saddle.”

Jenny took a step back, allowing Gabe enough space to jump down, stand behind her, and place one hand on the small

of her back. He hated being that proprietary guy, but the look Tuff had just given him told him he'd tossed down a metaphorical glove with the invitation to the horse farm. However, Jenny took one step away from him, forcing him to drop his hand. He got the message. *She* needed to handle this. *Okay*. He peered around Tuff to where the kids were petting Ransom's wide neck and oohing and aahing. "Kids, come on. Let's go find some hot chocolate and cookies."

Luke, Ben, and Clara whooped as he gathered them around him, preparing to cross Warner Drive to the River Walk. Tuff pulled out the folded bills Gabe had given him earlier.

"Use this." He peeled off a twenty. "You overpaid."

"That's your tip." Gabe took Luke's hand on one side and Ben's on the other.

Roughly, Tuff shoved the bill into Gabe's jacket pocket. "I don't need your charity."

Gabe's ire rose even further. *What an asshat move in front of his son*. He took a deep breath and glanced at his watch. Tuff's next fare would be here any minute. "Fine. Whatever. Clara, Ben, Luke, look both ways. Aaand . . . we're off." With that, he left with the three kids in tow and without so much as a backward glance at Ryan Tuffington.



JENNY WRINKLED HER nose and, with a little difficulty, tugged her hand out of her ex's grasp. "What was *that* about?"

Tuff scowled. "Are you sleeping with that nerd?"

She closed her eyes for a second. Surely, he wasn't planning on having *this* discussion in the middle of Warner Drive, amid a good bit of the population of River's Edge. She opted to ignore the question and answered the earlier one instead. "We can't come out tomorrow, but maybe Sunday."

"Jenny, I don't want him around my son. He's probably the reason the poor kid was dancing around up on the stage tonight like a damn—" He broke off at her warning look.

“Do not.” She held up one hand. “Do *not* go there. Luke is taking lessons on the showboat with Aidan and Matt for a couple of weeks so he can be an elf in the Christmas Eve show, and he’s loving every minute of it. Don’t you dare say anything to make him believe it’s not the best idea ever.”

Tuff’s disgusted expression was enough to make her walk away, but this was Luke’s father. They were stuck with each other and she needed to make it work if she could. She softened her tone. “He loved staying with you Wednesday night. Helping you clean stalls and brush horses. Be glad we’ve got a kid who wants to do something besides sit in front of a screen all day.”

“I am,” he grumbled, as he finished folding the lap robes and stacked them on the back-facing seat. “It’s just . . . I don’t trust that guy. He’s too slick.”

“Um, didn’t you just refer to him as *that nerd?*” Jenny couldn’t keep her gaze away from Gabe across the street at Paula’s booth, where he was passing out hot chocolates. He looked up from handing Luke a cardboard cup and caught her eye, and his intimate smile nearly made her knees weak. “There’s nothing *slick* about Gabe Dawson, and you know it.”

Ryan’s blue eyes darkened in the glow of the streetlights. “He doesn’t belong here anymore.”

She cocked one brow. “Oh really? So it’s okay for *you* to come back to your hometown, but not him?”

“I had a good reason to come home. It’s where my family is. Why’s *he* here?”

Jenny had to bite her tongue to keep from reminding him that he’d returned because he got fired from his position at Eastman. What would be the point? “It’s where *his* family is, too, Ryan.”

“Then he needs to stick with *his* family and leave *mine* alone.”

Jenny sighed. “We’re divorced, Ryan. Luke is your family. *I* am not.” She tipped her head to the side. “Luke is always my

priority, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to move on with my life."

"Is that what you're calling it?" Tuff's tone was harsh. "*Moving on* with the creepy gravedigger?"

Jenny pulled off her knit cap, raked her fingers through her hair, and tugged the cap back over her ears. She couldn't believe the inanity of the conversation. "Oh, for God's sake, what is this? Eighth grade? I thought you told me you were a changed man. This"—she waved a hand between the two of them—"feels a lot like the guy I left back in Florida."

He had the grace to look abashed, but his eyes still sparked. "I *am* trying to change, Jen. I-I just hate the idea of you with *him*." He scowled at Gabe, who had knelt down to help Luke with his hot chocolate cup. "I beat the crap out of him once, and I'll do it again if I—" His jaw snapped shut at her gasp.

Baffled, she grabbed his arm. "You *what*?"

Tuff shook her off and busied himself with the lap robes again, separating the pile and putting some on the other seat before pulling a couple of carrots out of a box under the driver's seat. "Never mind. It was a long time ago." He stalked up to the horse and held out a carrot on the flat of his palm.

"*What* are you talking about?" she persisted.

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again as Conor and Sam Flaherty appeared with their three little ones, along with Mac Mackenzie, who'd changed out of his Santa suit, and his partner, Carly Hayes.

Conor's daughter, Ali, looking darling in a pink jacket and matching knit hat, marched right up to Tuff. "We're here for our carriage ride. Can I pet the horse?"

Four-year-old Griff squealed, even though Conor held him firmly by the hand. "Me too!"

"Wait for Mr. Ryan to take you up to the horse, you two," Sam said. "Hey, Jenny, how are you?" She gave her a quick

hug while their toddler, Liam, clung to her knees.

With a frustrated whoosh of breath for Tuff, Jenny returned the hug warmly. “I’m good, thanks.”

Sam glanced over her shoulder at Gabe, who was standing by Paula’s booth, with a cup in each hand and three cookie-munching kids wandering to and fro in front of him. “I guess you are.” She wagged her auburn brows and grinned. “Can I just say, *yum*?”

Jenny side-eyed Tuff, but he was busy helping the kids and Conor shower affection on Ransom. “You can, absolutely.”

Sam grabbed Liam before he could toddle under the carriage. “We’re definitely meeting for lunch next week. I need deets.”

“There really aren’t any *deets* to share. I’d love to meet up, though. I miss you and the rest of the gang. We need a girls’ night.” Jenny snapped her fingers. “How about Wednesday evening, we all meet at Mario’s for half-price pizza and five-dollar pitchers?”

“Deal!” Sam gave her a thumbs-up. “I’ll get together all the Flahertys I can. You get Jazz and the Langes. Six thirty?”

“I’ll be there with bells on.” Jenny’s heart sang. She’d missed girls’ nights since Jo had left. Maybe they could FaceTime her in for part of the pizza party on Wednesday. With another hug for Sam, Jenny called to Ryan, “I’ll text you about Sunday.”

“Fine.” He kept his face to the horse, not turning or acknowledging her in any other way.

Dammit, just when she thought maybe things could be okay between them, he suddenly starts channeling the ass she left back in Florida. Why couldn’t life be simple? Divorced couples got along all the time, amicable separations where the woman led her life and the man went on with his, while they peacefully shared custody of their children. What was wrong with her and her ex? Trust Ryan Tuffington to virtually disappear from her life, only to reappear just as she was

beginning to get comfortable with herself. *Jerk*. She stared at his stiff back and sighed. *Jerk. Jerk*. Then she turned, squared her shoulders, and strode across the street to her son and Gabe.



“HE’S ALMOST ASLEEP.” Jenny came into the kitchen and sat down across from Gabe at the table. “I hope I don’t regret letting him have Harry’s crate in his room.” She drummed her fingers on the Formica surface. “Well, once he’s asleep, a bomb wouldn’t wake him, so I’ll go in before I go to bed and take the goofy dog outside one last time.”

“I imagine it’ll be fine. You’ve really mastered the housetraining.” Gabe was impressed with how seriously Jenny and Luke took Harry Potter’s training. Even though they still pretty much kept him in the kitchen at night, the nearly fifteen-week-old pup had learned to let them know when he needed to go outside and rarely ever had an accident in the house. Tonight was Harry’s first time to stay with Luke.

Jenny merely smiled wanly.

Gabe reached for her hand. “You want to tell me what’s on your mind? You’ve been . . . weird since our carriage ride.”

She shrugged, but didn’t meet his eyes.

He tilted his head and peered into her face. “Come on. What’s up?”

“Something Ryan said.” She grimaced. “This is so stupid.”

He waited, watching as she shifted in her seat, fidgeting, lacing her fingers with his, releasing him, and weaving them together again.

At last, she met his gaze. “He said he beat the crap out of you once. Did he do that?”

For a second, Gabe was baffled until he recalled a stupid incident from too many years ago. With a burst of laughter, he pulled her over onto his lap. “Well, if shoving me up against the door of the Rover and threatening to cut my balls off and

serve them to me on a paper plate if I ever came near you again qualifies as beating the crap out of me . . .”

Her eyes widened. “When and where did that happen?”

“Graduation day, in the parking lot at school.” He chuckled at the memory, so faint and ridiculous, although the reason for Tuff’s attack was still crystal clear. “I think he really hated that you hugged me in the hallway after the ceremony.” He pressed a kiss to her lips, just inches from his own, and tasted chocolate and peppermint. “Mmm. You taste good. Like Christmas.”

Jenny cuddled into him, resting her head on his shoulder, and he stroked her hair. “Gabe, I’m so sorry that happened. Maybe one day Tuff will actually leave high school.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath.” He put a finger under her chin and tipped it back to look into her beautiful face. “If high school, or college, for that matter, is a guy’s *best* time, they rarely get past it.”

She ran her fingers over the scruff on his cheeks, her expression solemn. “None of us are the same people we were back then. Too much of life, too many years have gone by. Even so, I’m glad you and I found each other again.” She took a long, deep breath, then slowly let it go. “I’m not going to let Ryan come between us, Gabe. I’m not.” She tried to offer a reassuring smile, but it got lost somewhere between her lips and her eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

“**Y**OU’RE ABSOLUTELY SURE you’ll be okay without me?” Gabe glanced over his shoulder at his mother as he shoved another shirt into his duffel. “I can let someone else proctor the finals and Zoom office hours.”

Claire leaned heavily on a four-legged cane as she stood in the doorway of his old bedroom. “I made it up the stairs, didn’t I? And I’ve got more freedom of movement in the walking cast. This cane is just for extra balance if I need it. Plus, I’m using the arm more every day.” She grinned. “I’m on the mend, son.” The grin turned to a bit of a scowl. “Besides, you’ve made sure I won’t be alone.”

“You betcha.” He looked around the room to make sure he’d packed everything. “Andi McNair said she’d be here around noon today, and she’s staying until I get back.”

Claire’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know why you’re spending the money to have her here. I have a phone on me at all times. You can’t afford this, and my insurance will cover a nurse visit a couple of times a week.”

“You don’t need to worry about—” Gabe began, but his mother cut him off with a wagging finger.

“*Don’t* tell me not to worry about the money,” his mother scolded. “I’m not your responsibility.”

Gabe shook his head. “You kinda are until you’re completely healed, so Andi is staying, or I unpack right now, and you’ll feel guilty because I’m missing finals week.” He hovered a hand over the zipper on his duffel. “Your call.”

Claire glared at him, then waved a hand—the hand on her healed arm—in a rare moment of submission. “Okay, okay. Andi and I will play endless games of Phase Ten, eat too many cookies, and watch every stinking Christmas movie on Netflix and Hallmark.”

Gabe zipped the bag and shouldered it. “That’s my girl.”

“Mother,” Claire muttered.

“Sorry?” Gabe had heard her just fine, but he figured he’d won this battle, so he may as well let her have her say. He was happy to see his mom back to her old self, tart-tongued and full of purpose. But it was too soon for her to stay alone—and that wasn’t only him or Chris being overprotective. Having someone stay with her was per the doctors’ advice.

Claire straightened her shoulders and gave him a haughty look. “I am your *mother*, Gabriel James Dawson, not your *girl*. I love you more than my own life, but, honestly, the longer you stay here, the bossier you get. You need to go back to your own life and leave mine alone.”

He grinned and turned her toward the stairs. “What if I told you I’m thinking of leaving school in May and moving back here?”

“Good God!” Claire stopped dead and awkwardly lowered herself down onto the second to the last step, nearly landing on his boot-clad feet. “What on earth are you thinking?” She stared up at him, disbelief in her dark eyes.

Gabe tapped her shoulder. “Let’s go have this conversation in a safer, more comfortable place.”

He led her to the kitchen, where she perched on a stool at the island while he made coffee and popped bread into the toaster. “Josh invited me to work this dig with him. It’s the most exciting thing that’s happened to archaeology in Indiana in my lifetime. I don’t want to miss it.”

“How will you live?” It was purely a mom question, and Gabe couldn’t fault her for it.

He’d lived on research grants, fellowships, federal grants, and private donations to digs since he’d entered grad school. The adjunct pay at William and Mary was decent enough to keep him in an apartment and groceries while he applied for work on digs, but that wasn’t where his heart was. He liked teaching; he *loved* being on digs and writing about them.

Despite wanting to remind her that he was a thirty-four-year-old adult with a PhD, he opted not to call her out for questioning him. He knew plenty of PhDs who were struggling to make ends meet, even a couple who still had to live with their parents. “Mom, Josh has private funding for this one as well as a state grant. I’ve checked and Warner will take me on as adjunct in the History Department next fall. Besides, remember, I have textbook royalties—two of my own and four I coauthored. Josh and I have already started talking about a book coming out of the Rising Sun project. So no worries, eh?”

“I’m sorry.” Her shoulders drooped. “That was inexcusably rude—you don’t owe me any explanations about your finances. You may be my kid, but you’re an adult, and unless you start selling drugs or robbing banks or decide to squat in my basement for the rest of your life, how you pay your bills is none of my business. That’s not really what I’m asking, anyway.” She rested her sling arm on the counter. “I’m wondering if that dig is enough reason to *move* back here when, years ago, you were so miserable you couldn’t wait to leave. I vaguely recall the words *never coming back* and *when hell freezes over* being tossed around.”

The heady scent of fresh brew tickled Gabe’s nostrils as he stared at the coffee dripping into the pot. He took two mugs from the cupboard above and added a little stevia to both before filling them and carrying them to the island. He sliced two bananas, then the toast popped up, warm and golden. He buttered each piece, serving them with a pot of strawberry jam as he considered his mom’s question. Finally, he sat.

“It’s not the only reason,” he admitted, more to himself than to her. “I left this town and that nerdy teenaged angst behind, determined to reinvent myself. But in the ensuing years, I figured out that the nerd is who I’ll always be, PhD, Lasik surgery, and other physical and emotional changes notwithstanding.”

Claire gave him a wry smile. “And now you’re back, all Indiana Jones, and falling in love with the cheerleader who

wouldn't give you a second glance so many years ago.”

Gabe sipped his coffee, feeling just a little uncomfortable. This wasn't a conversation he should be having with his mother. It was one to have with Jenny. He glanced at his watch. Seven thirty. He had to get going or he'd hit traffic in Richmond. “Jenny and I are both different people now, Mom. I don't know where we're headed, but I'll tell you this much—there's always been a hole in me that I couldn't fill up until now. I'm happy when I'm with her and Luke.”

