

THE CLAN OF HOGAN FALLS



HER SHIFTER

Wolf

DOCTOR

SERENA MEADOWS

HER SHIFTER WOLF DOCTOR

(THE CLAN OF HOGAN FALLS)



SERENA MEADOWS

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PROLOGUE



Millie looked down at the eight expectant faces of the girls she'd come to love as her own, letting the years fade away to a time when she'd been young and excited for the future, completely unaware of the heartache that would soon shape her world. Time and the love of all the children she'd helped find their second chance had helped ease the pain, but the ache of loss had never completely disappeared, and she could still feel it throbbing deep inside her if she thought about all that she'd lost for very long.

But this wasn't about her, this was about the lives of the eight precious girls gathered around her, listening to the story of how they'd been left on the porch of the orphanage she'd opened to fill her empty days and nights. She'd endure the pain of telling her story and reliving the events that led to Hogan's Folly becoming an orphanage so they could understand not only the gift they'd been given, but the dangers that came with that gift.

Putting a smile on her face, she looked at the girls, "You may not believe this, but I was young once," she said, then paused as the girls twittered amongst themselves. "I grew up on my parent's farm with my brothers and sisters not that far from here. We had a good life, we worked hard and played hard, and always did our duty to the clan and our neighbors. I grew up believing that someday I would marry a shifter from another clan and have my own family, just like all the women in my clan had done for generations. I never thought to question that's how my life would go."

Her mind slipped back to the summer everything changed, and she fell silent for so long that the girls began to get restless. “But you ended up here,” Shelby finally said. “How did that happen?”

“I fell in love, and love will make you do things you never thought you would do,” she said, remembering the rush of that summer, a wistful smile on her face. “It was the summer after I graduated from high school. I was desperate for some freedom before I was forced to settle down, so I talked my parents into letting me take a summer job. They were reluctant at first, but I finally got them to agree by promising that I wouldn’t go far from home. I found a job working at the diner downtown, a place to stay at a boarding house, and a few days later, I was packing my bags to leave for Hogan Falls.”

The girls began whispering, then grew quiet again, and she continued, “I’d been here a few weeks, enjoying every second of my freedom, beginning for the first time to question where my life was headed when my destiny walked in the door right after the lunch rush,” she said. “I knew the moment I looked into Timothy’s eyes that something in my world had shifted. You’re all too young to understand, but don’t ever let anyone tell you that love at first sight isn’t a real thing.”

“Oh, Millie, that’s so romantic,” Shelby said, hugging herself. “Someday, I’m going to fall in love like that.”

“It was one of the best summers of my life, except maybe the summer you all came to live with me,” she said, smiling at them all. “After that first day, Timothy showed up at the diner every day for a week, then finally got the courage up to ask me on a date, and I couldn’t say no. We’d been dating for a month when I finally got up the courage to tell him the truth about my family and the shifter blood I carried. I was sure it would be the end of us, but he accepted me for what I was.”

She paused, the aching throb of loss suddenly stealing her breath for a second, “He proposed the day I was supposed to leave for home, and I never went back. My family disowned me for marrying a human and cut me off from the clan,” she said. “We were married a month later, moved into Hogan’s Folly, and I’ve lived here ever since.”

“But Millie, what happened to Timothy?” Shelby asked, her voice full of confusion. “Didn’t you live happily ever after?”

“For a while,” she said, with a sigh. “But I think that’s enough for one night; it’s time for bed.”

CHAPTER 1



Shelby shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position in the awful padded chair, then winced when the plastic cover made a funny squeaking noise and looked around the room, relieved to see that no one had noticed. Louisa and Derek were tucked away in one corner, his arm around her shoulders as she slept with her head on his chest. Felicia and Penny were watching something on Penny's phone, sharing a set of earbuds. Jolene and Peter were whispering quietly in another corner of the room, while Darcy sat staring at the television on the wall, a blank look on her face.

Erin and Pierce were the only ones missing, but they were only a few floors down at the first doctor's appointment since Erin found out she was pregnant, and could be there in minutes if necessary. She wasn't sure what any of them could do if there was a problem, but they'd all gathered here as soon as Marshall called to say that Yvette had gone into labor and were clearly staying until it was all over. It wasn't that she wasn't excited about the birth of the twins, she just didn't see the need for all of them to sit waiting in uncomfortable chairs for hours until it happened.

With a sigh, she got to her feet, giving up on the chair for a while, and walked over to the window and looked out at the parking lot, then lifted her eyes to Main Street, only a few blocks away. Watching the usual Saturday morning hustle and bustle on Hogan Fall's only commercial street entertained her for a while as she watched her friends and neighbors go about their business. But it wasn't long before she began to think

longingly about her camera stashed in the back seat of her car, the shots she would take already lining themselves up in her mind.

She was so distracted she barely noticed when Jolene came up behind her, “Peter and I are going to run down to the cafeteria and grab something to eat, Darcy is going to go with us,” she said. “Do you want anything?”

“I’m fine,” she said, waving her hand, annoyed at the interruption. “I’ll wait here.”

A few minutes later, Felicia broke into her thoughts, “We’re going to run to the bathroom,” she said. “Be right back.”

She didn’t even bother to respond, her attention so focused on the street below her, she couldn’t turn away. The next thing she knew, someone was clearing their throat loudly behind her, “Excuse me,” a man’s voice said. “Are you here with Yvette and Marshall?”

She expected someone to answer, but there was only silence, and she realized with shock as she turned to look around the waiting room that she was alone. “Oh, yes,” she said, turning to face the man. “I didn’t realize I was all alone, I’m.....”

Her words died away when she saw the handsome doctor standing a few feet away. His scrubs were wrinkled, his hair was sticking up in places where he’d clearly run his hands through it, and there was the stubble of a beard darkening his cheeks. Dark circles under his hazel eyes spoke of how long it had been since he’d slept, but they did nothing to detract from his rugged good looks, and she felt a zing of attraction shoot through her.

“I’m Dr. Scott Dempsey, but everyone calls me Dr. Scott,” he said. “I only have a few minutes before I need to get back, but Marshall wanted me to give you all an update.”

“Oh...that’s nice,” she said, feeling like an idiot when it came out of her mouth. “I mean, how is Yvette? Are the babies, okay?”

“Everyone is doing great,” he said, smiling at her. “It shouldn’t be much longer now.”

“Oh, wonderful,” she said, another wave of attraction, this one much stronger, hitting her and stealing her breath. “Thank you for letting us know.”

A look of surprise appeared on his face, and something she couldn’t read flashed in his eyes, then disappeared. “Well, I should get back,” he said finally. “We’ll let you know if there’s any change.”

She watched him walk away and disappear through the swinging double doors, her body still tingling, the goosebumps rising on her skin making her shiver. Only a second later the elevator opened. Jolene, Peter, and Darcy emerged, large cups of coffee in their hands, took one look at her, and rushed over, all asking questions at once. Before she could reassure them that everything was fine, the rest of her friends were gathered around her all talking at the same time.

“Everything is fine,” she finally managed to say over the noise. “The doctor just came out and said it shouldn’t be much longer. Will you all please calm down?”

They all stared at her for a second, “Then why did you have that look on your face?” Jolene demanded. “You scared us all half to death.”

“I didn’t have a look on my face,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m just tired, like all of you.”

Jolene studied her for a second, then looked over at Darcy, who shrugged her shoulders, “If you say so,” Jolene finally said. “But you did look upset, I didn’t read that wrong.”

“Well, I’m fine, and so are Yvette and the babies,” she said, desperate to change the subject. “I think I’ll run down to the cafeteria now that you’re all back.”

When the elevator door finally closed, she leaned up against the wall and let out a sigh, not sure why she was embarrassed by a simple physical attraction. Shaking her head, she told herself it was just because she was tired. They’d all been up since the middle of the night, and her body was just a

little mixed up. Stepping off the elevator, she followed the smell of food, deciding that she was hungry, another good explanation for her over-the-top reaction to the handsome doctor.

Scott

Scott made it through the swinging doors before he stopped and took a deep breath, deeply shocked by his reaction to the pretty redhead, then shook his head, deciding he was more exhausted than he thought. Ignoring the last twinges of the powerful attraction that had swept through him the instant she'd turned and looked his way, he forced her out of his mind, knowing he couldn't afford the distraction. He had patients on every floor of the hospital, his brain was too crowded to even work through what he'd felt, let alone deal with it.

A second later, Nancey came rushing up to him, "I've got those test results you wanted for Mr. Avery in room 203," she said, then really looked at him. "Oh, you look terrible. How long has it been since you slept?"

It took him a second to remember, "I don't know, a couple of days," he said. "I've had a few cat naps here and there, I'm okay."

Nancey snorted, "You are not okay," she said, looking him up and down. "You could use a shower, and a good meal would be my guess."

"And I have every intention of getting both once I'm done here," he said, smiling at her. "Yvette's close, it shouldn't be long now, and I don't foresee any complications. Once those babies make their entrance into the world, I'll go home, I promise."

"In the meantime, I'm going to keep an eye on her while you get a little rest," Nancey said, pushing him down the hallway toward the elevator. "I'll page you if we need you, take one of those cat naps you were talking about, and I'll order something for you to eat when you wake up."

He knew, even after such a short time working with Nancey, that he wouldn't win an argument with her, and a little rest was very appealing. "I know better than to argue with you," he said with a resigned sigh. "But page me if there are any changes, even something small."

Nancey rolled her eyes at him, "Yes, sir," she said, a little grin on her face. "Now off with you, being a small-town doctor is harder than it looks."

"You're telling me," He said, shaking his head. "I thought Dr. Ziegler was crazy when he told me this would be harder than residency, but now I know just how wrong I was."

"Don't worry," Nancy said, giving him another shove toward the elevator. "It's not always like this."

He dove for the couch in his office as soon as the door shut behind him, and closed his eyes, but as exhausted as he was, he couldn't fall asleep. Opening his eyes, he looked around the shabby little office with its scarred desk and mismatched furniture, wondering not for the first time if he'd made a mistake coming to Hogan Falls. Tiffany had certainly thought so, hadn't been able to hide the shock on her face when he explained his plan, or the disgust in her voice when she not so politely turned down his invitation to join him.

She broke up with him a few days later, which hadn't really upset him. In fact, it had been a relief, and he wondered why he'd stayed with her so long when the spark between them had gone out. Tiffany had swept into his life just as he was about to begin residency, romance had been the last thing on his mind, but a chance meeting at a bar had changed all that. Sexy and seductive, her sights set on getting a doctor, she'd been impossible to resist, and before he knew it, she'd moved into his apartment.

It had been easy at first, nice to have someone to come home to after the long hours he put in, but as his time at the hospital started coming to an end, things between them began to change. She started hinting about a wedding ring, talking about the children they would have someday, the big house she wanted, and he found himself pulling back, questioning their

relationship for the first time. In the end he wasn't the one who ended it, it was a little leather-bound book he discovered hidden in his mom's closet a few weeks after her funeral.

That book was now in the bottom drawer of his desk, a reminder of the woman who had loved him and raised him as best she could on her own while suffering from almost debilitating depression. Her illness was part of the reason his dream of being a doctor had been born, the only positive reaction he could have to the years of anger and frustration as he watched his mother struggle. But after reading her diary, he realized that her pain and heartache were beyond the reach of modern medicine, and found himself reevaluating the path he was taking.

His phone began buzzing in his pocket, and he fished it out, looked at the message, then got quickly to his feet, his heart beginning to race. He'd helped deliver several babies on his rotation during his residency, but this would be the first time he'd done it alone, and he was suddenly nervous, his mind blank. A knock on the door shocked him out of his panic, and Nancey came rushing in only a second later, a tray in her hands.

"You don't have time for a real meal," she said, setting the tray on the desk. "But I brought you some coffee and a sandwich, that should get you through. Hurry up and eat, you have about ten minutes until we're going to need you."

CHAPTER 2



The shrill cry of a newborn woke Shelby and she sat up confused for a second. Then she looked around the hospital waiting room to find all her friends looking at the swinging doors that led back to the patient rooms with expectant faces. When the cry echoed through the room again, smiles of relief and excitement spread across everyone's faces, and they all sat up straighter in their chairs. Silence fell over the room again, and no one moved, the quiet leaving them all feeling uncertain as they continued to wait for the second cry that would signal all was well.

They were all beginning to shift restlessly, faces filled with concern, when another lusty cry filled the hallway and spilled out into the waiting room. The audible sigh of relief from everyone in the room would have been funny under any other circumstances, but it had been over twelve hours since Yvette had gone into labor, and nothing seemed all that funny right then.

The sound of two babies crying propelled everyone to their feet, smiles of relief on their faces as they began to talk in excited whispers, and she slowly got to her feet, stretching her tired muscles. Looking around the room, she realized that nothing would ever be the same, and she felt a pang of grief for the life she'd shared with her friends at the bed and breakfast. It had been just the eight of them for so long, loving and supporting each other, but that had all changed over the last year.

Their tight little circle had expanded to include the four men Louisa, Jolene, Erin, and Yvette had fallen in love with, and the new clan that Louisa and Derek had created, but nothing could compare to the addition of two new lives to the world. She wanted to be happy for all of them, was happy for all of them, but there was a tiny part of her that was standing back and waiting for the crash, waiting for the happily ever after to end and reality to take over.

Maybe she was too cynical, maybe happily ever after really did happen, and love that lasted a lifetime was real, but she'd seen very little evidence of it. Standing among her friends, she thought about a time when she was young and innocent, when love at first sight and a lifetime of happiness had seemed just as possible as the sun coming up in the morning. But it had all come crashing down the summer they'd turned eight when the truth about what and who they were had finally come out, and her innocence had been shattered.

“Oh, isn't it wonderful,” Darcy said, hugging her. “We're officially aunts now, I can't believe it.”

“Me either,” she said, putting a smile on her face. “I hope Yvette is okay.”

Before Darcy could reassure her, the doors swished open, and the handsome doctor was striding toward them, looking even more disheveled than he had earlier in the day. He had a huge grin on his face, and her heart did a couple of flip-flops before settling back into her chest. When their eyes met, warmth flooded her body, and she took a couple of steps back, shocked and a bit scared by the feeling, then quickly looked away.