“That's all a mom ever asks for her kids—that they be happy.” Claire's expression sent a little spark of warmth to his heart. This trip had shown him how strong his mom was and he was so proud of how she'd taken the accident in stride, determined to heal and get on with her life.

He was ready to come back to River's Edge. He *wanted* to come home to Jenny, to the dig, and to recoup all the time he'd lost with his family over the years. He'd figure it out—a way to have everything he wanted, everything he'd missed. “And it's all a kid ever wants for his mom. I'm glad to see you on the mend. You'll be back at the bank before you know it.” He rose, set his cup and plate in the sink, and dropped a quick kiss on her cheek. “I'm outta here.” He collected his duffel and laptop bag, then held up the leather jacket. “Okay if I take this?”

She grinned. “Sure. Why not take the fedora too? You may as well go all out.”

He slipped his arms into the coat. “Even *I'm* not that nerdy. I'm leaving the front door unlocked for Andi.” He stopped in the kitchen doorway. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you back. Let me know you got there safe.”



“GIRL POWER.” JAZZ held up her glass of beer, and Jenny and the others around the table raised theirs in a toast, repeating, “Girl power,” in unison.

Somehow they'd managed to get everyone to Mario's on the same evening—Jazz, Jenny, Sam, Meg, Tierney, Holly, and Kitt and Harley Lange, who were drinking club soda because both were pregnant. Even Lauren, Max's wife, had gotten time off from her ER rotation to join the party. Jenny's heart warmed as she stared down the table at her dear, dear friends—some she'd grown up with, others she was still learning about, but each and every one of them were true kindred spirits. She'd brought her iPad and set it up at one end of the table, so Jo could join them via FaceTime.

“I say we need to change that to *woman* power!” Jo announced from Durham, North Carolina, where she and her scientist fiancé, Alex, were now all settled into his condo. “Oh, it's so great to see you all! Lean in! Lean in!”

Obediently, each of them bent forward so Jo could check out all their faces on the iPad camera. Kitt and Harley even rose so she could compare their bellies—Harley's was bigger, even though Kitt was due first, and although Harley denied that she and Beck were having twins, Jenny was inclined to think maybe it was possible.

While the others chattered and laughed, a lump formed in Jenny's throat as the two pregnant women showed off their baby bumps. She'd desperately wanted another child, but two miscarriages after Luke, plus discovering Tuff's unfaithfulness, had forced her back on the pill. Her mind automatically went to Gabe and the fantasy of a beautiful, raven-haired, dark-eyed girl child with Gabe's amazing brain and dimples and her organizational skills. That now-familiar rush of heat whenever Gabe crept into her thoughts began to well up inside her and she blinked to focus on her sisters and friends.

Gabe was in Virginia and, even though they'd texted, he'd been so busy with finals and office hours and sharing the Rising Sun find with colleagues, they hadn't actually spoken in a couple of days. Jenny had been finishing up the year-end inventory and updating the Weaver's Landing website. Evenings, she'd been hard at work on her children's book,

which only Gabe had seen so far. The pleasure the story was bringing to her life made her smile, and Jazz elbowed her gently.

“What are you thinking about? Or do I need to ask?” she whispered underneath the clatter of the servers bringing pizzas. “You’ve got that look again.”

Jenny leaned away and looked down her nose at her sister. “Actually, I’m thinking about a new project I’ve got going. So there, smarty, who thinks she knows everything.”

“A project? Please tell me you’re finally going to change that awful green paint in the dining room.” Jazz craned her neck, checking out the several pizzas that had been placed on the table. “Oh, I want the veggie.”

Jenny shook her head. “No, I *like* the paint in the dining room.”

Jazz gave a sheepish smile and helped herself to a slice of pizza. “Oops, okay.”

“Are you dissing my paint again?” Harley asked from across the table. “I’ll have you know, that combination of sage green with white chair rail is very on trend right now. I put the exact same paint in my new dining room, and I’m thinking we might extend it into the kitchen if I can get Beck on board.”

Lauren grabbed a slice from the pizza tray as it went past. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, Harles, if you wanted to hang gold-leaf-flocked wallpaper in every room of that old house, Beck would hock his precious Camaro to make sure you had enough money to do it. He’s your slave.”

Harley’s satisfied smile made Jenny’s heart clutch. “Yeah, he is, isn’t he?”

“Max, on the other hand, has an opinion about everything we do in the condo,” Lauren continued. “Honestly, sometimes I think he missed his calling. He should’ve been a decorator, not a doc.”

“Rye’s exactly like him. I was thinkin’ sky blue in the wee one’s room, but he wants yellow, and he hates the cloud decals I found online.” Kitt patted her baby bump, and her smile said she clearly was not at all unhappy that her policeman husband had an opinion about their nursery.

Jenny sighed. Tuff had skipped going nursery furniture shopping with her during her pregnancy with Luke. *Too busy. Away games. Besides, that’s your job.* He’d told her to pick out whatever she liked, but when she found some beautiful fog-gray country pieces that she loved, he’d had a fit and insisted she switch it out for a practical, golden oak convertible crib and chest of drawers. She’d given in, but the furniture had stayed behind in Florida, and she found a wonderful, whimsical, boat-shaped trundle bed that Luke loved in an artisan furniture shop in Vevay.

As she gazed around the table at her friends, each one more happily married than the next, her heart ached. She’d wasted all those years trying to make her marriage to Ryan work, unaware until after the fact that it was destined to fail because she was the only one putting in any effort. As she looked back, she could see that she’d nearly turned into Ryan’s mousy mother—an obsequious, servile doormat for a loud, demanding man. No wonder he’d been so shocked when she finally left—that was all he knew of marriage.

“What’s the project?” Jazz’s question jerked her out of her rumination.

Jenny started to answer, then stopped. She thought she wanted to finish the book first, maybe shop the concept out to a few agents or publishers before she talked about it. Not that Jazz and Jo wouldn’t support her fully. Jo would be tossing out ideas for more stories and Jazz would be organizing her efforts, looking for possible places to send it and helping with queries. Was it a good idea to bring them in? Her sisters knew she’d always kept a journal and that she toyed with sketching and watercolors. After all, from the time they were little, she was the one who always created the cards for their parents’ and grandparents’ birthdays and other celebrations. But

something held her back. Maybe a desire to bring to fruition a dream that was entirely her own. “It’s Christmas. Don’t get nosy.”

Jazz merely offered a quirked brow and a shrug as Sam leaned around her to tap Jenny’s shoulder.

“Dish, girl. What’s up with the luscious Gabriel Dawson?” she asked, and the question seemed to quiet the entire table.

“Well . . .” Jenny longed to spill all her joy, doubts, and fears. She and Gabe were definitely headed somewhere, but where? Their lives were so very different. What did Gabe want? What did *she* want, for that matter? Just when she thought her life had settled into a pleasant routine since coming back to River’s Edge, two different men had appeared to put her right back into emotional chaos and for two very different reasons. Ryan, she could handle. She had to because he was a fact of life. Gabe, she yearned for, and that was a fact of life now too. The plain truth was, she had no idea how to answer Sam’s question. Until she saw Gabe again, until they’d had a chance to sort out the heat between them and see what was possible, she didn’t have a clue. So many things in play, but the one thing she knew for certain was, “He sure can kiss.”

She winked at Sam, and the chatter and laughter around the table started up again as the conversation turned to the holidays, the Christmas Candlelight Walk, the Advent play at St. Agnes Church, Aidan and Holly’s annual Christmas Eve show and party—all the things that made Christmas in River’s Edge so dear.

Chapter Fifteen

GABE WAS HOME! Jenny had been wrapping Christmas gifts at the dining room table when he appeared, totally unexpectedly, on her doorstep, looking tousled and delicious and . . . happy. Truly *happy* to see her. They'd had so little contact while he'd been back in Virginia that she'd started wondering if he would return at all. She didn't even try to contain her joy. She threw her arms around him, kissing him with gusto right there in her open doorway, with Luke not ten feet away on the sofa.

After a very satisfying hello, she leaned back in his arms. "Welcome home." She sucked in a sharp breath. She hadn't meant to say *that*. Embarrassed, she backpedaled. "I mean . . . not *home*. I know this isn't your *home* anymore, but I'm glad you're—" She gave a rather strangled laugh and finished lamely, "You know, *here*."

He touched his lips to hers in a quick kiss. "I'm happy to be here." He picked up the large shopping bag with handles that he'd set on the floor beside him. "For you and Luke."

Luke, focused on a video game, hadn't been paying attention, but now he looked up, his eyes wide. "You brought us stuff? What?"

"Come look." Gabe shut the door and held out the bag.

Luke dropped the game controller and raced over, taking the brown bag as Gabe hung his jacket on a hook. Then he took the bag back. "No, hang on a minute. Some of this is for your mom."

Jenny's heart filled up. "Christmas is still two weeks away."

Gabe's dimples showed through the scruff on his cheeks. "These aren't Christmas gifts, so we're okay." He pulled out a bottle of wine. "Red wine from Benton Farm Winery, just outside of Williamsburg." He handed her the bottle. "Cab

Franc. I thought it tasted pretty good.” He brought out a gift-wrapped box. “And something for your tree.”

Luke was practically bouncing on his toes. “What about me?”

Gabe chuckled. “You? You get . . .” He drew out the word as he reached in the bag and brought out a tin. “Christmas candy from the candy store in Williamsburg. And”—he brought out a long, flat box wrapped in plain brown paper—“a Colonial toy that requires no batteries, no screens, and nothing to plug in except your imagination.”

Luke tore the paper off the box and gazed at the picture on top for a second before taking the box to the sofa.

Jenny, carrying the bottle of wine and her own wrapped box, followed, watching over the back of the couch as Luke slowly and carefully opened the box. Gabe came up behind her and put one hand on her shoulder. The tingling surge his touch always caused started there and spread throughout her whole body. “What is it?” she whispered.

“You’ll see.” His warm breath stirred the hair that was falling out of her ponytail over her ear. She longed to lean back against his lean body, feel his strong arms around her.

Luke took out a jointed, carved wooden puppet, a round stick, a flat thin board, and a single sheet of paper. His brow furrowed as he read, “Li-limberjack. Dancing Dan?” The words rose on a question as he looked up at Gabe.

“I thought since you were learning to dance, you might get a kick out of him.”

Luke’s eyes lit up. “How do I make him work?”

Gabe grinned. “Read the instructions and see if you can figure it out.”

As Luke focused on his toy, Gabe took the bottle of wine and set it on the table beside the couch. “Open yours.”

Jenny shook her gift, which was also wrapped in plain brown paper, except hers had a narrow purple ribbon.

Whatever was inside made a small clunking sound—like wood against wood. As she untied the ribbon, her heart sped up, and she tried to sort out what he might be saying by bringing presents.

Upon opening the box, her throat clogged with tears. Nestled in tissue paper were two small, carved wooden ornaments—one a dark-haired girl, dressed in painted indigenous buckskin clothing, the other a blonde girl clad in a painted calico dress and pinafore. Each had a loop and a length of twine to hang them from the boughs of her Christmas tree. She turned them over in her hand. On the back of the carvings, the artist had signed their initials and labeled each figure appropriately, APONI and CLARISSA.

“Oh, Gabe,” she breathed, stroking the delicate figurines with one finger. “These are . . . exquisite.”

Gabe blushed, but his dimples showed his pleasure that she liked his gift. “A friend of mine works in a woodshop in Williamsburg. He does ornaments every Christmas, so I asked him to make these for me.”

Jenny held them up. “They’re perfect.” She led the way to the Christmas tree by the front window and hung the two ornaments together, front and center. When they were placed exactly right, she looked up at him, and the tenderness in his expression nearly took her breath away. “You really believe I can do this, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.” He touched his lips to hers in a soft kiss. “It’s a great story and your illustrations are fantastic. As a matter of fact”—he pulled a card out of his shirt pocket—“here is the name of my agent. She works with all kinds of authors, not just boring old textbook writers. I mentioned your book to her and she’d like to take a look.”

Jenny’s breath caught, and she pressed her palms to her chest. Finally able to speak, her voice came out squeaky. “Seriously?”

He grinned and nodded. “Yup. How close is it to done?”

“It’s . . . it’s . . . I-I . . .” Jenny was speechless.

“Breathe, Jenny.” Gabe gathered her into his arms, patting her back and rocking her.

At last, she leaned back, blinking away the tears that stung her eyes. If it was possible to feel joy, excitement, and terror all rolled into one, she was there. She took the deep breath he’d recommended. “I only need to color the illustrations for the last few pages.” She swiped a hand over her cheek. “I hadn’t even thought that far yet—I mean about how to go about getting it published. I figured I’d google publishers after the holidays.”

Gabe quirked one dark brow. “Want to start with Janine?”

Suddenly, Jenny laughed. “Yes. Yes!” She threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Clacking from the couch separated them as Luke squealed. “I did it! Look! He’s dancing!”

The wooden man was indeed dancing. Luke had inserted the rod into the hole between the doll’s shoulders and placed the thin board under his thigh, and although awkwardly, the puppet was tap-dancing. Luke’s eyes shone as he called, “Gabe, c’mere! He’s dancing!”

“I think you’re a hit, Dr. Dawson. Go,” Jenny encouraged. “I’m going to get us some cookies and coffee. I’ll be right back.”

“Would you make mine milk?” Gabe settled on the sofa next to Luke.

“You betcha.” She scooped up the gift wrappings and the bottle of wine and headed to the kitchen, humming as she put coffee on to brew and pulled Christmas cookies out of the freezer. As she artfully arranged several different varieties on a plate, she spoke aloud, “Alexa, play Christmas Classics.” Immediately, Andy Williams’s voice filled the house with “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” and Jenny couldn’t help grinning. Christmas was going to be extra wonderful this year. For the first time in more years than she could remember,

she wasn't dreading the holidays, worrying about traveling from Florida, or stressing over whether Tuff would be sober. No trying to schedule their time evenly between their families, hoping his mom and dad wouldn't buy Luke every toy in Target, or missing sister time because Tuff insisted on being at his parents', then having him disappear with his old buddies to the tavern.

Last year was a bit easier because she and Luke had moved home and had their own house, and she'd managed to allocate Luke's time evenly between the families. Tuff's parents were still treating her quite coolly, but they would never dream of being outright hostile. She held all the cards in *that* relationship, and although she wouldn't dream of doing such a thing, she was rather grateful they feared she might cut them off from Luke. It gave her a leg up in a situation that was never going to be very comfortable.

But this Christmas, Luke was having a blast learning soft shoe and tap with Mateo and Aidan for the Christmas Eve show, and Jo and her love, Alex, would be home in another week. Jazz was over-the-moon happy with Eli and her job as the director of the new River's Edge Arts Commission. Mom, Dad, Gram, and Grandpa Roy were healthy and strong, and the marina had had a fantastic year. *She* was writing a children's book! And, the biggest change, Tuff was mostly behaving.