“Dr. Scott,” Louisa said. “I hope you have good news for us.”

“The best,” he said, the smile getting bigger. “Yvette and Marshall are now the proud parents of twins. The babies both weighed over seven pounds and are perfectly healthy. Mom is resting comfortably, and will be ready for visitors in about an hour.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” Jolene said. “But you didn’t tell us. Are they boys or girls?”

“One of each,” Dr. Scott said. “One boy and one girl.”

The room exploded into laughter and excited conversation, everyone was hugging each other, and before she knew it, she was swept up into the celebration. Passed from person to person, she could barely keep up, when she was suddenly thrust into an unfamiliar pair of arms. Slightly off balance, she had no choice but to wrap her arms around the person, then looked up only to discover Dr. Scott’s amused hazel eyes looking down at her.

Breath caught in her throat, she could only look up at him as the same warmth spread through her body, quickly followed by a burst of desire. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, telling herself to pull away, but discovering her body wouldn’t listen. “I didn’t mean to run into you.”

To her shock and surprise, she saw the desire mirrored in the doctor’s eyes, and began to panic, “Ummm,maybe I should,” she stammered, her cheeks turning pink. “I think I need to go.”

Before he could say a word, she turned and walked away from him as fast as she could, slipped into the bathroom, locked herself in a stall, then leaned against the door. Heart pounding, body tingling, she stood holding her breath, wondering if she was losing her mind. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before; she’d never felt anything remotely like it and didn’t want to think about what it might mean, or that her friends’ love affairs had started out just the same way.

When she heard the bathroom door opening, she quickly reached out and flushed the toilet, taking deep breaths, then opened the stall door. “Oh, there you are,” Felicia said. “We wondered where you disappeared to.”

“Sorry, I guess it was all that coffee I drank earlier,” she said, going to the sink to wash her hands. “What did I miss?”

Felicia studied her for a second, then shrugged her shoulders, “Nothing really,” she said. “We’re all supposed to go home and come back one at a time if we want to visit. I guess we don’t want to overwhelm Yvette or the babies.”

“That makes sense,” she said, drying her hands. “Is the doctor gone?”

“Well, yeah,” Felicia said, giving her a funny look. “Did you have a question for him?”

“Oh, no, I just.....” she faltered. “I just wondered.”

Scott

Bright morning sun streaming in through the big window in his bedroom woke Scott the next day, and he groaned, slamming his eyes shut again, promising himself that getting some curtains would be a priority. Rolling over, he covered his head with a pillow, but the sunshine called to him, and he gave up trying to go back to sleep, realizing that he felt well-rested for the first time in days. He stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, going over the last few days in his mind, a smile spreading across his face when he thought about the two little bundles of joy he’d helped bring into the world.

A sense of satisfaction spread through him. It had been the perfect ending to the long string of medical emergencies he’d had to deal with, and proof that life goes on, a reminder all doctors needed every once in a while. Deciding that his time in Hogan Falls wasn’t going to be as boring as he first thought, he got out of bed and looked out the window at the mountains.

It had been years since he’d done any hiking, and it was his day off. A little exercise and some fresh air would be good for him, help clear his head so he could come up with a plan to find the sister he’d never met. Ignoring the little stab of guilt when he remembered the lies that he’d told Dr. Ziegler to get the job, he went to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee, telling himself that he’d done what he had to. It was a long shot that he’d find his sister, but he had to try for his mother’s sake, knew that he’d never be able to let her memory rest if he didn’t at least try.

But he also understood that what he was doing was dangerous. The clans who had so easily killed their own babies could still be lurking in the shadows, his mother's words had made that clear enough. Until he knew who he could trust, he'd keep the truth about who he was hidden, not for his safety but for the safety of the women who had found sanctuary in Hogan Falls all those years ago. His only hope was that his mother had been wrong, that his sister had found her way here and was currently living the life she deserved among people who cared about her.

He took his time over his first cup of coffee, then made a big breakfast and packed a lunch before jumping in the shower. On his way out of town, a map open on the seat next to him, he stopped at the hospital, unable to resist the temptation to check on the twins when he drove by. After sneaking in the back way, he stopped by the nurse's station and peeked at the three records, then, after tapping on the door to Yvette's room, let himself in.

Yvette was propped up in bed, a pink bundle in her arms, and a big smile spread across her face when she saw him. "Dr. Scott, I didn't think we'd be seeing you today," she said. "You look like you're off on an adventure, though."

"It's such a beautiful day, I thought I'd explore a little," he said. "But I wanted to stop by and check on you before I left town."

"That was nice of you. I know it's your day off," Marshall said, getting up from the chair next to the bed making the blue bundle in his arms squeak. "Other than a little lack of sleep, I think we're all doing great. Dr. Davis came by early this morning and gave us the okay to take the babies home as soon as Yvette is ready."

"That's great," he said, peeking in at the sleeping baby when Marshall went by. "How are you feeling, Yvette?"

"A little sore, but I think I'll be ready to go home tomorrow morning. We'll have plenty of help at home, and I'm anxious to get out of here," she said, then looked behind

him. "I'm sure Louisa or Erin already has a schedule put together."

He turned and noticed the pretty redhead standing behind him in the corner of the room, her cheeks flushed pink, "Oh, it's you," he said before he could stop himself, the thrill of attraction that rushed through him making it hard to think. "I mean.....hi."

"Haven't you two met?" Yvette asked, her face filling with surprise when Shelby shook her head. "Well, I don't know how that happened, Dr. Scott, this is Shelby; she handles social media and PR for the bed and breakfast."

"It's nice to meet you," he said, holding out his hand. "Please forgive me for not introducing myself sooner."

Shelby hesitated a second before stepping over and taking his hand, then gasped and quickly pulled it away, and a burst of desire shot through him when he realized that she was feeling exactly what he was. His body began to tingle as his magic came to life, the animal inside him awakening and sending a wave of primal need rushing through him. He watched Shelby's cheeks turn pink again, saw her chest begin to rise and fall a bit faster, and the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her began to overwhelm him.

"It's nice to meet you too," she finally said when the silence had gone on too long. "I'll just get out of here and let you do your thing. Yvette, I'll see you later."

She was out the door and gone only seconds later, leaving them all staring after her, "Well, that was strange," Yvette finally said. "She was supposed to take pictures of the babies."

CHAPTER 3



Shelby realized after she'd already driven away from the hospital that she'd forgotten to get pictures of the babies, but couldn't bear to turn around, sure that Yvette would have some questions about how she'd behaved. Running away seemed to be her answer to everything the last few days, but she didn't want anything to do with the doctor or her reaction to him. Pushing it all out of her mind, determined to enjoy her only day off that week, she drove back out to the bed and breakfast, parked her car, and unloaded her camera and equipment.

She snuck up the back stairs to her room, chose a camera and some film, loaded them into her backpack, then, after a quick raid of the refrigerator for some lunch, packed that as well. Picking up their private trail to the falls, she followed it through the forest and up into the mountains above town, taking deep breaths of the crisp air, enjoying the song of the birds in the trees. The falls were deserted when she got there, but it was early in the season, and she was more than happy to have them all to herself.

After putting film in the camera, she put the strap around her neck and spent a few minutes looking at the falls; then inspiration hit as it always did. Before long she was lying on the ground, shooting pictures of the sunlight streaming through the spray of water as it tumbled over the cliffs. When the camera was out of film, she rolled over onto her back and closed her eyes against the bright sunlight, then let out a sigh of satisfaction, sure that she'd gotten some great shots.

A second later a shadow blocked out the sun, and she opened them to find Dr. Scott looking down at her. “Are you hurt?” he asked. “You’ve been lying there for a long time.”

She sat up, “What are you doing here?” she asked, then jumped to her feet, heart pounding with a mixture of surprise and attraction. “How long have you been watching me?”

“Not very long,” he said, a look of amusement on his face. “You didn’t hear me when I walked up, and I didn’t want to scare you. It was a bit of a shock to find you lying on the ground. Are you sure that you’re, okay?”

She held up the camera, “I was taking pictures of the waterfall,” she said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m losing my light.”

“Does that mean you’re going to crawl around on the ground some more?” he asked, making her cheeks turn pink. “That was fun to watch.”

“You saw that?” she asked, then shook her head. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“So far, it was the best part of the hike,” he said, grinning at her. “And that’s saying a lot, cause these mountains are incredibly beautiful.”

She stared at him for a second, her mouth hanging open just a little as thrills washed over her, and her body began to tingle. “Are you flirting with me?” she finally asked. “You can’t be flirting with me.”

He pretended to think for a second, “As a matter of fact, I was flirting with you,” he finally said. “And giving you a compliment, if my grasp of the English language is as good as I think it is.”

“But you can’t.....I mean, you’re a doctor.....” she stammered, shaking her head. “It’s not professional or something.”

“Only if you’re my patient,” he said, grinning at her again. “Since I’ve never seen you professionally, we’re in the all clear.”

“I don’t.....that is.....I just came up here to take some pictures,” she finally said, hating herself for the way her body reacted to his. “I thought I would be alone.”

“Tell you what, I’ll just go sit over there on that rock and let you do your thing,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to spoil the morning for you.”

He was gone before she could tell him that he already had, and she forced herself to turn around, determined to ignore him, no matter how sexy he looked perched on a rock hanging over the pond at the bottom of the waterfall. Her hands shook as she removed the film and put in a new roll, but she told herself it was anger, not the desire simmering away deep in the pit of her belly.

It took longer than it normally did, but she soon lost herself in the process and managed to forget that Dr. Scott had invaded her perfect morning. When every roll of film she’d brought was exposed and tucked safely back in the protective case, she was sweaty and out of breath but riding on the high of creativity. After taking a long drink from her water bottle, she packed up her equipment and got her lunch out, but couldn’t help but notice Dr. Scott watching her.

“There’s plenty of room over here if you’d like to join me for lunch,” he called. “I promise I won’t flirt with you anymore.”

She looked over at him, then wished she hadn’t when her body began to tingle, “I think I’ll just stay over here where it’s safe,” she said, then cursed under her breath when he looked pleased. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to fall in.”

“Oh, I see, I supposed that is a good reason not to join me,” he said, then jumped down off the rock. “But that’s easy to fix; I’ll just join you. How about under that tree, or are you afraid of falling branches?”

“I’m not.....oh, you’re impossible,” she said, grabbing her lunch and stomping over to the tree. “Fine, have it your way, but I’m not in the mood for conversation.”

“That’s fine with me,” he said. “We’ll just sit in silence and enjoy the scenery.”

She felt like she’d been tricked, but there was nothing she could do about it, and she settled down under the tree. “I’m leaving as soon as I’m done eating,” she said, scooting away when he sat down too close to her. “And I don’t want company on the way back.”

Scott

Scott knew that he should feel guilty for having so much fun teasing Shelby for so many reasons, but he was enjoying himself even if he was flirting with disaster. The energy flowing between them was unlike anything he’d ever felt before, and he was finding it impossible to resist exploring it, but he sensed he needed to give her a break. After unpacking his lunch, he leaned back against the tree with a sigh and, without a word, began to eat.

Shelby didn’t exactly relax, but she leaned back against the tree as well and opened her lunch, glancing over at him occasionally when she thought he wasn’t looking. “Dr. Scott, what are you doing here?” she finally asked, looking over at him. “Did you follow me up here?”

A bit surprised, it took him a second to answer, “No, of course not, it was just a coincidence that we ran into each other,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m new to town, and this seemed like the best place to start exploring. The town is named after the falls, after all.”

He could see her visibly relax, “I guess that makes sense,” she said. “I just.....well.....you showed up out of nowhere, it freaked me out a little bit.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said. “That wasn’t my intention, I shouldn’t have been teasing you that way. It was just too hard to resist, and everything I said was true. But how about we start over, and I’ll behave myself.”

She studied him for a second, then let out a long sigh, “I might have overreacted,” she said. “You just took me by

surprise, that's all; you're the last person I expected to run into up here."

"I see; I'm not sure if that's insulting or not," he said, holding back a smile. "Do I look like that much of a city boy?"

"Well, kind of," she said with a shrug. "I didn't picture you as the get-out-into-nature type, but I guess I was wrong."

He laughed, unable to stop himself, "Well, you were half right," he said. "I did grow up in the city, but my mom sent me to camp in the mountains a few hours from home every year until I started high school. I haven't had much time for recreation lately; in fact, it's been years since I did any hiking, but if I'm living here, I have a feeling that won't be a problem anymore."

"Is that why you took the job here?" she asked, looking over at him. "I've been trying to figure out why you moved here. I mean the town is so small, it must be so different than what you're used to. Not everyone can take living in a town this size, it must be a bit of a shock, and you must miss all the things the city has to offer."

He hesitated, wanting to tell her as much of the truth as he could without lying, "You might not believe this, since I'm such a city boy, but I was born about a hundred miles from here in a town smaller than this one. My mom took me and left when I was five years old, so I really don't remember that much about it, and there's nothing but a ghost town there now. When the job opened up here, I took it since this was the closest that I could come."

"So, you're tracing your roots or something like that?" she asked.

"Yeah, something like that," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "But that's enough about me. You looked pretty serious taking those pictures this morning, like you knew what you were doing."

"I hope so, since I do," she said, then laughed. "I bought my first camera when I was ten, and I haven't stopped taking pictures since then. I was just launching my career when

Louisa asked me to come back and help run the bed and breakfast. I couldn't say no; we would have lost the house without it, so now most of the pictures I take are for our social media accounts."

"That sound like a waste of talent to me," he said, then grinned at her. "Unless you're not any good."

She laughed, "I'll have you know I've very good," she said, then a blush spread up her cheeks. "I mean, I'm a good photographer."

A burst of warmth spread through him, "I never thought for a second you meant anything else," he said. "But I would be willing to explore the other option if you're interested."

Her cheeks darkened to a deeper shade of red, and the vein in her neck began to throb, "Dr. Scott, you promised," she said, slightly breathless. "No teasing."

"I wasn't teasing, I meant that," he said, grinning at her again. "And I think you should call me Scott, since we're friends now."

"When did that happen?" she asked, but there was a little smile on her face. "I don't remember us becoming friends."

"I told you my story, and you told me yours," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "That makes us friends."

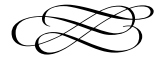
"Well, friends don't suggest.....what you did a minute ago," she challenged, her cheeks turning pink again.

"I have to start somewhere," he said, the grin back on his face. "I'll settle for friends, for now."

He'd rattled her, and he felt a little guilty that it pleased him so much, "I think it's time I got back," she said, packing up her lunch. "I have to go back to the hospital and take pictures of the babies."

"It was nice sharing lunch and the falls with you, Shelby," he said, reaching out and taking her hand. "I hope we run into each other again soon."

CHAPTER 4



S helby arrived back at the hospital late that afternoon, freshly showered, her camera bag thrown over her shoulder, forcing herself not to think about the man she'd left grinning at her from under a tree. Afraid that she might run into him, she checked every hallway and corridor as she made her way through the hospital and up to the third floor, then peeked into Yvette's room, ready to bolt if Scott was there. The room was empty, so she slipped inside, then looked around confused until she saw the light under the bathroom door.

A second later, Yvette emerged, her hair still wet from the shower, and a smile spread across her face, "Well, look who decided to come back," she said, studying her for a second. "You ran out of here like someone was chasing you this morning. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I thought I was in the way," she said. "I wanted to get up to the falls to get a few shots before the light changed. I'm sorry I forgot about the babies, but I can take their pictures now if that works."

"Good, because I thought maybe you had a problem with Dr. Scott," Yvette said. "Louisa said something happened between the two of you yesterday, that you suddenly ran off to the bathroom when you were talking to him, so I just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

She didn't like the way Yvette was looking at her, wondered if she could guess that even talking about the man

made her feel warm inside. "I drank too much coffee," she said, going back to her original lie. "I had to go."

"I'm so glad to hear that, Dr. Scott is a really nice guy, and he's not bad to look at either," Yvette said, walking back over and getting into bed. "If I wasn't madly in love with Marshall, I'd give him some serious thought; there's something about him.....well, anyway, I bet it won't be long before all the single women in this town are throwing themselves at him."

A wave of jealousy hit her like a punch in the gut, and she had to take a deep breath to control it, "Well, it won't do them much good, he probably won't be here long enough for any of them to catch him," she said. "He's just here looking for his roots or something. He was born around here somewhere."

The look on her friend's face told her that she'd said more than she should have, "And how do you know all this?" Yvette asked. "There's been zero gossip around town about him."

She stared at Yvette for a second, "Did you send him up there?" she finally asked. "Did you tell him where I was going?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Yvette said, trying not to smile. "I didn't know you were going up to the falls."

"Scott showed up at the falls, and started..... never mind," she said, feeling her cheeks turning pink. "He said that it was just a coincidence, but I don't really believe him."

"Scott?" Yvette asked, raising her eyebrows. "Now you're calling him Scott?"

"Well, he asked me to," she said. "We had lunch together, okay, it was no big deal, but now he says we're friends."

"Oh, now it all makes sense," Yvette said, nodding her head. "You had me confused for a second, I thought.....well never mind, I guess I was wrong."

"Wrong about what?" she asked, unable to stop herself. "You lost me somewhere."

“I just thought.....well it seemed like Dr. Scott was attracted to you, that’s all,” Yvette said. “The way he was looking at you the other day, well, a lot of women would kill to have a man look at them that way, but I must have read it wrong or something.”

She didn’t say anything for a second, too busy beating back the thrills that erupted inside her when Yvette’s words sank in. “Well, you might not have read it wrong,” she finally said when she had control again. “But I made it perfectly clear where we stood this afternoon; we’re just friends.”

“Was that your idea or his?” Yvette asked, clearly amused. “I bet it was his.”

Just then the door opened and Marshall came in, a baby in each arm, “Hi, Mom, we’re all clean and ready to go home,” he said, then saw her. “Hey, Shelby, glad you made it back.”

She groaned, “Not you too,” she said, giving Yvette a dirty look. “Don’t you two have something better to talk about, like these two?”

“But your love life is so much more exciting than dirty diapers and crying babies,” Marshall said, grinning at her. “Come on, Shelby, let us live a little.”

“Scott and I are just friends,” she said. “End of story.”

Marshall looked over at Yvette, “It was his idea,” she said, a grin on her face. “They ran into each other up at Hogan Falls this morning.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear about this,” Marshall said, expertly slipping the babies into their bassinets. “Did you go skinny dipping? I’ve heard that the water is really warm.”

Her mouth popped open, “Skinny dipping,” she gasped. “Don’t even say that, someone might overhear you. He watched me take pictures, and then we had lunch together, that’s all.”

“Oh, you had a date,” Marshall said. “I see now.”

“It wasn’t a date,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “We’re just friends, now, can we talk about something else? I

thought you wanted pictures of the babies.”

“Whatever you say,” he said, grinning at her. “But it sure sounds like a date to me.”

Scott

Scott opened his office door, flipped on the light, then carried his cup of coffee over to the desk and sank down into the chair with a sigh of exhaustion. After taking a long sip from the large cup, he leaned forward to turn on his computer, then sat back again, not ready to face the day ahead. He was sure his schedule would be fully booked, as it had been for the last few days, and he wondered briefly if Nancey was doing it on purpose, then quickly discarded the idea. She'd been nothing but helpful in the time he'd been there, and he'd begun to rely on her. He really had no choice until Dr. Ziegler got back.

His only saving grace was that he was off the hospital rotation for the next few days and would have his early mornings and evenings to himself, a welcome relief and some much-needed downtime. As she had been for days, Shelby popped into his mind. Too exhausted to fight it, he let himself think about her, not the least surprised when his body filled with warmth. Shutting down his thoughts, knowing he had no business getting involved with the sexy redhead, he forced himself to think about something else.

He wasn't planning on staying in Hogan Falls, he was only there to put his mother's ghosts to rest, so getting involved would be a mistake, no matter what his body seemed to think. A woman like Shelby deserved more than he was ready to give. He'd only put the plans for his life on hold, not abandoned them completely. Shelby was rooted firmly in Hogan Falls, and had given up her career to come home. Letting the attraction between them go any further would only be risking heartache for them both.

Ignoring the cold spot in his middle and the sense of loss that settled over him, he took another gulp of his coffee, then set it down and switched on the computer. He'd just pulled up his schedule for the day and was staring at it in shock when

Nancey came bustling through the door, a big stack of files in her hands. After dropping them onto the desk with a thud, she stepped back and studied him for a few minutes, then shook her head.

“You look like something the cat dragged in,” she said. “I think we’re working you too hard.”

“Not today, according to the schedule,” he said. “It’s practically empty; there’s only one appointment this morning and nothing for this afternoon. Does this mean I get the afternoon off?”

Nancey snorted, “Hardly,” she said. “Are you ready to go?”

“Go?” he asked. “Are we going somewhere?”

“Didn’t Dr. Ziegler tell you?” she asked, shaking her head. “Once a week we make house calls to some of the smaller towns in the area, and we’re already running late.”

Soon afterwards, Scott was forced to reach out and grab the dashboard of the old van when Nancey hit an especially big pothole, “Sorry about that,” she said. “These roads are a bit rough.”

“That’s a bit of an understatement,” he said, grabbing on again to keep himself from bouncing off the seat. “Doesn’t anyone take care of them?”

“There’s no money for stuff like that around here. Most of these people live on what they can get from the land and supplement their income selling crafts and stuff like that,” Nancey said, then looked over at him. “I see that look on your face. Just because they’re poor doesn’t mean they’re not happy. Money doesn’t always equal happiness.”

Properly chastised, wondering how he could have forgotten how little they’d had when he was growing up, he looked out the window at the view as they slowly climbed farther into the mountains. Summer was just coming to the higher elevations; wildflowers dotted the bright green meadows, the trees were covered in new leaves, and when he rolled down the window, the air was fresh and clean.

After a steep climb they came to the top of a rise and Nancey slowed the van down, letting him take in the little valley below them before taking them over the edge. The road snaked back and forth through the trees, but he caught glimpses of the tidy little houses that dotted the hillsides, their terraced gardens filled with dark soil ready for the plants that would flourish there over the summer. A cluster of buildings marked the end of the road, and he looked around at the little community when the van stopped, sensing anything but poverty.

“This is the end of the line,” Nancey said, a big grin on her face. “Mr. Franklin lives in that little blue house behind the school, I’m afraid we’ll have to walk from here.”

He got out of the van and went around to the back to get his medical bag, aware instantly that he was being watched, “I get the feeling we’ve got everyone’s attention,” he said when Nancey joined him.

She shrugged, “You’re an outsider, give them a few minutes, and they’ll come out,” she said, opening the double doors. “Here’s your bag.”

He took it from her, but stood staring at the back of the van, “What is all this?” he asked. “There’s enough equipment here to set up a hospital.”

“It’s nothing you need to be worried about right now,” Nancey said, slamming the doors closed. “Come on, Mr. Franklin is expecting us.”

They climbed the short distance up to the house, then Nancey knocked on the door, “Is that you, Nancey?” a man called. “Did you bring that young doctor with you?”

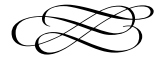
“Yes, sir, I’ve got him right here with me,” she answered. “Is it okay if we come in?”

“Give me a second to put my gun away,” Mr. Franklin hollered. “Wouldn’t want it to go off accidentally.”

Nancey laughed, “He’s kidding,” she said. “At least, I think he is.”

“Well, that’s certainly reassuring,” he said. “Maybe you should go in first.”

CHAPTER 5



S helby entered the last few lines of code, then, holding her breath, hit the button that would bring it all together, almost unable to watch as the new page for their website slowly unfolded on the computer screen. Letting her lungs empty with a whoosh, she sat staring at what she'd created, a feeling of accomplishment washing over her, and she finally let herself smile. It hadn't been her decision that she become the computer expert in the house, Erin had seemed a more obvious choice, but she'd been outvoted and sent off to a weeklong crash course.

"Hey, it's almost lunchtime," Felicia said, poking her head in the door. "Are you planning on coming out of your office today? You've been holed up in here for days, you need some fresh air and sunshine before you shrivel up."

"I'm going to shrivel up," she said, laughing. "I've been working on the website, you know how I am once I get started on something like this, I just can't stop until it's finished. Want to see what I've got so far?"

"Lunch first," Felicia said, shaking then head, then stopped. "No, I have a better idea; bring it with you, we can look at it while we're eating."

She hesitated, "I'm not sure I'm ready to show it to everyone," she said. "It's just a rough draft."

"Close the computer and bring it with you," Felicia said, rolling her eyes. "I'm starving, and you're being a perfectionist again."

The kitchen was still buzzing with activity, and she missed Yvette as she followed Felicia out to the porch, “It still seems weird without Yvette here,” she said, looking over her shoulder at the new chef they’d hired. “I can’t wait until she comes back.”

“Oh, come on, Sarah has been doing a good job,” Felicia said, holding the door open. “Yvette’s a hard act to follow.”

She felt a little bad when she saw the table filled with food Sarah had prepared for them, “I didn’t mean it that way,” she said. “Sarah just isn’t Yvette, that’s all.”

“Well, look at that, you managed to get Shelby out of her office,” Jolene said when she saw them. “Come and sit down, we’re just about to eat.”

“How’s the website coming?” Penny asked, pouring her a glass of sweet tea. “The way you’ve been working on it, I bet it’s amazing.”

“Oh, wow, thanks, that’s not putting on any pressure,” she said. “I’ve got the first draft done, that’s all, so don’t expect much.”

“Let’s eat first, and then we can take a look,” Darcy said, picking up a plate of sandwiches and taking one. “Sarah will be mad if we don’t eat all of this.”

When the food had disappeared and the table was cleared, she got out her computer and watched nervously as her friends studied what she’d created. “This is great,” Erin said. “Exactly what I had in mind; now we just need one for business conferences, and the phone will be ringing off the hook.”

“This is just a rough draft, Erin, slow down a little,” she said. “Besides, we already booked two weddings for later this summer without the webpage.”

“But it’s good, Shelby, really good,” Louisa said. “The sooner we launch it, the better. How much longer do you think you’ll need?”

“I should be able to finish it tomorrow morning,” she said. “I’m on duty at Yvette’s for the rest of the day.”

“I was there all morning, the babies are a handful, but they’re so cute,” Felicia said. “Almost makes me want one.”

There were gasps of shock around the table, “Be careful, what you say,” Erin said, grinning at her. “I used to think that same way, and now look at me.”

“You are going to make a wonderful mother,” Felicia said. “I’m not exactly the motherly type, and I know it, but that’s okay. I think I’m going to be really good at being an aunt.”

“And I should get going,” she said, closing the computer. “My turn to find out what being an aunt is all about. I hope it doesn’t include changing diapers.”

“I’ve got bad news for you,” Louisa said. “That’s number one on the list of things a good aunt does.”

She groaned but was smiling, “Then I’d better find some rubber gloves.”

When Shelby got to the top of the back stairs leading up to the apartment, Yvette was standing in front of the stove where she and Marshall lived above the restaurant he was opening. The old farmhouse had lent itself well to the transformation, and the entire town was excited about the grand opening only a few weeks away.

“What are you doing out of bed?” she asked. “I thought you were supposed to be resting all the time.”

“Yeah, well, that isn’t working so well,” Yvette said with a shrug of her shoulders. “It’s so strange, I feel perfectly fine, I mean, mostly fine, and lying in bed was driving me crazy. Then I got a great idea for a new dish for the restaurant.”

She rolled her eyes, “And so here you are at the stove,” she said. “Where are the babies?”

“Fast asleep with Marshall in the bedroom,” she said. “They’ll probably sleep for a couple of hours. I’m almost finished here, then I’ll make us some tea, and we can talk.”

The afternoon flew by, the smells from the little kitchen filled the entire apartment, and she discovered that Felicia wasn’t wrong, it was fun being an aunt. “You are going to stay

for dinner, aren't you?" Marshall asked when the light began to fade. "Yvette made enough to feed a crowd, and we need your opinion since she and I can't be impartial."