She took a breath as she enumerated her many blessings and finished her litany with *Gabe*. This holiday, there was Gabe—strong, kind, smart, deliciously sexy Gabe, who clearly shared her attraction, who was great with Luke, who seemed already to understand who she and Luke were, what they wanted.

But he lives over six hundred miles away, plus a career he loves takes him all over the world. He's gone for days, even weeks at a time, which makes him a poor prospect for a husband or a stepfather; the wary devil voice inside her head reminded her. Mentally, she swatted the intrusion away and told the little devil to shut up. She wasn't looking for a husband or a stepfather. She merely wanted to bask in the

pleasure of having a good man in her life, even if only for a little while.



GABE WATCHED AS Luke got the hang of the Limberjack, making the wooden puppet dance merrily on the end of the board. The kid had a good sense of rhythm, which Gabe totally did not, and was managing to get the little guy to dance to the beat of the holiday song that was playing on Alexa. Jenny must have turned on the music. The house, redolent with the piney and cinnamon scents of Christmas, filled with Luke's joy at the old-fashioned wooden toy, and the gas logs burning in the fireplace, felt like home.

Gabe glanced over his shoulder, peering through the dining room into the kitchen, where Jenny was plating cookies and swinging her hips and singing along with the same version of "Winter Wonderland," he remembered from his childhood. When the song ended and switched to Harry Connick Jr.'s rendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas," his throat tightened.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd truly cared about being *home* for Christmas. But this year, he couldn't wait to get through finals, grades, and last-minute office hours. He'd gotten a thrill he'd never felt before, choosing the gifts from old Williamsburg for Luke and Jenny. He'd even had fun Christmas shopping for his mom and Chris, Jeremy, and the kids. Everything was wrapped and in the back of the Rover, waiting to go under Chris's tree on Christmas morning.

For Luke's Christmas gifts, he'd found an easy-to-read biography of tap dancer Savion Glover online, as well as a couple of games for his Gameboy. He'd slip them under the tree after Luke went to bed tonight. Jenny's Christmas gift was harder. What said *I think I'm falling in love with you* without coming on too strong or scaring her half to death? He'd eschewed buying her a ring, although that was the very first thing that had come to mind as he'd wandered a jewelry store

in Williamsburg. It was too soon for that, despite the fact that he was absolutely sure of what he wanted.

It was in the museum shop that he found the perfect Christmas gift—exactly what he wanted to say to her. It was a sterling silver and citrine bee necklace. Throughout history, bees, like fairies, were often considered guardians of the natural world, eternally linked with love, magic, and romance. The golden citrine reminded him of her eyes, and all that the bee symbolized convinced him it was the perfect gift. Wrapped in silver gilt paper and tied with a red ribbon, it was tucked in his coat pocket. He would put it under her tree before he left.

“You want to?” Luke’s question and a tap on his shoulder brought him back to the present.

Smiling, he turned his focus back to Luke. “I’m sorry, Luke, I was drifting. Do I want to what?”

“Play Super Mario Kart?” He’d put the dancing man back in its box and offered Gabe a video game controller.

Gabe hadn’t played a video game since he and his buddies had played Super Mario 64 and Zelda when they were all only a couple years older than Luke. “Sure, okay.” He hoped he still remembered how, particularly since game controllers had gotten a lot smaller, and his hands, as well as TV screens, had gotten a lot bigger.

Turned out, it was like riding a bike. Gabe got into the game almost immediately, laughing and whooping with Luke as they sent their characters careening across the screen. He was so involved that he didn’t hear the voices in the kitchen until one of them—a deeper one—uttered a curse. Then, a couple of sharp barks from Harry. Gabe dropped the controller and hopped up. “Stay here,” he said to Luke, sounding more like a father than he’d actually intended, but whatever was going on in the kitchen, the kid didn’t need to be part of it. “Keep going. I’ll be right back,” he added, hoping the game would keep Luke engaged enough not to wander out to the kitchen.

Quietly, he moved into the dining room, but he couldn't see Jenny or Tuff. He'd assumed it was her ex, but now he was sure. Tuff's gravelly voice was hard to miss, particularly when it was raised in anger.

"I told you I didn't want him near my kid," Tuff snarled.

And that was all Gabe needed to step over the baby gate into the brightly lit kitchen. Cold air blew in through the back door where Tuff stood, his broad shoulders filling the opening. Gabe came up behind Jenny, who appeared to be giving Tuff a wide berth. "Tuff." He nodded briefly in the other man's direction.

Jenny turned to him, her eyes filled with a combination of disgust and disappointment. Thankfully, he didn't see fear. "Ryan was just leaving. He dropped off Luke's hat and gloves. He left them in his truck last night."

Tuff's eyes narrowed at Gabe. "Wasn't expecting to see *you* here. I thought you'd left."

"I'm back." Gabe put one reassuring hand between Jenny's shoulders before kneeling to rescue the knit hat and gloves from Harry, who'd pounced on them just as Gabe walked in. He had no idea how they wound up on the floor, but he suspected Tuff had tossed them there. Harry had one glove in his mouth, so Gabe rubbed the puppy's head in an effort to get him to release it. "Give it up, Harry."

The dog opened his mouth, and the glove dropped into Gabe's hand as Harry panted in anticipation of a game. Gabe petted him again. "Good boy." Picking up the dog, he moved toward the kitchen door and threw Jenny a lifeline. "It's starting to snow. Thought we could take Harry and Luke out for a walk before it gets too dark."

Relief was palpable in Jenny's expression. Striding to the back door, she took hold of the knob. "Thanks for bringing these by, Ryan. We'd have been searching everywhere for them."

“Jen, I want to talk to you.” Tuff’s cheeks had reddened, but as far as Gabe could tell, he was sober. “*Alone.*”

Gabe stepped over the baby gate into the dining room with the dog in his arms, slipping around the doorway so he was out of sight, but within earshot.

As he listened, Jenny remained calm, which made it nearly impossible for Tuff to continue his ugliness. “We’ll see you tomorrow evening at the Candlelight Walk, and afterward, you can take Luke to your mom’s for their Christmas party.”

“Mom wanted you to come too.”

“I doubt that seriously.” Jenny’s tone dripped irony. “But she can keep him overnight if she likes. I’ll pack his backpack.”

“That’s all Mom and Dad get?” Tuff’s voice rose once more. “One night a couple of weeks before Christmas?”

“Of course not. He’s out of school now until January third. There will be plenty of time for them to have him. We can talk about a holiday schedule when you bring him back to me on Monday.” With an exasperated sigh, Jenny started closing the door. “Right now, you need to go.”

A long silence followed as Gabe stood by, listening . . . waiting.

Finally, Tuff grumbled, “Monday, I’m taking him downriver to see the reindeer farm and have lunch with Santa, remember? We’re staying overnight so he can play in the pool at the hotel there.” The belligerence in his tone made Gabe’s skin crawl. “I’ll pick him up from Mom’s, so pack enough for two nights, and include something decent for him to wear. No holey jeans.”

“Fine.” Somehow, Jenny managed to keep her temper, although Gabe had no idea how.

The door slammed shut, rattling the wineglasses sitting on an open shelf in the hutch on the wall next to Gabe. That surely wasn’t Jenny’s doing. He peered around the doorway.

She gave him a wan smile. “Thanks. He can be such an ass.”

“I didn’t want to interfere.” He stepped back over the baby gate and set Harry down on the floor. “On the other hand, he was getting pretty loud.” He locked the back door before pulling her into his embrace. “He doesn’t want me around Luke, does he?”

Jenny buried her face in his sweater, muffling her voice. “Nope, but I really don’t care. No matter what he thinks, he has no jurisdiction here. He gave me full custody when I moved home. He only has visitation rights.”

“I don’t want to be the reason you and he are always butting heads.”

Suddenly, she stepped back, eyes narrowing. “Look, if this is going to be too hard for you, we can just forget it. Go back to . . . to what we were before . . . old classmates? Friends? Whatever.” She stalked to the sink, running water and talking so low and fast, he almost couldn’t hear her. “I’m not asking anything from you. You have a perfectly fine life out there in Virginia. You don’t really need the burden of a single mom and a kid and all the baggage that comes along with that.” She twisted the water out of the dishrag she was rinsing with more force than necessary.

He blinked, completely taken aback by the fierceness in her tone. *What the hell?* “Jenny—”

She tossed the dishrag in the sink and spun around, then crossed her arms over her chest, her expression a weird combination of defiant and . . . *sad?* “I can’t do this again. I *won’t* do this again. Do you understand me?”

Confused and, frankly, scared, he released a little frustrated breath. “No, I don’t. Do *what* again? What is it you think I want?”

“You tell me, Gabe, because I don’t know where we’re headed and I just can’t . . . lose myself in another man again. I

need me and, as crazy as I am about you, right now, I want *me* more than anything . . . even more than you.”

Gabe’s stomach tightened, and his hands curled into fists at his sides. What exactly was she saying? Was she sending him away? Confusion and questions tumbled through his mind like rocks in a rushing river. “I-I . . .” What were the right words to say to bring her back into his arms?

“Look, never mind. Just . . . just go, okay?” She turned her back on him, and his heart sank to his socks.

When she didn’t say anything more or face him again, he didn’t know what else to do except retreat. So that’s what he did. He stepped over the doggie gate and walked away, trembling. He stroked his fingers through Luke’s silky tousled hair as he passed the sofa, but the boy had set down the game controller in favor of his Gameboy and was completely absorbed. Gabe grabbed his coat and scarf from the rack in the foyer and quietly closed the door behind him, even though what he really wanted to do was slam it.

Thanks to Tuff, there’d been enough door slamming for one night, though. Wrapping his wool scarf around his neck, he got as far as the gate before he stopped with his hand on the latch, his mind whirling. He stared at the frost on the windshield of the old Rover—it was going to be another cold night. Even colder if he couldn’t figure out what to do. He shook his head and chewed his lower lip. *No. No way.* He wasn’t leaving like this, not when he had no idea what he’d done to piss her off. Like a lightning bolt, it hit him that it wasn’t *him* she was angry with—it was Tuff, and he was getting the blowback from her encounter in the kitchen with her ex. He turned around and hurried back up the sidewalk and then climbed the steps, his tread heavy on the wooden porch. Just as he raised his hand to knock, the door opened and there she was—his Jenny, her expression open and vulnerable, her eyes soft and shimmering with tears.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was ragged. “I-I took my anger at him out on you . . .” She sighed.

He reached for her, tugging her out onto the porch and into his arms, into his jacket, surrounding her with his heat. “It’s okay. It’s okay,” he murmured against her hair.

She slid her arms around his waist and clung. “No, it’s not okay. You aren’t him and you could never be him, thank God.” She tipped her head back. “I meant what I said, though. I can’t lose me again. I *won’t* lose me. Not even for whatever we may turn out to be.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “I hope to hell not, Jenny Weaver. You are a remarkable woman. I would never ask you to change for me or expect that. It’s you and me in this”—he struggled for a word to describe what was growing between the two of them, but gave up for fear of frightening her with the intensity of his emotions—“we’re *us*, and whatever happens in the future, I’ll always respect you, what you need, what you want, and I’ll expect you to do the same for me, okay?”

“Okay.” With a smile that told him she believed him, but would probably remain wary, she touched his cheek. When she kissed him, softly, his heart did a little flip thing. “Don’t worry about Tuff. If it wasn’t you, he’d find something else to be pissy about. He’s just an unhappy person.”

He nodded, hating the fact that she even had to deal with a moment of Ryan Tuffington’s many issues. “Just one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you ever”—Gabe wasn’t sure how to phrase the question or if he should even ask it, but he plunged ahead—“worry that he’ll do something . . . you know . . . like . . . *hurt* you or Luke?”

“Physically?” She shook her head firmly. “Not at all. That’s not his style. He gets loud and verbally mean, but he would never ever touch me or Luke in anger.”

She knew better than he did, so he’d have to trust her on that one. But nonetheless, he would remain vigilant. He dropped a kiss on her forehead before releasing her. “Come

on, let's grab Luke and Harry and see what that goofy pup thinks of snow."

Chapter Sixteen

“**L**OOK AT US,” Jenny whispered, as she cuddled closer to Gabe on the sofa. “All alone for another whole night.”

“Whatever will we do with ourselves?” Gabe murmured against her hair and tightened his arm around her.

Jenny had relished the last couple of days. She and Gabe and Luke had wandered the Christmas Candlelight Walk the previous night with Harry, first on a leash and then transferred to an infant carrier on Gabe’s chest when the puppy got too tired to trot along beside Luke. Jenny had dug the carrier out of the box of baby things in the attic, and it turned out to be just right for Harry to be snuggled up to Gabe’s warm chest. Folks stopped to chat along the way, welcoming Gabe and admiring Harry. They felt like a family, and although Jenny could tell Clyde, Gloria, Noah, Dot, and the others who called out greetings were popping with curiosity, nobody asked any questions, merely giving them knowing smiles.

After the Candlelight Walk, Ryan had been right on time picking up Luke to go to his parents’ holiday party, waiting with a lot of eye rolls and huge sighs while Luke had a long farewell with Harry Potter. Considering Ryan was the one who’d gotten Luke the dog, his reaction was a tad annoying. His sighs had gotten even deeper when Gabe appeared from the kitchen with Luke’s stuffed beaver, Wally.

“You gonna need this guy, pal?” Gabe held up the well-loved toy. “He was sitting on the table.”

“Thanks, Gabe.” Luke accepted Wally with a sheepish grin. “I left him there after breakfast by accident.” He unzipped his backpack and tucked Wally inside.

“You really think *that* needs to go to Grandma’s?” Ryan raised on brow. “She has stuffed animals.”

Jenny put her hands on Luke's shoulders and gave Ryan a warning look. "Wally's special."

Ryan shook his head and flipped his hand. "Whatever. Come on, big guy. Let's go. Grandma's waiting."

After more hugs and promises to take Harry for a walk to practice leash work, she finally got them out the door. She and Gabe had shared a pizza, and afterward, she'd showed him Aponi and Clarissa's nearly complete story. He'd been impressed with her watercolor illustrations and loved the narrative, commenting and offering a couple of historical reference suggestions as he read through. They'd brainstormed a title, settling on *Friendship of the Heart*, although Gabe warned her a publisher might change it.

The two of them sitting at the table together last night, discussing the book and the possibilities for others, had felt so natural. Jenny made notes while they talked, and ideas filled her imagination. That feeling of rightness continued as they'd closed up the house and he'd followed her up the stairs, stopping halfway to sweep her into his arms for the kisses she'd already become addicted to. Hot, hungry kisses that told her that he wanted her as much as she ached for him.

She'd spent Monday at the marina, showing her mom and dad the updates to the website, adding the new inventory to the Parts pages, and getting started on the taxes while Gabe went out to the dig with Josh and his crew. But now they were together again, watching the flames lick at the gas logs and kissing by the light of the Christmas tree while Harry snoozed on a plaid dog bed near the hearth.

Ryan had texted photos of Luke petting reindeer at the farm, sitting on Santa's knee at the luncheon, and splashing in the pool at the hotel. Luke looked happy and excited and Ryan's comments had been kept to simple, friendly captions, no snark or questions about what she was doing while he had their son. Maybe he was finally figuring out that they could live in harmony and share their time with Luke without contention.

“Hey.” Gabe lifted her chin and kissed her. “Got something I want to talk to you about.”

Jenny’s heart clutched. *Here it comes—he’s heading to Egypt or Borneo or Peru.* She sat back so she could see his face. He looked happy, excited. *Has to be a new dig.*

“Okay,” she said cautiously, mentally preparing herself, although she really wished he’d waited until after Christmas to drop any bombs. She scooted back a few inches.

But he reached out to stroke one finger down her cheek. “It’s nothing bad, Jenny. Get that *gird-your-loins* look off your face.”

“Habit.” She took his hand and pressed a kiss into his palm. “Over ten years of *I need to talk to you* and not once was it *good* news.”

His smile—those dimples—sent a shiver through her. “I’m hoping you’ll think this is good news.”

“Try me.”

“Josh got a second grant for the dig and he’s invited me to join the team. Officially, I’m committed to William and Mary until May, even though I’m free to leave now. But they’ve already got my classes scheduled for next semester, and I don’t want to slam that door, because they’ve given me grants for digs over the last few years. But I can be *here* and teach my classes online, just go back regularly for office hours and stuff. In May, though, I’m home for good.”

She blinked. “You . . . You’re moving back to River’s Edge?”

He nodded, his grin even bigger. “That’s my plan. I’ve already talked to the History Department head at Warner. In the fall, I can get an adjunct position there that could turn into a full professorship. They’d really like to expand their department to include more archaeology classes, particularly since this discovery at Rising Sun.”

Jenny's breath caught in her throat. *Gabe's coming home.* It was the very last thing she expected him to say, and she was so surprised, she had no words.

His teeth caught his lower lip, and his eyebrows pulled together in a look of strained apprehension. "I need you to say something . . ."

"I'm stunned. I never imagined you'd want to come back." The words came out croaky.

"When I left all those years ago, I thought I could leave geeky Gabriel behind me." He gave a sardonic laugh. "Turns out, you can't run away from yourself. You just have to learn to like who you are inside, even if you do manage to make some changes to the outside." He took both her hands in his. "I'm still that nerdy guy, Jenny, but I never stopped thinking about you. Wishing I'd been different. For you."

"Oh, Gabe, you wouldn't have wanted me back then. I-I —" She closed her eyes and suddenly her cheeks were scorching hot. She really didn't want to admit this to him, but if they had any chance at all, she had to be as honest as he was. "I was grateful that you helped me pass history, but I never looked beyond that, at who you really were. *You* never needed to be different. You were funny and smart and kind. But at seventeen, I was shallow and foolish. I didn't know those were the things about you I should have been treasuring."

His dark eyes grew more intense. "We were both different people and just kids. We never would've worked because we wanted different things. I've seen and done a lot in the world since I've been away. Met a lot of women, dated a few, even had a couple of relationships, but you were always there, Jenny, tucked away in a secret place in my heart. And when it came time to really commit, I couldn't do it because . . ." He shrugged. "Because there was you."

Jenny's heart rose to her throat. "I wasted so much time. Tried so hard to make my marriage work for Luke and because I'd promised, you know? But I lost *me* and Ryan didn't care or even notice. He just wanted me to be that cheerleader who was

always in the stands for him. I should've fought harder for me." She laced her fingers with Gabe's. "I've lived a small life, but I want it to be bigger, fuller, and oh, how I want you in it. But I'm scared I'll hold you back from all that you love. The digs, the traveling. Plus, I don't want you to ever have to be in the middle of my battles with Ryan."

Gabe bit his lower lip. "So here's the thing about Tuff. I'm not competitive. It never occurred to me back then to fight for you. You were a fantasy and I was no good at—"

Jenny touched two fingers to his lips. "I don't know who you're talking about when you say things like that. I don't want to be a fantasy. I'm just me—plain Jenny Weaver, a mom, a woman who's trying to rebuild her life. I want you to want the *real* me, not the person who's been taking up space in your head all these long years."

Gabe sucked her fingertips between his lips, touching his tongue to them in a gesture so sensual, Jenny felt its effect all the way to her toes. "Shh. You didn't let me finish."

Tears stung her eyelids and she blinked to keep them at bay. "What?"

"I know the real you—I've seen who you are these past few weeks. You're good and kind and talented and fierce and beautiful, inside and out. And maybe a little sad, but I'm going to work on that. It's not my nature to compete, but Jenny, I promise you, if you'll have me, I'll be right by your side. I'll slay dragons and ex-football heroes and protect you and Luke to my last breath." His rapt, yet tender, expression was her undoing.

Tears streamed down her face. "I think I'm pretty crazy about you, Gabriel Dawson."



SHE LOVES ME! Gabe's heart nearly pounded out of his chest as he gazed at Jenny. He hadn't planned on telling her that he was moving back, but he couldn't hold it in any longer. He was ready to start a new life with her and Luke. Even Harry Potter.

He'd been a little frightened that all the passion she'd shown him might have been simply a woman who'd been too long without physical affection, even though he knew in his heart that wasn't Jenny's way.

He swiped her cheeks, collecting the tears on his thumbs. "Yeah? Man, I'm glad to hear that because I've been pretty crazy about you for as long as I can remember." He kissed her, tasting salty tears and wine as her lips curved into a smile under his. "We'll figure this out, okay?"

She nodded, sniffing. "Okay."

He touched his forehead to hers. "And we talk. Always. No pretending to be someone we're not, no assuming we already know what the other wants. Open, honest, real."

She chuckled. "I've never done that before. My instincts are always to please."

"You please me," he said fervently. "You've got that mastered."

She sobered. "Don't change your life for me, Gabe. Don't change *you*. That's what I did when I married Ryan. I stopped growing, stopped being me, and it was awful. Promise me, you'll go on digs, you'll do what you love, you'll be my Indiana Jones."

Gabe laughed out loud. "Oh, sweetheart. Indy's real name was Henry, and he was just a small-town nerdy kid following his dad around the world. I've *been* around the world. Now, I'm ready to be home, to settle, to be with you and Luke. And if a dig turns up somewhere that I think I can't resist, we'll talk about it and make decisions together. Heck, maybe you and Luke can come along if you want to." He kissed her again. "We'll always communicate. Always." He reached for her and tugged her over onto his lap, loving how she fit against him perfectly, how she rubbed her nose on his scruff of beard.

"Speaking of communicating . . ." She put her arms around his neck.

“Here?” He quirked one brow. “On the sofa, in front of Harry Potter and the Christmas tree?”

The puppy jumped up at the mention of his name, but only stretched, scrabbled at the fluffy blanket on the dog bed, and curled back up.

Jenny started unbuttoning Gabe’s shirt, kissing his exposed patches of skin as she loosened each button. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back, allowing her to take the reins, blissful in her warm breath on his throat and chest.

All of a sudden, her phone chimed, and she raised her head and glanced at it sitting on the table beside the sofa. “It’s Luke on his iPad,” she said and sat up. As she did, she glanced at the big clock over the fireplace. *Nine thirty*. “He should be asleep.”

The alarm in her voice cooled the ardor immediately, and he reached behind him and nabbed the phone. “Here.”

She slid off his lap and tapped her phone and Luke’s face appeared on the screen, shadowed and clearly frightened. “Luke? Why aren’t you in bed?”

“Mommy, I need you.” Blankets pulled up to his chest, Luke clutched Wally. “I’m all alone. I don’t know how to turn on the light.”

Jenny frowned. “Honey. Honey. Take a breath. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Dad’s g-gone,” Luke choked out, his voice was full of fear and tears.

“What do you mean, he’s *gone*? He’s not in the hotel room with you?”

“No, he’s gone!” Luke cried. “I don’t know where he is. His phone’s here, but he’s not.”

Jenny swallowed hard. “Honey, check the bathroom.”

“The bathroom’s dark.”

“Check anyway.” She rose and paced. “The switch for the bedside light is on the bottom of the lamp. Shine your iPad there and push the switch.”

The room lit up, and then came a rustle of sheets and the patter of footsteps, and Luke was back. “No, he’s not here.”

Gabe jumped up, ran to the coatrack in the foyer, and grabbed his own phone. “What hotel?”

Jenny scrunched her nose, followed Gabe to the coatrack, pulled her winter jacket on, and slipped into her boots. “The Traveler, I think. That’s the one with an indoor pool. Luke, I’m on my way, honey. We’ll find Dad.”

Gabe slid his jacket and shoes on, too, and they were out the door. “The one in Chandler? That’s only about twenty minutes away.”

She nodded. “Yeah, near the reindeer ranch. Luke, get back in bed. Don’t move. I’m staying with you all the way.”

Luke took a shaky breath and nodded. “Hurry, Mommy.”

“We’re coming, honey. Just keep talking to me.”

Gabe googled as he walked, nearly tripping over the gate at the end of the sidewalk. “Dammit.” He opened the gate and then they were in the Rover, headed east.

Jenny had stayed online with Luke, who was still tearful and frightened. Gabe’s heart ached for the poor kid.

He thanked the universe that he’d installed a new sound system that included a Bluetooth receiver, as his own phone finally connected to the car. He tapped on the number of the Traveler Hotel that he’d found on Google and waited for the desk clerk to pick up, but when she did, she immediately put him on hold.

He side-eyed Jenny, who was calming Luke by asking him about petting the reindeer and talking to Santa, while pan flute music wafted from the car speaker. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he pushed the Rover slightly past the posted speed limit, although the road was curvy and the last

thing they needed was to end up in the river. His mind was whirling. What the hell was Tuff thinking, leaving an eight-year-old kid alone in a hotel room? Maybe he just ran down to the ice machine or something. But he'd been gone at least ten minutes as far as they knew and nobody takes that long to grab a bucket of ice or hit a vending machine.

At last, the desk clerk picked up, and Gabe asked her to check the bar for Ryan, but she said she was not allowed to leave her post and had to check in a busload of seniors who were late arrivals. "Can you connect me to the bar?"

She dithered. "Well, the bar's pretty busy right now. I doubt the bartender will pick up since it's too late for reservations."

Gabe released a frustrated breath. "Connect me to housekeeping then." He glanced at Jenny as the phone went quiet for a second before ringing again. "Maybe I can get someone from there to go to the bar and find him."

Jenny looked like she was going to cry as she muted her phone. "You're convinced he's in the bar?"

"Well, unless he had a heart attack at the ice machine or fell down a flight of stairs . . ." He gritted his teeth. *Where is housekeeping?*

"He said he'd stopped drinking."

"Yeah, well . . ." He didn't know what to say, but all his instincts told him the bar was where they'd find Tuff.

Housekeeping's voicemail answered at last, and Gabe tapped his phone to disconnect. No point in leaving a voicemail. They were nearly there, and Luke was as safe as they could make him.

Fury began a slow simmer in his belly as Jenny went back to distracting and soothing her son. He pressed the accelerator a little harder. He was beginning to understand what drove a man to violence because, at this moment, all his protective instincts were on point, and he was seriously considering throat-punching Ryan Tuffington when they got to the hotel.

Chapter Seventeen

GABE WAS BARELY parked in front of the two-story hotel before Jenny hopped out of the Rover. He had to hustle to catch up to her. She smiled at her phone screen as she sped to the well-lit hotel lobby. “Luke, I’m here. I’m going to find your dad and get the room key, okay?” She passed her phone to Gabe as he rushed up behind her and held the big glass door. “Will you stay with him while I go check the bar?”

He took the phone and grinned at the screen. “Hey, Luke!” He muted the phone. “Do you want me to go up to the room?”

She shook her head, grateful that he was letting her take the lead, even though she could see from his expression that he was as concerned as she was. “I don’t know what room, so hang here for a sec, okay? I don’t want Ryan following me up there if he’s buzzed.”

Gabe nodded and offered an encouraging little smile. “Gotcha. I’ll be right here.” He jerked his head in the direction of the lounge area of the lobby, where several conversation areas with sofas and chairs were set up by a huge stone fireplace. White lights twinkled on a gaily decorated Christmas tree in the corner and the mantel was hung with ropes of cedar boughs that scented the air.

If she hadn’t been furious, she might’ve taken a moment to enjoy the scene, but her entire focus was on the bar at the far end of the lobby. Music and chatter and laughter spilled out of the open doors. With a deep breath, she stalked to the entrance and gazed around the wood-paneled, high-ceilinged space.

And there he was, sitting at the bar with his back to her, a nearly empty beer glass in his hand and two empties in front of him, yukking it up with a guy who looked vaguely familiar. She squared her shoulders, took another deep breath, and wound her way past crowded tables. When she got to within

two feet of her ex, the guy Ryan was talking to snapped his mouth shut in the middle of a sentence. Then he nodded toward her.

“Um, dude . . .”

Ryan spun around on the stool. His reddened face was a study in bewilderment. “What the hell?”

Drawing on every ounce of patience she could muster, Jenny held out her hand. “Your room key.”

Ryan blinked, then blinked again as if he couldn’t believe his own eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Rescuing my son.” She stepped closer, deliberately getting into his personal space—a move that she ordinarily wouldn’t make, but this was about Luke. “Your key. *Now.*”

“R-rescuing?” His voice rose on the word. He stood up, towering over her, a tactic he’d used during their marriage if he knew he was in the wrong. It used to make her cower, but this time, Jenny didn’t back away.

“You left him alone in a strange hotel room, Ryan.” She kept her voice even with an effort. “He’s only eight years old.”

“He’s fine. He was sound asleep.” Ryan sat back down and attempted the charming smile, but it only appeared smirky, which made Jenny want to gut-punch him. “I only came down for a Coke, but”—he jerked a thumb over his shoulder—“look who I ran into. You remember Bart, right?”

She did remember Bart Summers, the kicker from River’s Edge High School’s team fifteen years ago. Jazz had told her that he’d gotten bombed at the reunion, and his very embarrassed and angry wife had yanked him out of the party. Clearly, the guy had enjoyed more than one drink here at the hotel bar—his pupils were pinpricks and his cheeks were rosy.

Jenny acknowledged him with a cursory nod before setting her ire back on Ryan. “He woke up and you weren’t there, and he panicked. I’m taking him home. Give me your key.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Oh, for . . . It’s only a couple beers, Jen.” He stared at her for a few seconds. “C’mon, I’ll go let you in. You’re being melodramatic. He’s going to want to”—he rose again, putting a hand on the bar as he stood—“stay with me.”