She laughed, "I think I can manage to give you an honest answer, especially if it tastes as good as it smells," she said. "I'll set the table."

"Set an extra place," Marshall said. "I asked Dr. Scott to join us, he should be here any minute."

For a second, she wasn't sure that she'd heard him right, "You did what?" she asked, looking over at him.

"He called to check on the babies, and it sounded like he'd had a long day, so I invited him to dinner," Marshall said, clearly a bit confused. "He's been working his butt off since Dr. Ziegler has been gone, so I thought he might enjoy a nice hot meal."

"Oh, I just....." she faltered, feeling guilty. "I thought it was just going to be us, that's all."

Marshall studied her for a second, then a smile spread across his face, "You do like him," he finally said. "I was just teasing you the other day, Shelby, but now I'm wondering if Yvette was right."

She opened her mouth to deny it, but there was a knock on the door, "I don't like him," she said, pushing her way past Marshall, hoping he didn't see the pink in her cheeks. "Shouldn't you go answer the door?"

Scott

Scott followed Nancey into the house, surprised to find that Nate Franklin wasn't the infirm old man he had expected but a robust middle-aged man, and he looked over at Nancey, who just grinned at him. After setting his bag down on a big, scarred wooden table that filled up most of one side of the huge room, he turned to face his patient, wondering what could be ailing him.

"I'm going to make us some coffee while you two get acquainted," Nancey said, patting him on the back. "You'll be just fine."

He glanced over at her, and she gave him an encouraging smile, then turned and walked over to the stove, leaving them more or less alone. “So, you’re the young hotshot Doc hired to replace him,” Nate Franklin said, looking him up and down. “You sure that you’re old enough to be a doctor?”

It took him a second to decide if he was insulted or not, then realized that the man standing before him could be a link to his sister, “Well, I turned twenty-six last winter,” he said. “I spent four years getting my Bachelor’s degree, two more years in medical school, then a couple more years in an internship, and finished it all off with a residency at one of the busiest hospitals in New York.”

Nate studied him for a second, “Impressive,” he said, but the tone of his voice said something different. “Our little community must seem very backwards to you after living in the big city.”

“Not at all, it’s very charming,” he said. “And there’s something to be said for clean living.”

“Well, that’s an interesting way of phrasing it, I’ve never quite heard it put that way, but I like it,” Nate said, a smile on his face, then shook his head. “Let’s just put our cards on the table, Dr. Edwards. You seem like an intelligent man, so I won’t play games with you. What are you doing here? You should be at some big hospital in the city, where all that talent won’t go to waste.”

He studied the man for a second, then shook his head, “That’s where I’ll have to disagree with you. In the last week alone, I’ve treated three heart attacks, two strokes, taken out an appendix, and helped a pair of twins into the world, and that was on top of the regular patients I had to see,” he said. “I hardly think my talents are going to go to waste around here; in fact, I’ve never worked harder or been more challenged in my entire career. I know that I’m an outsider, I completely understand why you would be reluctant to trust me, but I’m a good doctor, and as long as I’m here, my patients will come first.”

Nate studied him for a second, then shook his head, “Well, you managed to avoid my question quite effectively, but I’m going to let it go,” he said. “There’s a reason that you’re here, I just haven’t figured out what it is yet, but I’m sure everything will reveal itself before long. Now let’s have that coffee, and then I’ll give you a tour of our little community.”

“Wait, I thought you needed a doctor,” he said. “Isn’t this a house call?”

“I haven’t been sick a single day in my life,” Nate said, laughing. “But I’m sure we’ll find a use for your talents before you go home.”

“This coffee is ready,” Nancey called from the little kitchen. “If you boys think you can serve yourselves, I’ll just be on my way; I’ve got better things to do than waiting on two capable men.”

“Go on with you then,” Nate called back. “I don’t remember asking you to make coffee anyway, you just wanted to eavesdrop, and don’t think I don’t know it.”

Nancey let out a huff, “Someone has to keep an eye on you, Nate,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “You can be a big bully, and you know it.”

“I’m just protecting the people I care about,” Nate said unapologetically. “You can’t blame me for that.”

“No, I suppose not,” Nancey said, shaking her head, then let out a long sigh and started for the door. “Just be nice to Dr. Scott, or you’ll be sorry.”

When the door closed behind her, Nate started laughing, “That woman drives me crazy, but she must like you, so that’s a point in your favor,” he said, walking over to the stove. “Someday, when things quiet down around here, I’m going to marry her.”

“Does she know that?” he asked, trying not to smile.

Nate shrugged, “I’ve made it clear enough,” he said. “She’ll come around when the time is right. I’m content to wait until then.”

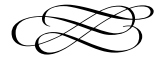
He took the cup Nate offered him, "I've only been here for a few weeks, but from what I've been hearing, it hasn't been quiet around here for a while," he said. "Erin's problems with her clan aren't the first you've had, are they?"

After studying him for a second, Nate shook his head, "No, and I don't imagine they will be our last," he said. "But it's nothing you should be worried about. We take care of our own around here, and I'm not sure a city boy like you can understand that."

"I might have been raised in the city, but I was born about a hundred miles from here, Mr. Franklin," he said. "My mother took me away from here when I was just a child. I know that some terrible things happened around here back then, and although I can't begin to understand what it must have been like, I do know that it broke my mother's heart, and she was never the same again."

"There were so many victims of the insanity that a few men created back then. I'm sorry if your mother was one of them; that time changed all of our lives one way or another," Nate said, shaking his head, then studied him for a second. "I think I'm beginning to understand why you're here; you're a piece of the puzzle, one we didn't know we were missing."

CHAPTER 6



Marshall started for the steps, but he didn't make it far before the wail of a baby filled the apartment, "Oh, no, guess I can't get the door after all," he said, turning for the hallway. "That sounds like Millie crying. I'd better go check on her."

Shelby looked over at Yvette, "Don't look at me, I can't leave this sauce, or it will burn," she said, trying not to grin. "And just for the record, we didn't plan this, it just sort of happened."

"Right, that's easy to believe," she said, rolling her eyes at her friend. "Stop trying to be a matchmaker, Yvette. I don't need any help with my love life. Just because we're attracted to each other doesn't mean anything has to happen."

Yvette stared at her in shock for a second, and she was instantly filled with regret, "I'm sorry, that came out wrong, I'm just.....," but there was a second knock on the door before she could finish, and she let out a long sigh. "I've never felt anything like this before, I don't know how to handle it, and ignoring it isn't working."

Yvette shook her head, "No, that never works, and this is a conversation that's going to take more than a few seconds, so we'll have to have a long talk later," she said. "Right now, I think you should go answer the door, Marshall didn't mean to put you in this position, but maybe you should look at it as a chance to get to know Scott better."

“Right, because I’m suddenly going to decide that he’s a jerk,” she said, then sighed. “I don’t want this, any of this, I didn’t ask for it, and I wish it would all just go away.”

“Sometimes fate doesn’t care what we want or think,” Yvette said. “Now go answer the door before Scott leaves.”

Stomach full of butterflies, anticipation thundering through her, she walked slowly down the stairs and opened the door to find Scott just turning to go back to his car. He turned when he heard the door open, and a smile spread across his face, making her heart jump and a thrill rush through her. Slightly breathless, she forced herself to smile back, hating the way her knees had gone weak.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Millie started crying, and Yvette is stuck at the stove,” she stammered, then forced herself to take a deep breath. “Come on up, dinner is almost ready, and it smells really good.”

“Thanks, I can smell it from here, and I’m starving,” he said, flashing her another smile, but this time she noticed how tired he looked. “Lead the way, Marshall’s call couldn’t have come at a better time. I was just on my way home to a frozen pizza.”

She led him up the stairs and into the kitchen, very aware of his eyes on her, but when they walked into the kitchen, his focus switched to Yvette. “It smells wonderful in here, but you should be in bed,” he said. “You’re supposed to be resting, not cooking a big meal.”

“I did that yesterday and the day before,” Yvette said with a shrug of her shoulders. “I just couldn’t do it again today, I feel fine, and we’ve had so much help that I was getting bored.”

“Well, just don’t overdo it,” Scott said. “And I expect to see you in my office in the next few days.”

“I’ve already got an appointment for tomorrow,” Yvette said. “Now sit down, you’re the one who looks like they need to be in bed.”

“It has been quite a day,” he said, sinking down into one of the kitchen chairs with a relieved look. “I met Nate Franklin today, along with just about everyone who lives up there with him.”

She’d been silent until then, trying to control the way her body was reacting to being so close to Scott, but her guardian’s name caught her attention. “You met Nate?” she asked. “He’s.....well, a very good friend.”

“And about as tough as they come,” Scott said, shaking his head. “I’d think twice before messing with him, but we came to an understanding, or I passed his test, I’m not sure which.”

“Knowing Nate, it was a test,” Marshall said, appearing from around the corner. “I still remember our first little talk; I walked away drenched in sweat, feeling like I’d just run a marathon.”

Yvette looked over at him, “You never told me that,” she said. “When did this happen?”

Marshall walked over to Yvette and put his arms around her, “Right before I asked you to marry me,” he said, then gave her a noisy kiss. “Good thing I passed the test.”

“This is bordering on gross,” she said, looking over at Scott, who just shook his head. “Maybe we should give you two some privacy.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Yvette said, pushing Marshall away, a smile on her face. “I think we should eat instead. The food is going to be ruined if we wait too long. Sit down, everyone, Marshall, get Dr. Scott something to drink.”

She looked over at the table and with a sinking feeling, realized that she was going to have to sit next to Scott, the last place she wanted to be. It was already difficult enough to keep her errant body under control; sitting that close might be disastrous, and for a second, she began to panic and almost considered suddenly pretending to become ill.

Not a complete lie, she decided when she really thought about it, there was definitely something wrong with her, it just wasn’t the kind of illness you could see. She tried not to think

about what the cure might be, didn't dare let herself think about giving into the increasing demands of her body. But as she slid into the chair next to Scott, knowing she had no choice, a thrill rushed through her, and she felt her cheeks turning pink.

Scott

Scott was acutely aware of how good Shelby smelled when she sat down next to him, her cheeks pink, her eyes glued to the plate in front of her, and he had to sit perfectly still as a wave of desire washed over him. He hadn't expected to see her when he accepted the invitation to dinner and might not have come if he'd known she'd be there. It had already been a long day, he wasn't sure that he had enough energy to control the animal inside him, not with the Shelby sitting so close to him.

Yvette and Marshall brought the filled plates over to the table, then sat down and joined them, "Now, Scott, I don't want you being polite," Marshall said. "We want your honest opinion on the food. If you don't like something, speak up."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then he let out a long sigh, "If you guys put this on the menu, you'll sell out in an hour," he said. "It's fantastic, better than a lot of meals I've had in the fancy restaurants in New York."

"Yvette's a genius in the kitchen, I'm just an amateur compared to her," Marshall said, taking her hand. "Do you miss it, the city, I mean?"

"Not really. I've been so busy since I got here, I haven't really had time to think about it," Scott said. "I suppose with time, there may be things I miss, but for right now, I'm enjoying the change."

"Shelby told us that you were born around here," Yvette said. "Is that why you decided to come here? Maybe it's none of my business, I mean I probably shouldn't have asked, but well.....I guess we're all curious."

"Yvette, don't you think that's a little....." Shelby said, giving her a dirty look, then looked over at him. "I'm sorry, I

shouldn't have repeated what you told me at the falls that day, I just.....”

He reached out and put his hand over hers where it rested on the table, sending a wave of electricity shooting up his arm, “I never meant for it to be a secret, I certainly don't blame everyone for being curious. I would be too if I were all of you,” he said, then looked around the table. “I'm not trying to hide anything; I'm here because twenty-three years ago, my sister disappeared on the day she was born, and only a few days later, my mom took me and fled across the country. She grieved for the rest of her life, but I never understood what really happened back then until I found her diary after she died. She always hoped that by some miracle, my sister ended up here with Millie. I know there's not much of a chance it's true, but I had to find out for myself.”

Shelby's fork went clattering to her plate, and no one spoke for a long time, “Are you saying that you might be related to one of us?” she finally asked, a horrified look on her face. “That's.....”

“It's a minimal chance,” he said. “In her diary, my mom talked about a friend of hers who was going to bring my sister here to Millie after she was born, they had a plan all worked out. Something must have gone wrong, the last entry in the diary was made the day after my mom gave birth. Both her friend and the baby disappeared, and she blamed my father and his parents. I don't think she ever gave up hope that her friend made it to Hogan Falls before they caught up with him and that my sister was safe here. I see now it was the only thing that kept her going.”

There was another long silence, “I think you need to talk to the guardians, Scott,” Yvette finally said. “They know the most about what happened back then. If anyone can help you, they can.”

“The guardians?” he asked. “I'm not sure who you mean.”

“Each of us has one; you met Shelby's today,” Yvette said. “They are the men and women who left our original birth clans to keep an eye on us and help Millie out when she needed it.”

We've known them all our lives, but until Louisa's clan showed up trying to reclaim her, we had no idea how important they were."

"I'm not holding out a lot of hope that I'll find the answer I want to hear, but I would love to talk to them," he said. "We left so soon after it happened, disappeared into the city where no one could find us, that it's possible that her friend didn't get caught and we just never found out about it, or at least that's what I keep telling myself."

"I'll see what I can do about arranging a meeting with them for you," Yvette said, her face full of compassion. "I can't promise that they'll be able to help you, but at least you'll know that you tried."

"At this point, that's all I can do," he said, then sighed. "I would love to find out that my sister survived, but deep down, I have a terrible feeling that she was a victim of the madness back then."

"I hope that's not true," Yvette said. "But I don't want to give you false hope, more babies died back then than lived. Not a day goes by that I'm not thankful to be here."

Shelby, who had been silent throughout the entire conversation, made a little sound in her throat, and he looked at her. "I don't feel very well, I think I need to go home," she said, jumping to her feet. "Thank you for dinner, it was wonderful."