Only a couple of beers, huh?

“He’s not going to be given that option.” Jenny put one hand on Ryan’s chest and with hardly any pressure, sat him back down on the stool again. She felt the room keycard in his shirt pocket and plucked it out. “Room number?”

He scowled. “Two seventeen, but hang on . . .”

She turned her back on him and marched away.

Gabe was pacing in the lounge when she got to the bottom of the wide curving staircase that led to a mezzanine and the second floor of the hotel.

She held up the keycard and started up the stairs—it was way faster than the elevator at this point. But midway up, she paused and turned around, jerking her head toward the bar. “Please, if you can keep him down here without getting in a fight, will you?”

Gabe nodded. “Go get him. I’ll be here.” As she hurried up the stairs, she heard him say, “Luke, your mom’s on her way up now.”

It took three tries with the room key because she was trembling and sliding it in and out too fast. At last, the damn green light came on and she shoved the handle down.

Luke was on the other side, barefoot, clutching Wally to his *Star Wars* pjs, and looking so small. “Mommy!” He threw himself into her arms when she knelt down, and she gathered him close.

“It’s okay, love. I’m here,” she murmured, inhaling the sweet scent of his hair and basking in the pure pleasure of having her son safe in her arms.

After a moment, he leaned back. “Did you find Dad?”

She nodded. “He ran downstairs for a minute and got waylaid by an old friend. But we decided it might be best if you came home with me and slept in your own bed tonight. Let’s get your stuff together.”

“Okay!” Clearly relieved, Luke hugged her tight again, then leaned back in her arms again. “Is Dad . . . will he be mad if I go home?”

“Dad will be fine. He’ll be back at the ranch in the morning, and you can go out to see him and the horses in a couple of days. You can wear your jammies home. Just put your socks and shoes on, and I’ll pack your backpack.”

Hurriedly, she packed his iPad, a Ziploc bag full of tiny *Star Wars* figurines and weapons and ships, the clothes he’d discarded on the chair, and his toothbrush from the bathroom, while Luke pulled on his socks and shoes. “Is this everything you brought with you?”

He peered into the case before looking around the room. “Yeah. Oh, wait, there’s this too.” From the nearby desk, he produced a sheaf of papers held together with a large red paper clip—holiday scenes he’d colored at the Santa event—and a waxed paper bag with two cookies in it. “Dad said I could have the cookies for breakfast.”

She tucked them on top of the other things in the pack. “Okay. Do you want to put Wally in here?”

“No, I’ll carry him.” Tongue sticking out between his lips in concentration, Luke tied his shoes, which was still a bit of an awkward task as, thanks to Velcro shoes, he’d only recently learned how to do it.

Jenny zipped the bag shut and gathered his coat, hat, and gloves. “Come on, sweetie, let’s go.”

In the hallway, she glanced up and down. Ryan was nowhere to be seen, so she stopped long enough to zip Luke into his jacket before leading him to the staircase. Over the mezzanine railing, she saw Gabe first, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched the stairs from a wing chair by the

fireplace. Across from him on the sofa, his back to the stairs, sat Ryan, leaning forward, head down, his hands hanging between his knees. When Gabe saw her, he stood and came toward the staircase.

As soon as Luke caught sight of Gabe, he gave a little squeal of joy and raced down the steps.



TIME HAD SEEMED to slow down after Jenny went upstairs, and Gabe waited for the inevitable encounter with Tuff. He sure as heck didn't want a scene in the middle of a hotel lobby, but he'd told Jenny he wouldn't let Tuff interfere with her taking Luke, and he wouldn't, even if meant wrestling the bigger man to the floor. He swallowed, hoping against hope that wouldn't be necessary. He might be in better shape than he had ever been in his life, but Jenny's ex was a big guy and could probably take Gabe down pretty easily. All Gabe had on his side was his strong desire to protect Jenny and Luke and maybe the fact that Tuff might not be fully on his game after a beer or two.

Tuff didn't disappoint. Within minutes of Jenny's disappearance at the top of the steps, he'd stormed out of the bar and stalked to the elevator, punching the Up button with more force than necessary. He didn't even look in Gabe's direction.

The desk clerk, craning her neck to catch sight of whoever was at the elevator, called, "Sorry, sir, the elevator is downstairs while housekeeping cleans the car for tomorrow. It'll be out of commission for a few minutes."

Tuff uttered an oath and headed to the stairs, stopping at the bottom as he noticed Gabe loitering near the stairs. "What the—" he growled, before his face smoothed into the old disdainful expression that had intimidated the hell out of Gabe years and years ago. On Tuff's haggard face, it was now merely sad. "I should've known she'd drag you along."

“No dragging necessary.” Gabe stayed put, keeping the fat newel post at the bottom of the staircase between him and Tuff.

“I’ll bet.” Tuff sneered. “Only way *you* could get into her pants is to be at her beck and call.”

Good grief. It’s high school all over again.

Tuff swaggered across the wide stairway to stand only a few feet from Gabe. “She’s always been in love with *me*.”

As the other man drew closer, Gabe saw the fear in his blue eyes. “Not anymore.”

Tuff started up the stairs, and Gabe came around the post. “Dude, don’t go up there. She’s pretty pissed. You don’t want Luke to see that.”

Suddenly, Tuff swung about and crumpled against the banister, landing on his butt on a step midway up. “I can’t lose them.” He dropped his head into his hands, his shoulders shaking.

Gabe closed his eyes. *This* was not what he was anticipating. Anger, yes. Sardonic and cruel comments, for sure. But despite seeing it on Halloween night, vulnerable Ryan Tuffington was still disconcerting and rather a shock. He took a deep breath. “Get off the stairs,” he suggested quietly. “Come over here and sit down.”

Tuff heaved a sigh, pulled himself up, and followed Gabe to the seating area by the fireplace. “I can’t lose my son.” He fell back onto the sofa, dropping his head and sighing.

Gabe sat down across from him in a chair that allowed him a clear view of the stairs. Tuff seemed to be in control of his temper for now, but all bets could be off once he saw Jenny with Luke. “You won’t lose him. You’ll always be his dad.”

Tuff thrust his fingers through his hair, pressing it back against his head and closed his eyes. “I screwed up with Jen. I don’t want to mess up with Luke.”

“Then don’t.”

“Just that easy?” Tuff lifted his head and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “What do you know about parenting?” Surprisingly, the question wasn’t hostile.

“Not a damn thing,” Gabe admitted. “But I’m pretty sure if you love ’em, the rest comes along.”

“I do love him.” Tuff stared at his shoes. “Sometimes, though, I’m not sure what to do with him. He’s such a different kid.”

“That’s a reason to love him more.” Gabe spoke from his heart. He’d always been the *different kid*.

Jenny and Luke appeared at the top of the stairs. When Luke gave a little squeal and raced down the wide steps, Gabe rose, met him at the bottom, and swung him up into his arms. Luke slid his arms around Gabe’s neck and held on tight, then he tipped his head back. “Wally was scared of the dark.”

Gabe chuckled, delighted to see Luke in good spirits. “I imagine he was. Lucky you were there with him.”

“I kept him safe.”

“You sure did, kiddo.” Gabe kept the boy in his arms, looking to Jenny for his next move.

She tilted her head toward Tuff, who’d risen from the sofa and was watching, his hangdog expression about as tragic as any Gabe had ever seen.

Gabe hugged Luke, then whispered in his ear, “Go say good-bye to your dad and give him a hug. He’s not feeling very well, so we’re taking you home.”

Luke immediately slid out of Gabe’s grasp and ran to Tuff, who pulled the boy up into his arms. “Dad, I’m sorry you’re sick,” Luke said and kissed Tuff’s cheek. “Get well fast ’cause we’re supposed to ride Jasper, remember?”

Tuff threw Gabe a grateful glance as he clasped Luke close. “I remember. I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll talk to Mom about what day she can bring you out to the ranch, okay? Jasper’s waiting for you.”

“Can we make him trot?” Luke’s utter innocence as he gazed with complete trust into Tuff’s face made Gabe’s stomach lurch.

Tuff was right about one thing—Gabe knew nothing about being a parent. But he wanted to learn, not only for Luke but also for the possibility that he and Jenny might one day have a child together. The very thought sent a shiver of excitement through him as Jenny came up beside him.

“Sure, Lukie, we can try a trot, but you’ll have to hold on tight.” Tuff smiled and swallowed hard as he pressed a kiss to Luke’s cheek and set him down. “Love you, buddy. Go with Mommy and . . . and Gabe, and I’ll see you later.”

Luke grinned. “I love you, too, Dad. Feel better, okay?” He turned toward Gabe and Jenny, but then spun around again, his sneaker squeaking on the polished pine floor. “You should rest. Grandpa-great says a nap fixes everything.”

Tuff chuckled. “Grandpa-great’s a smart guy. I think I’ll go upstairs and go to bed right now.”

Jenny handed Luke his hat and gloves. “Put these on, sweetie. It’s cold out there.” She touched his cheek. “Go on with Gabe. I’ll be right out.”



JENNY WAITED UNTIL the heavy glass door closed behind Luke and Gabe before she turned to Ryan with a tired sigh.

He met her gaze, looking abashed and pretty beat himself. “I’m sorry, Jen. I messed up. It won’t happen—”

“Just stop.” She held up one hand. “No promises. I’m too mad at you to hear them. I need you to be out of my sight for a while.”

He released a frustrated breath. “Listen for a minute.”

“No. *You* listen to *me* this time.” She strode up to within a few feet of him, and the heat off the fireplace warmed her cheeks. “If you can fall off the wagon this easily and forget

that your eight-year-old son is in a strange hotel room all alone, then you need to get some help.”

“I didn’t forget him. It was a mistake, that’s all.” His tone turned defensive and whiny.

Jenny was in no mood to take it all apart. She only wanted to leave. “That’s even worse. You thought it was *okay* to leave him alone.”

“Jen . . . I didn’t plan to have a drink. I ran into Bart and —”

She raised both hands, palms outward. “Not right now. Get some sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow or the next day.”

“Are you going to bring him out to the ranch?” Ryan’s tone had changed to wistful.

“I don’t know yet.”

“He wants to ride Jasper.” He straightened his slumping shoulders. “I got him his own saddle and blanket for Christmas.”

“He’s got rehearsal with Aidan and Matt every morning until Christmas Eve, so if we come, it’ll have to be in the afternoon.” She was still so mad she wanted to throttle him, but she knew how much Luke wanted to ride. She didn’t want to have to tell him that she had no faith in his dad, even though, at that very moment, she didn’t trust Ryan Tuffington to take his son for ice cream. “Text me tomorrow.” She turned away.

“Jen, wait.” Ryan came up, stopping a few feet from her. “I’m sorry. Truly.”

She stared at him for a moment. What had happened to the guy she’d fallen in love with so many years ago? “Get some help, Ryan.” She shouldered the glass door open, heading for Luke and Gabe and blessed peace.

Chapter Eighteen

JENNY RACED FROM the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Had to be Jo. She and Alex had gotten into Louisville over three hours ago. Jo had texted after they landed, “*Monday night dinner ready? On my way.*” Jenny hadn’t even bothered to remind her it was Tuesday. It didn’t matter a bit. Only three days until Christmas Eve, and the triplets were going to be together again at last.

She threw open the door to find not only Jo, but Jazz, too, both rosy-cheeked from the cold and loaded down with bags. She held the screen door open and took a sack from each sister. “Come in, come in!”

They set the rest of their packages down while they discarded their coats, gloves, hats, and purses, piling them on the coatrack by the door. Jenny practically bounced on her toes, anxious for hugs.

Jo was first, tossing her arms around her sister. “God, I’ve missed you!” The joy in her voice brought a lump to Jenny’s throat and she held on a bit tighter for a few seconds.

“I’ve missed you too.” Jenny blinked back tears.

“None of that now,” Jazz scolded as she joined in, turning the embrace into their familiar three-way hug. Her eyes shimmered, as well, so Jenny just wrinkled her nose as they all clung together for longer than usual. Pragmatic Jazz broke the circle first. “Let’s get this stuff to the kitchen. Did you turn your oven on to four hundred?”

Jenny grabbed a couple of bags and led the way. “I did, but I thought *I* was cooking tonight. I made chicken velvet soup and a gorgeous salad.”

Jazz tutted. “We weren’t about to let you do everything, sis. I brought a pie that needs to bake while we eat supper and

some of Gram's refrigerator pickles and three kinds of olives from the new olive bar at Deke's."

"And I brought"—Jo pulled a long loaf of bread out of the net bag she was carrying—"French bread from Mac's, and Carly even snuck in this!" She brought out a small container and opened it. "Ta-da! Truffle butter!"

Jenny laughed as she swiped a finger across the top of the soft yellow butter and licked it clean. "Oh, yum! I can't believe she did that! Did Mac see? He never lets that stuff leave the diner."

Jo shrugged. "Dunno. It *is* Truffle Butter Tuesday, so I think we're all good."

Jazz grinned as she pulled out a jar of pickles and containers of olives. "I think Carly occasionally giving away truffle butter behind Mac's back is their thing. She does it, he knows she does it, but they pretend he doesn't know she does it. It's a game. I need your four-pocket plate, Jen."

"In the cabinet above your head." Jenny pointed, basking in the pure bliss of the three of them together in her kitchen.

Jo looked around. "Where's Luke? And Harry, the wonder pup? I'm dying to meet him."

"You'll meet him soon. Tonight they're at Ryan's mom and dad's. I think Vicki bought stuff for Harry. I saw her coming out of Bea's place earlier this week, and she was insistent that Luke bring him to Christmas dinner tonight."

"Aren't they going to be in town on Christmas Day?"

"Nope, they're heading to Indy right after Aidan's party on Christmas Eve."

Jo's eyes widened. "Luke's not going with them, is he?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. They had him for Thanksgiving. Christmas is mine."

Jazz glanced at Jo, then side-eyed Jenny. "You're being damn generous, letting Tuff have him at all after . . .

everything.”

Jo looked up as she pulled a bread knife from the rack on the counter. “What *everything*? I don’t live here anymore. What did I miss?”

Jenny frowned at Jazz. She didn’t want tonight to be all about her problems with her ex. There was too much other news to share. Shaking her head, she stirred the pot of soup, making sure it wasn’t scorching as she gave Jo the quick-and-dirty version of the whole hotel fiasco, leaving Gabe’s presence out entirely simply because she wasn’t ready to dish with her sisters about that relationship yet. One day soon, but not yet. She ended with, “I’ve been really cautious about letting Luke be with his dad. I’m staying at the ranch while he’s out there for riding lessons, and if Ryan wants to spend time with him otherwise, it has to be here with me in the next room.”

Jo heaved a disgusted sigh. “Thank heaven you got full custody of that kid. Is Tuff kicking and screaming about *supervised* visitation?”

“Not really.” Jenny pondered the days since she’d picked up Luke at the hotel. Ryan had been unusually quiet, almost submissive, which was totally out of character. He was polite to her and loving and fun with Luke, leading him on Trudy’s old gelding, Jasper, at the ranch, playing video games or building with Legos when he visited here at the house. He even texted before stopping by, and although he seemed tired after a day of working with the horses, his eyes were clear and the florid cast to his cheeks was diminishing. Obviously, he’d stopped drinking. Again. Jenny was afraid to trust him, though, and he seemed to be respecting that for now.

“The guy needs to get some help. Maybe AA or rehab or something?” Jazz carried the filled relish tray to the table while Jenny set three places with soup bowls and plates for salad and bread.

“Oh, I can see Tuff in rehab. Not!” Sarcasm dripped from Jo’s tone as she sliced the warm French loaf and tucked it into

a towel-lined basket. “He’d be the one charming the cleaning staff into leaving a six-pack in his trash can.”

Jenny gave her a severe look, causing Jo to look abashed. “Sorry, sis, that was probably a little too on target for comfort.”

Chances were good Ryan was merely biding his time, keeping her happy until she relaxed, before he did something else stupid and they’d have to start all over. As much as Luke loved his dad, sometimes she couldn’t help wishing Ryan hadn’t screwed up his life in Florida so badly. That he still lived down there and was satisfied with quarterly visits with his son. Shoving the unhappy thoughts aside, she carried the bowls to the soup pot on the stove and filled them. “C’mon, grab the salad and dressing from the fridge, Jazz. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

When they were finally all seated, the overhead light glinted on Jo’s left hand as she smeared truffle butter on her bread. Jenny dropped her own slice and grabbed Jo’s hand, where a gorgeous emerald-cut diamond solitaire glistened. “What is *this*?”

Jo grinned. “An early Christmas gift from Alex.”

Jazz hopped up and came around to stand behind Jo’s chair as she held the ring up to the light. “Jo-Jo, this should’ve been the first thing you mentioned as we walked in the door!”

“I wanted to see if you two would notice it.” Jo shrugged and happiness wafted off her in waves that warmed Jenny right down to her toes.

“Jo, you’re getting married!” Jenny exclaimed.

“I am.”

“When?” Jazz demanded, plopping back down in her chair and reaching for the blue cheese dressing.

“I don’t know yet,” Jo admitted, going back to buttering her bread. “He just gave it to me last night—totally unexpected because we’d talked about trying to find a house

before I start work in April, so I thought we were skipping gifts this year.” Jo had found a gig repairing boats at a small family marina on Silver Lake just outside Durham, and she and Alex had been house hunting on the lake.

Jenny passed the truffle butter to Jazz. “More importantly, *where?*”

Jo looked at her as if she’d just suggested joining a satanic cult. “Well, *here*, of course. Where else? We want something small and not fancy, although I can promise you Alex’s mom will want to go for something *très élégant*. That said, *I’m* thinking St. Agnes for the wedding and, if Aidan’s not booked, the riverboat for the reception, or I’ll talk to Sean and Conor about using the winery or maybe even Walkers’ party barn if we wait for summer. Can’t you just see my future mother-in-law sitting on a hay bale in her Dolce & Gabbana dress and Jimmy Choos? I love her, but man . . .” She shook her head. “Anyway, you two will be my only attendants.”

Jazz had gone unusually quiet, her expression solemn, yet there was an air of excitement about her as she probed for more details. “Will it be in the spring, do you think?”

Jo, in the midst of a bite of bread, gave her a curious look. “I’m not sure. Why?”

“Could you try for some time *after* May?” An enigmatic smile curved Jazz’s lips up and she leaned back, placing one hand on her stomach. “Eli and I were planning an announcement on Christmas Day, but I can’t hold it in another second. I’m pregnant! We’re going to get married very quietly in the chapel at St. Agnes on New Year’s Day.”

Jo squeezed Jenny’s forearm and squealed, “I’m going to be an auntie again! *We’re* going to be aunties!” while Jenny sat dumbfounded, tears burning her eyelids. *Jo married! Jazz married and a mother!* What changes this year had wrought.

Finally, she managed a choky, “How far along are you?”

“Four months.” Jazz’s expression was one of perfect contentment. “I’ve been dying to tell you, but I wanted to wait

for Jo to get home, so I could tell you together.”

Both Jenny and Jo jumped up to hug Jazz. “Oh, we need a new baby in this family,” Jo said. “Luke is growing up too fast.”

“You’re glowing, Jazzie.” Jenny swiped her cheeks with her palms. “I’m so happy for you and Eli.”

“Eli’s feeling pretty proud of himself.” Jazz laughed. “And I couldn’t be happier or more terrified.”

“Perfectly normal.” Jenny ate a spoonful of soup, then another, before she caught Jo’s wistful expression.

“Won’t it be wonderful when Alex and I come back summers, all three of us sitting on your porch, Jenny? Our kids playing on the steps and out in the yard?” Jo fantasized aloud. “Alex is a little worried about passing the type 1 diabetes to our kids; however, it’s not going to stop us from getting busy as soon as we’re married. We want a houseful of little Briggses.”

“And one day, grands,” Jenny added. “I’m counting on Luke for grandkids.”

Jazz giggled. “He’s only eight, Jen. You’ve got a while. Maybe you need to ramp up the thing with Indy. Luke needs a little sister or brother. We could all have babies together!”

Jenny chuckled, ignoring Jazz’s not-so-subtle hint. “Poor Gabe’s never going to live down that Halloween costume, is he?”

Jazz winked and sipped her soup. “Nope.”

Jenny dug into her salad, and for a few moments, they all focused on their food. Then Jo asked, “So how *are* things with the delectable Dr. Dawson? Jazz told me he’s been around a lot.”

“He’s good. Great, in fact,” Jenny said, smiling. “I think I’m . . . well, *we’re* . . . deeply in *like*.” The *love* word hadn’t actually been spoken between her and Gabe yet, although they’d danced around it more than once. They were both all in,

yet it felt like tempting fate to say it to her sisters before she'd actually said it to him.

"I knew it!" Jazz chortled. "You can't get through a FaceTime call without talking about him."

Jenny held up both hands. "We're taking it slow. There's Luke to consider, and Gabe's going to stay at William and Mary until May, as well as work on Josh's dig over at Rising Sun. He'll teach some classes online, but he's still going to have to be in Virginia a good bit of spring. But, oh, my . . ." Jenny's heart thumped harder at the thought of Gabe's toe-curling kisses. "If I'd only known what I was missing back in high school."

"If you'd ended up with Gabe, you wouldn't have our sweet Luke," Jazz pointed out reasonably enough. "Although I hate that you had to deal with Tuff's nonsense to get that accomplished."

Jenny couldn't disagree. Her son was her heart, and in truth, some of the very best things about him were traits of Ryan Tuffington's—his wry humor, his persistence, his love of reading, and animals. Luke wouldn't be Luke without Ryan's genes. "You know, weird as it sounds, Ryan taught me a lot about life and myself. *He* didn't know that was what he was doing all those years, but he did. Now, I'm pretty sure I know who I am and what I want. I'm tired of always trying to please everyone else. And most important, I've finally discovered what's been missing in my life. A real grown-up romance."

"Then a toast to old Tuff." Jo raised her glass of water.

"Oh crap, I forgot to open the wine." Jenny pushed her chair back.

Jo waved her hand to stop her. "Forget the wine for now. Jazz can't have it, anyway, and I'm happy with water."

"Okay"—Jenny pulled back up to the table and held up her glass—"to Tuff. He may be a punk, but he gave me Luke and helped me see what I truly want."

After they clinked glasses and sipped, the conversation turned to weddings and, by the time the oven dinged to let them know Jazz's apple pie was done, they'd pretty much planned her and Eli's intimate New Year's Day ceremony, right down to having a reception for family and close friends in the church fellowship hall afterward. A quick call to the pastor and to the chairperson of the church events committee, who just happened to be their friend, Harley Lange, and the whole thing was easy to arrange. They'd even discussed dates—midsummer—for Jo and Alex's impending nuptials, which would most certainly be a more lavish affair, although no less romantic.

While Jazz and Jo rinsed the dishes, Jenny stole away to her little alcove off the living room. It was time to show her sisters what she'd been up to all fall.

Clutching the large sketch pad to her chest, she paused outside the kitchen, absorbing for a moment the sweet sounds of her sisters chattering like a couple of teenagers who'd been apart too long. Once again, she wished Jo hadn't moved to Durham, even though in her heart, she knew that was exactly where her sister belonged. Jo and Alex fit together like peanut butter and jelly, and Alex's research into a cure for diabetes was too important for him to leave his lab at Duke. The good news was that, thanks to his trust fund, money was never going to stop them from coming back to River's Edge to visit whenever they wanted. Perhaps the three sisters weren't destined to live in the same town, but over the years, their connection had always withstood the miles between them. It would this time too.

"Hey, you two, come see." She laid the sketch pad carefully on the table, making sure first that there were no stray crumbs or food on the surface.

"Whatcha got, sis?" Jo dried her hands on a tea towel and tossed it to Jazz as they walked over to peer at the tablet.

"I wrote a children's book. Not *little* children. More like for early readers, kids four to eight." Jenny opened the pad to

reveal the title page for *Friendship of the Heart*, proud of the lovely little watercolor sketch of Aponi and Clarissa, hand in hand in a grove of trees—the one she hoped would be on the cover of the book.

Neither Jazz nor Jo said a word, merely stared in mute silence at Jenny as she lifted the page to reveal the beginning of the story of the two little girls' friendship. As she started to turn that page, too, Jo put a hand out to stop her.

“No, wait.” She hip-checked Jenny aside and pushed the sketch pad to the center of the table, directly under the light and stared. “Jenny, this is . . . This is *amazing!*”

Jazz stepped closer, too, until the three of them were standing shoulder-to-shoulder. “My God, Jenny! How long have you been working on this?” She touched the bottom of the next page almost reverently.

“Since around Thanksgiving,” Jenny admitted. “I went out to the dig with Gabe and saw this”—she pulled her phone out of her pocket and brought up the photos she'd taken of the braided bracelet—“and the story just came to me. So I started playing around with it, then I dug out my pencils and drew a few pictures to go with the story. I got so into it, I ordered a couple of new sketchbooks and watercolors from Amazon.”

“You never said a word! Not one word all the times we've been together,” Jazz accused. “These are incredible.”

“I wasn't sure I could do it, so I kept it a secret. I finally showed the beginning to Gabe, and we talked out the story, and suddenly, there it was.”

Jo was still focused on the pictures on Jenny's phone. “What is this thing?”

“It's a braided hair bracelet, but look, there are two different colors of hair braided with the leather—one dark, one light. It made me wonder about who might've made it. What their story was. Of course, we have no way of ever knowing, so I made one up.”

“How fascinating.” Jo watched intently as Jazz turned the pages of the sketch pad, and they read the story of the two little girls—one Shawnee, the other the daughter of settlers—who lived on the cliffs above the river. How they discovered they were kindred spirits, despite their cultural and language barriers, and how the tribe welcomed the settlers and the settlers had respected and become friendly with the Shawnee. The girls’ friendship grew, until one night, Clarissa’s father, always full of wanderlust, announced the family was leaving, moving West to Oregon. The two little girls were devastated they would be torn apart. Then Aponi had the idea to make jewelry to remember each other by. Both girls cut a lock of their long hair and they braided them together with leather thongs to make the bracelets.

“Oh, Jenny, this is so touching.” Jo sniffed as they reached the last page, a picture of Clarissa, the bracelet on her arm, waving from the back of a covered wagon that floated down the Ohio River on a flatboat, and Aponi running along the shore, holding the arm with her bracelet high above her head.

“You really don’t feel like it’s good-bye forever, just good-bye for now, even though you know they’ll probably never see each other again.” Jazz sighed as they all stared at the last picture. “It’s brilliant, Jen, just brilliant.”

Jo dropped into a chair. “Jenny, when you changed your major from art to marketing and graphic design, we all thought it was the sensible way to go because you didn’t want to be a teacher. You did all that website design down in Florida, which was great. But seeing this . . .” She extended her hand toward the story and gazed up at Jenny, her expression full of wonder. “*This* is your calling, honey. Please tell us you’re going to submit this gorgeous story to publishers.”

A lump formed in Jenny’s throat and she swallowed hard before she could respond. “Gabe wants me to send it to his agent.”

“Do it!” Jazz and Jo cried in unison.

“I’m going to.” Jenny’s heart soared. *It is a good story!* “I have more ideas. There’s been a middle-grade story series in my head since Luke started reading—a boy detective—he and his pals travel through time, solving mysteries. It’ll take some research, but I’ve jotted down almost a whole notebook full of ideas. And I want to do more stories from the dig. Gabe has a couple of ideas that will teach Indiana history, as well as tell a story.”

Jo shook her head in obvious disbelief. “Jenny, I’m so thrilled for you. For us, too, because we’re going to be reading your stories to our kids!” She grinned. “I can’t wait to say, *your auntie Jenny wrote this book—*”

Jazz hugged Jenny tight as she laughed and completed the concept with, “And this book and this one and this one. Jenny, we’re so proud of you! Bravo, sister!”

Chapter Nineteen

“MOM, YOU OKAY in there?” Claire had been in the bathroom long enough that Gabe was starting to worry. It was her first shower without Chris or Andi with her, but now that she had the Aircast, she’d insisted she could handle it all herself. He’d installed two grab bars in the shower stall in her bathroom before she got home from rehab, and there was a built-in seat, but showers were wet and despite the rough floor in the stall, shampoo suds and soap made them slippery.

“I’m fine,” Claire called through the closed door. “Just getting ready to dry my hair, and it’s a little tricky because I have to keep lowering my left arm.”

“Do you want me to help you?” Gabe made the offer, even though he’d never dried anyone’s hair except his own. But this was his mom. If she needed help, he’d dig deep for his inner hairdresser and blow-dry her hair.

“I’ve got it, babe.” Claire sounded pretty confident, so he went back upstairs and pulled his fleece vest from the closet. It wasn’t quite as cold as it had been earlier in the week, however, The Weather Channel had predicted snow showers by nine P.M. He’d never been on Aidan Flaherty’s *River Queen* riverboat, so he had no idea whether it was hot or cold or what. He grinned at himself in the mirror above the dresser. He was going to the Flahertys’ Christmas Eve party, something he couldn’t have imagined doing in high school. He and Conor Flaherty were friendly enough in those days, although they traveled in different social circles.

He chuckled. It was laughable to even think of himself in a *social circle* in high school. Although he had hung out every once in a while with a couple of guys to play D&D or video games, he’d barely spoken to anyone. He’d totally lost track of those two since graduation. The class reunion booklet listed both as *MIA*, and since he wasn’t on Facebook or other social

media, he wasn't motivated to find them. He'd been what people used to call a *loner*, and back then, that suited him just fine.