She was gone before any of them could say a word, her feet pounding down the stairs. When the door slammed, he turned and looked over at Yvette. "I think she's upset because you might be her brother," she said. "Maybe you should go talk to her."

"I don't under....." he started to say, then it hit him. "Oh, I get it now.....I don't think.....I mean.....we can't be..... that's not what this feels like."

"Then you'd better go after her," Marshall said. "She was pretty upset."

CHAPTER 7



Shelby's stomach was churning dangerously as she took the stairs two at a time, the delicious food she'd just eaten heavy in her stomach as Scott's words echoed through her head. Closing the door behind her, she tried to ignore the voice in her head chanting that he could be her brother, and her stomach heaved with both disgust and disappointment. She stumbled to her car, taking deep breaths to keep from getting sick, fumbled in her purse for her keys, only to drop them on the ground when she finally managed to find them through the tears that filled her eyes.

"Here, let me help," Scott said, scooping the keys off the ground and unlocking her door. "I'm sorry that I upset you, Shelby, I just wanted to get it all out in the open, I never thought that you might....."

"Be your sister," she finished for him with a shutter. "You had to have had some idea. You knew what happened to us, you had to have had some clue."

He shook his head, "Shelby, it just didn't occur to me; I'm sorry, I was acting on pure instinct," he said. "I'm just now beginning to understand everything that happened back then. You have to believe me, up until a few months ago, I didn't know about any of this. Even after I became an adult, my mom refused to tell me why we left my father. She always said it was too painful to discuss it."

She knew he was telling the truth, but that didn't change the fact that she was attracted to him, even though he might be her brother. "That doesn't help anything, since you might be

my brother,” she said, shaking her head, revulsion washing over her. “It’s just gross and wrong in so many ways, I can’t believe I thought about.....”

Snapping her mouth shut, she turned and opened the car door, “I think I need to go home,” she said. “We need to stay as far away from each other as we can until whatever this is goes away.”

Before she could get into the car, Scott grabbed her arm and stopped her, “Shelby, you’re not my sister,” he said, his voice full of so much conviction she almost believed him. “There’s nothing gross or wrong about what’s going on between us, and once I can prove that to you, things are going to be different.”

She studied him for a second, then shook her head, not able to get past the fact that they might be related, closely related. “It’s just too weird,” she said, ignoring the tight knot of disappointment in her stomach. “I can’t think about you like that anymore, I’m sorry, Scott, it’s just too.....dangerous.”

He let her slide into the car, then leaned over and looked at her, “This thing between us isn’t going to go away,” he said, then closed the door and stepped back.

Cursing the little flare of hope that nestled itself next to the cold spot and melted it, she drove away, more confused than she’d ever been, wishing she’d never laid eyes on Scott. Her magic had always been something she could count on, it was solid and predictable, unlike the rest of the world, but for the first time in her life, she wasn’t sure that she could trust what it was telling her. It was like having the rug pulled out from under her. The power of the attraction between them had been bad enough on its own, but to discover he might be her brother not only made her slightly ill, it made her question the one thing she’d never questioned before.

Hoping to avoid her friends and escape to the privacy of her room, she used the front entrance hoping everyone would still be in the kitchen at dinner, but Louisa was sitting at the front desk. “Hey, I’m home,” she said, hurrying toward the stairs. “I’m drained. I think I’ll just go on up to bed.”

She was just lifting her foot onto the first step when Louisa got to her feet, “Hold on, you look upset, don’t go running off,” she called, then stepped out from behind the desk. “What happened over at Yvette’s? Did something happen with the babies?”

“No, they’re fine,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m fine, I just had a long day.”

“Liar,” Louisa said. “I can’t drag it out of you, but if you tell me what’s wrong, I might be able to help.”

“There’s nothing anyone can do,” she said, doing her best to hold back the tears. “And it’s so embarrassing and gross, it’s very gross, I can’t talk about it.”

To her horror, she began to cry, huge sobs that made her entire body shake. Louisa put her arm around her and led her over to a padded bench along one wall. When her tears finally subsided, she pulled back and looked over at Louisa, who gave her a little smile, then hugged her.

“Now do you want to tell me what that was all about?” she asked. “I think you need to talk about it. Did someone hurt you?”

She shook her head, “No, it’s nothing like that,” she said, then quickly filled Louisa in about Scott’s sister. “It could be me, I could be Scott’s sister, and I was.....thinking things a sister shouldn’t think about a brother.”

“Well, if you are his sister, this will make for some interesting conversation next Thanksgiving,” Louisa said, smiling at her. “But seriously, Shelby, there’s not much chance that’s true; if one of us was Scott’s sister, the guardians would know. I hate to say it, but I think she’s gone. I don’t think she made it this far.”

“Do you really think so?” she asked. “I feel terrible hoping that’s true, especially because I know that Scott is going to be upset, but I can’t help myself.”

“These things have a way of working out, Shelby; you just need to have a little faith,” Louisa said, giving her another

hug. “Now let’s get you up to bed, you’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

Scott

Scott tossed and turned the entire night, a little part of him as weirded out as Shelby was, but each time he awoke from a disturbing dream, he reminded himself that his instincts had never been wrong. It was still a relief to see the sun peeking over the mountains through his still uncovered window, and he threw off the covers, got out of bed, then headed for the coffee pot. He showered, trying to put it all together, but realized there were still too many missing pieces of the story for him to get the full picture and prove to Shelby that she wasn’t his sister.

He wasn’t sure when that had become so important to him, or what would happen afterward, only that he had to discover the truth before he could move on with his life. After he’d dressed and poured himself a cup of coffee, he pulled his phone off the charger, then stood staring at it for a long time. After scanning his contacts, he tapped on Nancey’s number and waited while it rang several times.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” Nancey barked when she picked up. “Some of us need our beauty sleep.”

“Sorry to call so early, but I need to take a personal day. Some stuff has come up that I can’t ignore,” he said. “Would it be possible to reschedule my appointments for today?”

There was a brief silence and he thought he heard a man’s voice in the background, “Hold on, let me look,” Nancey finally said. “I booked you light today, but I can’t remember if there’s anything that can’t wait.”

The phone clattered onto the table, but he could hear a man talking in the background, “You’re in luck,” Nancey said a few minutes later. “I can move everything around so you don’t have to come in today. Is there anything I can help with?”

“No, but thanks,” he said. “There are some people I need to talk to. I promise I’ll explain everything when we see each other tomorrow.”

Scott parked in front of the community building at the end of the road, turned off the engine, and looked up the hill at Nate's house as the feeling that everything was about to change slowly settled over him. For a moment, he thought about just turning around and going home, knowing that the answer to his questions might not be the ones he wanted to hear. But he forced himself to get out of the car and take the short walk up to the tidy little house and knock on the door.

"I wondered how long it was going to take you to show up here," Nate said when he opened the door. "You just missed Nancey."

"She was here?" he asked. "Does that mean?"

"Nope, still haven't convinced her, stubborn woman," Nate said, shaking his head, but there was a smile of affection on his face. "I guess you'd better come in, I imagine you have some questions you think I can answer."

"I'm sorry to bother you so early," he said, following the older man into the house. "Yvette promised to help me, but.....I got impatient."

Nate nodded, "She called right after Nancey left," he said, going over to the coffee pot and pouring them both a cup. "Let's go sit out on the porch, it's too nice to sit inside."

When they were settled, Nate took a long sip of his coffee, then looked over at Scott, "I've known Dr. Ziegler for half of my life, and he's not a man who makes very many mistakes, but just because he trusts you doesn't mean that I do. There are people out there who would like to get to the women of Hogan's Folly, and it's my job to make sure that doesn't happen."

He'd anticipated Nate's little speech and pulled his mother's diary out of his pocket, "I found this right after my mother died," he said. "I'd like you to read it. I think it will explain why I'm here."

Nate studied him for a second, then took the little leather-bound book and opened the cover. A look of surprise appeared on his face, then quickly disappeared. Scott saw him take a

deep breath before turning to the first page and beginning to read, his face devoid of emotion. He'd read the diary so many times he'd almost memorized it word for word, but he knew that it would take some time for Nate to make it all the way through, so he made himself comfortable.

He'd refilled their cups twice before Nate closed the diary and looked over at him, his eyes full of both sadness and a bit of wonder. "I never thought I'd hear Mary Ellen's voice again," he finally said. "But she's here in every word."

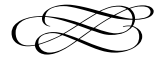
Stunned, he could only stare at Nate for a second, "Are you saying that you knew my mother?" he finally asked.

"We grew up together," Nate said, then let out a long sigh. "I can't believe that you're here. I always wondered what happened to you and your mother after she got away. It would have been too dangerous to try and contact her, so we all just had to hope that you were both safe and happy somewhere."

"We?" he asked. "Does that mean you knew my dad too?"

"Oh, I knew him, didn't like him," Nate said. "Your father was part of the reason your sister.....well, maybe I should start at the beginning and let you decide for yourself. I'll get us some more coffee, this might take a while."

CHAPTER 8



S helby closed her computer with a snap, then massaged her temples, hoping the headache that she'd been fighting for two days wasn't going to come back. There was still so much work to do promoting the expansion of the bed and breakfast, and it was helping keep her mind off Scott, but the throbbing at the back of her skull made it hard to think. When she couldn't think, her mind wandered, and she'd end up thinking about him again, and the whole process would start over.

With a sigh, she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, "If you need a nap, maybe you should go up to your room," Felicia said from the doorway. "Is that headache bothering you again?"

"Only when I'm awake," she said, without picking up her head or opening her eyes. "Just when I think it's gone, boom, it's back and even worse."

"You and I both know that it's stress. You've got to figure this thing with Scott out before you drive yourself crazy," Felicia said. "Until you do, I don't think it's going to get better."

She finally opened her eyes and looked over at her friend, "Was that supposed to make me feel better?" she asked. "Because it didn't, and besides, it doesn't matter what Scott finds out; I'm staying away from him, it's all just too weird."

Felicia studied her for a second, "But it isn't going to go away no matter how much you ignore it," she said. "Why

don't you just go ask Nate? I'm sure he'll know the truth."

"Didn't you hear me before? It doesn't matter, because if he's my brother and I'm attracted to him, that's just gross and wrong," she said. "And if he's not, well.....that's not good either, he'll probably leave the first chance he gets, so there's no point in even getting involved. You know I don't believe in happy endings; they aren't real, someone always gets hurt, and I don't want it to be me."

Felicia stared at her for a long time, then threw her hands up in the air, "I'm the last person you should be talking to about this, but I'm going to give it a shot even though flowery speeches aren't my thing," she finally said. "Turning your back on Scott would be the stupidest thing you've ever done. If he is your brother, you'll figure the attraction thing out, and if he's not, you'd be throwing away something special, something very few people get to experience. Sure, you might get hurt, but you might not. It's normal for you to be frightened, but don't let that fear rule you; I've never known you to be a coward, so don't start now."

She stared at Felicia for a second, sure that she'd heard her wrong, "Don't look at me like that," Felicia said. "It's not like I want to fall in love or anything, the last thing I need is a man, I just don't want to see you throw away your chance. Go talk to Nate. Shelby, take control of the situation instead of letting it control you."

It took her a second to answer, "You're right, I've been running away this entire time," she said, getting to her feet. "It's time I faced it head-on, so I'm going to talk to Nate right now."

"That's more like it," Felicia said with a smile. "Either way, I think you'll feel better."

After running up to her room to grab her purse and keys, she headed for her car, but when she got down to the lobby, it was packed with people, and Darcy was all alone behind the desk. Without hesitating, she went behind the counter, "Where is everyone?" she asked, smiling at the crowd of guests. "I'm

sorry to keep everyone waiting; I'd be happy to help the next person in line."

"I don't know where everyone is, and I have no idea where all these people came from," Darcy whispered. "A second ago, I was sitting here alone."

It didn't take long for Jolene, Louisa, and Erin to come to their rescue, and the lobby slowly emptied except for the last couple. "Mr. and Mrs. Peterson, I'd be happy to show you to your room now," she said. "We've put you on the second floor; there's a wonderful view of the mountains from your room."

"Oh, that sounds lovely," Mrs. Peterson said, then turned to her husband. "Stan, go get our luggage."

"Oh, that's okay, I'll get it," she said, walking over to where two bags sat by the front door. "You're on vacation."

Before she could pick up the bags, the front door flew open, and Scott came striding in, a look of determination on his face. His eyes found hers instantly, and a thrill rushed through her when she saw the raw desire in them. She gasped, then staggered back a step. He was already closing the distance between them before she could recover, then she was suddenly in his arms, and his mouth came down on hers.

Too shocked to move at first, she was soon swept away by the pleasure that rushed through her, and without thinking, she wrapped her arms around his neck. The world around them melted away, leaving only the two of them and the passion that was slowly beginning to build. Then as quickly as it had begun, it was over, and she was looking up into Scott's eyes, his arms still tightly locked around her.

Untangling herself, her cheeks flaming, she stepped away from him, her chest rising and falling, "You can't just come in here and do that," she hissed at him. "I'm in the middle of helping a guest."

"I'm sorry, but I've been waiting two days to do that, I couldn't wait any longer," he said, then looked over at the Petersons, who were smiling indulgently at them. "Please

excuse my bad manners, I don't usually do things like that, but.....”

“Oh, we understand, love will make you do crazy things,” Mrs. Peterson said, looking at her husband affectionately. “This is the last place Stan wanted to spend the weekend, but he came because he loves me. Get the bags, sweetheart, I think these two need to talk.”

Scott

For the first time Scott wasn't sure if the pink in Shelby's cheeks was from embarrassment or anger, but as he followed her out the front door and onto the porch, he knew that he was about to find out. When the door closed behind them, she whirled around, and glared at him, then let out a huff before turning and stomping around the house to the backyard. He followed her, trying to look appropriately contrite, but inside he was celebrating, not the least bit sorry that he'd kissed her.

“What the hell was that?” she demanded when they were alone, her eyes narrowed at him, a little vein in her neck pumping away. “I'm so mad I could scream.”

“That was a kiss to see if this thing between us is real,” he said, trying not to grin at her. “Do you want to know what I found out?”