Fifteen years had certainly brought a lot of changes, not the least of which was that he was actually looking forward to joining Jenny and Luke and his own family at the Flahertys' Christmas Eve party and show this afternoon. Luke was going to be an elf in a dancing-Santas number that Matt and Aidan had come up with, and the kid was about to fly out of his curly-toed slippers with excitement.

The previous night, Gabe had watched Jenny resew a couple of shiny brass buttons on the elf jacket Luke had worn for the tree lighting, her lower lip tucked under her front teeth as she concentrated. Luke had kept busy playing with Harry Potter by the light of the Christmas tree. Earlier in the day, Harry had gotten ahold of a couple of wrapped packages and torn the paper, which meant he'd been banished to the kitchen for a bit, but as the giggling boy and the puppy roughoused together, Gabe had basked in the warmth of simply being there. A fire in the fireplace, a mug of hot chocolate for Luke and sweet, rich eggnogs he'd sprinkled with nutmeg for him and Jenny, a card game he and Luke had been playing, abandoned on the coffee table after Harry was allowed to join them again—it all felt very right.

This is what marriage would be like. This warm, cozy feeling of belonging. He thought about his mom and dad, about Chris and Jeremy, Jo and Alex, Jazz and Eli—couples whose intimacy was practically a tangible thing. He could see it, feel it, whenever he was with any of them. It was what he shared with Jenny at last. His heart had surged, and for a moment, he'd wished he'd bought her the ring, that they could have a double wedding with Jazz and Eli on New Year's Day or even with Jo and Alex in the summer, because right here with her was where he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

She'd glanced up from her task, and delicate pink color filled her cheeks when she caught him staring at her. "What?"

He was sure that naked longing was evident on his face, but it was okay because it was reflected back to him in her gorgeous golden-brown eyes. It was enough for now, so he'd merely smiled and asked if she needed a refill on her eggnog. They had time . . . plenty of time.

Blinking the memory away, he zipped his vest over a red-and-green-plaid flannel shirt and raked his hair back with his fingers, aware that he probably should have made time for a haircut before the holidays got under way. He shrugged at his reflection. *Too late now.* Besides, later Jenny would sift her fingers through it while they kissed in the firelight—

“Hey?” His mom’s voice interrupted the fantasy. “Are you ready? We’re gonna be late.”

“Coming!” He thundered down the steps and met her at the kitchen door. She looked terrific, healed and back to her old self in leggings and a long red sweater with gaily wrapped packages embroidered across the front.

She gave him an arch look. “*That’s* your idea of festive?”

He glanced down. “It’s red and green. Christmas colors.”

“I can’t believe you don’t own a Christmas sweater.” She went into the kitchen and pulled a pie carrier from a bottom cupboard. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen you in any kind of holiday sweater since you were fourteen and you wore the one with the fuzzy snowman on it to your grandparents’ house in Louisville. Remember that sweater?” She pulled a couple of her delicious pumpkin pies out of the fridge to add to the dessert table at the potluck.

Gabe chuckled. “I do, and I suffered grave humiliation at the hands of my Dawson cousins as I recall. I swore I would never again wear a Christmas sweater, and I’ve managed to avoid it ever since.”

“That was before ugly Christmas sweaters were a thing. You’d be right in fashion at today’s party if you still had it . . . or one like it.” She snapped her fingers. “Oh, oh . . . hang on,

I'll be right back." She limped out, calling over her shoulder as she left, "Stick those two pies in the carrier, will you?"

He was pretty sure what her mission was. No doubt, he was going to be wearing the red sweater with the light-up-nose reindeer that his dad had worn on his last Christmas before his heart attack. "Mom, I'm fine."

She didn't respond, so he packed the pies, too aware that it didn't matter what she brought back with her. He'd put it on, kiss her cheek, and be glad that she hadn't broken her neck in the fall from the ladder. Wearing an ugly Christmas sweater to a town event was a small thing to do to please his mom. Besides, Luke would get a kick out of the light-up nose.

She came back with a padded mailer that had never been opened. "Here." She handed it to him. "Try this."

"What's this?" He turned the package over in his hands, before reaching for the pull tab on the back and tearing it across as she smiled a little enigmatic smile. He pulled a red-and-green sweater out of a plastic bag and shook it out. On the front was the knitted face of The Dude himself—the Big Lebowski—on a background of snowflakes, with the word ABIDE above him, and a row of marmots trimming the bottom of the sweater. *The perfect Christmas sweater.* "Wh-where did you . . .?" He was practically speechless as he yanked off his vest and flannel shirt and tugged the sweater over his Henley.

His mom laughed, even though after he popped his head through the neck of the sweater, he saw tears glistening in her eyes. "I bought it for your dad the year he died. I had it hidden in the back of my closet so he wouldn't see it before Christmas Eve. I just this minute remembered it, so it never got sent to charity when your sister and I cleared his stuff out this past spring." She leaned back a little and gave him an assessing look. "I like it. It's your look."

Smoothing the sweater over his chest, Gabe's throat tightened and he swallowed hard. "I could totally see Dad in this. We loved that movie. I think we watched it every time I came home."

“It looks great on you.” Her voice was a little husky.

He reached out and pulled his mom into a bear hug. “I love you, Mom. Thanks.”

“I love you too.” She returned the embrace, pressing against his chest for a few seconds before patting his back and saying briskly, “Come on, *Dude*, let’s go.”



JENNY LOOKED OUT at the crowd from her place behind the sweep of curtain across the showboat’s stage. It was a great group for early afternoon on Christmas Eve, close to a hundred townfolk mingling, laughing, and chatting. The Weavers filled an entire round table, while behind them, Eli’s family, the Walkers, chattered noisily. Eli tipped his chair back to say something to his brother, Jack, who looked handsome and brawny in a royal-blue sweater covered in snowflakes. His cousins, Cameron and Joey, had gone all out with the ugly Christmas sweaters—one with a Grinch and one with a sweater that actually said UGLY CHRISTMAS SWEATER inside a wreath. Their sister—gorgeous, willowy Annabelle Walker—had chosen to go elegant with a glittery gold tunic over black leggings, making her long legs look even longer. How was it possible that every single member of that family was beautiful? She wasn’t the only person to notice. Who was that cute, auburn-haired woman sitting next to Gerry Ross at the Langes’ table? She kept eyeing Jack Walker like he was a big slice of Paula Meadows’s Italian cream cake and she was starving to death. *Interesting.*

Jenny had also opted for pretty instead of goofy, choosing a shimmery winter-white sweater sewn with pearls and crystal beads over a pair of skinny jeans and black ballet flats. Christmas happened in her jewelry, where colorful gold-green-and-red Christmas trees dangled from her ears and a gold chain with a wreath pendant hung in the V-neck of her sweater. Jazz and Jo sported the same necklace, which had been gifts to them from Gram and Grandpa Roy a couple of Christmases ago. It was their nod to being identical triplets since, except at

Halloween, they'd outgrown dressing alike years and years ago.

At the table next to her family, she spotted Claire and Chris and her family, although Gabe was nowhere to be seen. She scanned the large room, hoping, when suddenly a hand on her shoulder startled her.

"How's our elf?" It was Gabe, his dimples out in full force.

Jenny's heart beat faster. "Love your sweater." She rubbed a hand over The Dude's face.

"Isn't it great?" He put one arm around her shoulders. "There's a story I'll tell you later. You look amazing, like snow and cotton candy and . . ." He closed his lips as another mom scurried past, and instead he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Is Luke good to go?"

"Yeah, I just got him back to the dressing area with the other elves. Aidan's running around like a chicken with its head cut off while Bren and Holly corral all the acts. I was on my way out to find a seat. Is there an empty chair at your table?"

"You aren't sitting with your family?" Gabe's tone was wistful.

She linked her arm with his. "I'll be right next to them if I sit with you."

The show was delightful, as it was every year, and Gabe's first-timer enthusiasm made it even more fun. He laughed uproariously at the silly skits, clapped long and loud for the high school madrigal choir's performance, and *awwed* along with everyone else at Miss Francie's little ballerina snowflakes. Jenny sat close beside him, her fingers laced with his under the bright red tablecloth in between applause. It was perfect to be sitting with the Dawsons, yet have her own family close by. She glanced around and saw Ryan and the Tuffingtons sitting a few tables away with Noah and Dot and Trudy Morrow. Ryan's expression was pensive, maybe even a

little melancholy, but when he caught her eye, he smiled and hitched his chin her way.

Then the sound of “Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town” filled the room and it was time for the dancing Santas and her little elf. She sat forward as Gabe squeezed her hand and Aidan and Matt, clad in Santa suits, along with big Mac Mackenzie, dressed as a very authentic-looking Santa Claus, tapped on from stage left. As the crowd stomped and clapped, the three Santas danced like they were channeling Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and . . . Jenny ransacked her brain for another famous tap dancer . . .

“Those three are pretty good—Aidan moves like a pro . . . easy, like Gregory Hines used to. Remember him?” Gabe whispered in her ear.

Ah, yes, Gregory Hines. Jenny nodded, her pulse speeding up as several festively dressed elves entered from stage right. It was time for Luke! She glimpsed Miss Francie urging them onstage with Luke and petite little Ali Flaherty bringing up the rear. The kids raced and tumbled around the dancing Santas in what appeared to be complete, unrehearsed chaos until Matt took Ali by the hand and Aidan grabbed Luke. The two elves fell into line with the Santas and danced a charming soft shoe, the kids staying in perfect step with the adults. The audience went crazy, rising to their feet and clapping wildly.

Luke caught her eye and grinned as the routine ended and all five dancers linked their arms and line-kicked before doing a synchronized bow, starting with Aiden on one end and ending with Matt on the other. The kid had done it, and the elation in Luke’s expression made her heart sing. When she glanced over her shoulder at his dad, she wasn’t sure what to expect, but Ryan and even his parents were out of their chairs and applauding, pride etched on their faces. The tension in her body passed like a bad odor dispersing on a breeze. She looked up at Gabe, and that same look of pride glowed on his handsome face.

As soon as Aidan ended the show with a rousing audience-participation version of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” her family surrounded her, exclaiming over Luke’s talent.

Gabe touched her shoulder. “I’ll go find Luke.”

She nodded as the Langes, Flahertys, and Walkers joined the chorus of congratulations and praise for Luke’s and Ali’s performances. Finally breaking away, she found Gabe standing backstage, out of sight of a chuckling Tuff, who was attempting to follow Luke’s soft-shoe directions.

“No, Dad, like this. Left first.” He hummed, demonstrating the left foot forward, then a shuffle and forward with the right. “Dubba, dubba, dubba dub.”

His dad imitated the move, looking more like a great shambling bear than Fred Astaire, but the delight on Luke’s face kept Jenny from giggling. She grasped Gabe’s hand and they walked closer. Tuff frowned when he caught sight of them, and for a moment, she thought he was going to get nasty and give it up. Instead, his lips curved up and he waved.

“Get over here, Professor, and join us. You need to learn this stuff too.”

Gabe and Jenny exchanged a glance and then Gabe hustled over to the other side of Luke and began the step, shuffle, step—not quite as awkwardly as Tuff, but close, though. The two men, focusing intently on tiny Luke between them as, *together*, they attempted the dance, made Jenny’s eyes sting. Any other time she would have pulled out her phone and caught the whole thing on video, but this was too precious to record anyplace except in her own heart. As Luke showed them the last step and stomp, Tuff looked over his son’s head at Gabe and gave him the slightest nod. Gabe acknowledged with a nod of his own.

Tuff stooped down to scoop Luke into a hug. “You were great tonight, buddy. I’m so proud of you.” His voice was gravelly.

Luke practically glowed. “Thanks, Dad.”

He brushed Luke's hair off his forehead. "You keep working with Matt and Aidan and before you know it, you'll be dancing like a pro." His expression sobered. "Listen, you know I'm going to Indianapolis with Grammy and Grandad this afternoon, right? Well, after Christmas, I'm going to stay there for a little while."

"How come?" Luke asked, concern wreathing his face. "How long? What about the horses?"

Tuff sucked in a deep breath. "Here's the thing, Lukie. You know how I'm kind of cranky sometimes and sad? I'm tired a lot and don't always want to do fun stuff with you?" Luke nodded once and his dad continued, "That's all part of a sickness I have called alcoholism. I need to go to a safe place where I can be with doctors and therapists who will help me get better. I'll be away for about six or eight weeks, but when I come home, I'll be happier and stronger and ready to ride with you again."

"What will Miss Trudy do without you? And Jasper and the other horses?"

"Miss Trudy and I talked about it, and she's got someone who can help her while I'm away. She wants me to get well, too, and so does Mom . . . and Gabe." He glanced over at Jenny, who was biting the inside of her lip to keep it from trembling. She reached behind her and Gabe was there, his fingers wrapping around hers while Tuff went on, "I have to leave my phone at home, but I'll write you letters, so watch the mailbox. Maybe Mom can help you write me back."

Jenny nodded. "Sure. You can draw some pictures of Harry to send along."

He stood, one hand ruffling Luke's hair. "And maybe Gabe will take you out to see the horses while I'm gone."

Gabe's hold tightened. "You bet. I'd like to meet Jasper."

Luke looked from one adult to the other and Jenny could almost see the wheels rotating in his head as he processed this

new turn of events. Finally, his gaze landed on Tuff. “But you’re gonna be okay, Dad, right?”

“I’m going to be just fine, son. Better than ever,” he said, his voice strong and firm. “Why don’t you go out and say good-bye to Grammy and Grandad?” He offered a pretty convincing smile to Jenny as Luke hugged him for a few seconds, then hopped down the stage steps. “We’re going to head out.” Ryan came over to Gabe and stuck out his hand. “So long, Professor. Look after him, okay?”

Gabe released Jenny and shook his hand. “I’ve got him, man, ’til you get back. Good luck.”

Tuff nodded. “Thanks.” He stepped closer to Jenny and handed her a card. “Here’s where I’ll be. I’ll be in touch when I can.”

Jenny didn’t even try to stop the tears that rolled down her cheeks as she pulled him into a warm hug. “You’re doing the right thing, Ryan. I wish you well,” she whispered.

He hung onto her for a few seconds before walking away. At the top of the steps, he stopped, half-turned, and raised one hand, palm outward. “Merry Christmas, Jenny.”

Chapter Twenty

AH, QUIET AT last. Jenny sighed in perfect contentment as she cuddled against Gabe's warm chest, stroking the soft knit of his Christmas sweater. "I can't believe you won *most original* in the Ugly Christmas Sweater contest tonight."

"I know, right? I'd have given it to Joey Walker."

She grinned at the memory of Joey's sweater, which bore the proclamation, UGLY CHRISTMAS SWEATER. "That was pretty clever, but you have 'The Dude.'"