“No, I don't,” she said, taking a step back when he took a step toward her. “Don't even think about kissing me again.”

“Oh, I'm thinking about it, that seems to be all I can think about lately,” he said, enjoying the way her eyes widened and her cheeks turned pink. “But I think first we should talk. I've spent most of the last two days with Nate and Nancey, and they've managed to clear a few things up, including the fact that you're not my sister.”

Shelby stared at him, a look in her eyes he'd couldn't read, “I'm not?” she finally asked. “You're sure?”

“It's not even a possibility, but I think we should sit down,” he said. “It's a long story, and you look a little pale all of a sudden.”

“I do feel a bit shaky,” she admitted. “That might be a good idea.”

She let him help her over to the table, “I’m going to go inside and get you some water,” he said, getting her settled into her chair. “I’m sorry, Shelby, that didn’t quite work out the way I thought it would.”

“It’s not completely your fault, I’ve been working too hard,” she said. “I might have missed a few meals over the last few days too.”

He gave her a look, “Since I’m not your doctor, I won’t yell at you,” he said. “But as your friend, I’m going to make sure that you eat something while we talk.”

When he came back a few minutes later with a tray full of food and a big pitcher of iced water, some of the color had come back into Shelby’s cheeks. “You don’t really think I’m going to eat all of that,” she said. “That looks like enough food to feed an army.”

“Don’t blame me, this was Sarah’s idea,” he said. “She’s as worried about you not eating as I am, so you’d better make some of this disappear.”

He heaped a plate full of food and set it in front of her along with a big glass of water, then helped himself before sliding into the chair next to her. “Before we talk, there’s something I want to show you,” he said, pulling his mom’s diary out of his pocket and setting it down on the table between them. “I think you should read it.”

“Oh, Scott, is this your mom’s diary?” Shelby asked, reaching out to stroke the worn leather cover. “Are you sure you want me to read it?”

“It will help explain some of what I’m about to tell you,” he said, pushing it over to her. “We do have a connection, Shelby, just not the one you’re afraid that we have, and I think my mother would be happy that we’ve found each other.”

She looked over at him, a thousand questions in her eyes, then reached out, picked up the diary, and began to read. When she was finished, tears were streaming down her cheeks, and

she let out a long sigh before carefully setting it down on the table. He reached over and wiped the tears away with his thumb, then gathered both of their empty plates, willing to wait for her to speak.

“Oh, Scott, I wish I was her daughter,” she finally said. “It’s so sad, she lost so much and for such a stupid reason; it still makes me angry every time I think about it.”

“You weren’t her daughter, but your mother was her best friend. Nate explained it all to me,” he said. “We’re connected because they were all friends, your mom, my mom, Nancey, Nate, and his brother Charlie. They grew up together, Shelby, they watched out for each other, protected each other, and when all the craziness started, they worked together to try and protect you and my sister. You and Nate made it here safely, but my sister and Charlie didn’t make it. He died trying to protect her.”

“Oh, Scott, I’m so sorry,” she said, squeezing his hand. “You must feel terrible, and I was acting like an idiot about the whole thing. Can you ever forgive me?”

He sighed, “I am disappointed, I guess that’s only natural,” he said. “But there’s also a part of me that’s relieved. Now that I know what happened, I won’t have to spend the rest of my life wondering about the past.”

Shelby didn’t say anything for a second, “I guess you’ll be leaving then,” she said, pulling her hand away. “I mean, there’s nothing to keep you here anymore.”

“Well, that’s not exactly true. There are my patients, I can’t just go off and leave them, and I signed a lease on that little house. It would cost a fortune to break it,” he said, then pretended to think. “Oh, yeah, I almost forgot, there’s you.”

“Me?” Shelby squeaked; her eyes wide. “You’re going to stay because of me?”

“I can’t think of a better reason,” he said, grinning at her. “I came here looking for my sister; instead, I found you.”

CHAPTER 9



Scott's words sent a rush of pleasure shooting through Shelby, and for a second, she couldn't breathe. Then reality came screaming back, and it quickly turned to panic. "You can't stay because of me," she said, jumping up from her chair and backing away from him. "That's a terrible idea, you can't change your whole life just because we're attracted to each other, you'll only end up blaming me when things go wrong, or you'll start hating it here and blame me because you stayed. Even worse, I might disappoint you....."

He got up and came over to her, grabbed her gently by the shoulders, "Hey, slow down, we haven't even been on a date yet," he said, smiling down at her. "There's no way to know for sure what will happen between us, but considering the way that I already feel about you, I have a good feeling about it."

She pulled away from him, "There is no such thing as a happy ending, Scott," she said, shaking her head. "Life isn't like books and movies. No one ever lives happily ever after, no matter how much they try to make you believe it, love is never that simple."

"Neither is life, but I don't see you hiding from it," he said, pulling her back into his arms. "Did it ever occur to you that happily ever after doesn't mean that nothing bad ever happens? Did you ever think that the happy part is because you don't have to face all the curves that life throws at you alone? Love is neither simple nor easy, Shelby, but when it's right, it's the most wonderful gift we can be given."

“Until it gets ripped away,” she said, wishing he’d let her go. “Millie fell in love and married the man of her dreams, but then he was killed before they could even start their lives together. That doesn’t sound like much of a gift to me. Your mom spent her whole life mourning a man who.....well, she loved him so much she couldn’t move on, and it ruined her life.”

Scott looked down at her, “Let me ask you a question,” he said. “Do you think Millie would have given up the time she had with her husband if she’d known that she was going to lose him so soon? Do you think she would have given him up to spare herself the grief and longing that came afterward?”

She didn’t have to think about it for long, “No, she wouldn’t have,” she said. “She always said those few years they had together were the best of her life, and she wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“As much pain as my mother was in, I don’t think she would have done anything differently,” he said. “She always loved my father, but her love for me was stronger. She took me away to give me a chance at a normal life, she chose me over him, and I’ll be grateful to her forever for that sacrifice.”

“It all sounds so logical, but I’m still scared,” she said, looking up at him. “This thing between us is so big and powerful, it sweeps me up and carries me away, leaves me feeling like I don’t have control of my feelings anymore.”

He reached up and stroked her cheek with his thumb, “I’m scared too, Shelby,” he said. “But I’m not going to run away from what I’m feeling. I’ll take a chance if you will.”

His offer was too much to resist, and she was tired of fighting, tired of running away from both him and her feelings, “I think you’ve finally managed to wear me down,” she said, then had to take a deep breath to steady herself as a barrage of emotions almost overwhelmed her. “But we’re going to have to take this slowly, or I might give into the urge to run away from you again.”

“Go ahead,” Scott said, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s kind of fun to chase you down.”

“I wasn’t joking,” she said, slapping him in the chest.

“Neither was I,” he said, grinning at her. “But I’ll tell you what, how about we start with a date on Saturday night? We’ll have dinner out, I’ll bring you flowers, and you’ll get all dressed up for me.”

“I can’t, I’m busy Saturday night,” she said, surprised at how disappointed she was. “I signed up for the box dinner at the elementary school, I can’t back out now.”

“What exactly is a box dinner?” he asked, clearly annoyed. “Why can’t we go together?”

“It’s not the kind of thing you bring a date to, it’s just for singles,” she said, then sighed. “It’s an old tradition to help young single people meet, single women cook a meal, put it in a box, then the single men bid on it, and the winner gets to have dinner with the woman.”

“And you’re going to make a box?” he asked, a look she’d never seen before in his eyes. “Then have dinner with some man you’ve never met before?”

“I doubt that, I know pretty much everyone in town,” she said. “But I will have dinner with whoever wins my box. The money goes to the school; it’s a good cause.”

“Well, I don’t like it,” he said. “Can’t someone else take your place?”

She studied him for a second, “Are you jealous?” she finally asked. “Because there’s absolutely nothing to be jealous about.”

“I’m not jealous, I’m just worried about you,” he said, but she could tell he was lying.

“Right, you’re just worried,” she said, grinning up at him. “It seems to me there’s an easy way to fix that; just bid on the box yourself, then you won’t have to spend the night worrying.”

He laughed, “Now, why didn’t I think of that,” he said, his body relaxing. “It’s not what I had in mind for our first date, but it sounds like fun.”

“Oh, there’s one thing I forgot to mention,” she said. “Last year, my box sold for two hundred dollars.”

Scott

Scott emerged from his little rented house and stood on the porch enjoying the warm evening air. He was a bit nervous about how the night would go, which was a bit of a surprise. He and Shelby had been circling around each other up until now, but he hoped that night would be different and Shelby would be able to relax around him. Taking a deep breath to calm the butterflies in his stomach, he started for his car, then changed his mind and put the keys back in his pocket.

As he got closer to the park, he was glad that he’d walked. The normally quiet neighborhood streets had become crowded with people and vehicles looking for a place to park. It came as a bit of a surprise to see that many people. He’d imagined that it would only be a small gathering, but looking at the crowds, it appeared that most of the town was there. His hope of a quiet dinner with Shelby vanished, but it wasn’t long before he picked up on the crowd’s excitement as he made his way to the front, where the tables of brightly decorated boxes were set up.

After chatting with several of his patients, he spotted Nate standing a few feet away and made his way over to him. “I’m surprised to see you here,” he said. “This doesn’t seem like your kind of thing.”

“It’s not, but that’s Nancey’s box wrapped in the silver paper,” he growled. “She does this to me every year.”

“But it’s for a good cause,” he said, grinning at the older man. “At least that’s what Shelby said when she told me where she was going to be tonight.”

Nate let out a grunt, “That doesn’t mean I have to like it,” he said. “I could put my money in the collection box like most everyone here is going to do; we don’t need all this hullabaloo to have a nice dinner together in the park.”

“Women like to be fussed over sometimes,” he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. “It could be worse; she could make you

get all dressed up and take her out to a fancy dinner.”

“Don’t you dare mention that around Nancey,” he growled, then let out a long sigh. “We do this every year; you’d think that by now I’d be used to it.”

“Well, this is my first time, and I don’t intend to lose,” he said. “Got any pointers for me?”

“You gotta have cash,” Nate said. “Other than that, it’s just a matter of being the top bidder when it’s all over.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “I’ve got a roll of twenties in my pocket.”

Nate looked over at him, “This isn’t the city, boy,” he said. “Most of the bidding tops out at fifty or sixty bucks.”

“Shelby told me her box when for two hundred dollars last year,” he said. “I figured I’d need three.”

“The only reason that happened was because the Davis brothers got into a bidding war,” Nate said, shaking his head, his face full of amusement. “It had nothing to do with Shelby.”

“She didn’t tell me that part,” he said, equally amused. “Maybe I shouldn’t bid on her box until the very end. Let her worry that I’m not going to; it would serve her right.”

“You’ll be sorry,” Nate said, shaking his head. “Take my advice and don’t play games, even innocent ones.”

He thought about the fragile trust between them and discarded the idea. “Message received,” he said. “Thanks for the advice.”

Before Nate could answer, the microphone crackled to life and the mayor welcomed everyone, then laid out the rules. When he was finished, a cheer went up, and the auctioneer took the microphone and got started, “Okay, gents, let’s get things rolling with this pretty little box on top,” he said. “Who will open the bidding with ten dollars?”

The next half an hour flew by as one box after another was auctioned off, the owners ranging in age from fresh-faced teenagers to grandmothers, and he found himself joining in when the crowd took sides, cheering and rooting for their

favorite bidder. He still hadn't seen Shelby, but he was sure she was there, and his instinct was right when a box covered in brightly colored paper was chosen as the next to be auctioned off, and she stepped out of the crowd. Wearing a yellow sundress, her red hair tumbling over her shoulders in a shining wave, she looked more beautiful than he remembered, and it took him a second to remember how to breathe when their eyes met.

She flashed him a nervous smile, then stepped up next to the auctioneer, "Well now, look who we have here, last year's record holder," he said. "What do you think, boys? Can we beat last year? Remember, it's for a good cause. Let's start the bidding at twenty dollars, do I hear twenty?"

"I'll bid forty," he called, taking a step away from the crowd.

"I've got forty," the auctioneer called. "Do I hear fifty?"

"One hundred dollars," a booming male voice called.

The crowd gasped, and everyone began looking around, "Now this is getting interesting," the auctioneer called, then looked over at him. "Do I hear one hundred and twenty?"

"One hundred and fifty," he called.

"Two hundred," the voice answered, but this time the crowd parted and an older grey-haired man walked to the front.

Dressed in an expensive suit and carrying a long black cane, the man looked a little out of place in the park. Everyone was staring at him, but the man didn't seem to notice. His eyes were locked on Shelby, a look on his face that made Scott instantly wary of the man, and he felt his magic beginning to stir, the instinct to protect Shelby slowly coming to life for the first time.

"Two hundred," he called back, his voice no longer playful.

The man pulled his eyes away from Shelby and studied him for a second, "Five hundred dollars," he barked. "And if I was you, young man, I'd let this go. I'm prepared to spend far

more money than you are to have the pleasure of the young lady's company.”

CHAPTER 10



Shelby inched closer to the auctioneer, “Sam, do you know who that is?” she asked. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“I don’t have a clue, I’ve never seen him before either,” Sam said. “Do you want me to handle it?”

She nodded, “He gives me the creeps,” she said, shivering. “Don’t let him win the bidding.”

“I’ve got this,” Sam said. “I just need Scott to make one more bid.”

Forcing herself to step away from Sam, she looked over at Scott, who looked less than happy, “Now, that’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “I bid six hundred dollars.”

Sam opened his mouth but before he could speak, the stranger took a few steps toward Scott, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a stack of bills. “I’ve got ten crisp fresh one-hundred-dollar bills here, and I’m prepared to spend every one of them to get what I want,” the man said, an evil look in his eyes. “I warned you, young man, back off, I’ve been waiting a long time for this night.”

A rush of fear made Shelby’s head spin, and she looked over at Scott, hoping for some reassurance, but he looked a little panicked. “The bid stands at one thousand dollars,” Sam said reluctantly. “Do I hear one thousand and one?”