He tightened his hold on her. "I gave Mom the gift card to Paula's. This sweater was all her."

"You said there was a story. Tell me." She rubbed her cheek on his shoulder and slid her arm across his lean belly while he recounted how the sweater was supposed to have been Claire's gift to his dad.

"She remembered it at the last minute this afternoon after she got a look at my rather pedestrian plaid flannel," he finished and his fingers tracing the knobs of her spine sent a shiver through her. "Are you cold?"

"No, just"—she pressed a kiss to the scruff of beard on his chin—"happy."

"And that makes you shiver?" His deep voice caused a surge of yearning to wash over her.

"If it's you that's making me happy, yeah, it does." She brought his face down to hers, and his bone-melting kiss wiped all clear thought from her mind. Another wave of desire nearly overwhelmed her. All she wanted was to take him upstairs and—

"Mom! Did you know that Savion Glover danced at the White House?" Luke's voice from the top of the stairs pulled them apart.

When she looked up, there he stood in his pjs, waving the new book over the banister, his hair tousled and Harry Potter at his feet. The dog gave a sharp bark as if to say, *How cool is that?*

Jenny groaned. “Lucas Roy Tuffington, get back in bed. If I hear you again tonight, I’m going to take the book away, and Harry will go back to the kitchen.”

“Sorry! Come on, Harry.” Luke and the puppy scampered back into his bedroom while Gabe tried to smother a chuckle.

She elbowed him. “What are you laughing at?”

Gabe grinned. “Just happy.”

“This is *your* fault, you know.” She fake-pouted. “You gave him the book.”

He stood. “Can I redeem myself by giving you your Christmas gift?”

“Maybe,” she murmured, but inside, she was squeeing. *Finally!* The little package had been tempting her for over a week.

As if by tacit agreement, they’d focused on Gabe’s gifts to Luke and Luke’s to Gabe after they got done with supper, saving their own presents for when they were alone. Luke had loved the video games and made plans with Gabe to play them sometime during his school holiday break, but he’d been thrilled at the book about tap dancer Savion Glover. In turn, Gabe had exclaimed over his gift—a mug Luke had picked out himself that had *ARCHAEOLOGIST’S CHECKLIST* printed on it with pictures of a fedora, a gun, and a whip beneath the words. The kid’s eyes had shone as Gabe high-fived him with a very sincere *awesome mug!*

Gabe went to the Christmas tree and picked up the small square box he’d put there the week before Christmas.

“Will you grab the one I hung on the tree?” Jenny pointed to a square box that hung by its green ribbon from a bough near the top of the tree.

Gabe reached for it. “This one?”

“Yup. That’s yours.”

“Ah.” He shook the package, but it didn’t rattle. “Good things, small packages?” He held both boxes up side by side.

“I’m a true believer,” Jenny agreed, and patted the sofa cushion beside her. “Come sit and open yours.”

He sat and handed her the box wrapped in silver paper and tied with a red ribbon. “You first.”

Her heart knocked in her chest. It wasn’t a ring; the box wasn’t the right shape or size, but it was jewelry, she was certain. She untied the ribbon and carefully removed the paper, folding and smoothing it before she set it aside. Inside was a navy-blue velvet box, and upon opening it, she caught her breath. There on a lighter-blue velvet background was an elegant sterling silver necklace from which dangled a bee pendant. The golden-amber stone that was the bee’s body gleamed in the lamplight. “Gabe, this is gorgeous!” Carefully, she removed the necklace from its box and held it up, turning it this way and that, letting the bee capture the light.

“It’s a citrine. It reminded me of your eyes,” Gabe said softly and he held out his hand. “Here, let me . . .”

She handed it to him, took off her wreath pendant, set it on the lamp table, and twisted in her seat, lifting her hair to grant him access.

His breath was warm on her nape as he clasped the chain around her neck, explaining in the professor voice she loved, “Bees, like fairies, have often been considered guardians of the natural world, linked with love, magic, and romance.”

When she turned back to face him, his dimples creased his cheeks and his eyes shone with so much tenderness, she would have collapsed in a puddle if she weren’t already sitting.

He touched the pendant with one finger, then framed her face with both hands. “This is to remind you that I’ll always be with you even when I’m not *here*. You can count on me, Jenny

Weaver. I'll keep you and Luke safe, I'll do my best to bring you magic every day, and I'll always, always love you, to my dying breath." He kissed her like he cherished her, like she herself was a precious gift.

Jenny slid her arms around his neck, falling into the promise of that kiss. This was what she'd been missing all these years—that feeling of being tethered to another person, intimate and passionate and . . . happy. *Truly* happy. Desire pooled in her belly and when she pulled back, she could see the same hunger in his dark, expressive eyes. It was intoxicating. "I love you too," she whispered. "*We* are the magic. For so long, I never knew, never suspected, but how amazing to have finally discovered how exactly right this is—you and me, together."

He touched his forehead to hers. "I've always known."

"Thank you for never giving up." She blinked away the easy tears that pressed against her eyelids. This was not a time for tears, even the happy kind. She tapped the box balanced on his thigh. "Open yours now. I think you're going to see that we were on the same wavelength this Christmas."

He was much less careful about opening his gift, sliding off the ribbon and tearing the paper away from the light-brown, recycled cardboard box. His brow furrowed at the logo on the top—a woman with flowing hair and the words MOON MAID DESIGNS. He opened it, gazing in obvious surprise at the bracelet nestled in a bed of white tissue paper. Lifting it from the box, he turned it in his hand while Jenny held her breath.

She'd gone to Tierney Flaherty a couple of weeks earlier with an idea and a drawing, knowing that if anyone could make her vision come to life, it would be Tierney, whose exquisite jewelry was sold in several shops along the river. When she'd picked it up a couple of days ago, she'd gulped at how utterly perfect it had turned out. A narrow, braided black leather bracelet set onto a locking silver clasp to keep it safely on Gabe's arm. A sterling silver plate opposite the clasp had

the words AT LAST engraved on the outside and on the inside against his skin, a simple message J TO G FROM MY HEART.

“It’s . . . it’s incredible.” Gabe’s voice was husky with emotion as he held out his right arm. “Here, put it on me.”

She smiled and clasped the bracelet around his wrist. “I got the idea from Aponi and Clarissa.” After fastening the bracelet securely, she turned his hand over, pressed a kiss into his warm palm, and closed his fingers over it. “There. Now no matter where you are, Gabriel Dawson, I’ll always be with you. I love you with all my heart.”



GABE SWIVELED IN his pew as the prerecorded strains of Pachelbel’s Canon in D filled the small chapel of St. Agnes church and the doors opened. Against the background of a New Year’s Day snowfall swirling outside came Jenny and Jo, walking arm in arm up the aisle. They were dressed in matching long-sleeved, sage-green flowy dresses that floated around their calves, and each carried a small bouquet of white flowers. Behind them sauntered Luke, in khakis and a white shirt with a sage-green tie, proudly carrying a satin pillow that had two rings tied to it. Next was Ali Flaherty in a green-and-white flowered dress, tossing white petals from a basket over her arm.

Jenny, wearing her citrine bee necklace, winked at him as she passed, and the longing he felt every time he saw her increased tenfold. She was so beautiful, her amber-brown eyes shining and her dark hair pulled up into a messy bun with tendrils curling next to her rosy cheeks. God, how he wanted her.

He’d never been with a woman who had kids before, so the whole *trying to find a good time to be intimate together* thing was new and often disconcerting. There was no carrying her up the stairs à la Rhett Butler, because chances were pretty darn good that a boy and a puppy would be waiting at the top. In the week since Christmas, they’d had only one night alone

and that was by the grace of Alex and Jo, who'd taken Luke over to Jo's old cottage for an Auntie Jo fun-and-games night after Jenny had hinted broadly that Gabe would be heading back to Virginia in only a few days.

Next down the aisle sauntered Eli, followed by his brother, Jack, and best buddy, Conor Flaherty. The three men looked comfortable and casual in sage-green button-downs tucked into khaki pants and white ties—the opposite of Luke's outfit. Gabe liked the whole idea of foregoing formalwear for a wedding. Maybe he could suggest it to Jenny when they—He closed his eyes for a second. *Don't get too far ahead of yourself, Dawson.*

The small congregation rose as a unit as the music suddenly switched to Train's "Marry Me," and there were Jazz with her parents on either side of her. Her dress was white lace over a sage-green underdress of some silky material that reached to just above her knees and moved with her as they made their way down the aisle. On her head was a wreath of white flowers and frothy greenery, and she carried a bouquet of white flowers like Jenny and Jo's, only bigger. She didn't look either right or left as they walked. Her whole attention was on Eli, who stood tall, waiting for her, his heart in his eyes.

Gabe felt a stab of envy. *He* wanted to be the one waiting at the end of the aisle for his Weaver sister, putting a wedding ring on her finger, taking a honeymoon to Hawaii. He barely paid attention to the short ceremony, he was so focused on Jenny, imagining her in the white dress, smiling up at him, her eyes full of love, repeating the old familiar vows, *I, Jennifer, take you, Gabriel, to be my husband . . .*

A passionate kiss between Eli and Jazz, and then Natalie Cole's voice rocking "This Will Be an Everlasting Love" ended his musing. The newlyweds danced down the aisle to applause that turned into clapping in time to the music. Luke and Ali cavorted their way behind Eli and Jazz, followed by Conor and Jo and Jack and Jenny.

Conor surprised everyone by handing Jo's arm to Alex as he passed his row and grabbing his wife, Sam, from the third row to spin her around in a joyous dance. Jo and Alex joined in, dancing down the short aisle together. Jack released Jenny's arm when they reached the fifth row, handing her off to a very willing Gabe, and cracking up the whole chapel by offering his own hand to Claire, who accepted with a huge smile. Jack carefully danced her, cane and all, down the aisle in front of Jenny and Gabe, while the fifty or so friends and family clapped and laughed before filing out and down to the fellowship hall.

In Gabe's opinion, the party was as much fun as the Christmas Eve bash on the riverboat. The small group included the entire Walker clan, as well as all the Weavers. The Flahertys, the Langes, Mac and Carly, who'd closed the diner for the holiday, and all those folks' assorted children and babies were in attendance too. The older kids had gathered around Holly and Aidan's teenager, Matt, who was playing DJ for the day. They begged him for songs as they romped and danced on the old wooden stage at the end of the hall.

After he finished his slice of cake, Gabe extended a hand across the end of a long banquet table to Jenny. "Hello, gorgeous."

"Hi." She smiled and squeezed his fingers briefly. "It was a great wedding, don't you think?"

"Believe it or not, it's only the fourth wedding I've ever been to," Gabe admitted, scraping his fork in a little row of icing he'd missed earlier and popping it into his mouth. "It's by far the best one, though."

Jenny looked astounded. "In thirty-four years of life, you've only been to *three* other weddings?"

"Yup." He set the fork down and wiped a sage-green napkin across his lips. "My sister's, a cousin's in Kentucky, and my friend Peter's. Of the three, only Chris is still married."

“Wow.” Jenny sipped her punch. “I’ll bet I’ve been to at least fifteen or twenty.”

“What was your wedding to Tuff like?”

She rolled her eyes. “Big, expensive, extravagant. His parents wanted to go big since he’s their only child, so they paid for most of it. The church smelled like a funeral parlor, there were so many flowers. I’d *never* want to go through that again.”

“How about one like this?” Gabe waved his hand to include all that was going on around them.

“Even smaller. I’d be perfectly happy with a trip to city hall and dinner at Mac’s.” She gave him a teasing smile. “As long as it was on a Tuesday, because, you know, truffle butter.”

Gabe took a deep breath. “How about *next* Tuesday?”

She was looking around, probably checking for Luke, but she jerked her head back around to face him, bewildered. “*What?*”

Heart pounding, Gabe stood, tugged her out of her chair, and urged her into the empty hallway beside the kitchen, where he knelt on one knee and took her hand in his. “Jenny Weaver, will you marry me next Tuesday?”

“Are you serious?” she breathlessly asked, her eyes huge.

“I’ve never been more serious in my life.” He kissed her hand. “I love you and I love Luke, and I don’t want to wait some sensible amount of time for us to be together. And maybe me in Virginia and you here isn’t the ideal way to start a marriage, but we’ll *be* married, and I’ll come back as often as I can until school is out. When I come back for good, we can be together like we should be. Marry me, Jenny. Please say you’ll marry me.” It all came out in one big breath, so his chest hurt a little after he finally stopped talking.

“Gabe, I . . .” She put her hand to her heart.

“I promise I’ll always bring the magic, Jenny.” He cupped her cheek and when he did, she put her hand over his and

pressed a kiss into it.

“Yes.” She laughed and gifted him with a sweet smile. “Yes, I’ll marry you on Tuesday.”

Incandescent with happiness, he stood up, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her slow, sweet, and tender.

“You’re gonna need a ring.” Claire’s voice brought them apart. She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, a huge smile on her face and tears shimmering in her eyes. She pulled her wedding set from her left hand, took off the diamond engagement ring, and then replaced the platinum band. “Do it proper, son.”

A lump grew in Gabe’s throat. “Mom . . .”

With one quick nod, she held out the ring. “Here.”

Eyes stinging, he accepted the gift and a hug from his mother before turning back to Jenny. “As she said, let’s do this proper.” He took her left hand, and slipped the slightly too-big ring on her finger, and then pressed his lips to it. “Tuesday?”

“I’ll meet you at city hall.” She looped her arms around his neck. “I’ll be the one out front, holding a bouquet. But you better pay attention, because there are two others who look exactly like me, and they’ll be there too.”

He chuckled and drew her closer, his arms around her waist. “I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to sort you out among the Weaver sisters. But if I get confused, I’ll just kiss each and every sister until I get the right one.”

Her lips curved up in a perfect smile of utter joy. “Sounds like a plan, Dr. Dawson.”

THE END

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About the Author



Nan Reinhardt has been a copy editor and proofreader for over twenty-five years, and currently works mainly on fiction titles for a variety of clients, including Avon Books, St. Martin's Press, Kensington Books, Tule Publishing, and Entangled Publishing, as well as for many indie authors.

Author Nan writes romantic fiction for women in their prime. Yeah, women still fall in love and have sex, even after they turn forty-five! Imagine! She is also a wife, a mom, a mother-in-law, and a grandmother. She's been an antiques dealer, a bank teller, a stay-at-home mom, and a secretary.

She loves her career as a freelance editor, but writing is Nan's first and most enduring passion. She can't remember a time in her life when she wasn't writing—she wrote her first romance novel at the age of ten, a love story between the most sophisticated person she knew at the time, her older sister (who was in high school and had a driver's license!), and a member of Herman's Hermits. If you remember who they are, *you* are Nan's audience! She's still writing romance, but now from the viewpoint of a wiser, slightly ruffled, post-menopausal woman who believes that love never ages, women only grow more interesting, and everybody needs a little sexy romance.

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