Scott leaned over and whispered something to Nate, who started digging through his pockets, then handed over a small

wad of bills. He turned to the next man standing next to him, said something she couldn't hear, but that man too dug in his pocket and handed over some money. It wasn't long before Scott was surrounded by people shoving money at him, while the stranger looked on, his face filled with disgust and anger.

"One thousand, one hundred dollars," Scott finally called, his face full of relief.

"Sold," Sam called. "For a final bid of one thousand, one hundred dollars."

The crowd sighed with relief right along with Shelby, and she nearly collapsed to the ground but managed to stay on her feet by holding onto the table. The man's face turned stormy, and for a few seconds, she thought there was going to be trouble and braced herself. But he finally nodded at Scott and put his money back in the pocket of his jacket, his face once again composed.

"I can see I'm going to have to be a bit more patient," he finally said. "Well, played, young man, but don't think you'll be that lucky next time. I always get what I want, one way or another."

Before Scott could respond the man turned and walked away, leaving a long silence in his wake. Nate leaned over and whispered something to Scott, then turned and disappeared into the crowd, several other guardians right behind him. Scott was already walking toward her, a mixture of fury and concern on his face, and she went willingly into his arms when he opened them to her.

He held her for a few minutes, before pulling back and looking down at her, "Are you okay?" he asked. "I'm sorry that was so close, I didn't have that much cash on me."

"I was only joking about the two hundred dollars," she said, hating the way her bottom lip was trembling. "I didn't think....."

Scott crushed her to his chest, "It's okay, Shelby, he's gone," he said. "Nate and a few of the others followed him; we'll find out who he is."

“I know who he is, or at least where he came from,” she said, holding on tighter. “He’s from my clan, you heard him, he said he’s been waiting for this a long time, that’s the only thing that makes sense. Louisa, Yvette, Jolene, and Erin’s clans have already come after them, I thought.....I don’t know that maybe mine wouldn’t care that I was still alive.”

“I’m sorry, Shelby, all this must be so hard, but I promise I won’t let anyone hurt you,” he said. “How about we take that dinner you made and go back to my house?”

Just then, Penny, Felicia, and Erin came rushing up, “What happened?” Felicia asked. “Everyone’s talking about a stranger trying to buy your dinner box.”

“We heard that Scott had to borrow money from everyone in the crowd to win,” Penny said. “Did you really pay over a thousand dollars?”

“Are you okay?” Erin asked. “Do you want to go home? I’ll get Peter, and he can take you.”

She shook her head, “I’m okay, maybe a little shaken up,” she said, taking a deep breath and squaring her shoulders. “But I’m not going to let it ruin our night. We’re supposed to have dinner in the park, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do; after all, you just set a new record.”

“And it’s going to stay the record,” Scott said, grinning at her. “If I have my way, you won’t be single by this time next year.”

She gasped, and her friends laughed, “Well, I think that might be our cue to leave you two alone,” Penny said. “We won’t wait up.”

When they were gone, she looked up at Scott, “You can’t say things like that,” she said. “It’s.....I don’t know..... scary.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said. “I was just telling the truth, I’m crazy about you, Shelby, and I don’t see that changing any time soon.”

“See, there you go again,” she said, slightly breathless from the way her body was reacting. “You say things like that,

and I can't think straight.”

“Well, then maybe we shouldn't talk anymore,” he said, pulling her into the shadows and lowering his mouth to hers.

Scott

Scott parked in the usual space at the hospital, but he didn't get out. Instead, he closed his eyes and laid his head back against the seat, digging deep down for the energy to get out of the car. After dropping Shelby off at the bed and breakfast the night before, he'd gone home sure that he'd fall right to sleep, but he tossed and turned for hours, unable to shut his brain down. When he'd finally dropped off, his dreams had been filled with visions of the stranger, and when he woke even more tired that morning, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something familiar about the man.

Forcing himself to get out of the car, he realized that it wasn't helping that this was the last place he wanted to be, especially since Louisa and Derek were having a meeting with the guardians and the leadership of their fledgling clan about what happened the night before. He couldn't help but feel like he should be there. He couldn't help protect Shelby if he didn't have a full picture of what they were dealing with. But his patients came first, he couldn't just abandon them, and all it would take was a quick trip up to Nate's later to get the full story.

Nancey was sitting behind her desk when he finally made it to his office, and he looked up at the clock, surprised to see her. “You're here early today,” he said, stopping in front of her. “I hope that doesn't mean we are going to have one of those days.”

“Don't worry, we haven't had an outbreak of pink eye at the school or a bunch of tourists hurting themselves,” she said, smiling at him. “But there is someone in your office I think you'll be happy to see.”

“I don't suppose you're going to give me any more information,” he said, then sighed when she just shook her head and went back to her computer. “Okay, then, I guess I'd better go see for myself.”

The last person he expected to see was sitting on his couch reading the morning newspaper, and he froze for a second, afraid that he was dreaming. Dr. Zeigler lowered the paper when he heard him, and relief poured through him, leaving him a little weak in the knees. Until that moment, he hadn't realized just how worn out he was, not just physically tired, but emotionally drained, and the sight of the older man almost brought him to tears.

Embarrassed, but unable to completely block the emotion, he sat down behind his desk and took a deep breath. "You look about as bad as Nancey said you did," Dr. Ziegler said, getting up from the couch and bringing over a tall cup of coffee and a paper bag from the diner. "You look like you could use this, Marge's famous egg and bacon sandwich and one of her blueberry muffins."

Just the thought of food made his stomach begin to growl, and he reached for the bag, "Thanks, I appreciate it," he said, pulling out the sandwich. "I thought you weren't going to be back until next week at the earliest, not that I'm not glad to see you."

"I was just getting in the way," he said. "And when Nancey called to tell me what happened last night, I figured it was time for me to come home, but don't think I haven't heard about what a great job you've been doing."

"Well, that's good to hear," he said, unwrapping the paper around the sandwich. "I don't think I've ever been pulled in so many different directions at once."

"You just got a good taste of small-town medicine," Dr. Ziegler said, taking his seat on the couch again. "Do you still think you want to hang around for the next year?"

"I'm not planning on leaving, if that's what you're asking," he said. "I made a commitment, and I'll stick to it."

Dr. Ziegler took a long sip of his coffee, "Is that the only reason that you're going to stay?" he finally asked. "I had the feeling that you came here with a purpose, some personal business. Am I wrong?"

“No, sir, and I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you from the very beginning, but I wasn’t sure what I would find, and I didn’t want to stir up trouble,” he said, opening the bottom drawer of his desk and pulling out his mother’s diary. “I think you should read this, and when you do, keep in mind that I didn’t find it until after she died. I was left with more questions than answers, and she wasn’t there to answer them.”

Dr. Ziegler took the diary without a word, opened it to the first page, and began to read, “You might want to eat that food before it gets cold,” he said, not looking up. “You clearly haven’t been eating enough.”

After polishing off all the food in the paper bag, he felt better. He spent some time catching up on charts, occasionally glancing over at Dr. Ziegler, who was completely focused on the little leather book in his hands. An hour had passed before the older man closed the book very gently then looked up at him, a mixture of anger and grief on his face. It took him a few minutes to collect himself, then he shook his head, got to his feet, and walked over to the desk.

“Every time I hear one of these stories, it tears me up inside. I understand why you didn’t tell me the real reason you were here,” he said, gently setting the diary down on the desk. “I never knew your mother, but I know that Nate and Nancey will always miss her. I’m sorry life was so difficult for both of you.”

“Thank you, I just wish my mom had told me sooner,” he said. “I can’t help but think I could have done something to ease her suffering, that knowing the truth would have helped.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Dr. Ziegler said. “Having that little bit of hope might have been the only thing that helped your mom cope with the horror of what was done to them by the people who were supposed to love and protect them.”

He was silent for a second, “It must have been hard; I think she still loved my father,” he said. “She just couldn’t forgive him for what happened.”

Dr. Ziegler nodded, “She was a strong woman, Scott, and I think she’d be happy that you’re here,” he said. “Now, I want

you to take the next few days off. I understand a certain young lady has caught your attention and I think she needs you more right now than I do.”

“How did you.....” he started to ask, then shook his head. “Never mind, Nancey told you.”

“Nothing gets past that woman, in case you didn’t know it,” Dr. Ziegler said, laughing. “Now get, before I change my mind.”

CHAPTER 11



S helby closed her computer, knowing that she wasn't going to get much work done. She was too keyed up and nervous to concentrate, the latest twist in her normally well-controlled life was almost more than she could handle. After spending most of her life watching over her shoulder and preparing for the day her clan came looking for her, now that it had really happened, she wasn't ready. It didn't matter that she wasn't alone in her fight, or that they'd already defeated four of the clans trying to reclaim the women they'd wanted dead on the day of their birth, she was scared.

Millie had spent enough time warning them that no one from their clans could be trusted, beating it into their heads that the madness that had infected the clans of the mountains all those years ago hadn't gone away. They were still the same people who had turned on all the female offspring of the clan, labeled them cursed, the root of all the terrible weather, disease, and death, then ordered them abandoned in the forest to die.

She might not have been as scared if they'd just wanted to kill her, but she had no doubt that wasn't their motivation for seeking her out, and she shivered at the idea of what they really wanted. Too agitated to stay seated at her desk, she jumped to her feet and began to pace back and forth across her tiny office, the implications of her thoughts leaving her with a cold spot deep inside. The fear that there would be no victory this time and she'd be dragged away from the only family she'd ever known began to grow inside her, making panic sweep through her.

“If you keep pacing like that, you’re going to wear a hole in the floor,” Scott said from the doorway. “I can think of something else to do with all that energy.”

She jumped, turned to face him, and the amused look on his face disappeared, replaced by a look of concern that instantly made her feel better. Not thinking about what she was doing, she crossed the room, wrapped her arms around him, and buried her face in his chest. It only took a second for him to wrap his arms around her, and she was instantly filled with warmth and comfort, blocking out all the terrible thoughts until she felt steady again.

Letting out a long sigh, she pulled back and looked up at him, “I’m so glad to see you,” she said. “But what are you doing here? I thought you had to work today.”

“Dr. Ziegler was waiting for me in my office this morning, Nancey called him last night, and he decided to come home early,” he said, wiping the tears off her face. “After we had a long talk about my mother, he told me to take a few days off. It seems he’s under the impression that a young lady needs me a bit more than my patients do right now.”

“He’s a smart man, and he was right, I just didn’t know it until you showed up,” she said, letting out another sigh as the fear and panic finally completely let go. “I’m sorry about that little meltdown, I started thinking about.....never mind, I don’t want to go there again.”

“Hey, you have nothing to be sorry for; if I was in your shoes, I’d be scared too. It’s only natural,” he said. “Next time you start feeling that way, I want you to remember that you’re not alone, you have your friends, the guardians, an entire clan, and now me, watching out for you. Anyone who tries to get to you is going to have to through all of us, and if what I hear is true about the people in this town, that’s going to be impossible.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “Thanks, I needed to hear that,” she said. “But could you just hold me for a few more minutes? I’m not quite ready to let you go.”

“That’s a request I have no problem fulfilling,” he said, pulling her close again. “Then I’m going to take you to the meeting. I think you’ll feel better once we know for sure who that was last night.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, burying her face in his chest and closing her eyes, the smell of him stirring the desire that had been slumbering under the fear and panic. “Oh, maybe this isn’t such a good idea anymore.”

She tried to pull away, but Scott kept his arms locked around her, “I think it’s an excellent idea,” he said. “Although I have an even better one.”

“Scott.....” his mouth coming down on hers cut off her protest, but the truth was, she wanted the kiss as much as he did, and opened herself up to him.

He growled deep in his chest and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss until all she was conscious of was the pleasure that rushed through her body, feeding the magic that lived inside her. Her body began to tingle and tighten in ways it never had before, and she pressed herself up against him, suddenly desperate to feel his hands on her. When he gave her what she wanted by beginning to explore the curves of her body, she moaned into his mouth, making him growl again.

They almost missed the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway, but Scott pulled away from her just as Louisa appeared in the doorway. She took one look at them, then a smile spread across her face, “Sorry to interrupt, but we’ll be leaving for Nate’s,” she said. “I was wondering if Shelby needed a ride, but it looks like you’ve got it handled.”

Knowing that her cheeks were flaming, wondering exactly how much Louisa had seen, the urge to hide her face in Scott’s chest creeping up her again, she took a deep breath. “Maybe we could both ride with you,” she finally managed to say. “If there’s room, I mean.”

Scott

Scott followed Louisa and Derek into the grey cinderblock building, expecting the inside to be as nondescript as the

exterior, but was pleasantly surprised by what greeted him. Warm rugs and soft lighting made the room feel welcoming, the smell of cinnamon filled the air, and the small groups of people chatting and laughing gave it some life. He spotted Nate over in one corner and would have made his way over to him, but Shelby pulled his hand, taking him in the other direction.

“I smell cinnamon, and that can mean only one thing,” she said, heading for the kitchen at the back of the room. “Marge brought the sweets; let’s grab something before it’s all gone.”

He followed her, thinking he’d never been to a clan meeting that felt more like a party, “This isn’t quite what I expected,” he said when they walked out of the kitchen with a big cinnamon roll each and steaming cup of coffee. “Aren’t we supposed to get started soon?”

“We’re a bit more laid back than most clans,” Shelby said, shrugging her shoulders. “Louisa and Derek wanted to do things differently. They don’t so much rule the clan as manage it; the guardians and the leadership council have as much power as they do. So far, it’s worked for us, but the grand council isn’t so sure about our methods, and they’ve been holding back giving us full clan status.”

“I can imagine this is a bit out of the ordinary,” he said, beginning to relax. “I’m sure they feel threatened by the idea of change, most people are.”

“They haven’t been all bad; they’ve supported us on several occasions. I just think it’s going to take some time for them to accept a different way of doing things,” she said. “It’s all just politics when you come right down to it, but it is nice having their support. They know what happened to us back then wasn’t right, that they should have stopped it before it went as far as it did, and we’ll use that leverage someday, if necessary, but for now we’re content to wait.”

He looked over at Shelby, a feeling of respect washed over him. He realized that the petite beauty who had captured his heart was a lot tougher than she looked. “Your old clan is making a big mistake messing with you, I have a feeling

before this is all over, they're going to be sorry," he said, grinning at her. "Now, let's go find someplace to sit down and eat these cinnamon rolls; the smell is driving me crazy."

Shelby laughed, then looked around, "It looks like everyone is gathering over by the fireplace," she said. "We should head over there."

He was surprised to find that the room had almost emptied out, leaving only a couple dozen people slowly taking seats in the chairs and couches gathered around a huge stone fireplace at one end of the room. They'd barely gotten seated when Louisa and Derek stepped up in front of the fireplace and waited for a second for the room to fall silent before greeting the group.

"First, I just want to thank everyone for coming on such short notice," Louisa said. "I'm sure everyone knows what happened at the box dinner, last night, but before we continue, I just want to make sure there aren't any questions."

There was silence, "Okay, then I'm going to turn things over to Nate," she said. "He'll give us an update on where we stand right now, and then we can discuss how we want to proceed from there."

Nate came to the front of the room, "A few of us followed the man who tried to buy Shelby's box when he left the park," he said. "He got into the back of a black Mercedes and left town. I was able to get the license plate on the car, but when I tried to trace it, I came up with a dummy corporation; it's going to take some time to dig deeper. So, for now, our mystery man is still a mystery, but based on what he said last night at the auction, I think we have to assume he's from Shelby's old clan."

Shelby tensed next to Scott, and he reached to take her hand, "It's nothing we didn't already know," he said, hoping to reassure her. "And thanks to my mom, we know more than they think we do. It's going to be fine."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "So, what do we do now?" she asked. "And please don't tell me we have to wait, I'm tired of waiting for them to make the first move."

“We all are,” Louisa said. “But we don’t know who we’re dealing with yet. We can’t move too fast, or we might make a mistake, and there’s too much at stake to risk that.”

“I’ll keep working on getting a name for our visitor,” Nate said. “In the meantime, I want you to stay smart and aware, Shelby, and don’t go wandering around alone. Listen to your instincts, if something feels off believe it. We’re all just a phone call away if you need us, and I expect you to call.”

Louisa and Derek took the opportunity to discuss some other clan business, then sent everyone on their way with orders to keep their eyes open. Scott helped Shelby to her feet, but before they could head for the door, Nate tapped him on the shoulder and nodded his head to the corner of the room.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. “I just need to talk to Nate for a second.”

When they were far enough away, Nate stopped, “I want you to keep a close eye on her. She needs someone with her every time she leaves the bed and breakfast. If you can’t be there, make sure someone else is. I don’t want her alone, I think I know who we’re dealing with, and it’s not good.”

CHAPTER 12



Shelby had never thought the old house was small but cooped up inside, the only prospect for escape was if she went with a guard, it seemed to have shrunk overnight. She knew that she was being ridiculous, but after only twenty-four hours, she was fighting the need for escape and had already considered climbing out the window. Walking back over to her desk, she sat down, determined to get some work done. All she had to do was pretend it was a normal day.

She'd just opened her computer when there was a knock on her door, "Who is it?" she called, getting back up from the desk. "I'm trying to work in here."

"Good morning to you, too," Scott called from the other side of the door. "Should I go away?"

Her heart leapt with excitement, "No, don't do that," she called, jumping to her feet. "Just give me a second to unlock the door."

When she had him in the room, she locked the door again, then let him pull her into his arms, "Is it too much to hope you locked the door so we wouldn't be interrupted?" he asked, grinning down at her.

She slapped his chest, "Very funny, Louisa insisted," she said. "I think it's going too far, but she harped on me until I agreed."

"I don't blame her," he said. "I'd probably do the same thing, but the good news is, I've come to get you out of here."

“Really?” she asked. “Where are we going?”

“To get some fresh air,” he said. “You might want to bring your camera.”

Half an hour later they were headed for the trail that led up to the waterfall, and she didn’t even care that Penny and Felicia were tagging along. “This was a great idea,” she said, taking a breath of the fresh air. “I needed to get out of the house, all I could think about was.....”

Scott pulled her to a stop, kissing her until she was breathless, ignoring her friends’ taunts, then smiled down at her. “For just today, we’re not going to talk about all that,” he said. “We’re going take a break, just enjoy ourselves, you’re going to take some pictures, and I’m going to watch you. Then we’re going to share a picnic lunch with your friends. After that, if I’m lucky, we can ditch them and have a good make-out session.”

“I heard that,” Felicia called. “Gross.”

“Like we’d want to watch that,” Penny added, making a face. “This is bad enough, break it up you two, before I get sick.”

Scott laughed, “Only if Shelby agrees,” he said, looking down at her. “What do you say? Let’s leave everything behind for a few hours.”

“Sounds like an excellent idea to me,” she said, then looked over at her friends. “I especially like the part about making out.”

The day had turned hot by the time they reached the waterfall, there wasn’t a cloud in the brilliant blue sky, and no one was surprised to find a sprinkling of tourists in the clearing. Shucking off their backpacks, they stowed them under the tree where she and Scott had shared lunch only a few days before, but she didn’t get her camera out. Instead, she peeled off her shorts and tank top, enjoying the look on Scott’s face when he saw the bikini underneath, then, with only a glance over her shoulder, headed for the water.

She paused on the edge of the pond, looked over her shoulder again, a wave of desire erupting from deep inside her when she saw the hunger in Scott's eyes, then jumped into the water. The cold hit her instantly, but it was a relief after the burning sun, and she stayed under for a second before propelling herself to the top. She surfaced, the water only coming up to her hips, and felt her nipples hardening when a breeze blew across the surface of the water.

Scott's eyes nearly popped out of his head, and he quickly began removing his clothes, then jumped in right next to her, splashing her with a wave of water. She was laughing and wiping the water from her eyes when he popped to the surface, grabbed her, and carried her into deeper water. It wasn't long before she was forced to grab onto him or go under, and the feel of his naked skin on hers for the first time made her gasp.

When the water was up to Scott's shoulders, he stopped and took a quick look around before slamming his mouth down on hers in a kiss that carried all the need she'd seen in his eyes. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, rubbed her chest against his until he groaned deep in his throat, and broke the kiss, leaving them both breathless and unsatisfied.

He shifted her in his arms, and she gasped when she felt his erection pressing against her, "I could take you right now, just slip that little piece of fabric to the side and bury myself deep inside you," he said, his eyes locked on hers. "I've never wanted a woman like I want you, Shelby. Everything you do makes me want you."

She was breathless, her body throbbing with need, the instinct to give herself to him so powerful it was almost impossible to resist, but the excited screams of children broke through the passion raging between them. Surfacing from the haze of desire, she looked over at the trail, then back at Scott and gently pushed herself away from him, and swam for the shore. It took him a bit longer to recover and make his way over to where she, Penny, and Felicia were lounging in the shallow water, soaking up the warm sun.

"You ladies look a bit hot lying there in the sun," he said, grinning at them. "I'm a bit worried you might get heatstroke;

we should probably do something to cool you down.”

None of them moved fast enough, and the first splash got them all. They scattered screaming, then exchanged a quick look before ganging up on Scott. By the time they finally climbed out of the water, they were all laughing and out of breath, but she felt better than she had in days.

“Thank you for forcing me to take a break,” she said, stretching up and giving him a kiss. “I needed to forget for a little while.”

Scott

“My pleasure,” Scott said, his chest swelling with a feeling that reminded him a lot of love. “You’re not the only one who needed a break. So much has happened over the last few days, I needed some time to catch up too.”

Shelby wrapped her arms around him, “I’m sorry, I’ve been thinking so much about myself, I forgot that this has been hard for you as well,” she said. “Can you forgive me for being so selfish?”

“You have been anything but selfish,” he said, giving her a quick kiss on the lips, “and just being with you makes everything easier.”

She studied him for a second, “I’m glad I’m not the only one who feels that way,” she said. “Now, unless you want to carry me back down that trail, we’d better eat something. I’m so hungry I think I’m going to pass out.”

They ate the huge lunch he’d brought sitting in the grass under the big tree, then stomachs full, stretched out on a warm rock next to the pond, their hands entwined, looking up at the sky. More content than he’d been in a long time, it was easy to let his exhaustion take over, and only a few minutes later, he was sound asleep. He woke hours later to find the sun hidden behind dark clouds and the waterfall deserted, except for them.

Shelby was leaning up on one elbow watching him, and he smiled up at her, “I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” he said, yawning. “Where is everyone?”

“You needed it,” she said. “They’re out hunting for wild mushrooms, but looking at those clouds, I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

He sat up, and stretched, “I guess we should head back, although I hate to see the day end,” he said, reaching over and pulling her into his arms. “But it looks like we have a few more minutes before our chaperones come back. I vote we make the most of it.”

“Oh, and what did you have in mind?” she asked, her body already beginning to tingle and tighten. “The last time we were here, we almost embarrassed ourselves in front of a bunch of people.”

“I don’t see anyone around now,” he said. “We could take another dip in the pond and see where it leads.”

“As tempting as that offer is,” she said, laughing. “I think we’d better start packing up. I think I just felt a raindrop.”

* * *

By the time they made it to the bed and breakfast, they were all soaked to the skin, “Well, that was a fun way to end the day,” Shelby said, her teeth chattering. “Do you want to come in and get dry?”

“I think I’ll just head home,” he said. “I need a shower and a change of clothes, but I could come back later and bring a big pizza with me.”

Shelby slipped into his arms and pressed her body up against his, “I have a better idea. How about I meet you at your place, and we’ll have that pizza there?” she said. “I don’t feel like a lot of company tonight.”

He read the message in her eyes loud and clear, and his body responded, “I think that sounds like a perfect plan,” he said, then kissed her thoroughly before stepping back. “That should give you something to think about until tonight.”

“If I wasn’t so cold, I’d return the favor, but you’re just going to have to wait until tonight,” she said, grinning up at

him, her teeth still chattering.

He watched her enter the house, headed home, took a shower then changed the sheets on his bed, feeling like a bit of a jerk and promising himself that he wouldn't push Shelby. Sleeping with her had been on his mind since the moment he'd met her, but waiting a little longer wouldn't kill him if it meant the connection between them would be stronger. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that she was the woman for him. As much as he wanted her in his bed, he wanted more between them than just physical need when it happened.

The knock on his front door came right after he ordered the pizza, his stomach filled with butterflies, and anticipation rushed through him as he walked over to answer it. Shelby was standing on his front porch with two bright spots of color on her cheeks, a bakery box in her hands, and a smile spread across her face when she saw him. Over her shoulder, he saw Peter leaning against his car, watching them. He waved, Peter returned the gesture, then got in his car and drove away.

"I'm not even allowed to drive my car," Shelby said, shrugging her shoulders. "Peter has been appointed my official driver because of his training. It was Jolene's idea."

"It's nice that she's willing to share him," he said, grinning at her. "But it is a good idea. Peter will be able to pick up someone following you, he's been on the other side often enough."

"That's why I'm not fighting it, having an ex-assassin as a bodyguard does give me a sense of security," she said, then her cheeks blushed "He isn't.....ummm expecting to pick me up until tomorrow morning, not that you couldn't give me a ride home if you don't want me to stay. I mean....."

He took the bag she was carrying out of her hands, pulled her into the house, closed the door firmly behind him, then reached for her. "There's nothing I would like more than to have you all to myself for an entire night," he said, then lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her until she was trembling in his arms.

CHAPTER 13



“Well, I guess that answers my question,” Shelby said when she could form words again. “I don’t know what I was worrying about.”

Scott smiled down at her, “I’m a little nervous too, Shelby,” he said. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for, the last thing I want to do is rush you. We’ve got lots of time, and it is a big step for both of us. So, there’s no pressure, okay?”

“No pressure, that’s a deal,” she said, then smiled up at him, the pink back in her cheeks. “I just wish my body was listening, cause it seems to have other plans.”

He laughed, gave her a kiss on the nose, then let her go, “Well, then I’d better not kiss you again like I was planning to do,” he said, grinning at her. “The pizza is on the way. Why don’t you get yourself something to drink and see if you can find a movie to watch? I’m just going to put your bag in the bedroom.”

A little shot of anticipation made her heart beat faster, and she knew that they would end up in his bed before the night was out. She was done fighting what felt so right, it didn’t matter if she’d only known him for a few weeks, something deep down told her that he was the man for her. Postponing the inevitable would only frustrate them both, and as sure as she was that the people who loved her would protect her, she knew that life could be cruel. She wasn’t going to waste a second of their time together.

Going to the refrigerator, she opened the door, scanned the shelves, then leaned over to pull out the pitcher of cold water on the top shelf. When she straightened up, the room rolled a little, and a wave of dizziness washed over her, then passed just as quickly as it had come. Taking a deep breath, she set the pitcher on the counter, afraid she would drop it if the dizziness came back, but nothing happened, so she grabbed a glass out of the cabinet.

She'd downed half a glass before Scott came back from the bedroom, "I don't think I drank enough water today," she said, finishing the glass. "Do you want some?"

"Sure, I could probably use some more myself," he said. "Thanks."

The doorbell chimed just as he reached for the glass she'd filled for him, "Do you want me to get that?" she asked, setting the pitcher down.

"No, you'd better let me," he said, setting the glass down. "I'm sure it's just our pizza, but you can never be too careful."

"I'll get us some plates," she said, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. "I'm glad I'm here."

"Me too," he said. "I'll be right back."

Scott came back with the pizza, and she followed him into the living room with everything else, her stomach growling when she smelled the cheese and pepperoni. "I wasn't sure what kind of pizza you liked, so I kept it simple," he said, flipping open the lid and holding out his hand for her plate. "One piece or two?"

"I'm tempted to ask for two, but I'd better start with one," she said, her mouth already watering. "Pizza is one of my favorite foods."

"Mine too," he said, grinning at her and putting two pieces on his plate. "Too bad something that tastes so good is bad for us."

"Don't remind me," she said, laughing. "I'll eat a salad tomorrow to make up for it."

They settled down on the couch together, Scott put on a silly movie, and they dug into the food, content for the moment just to be together. After polishing off two huge pieces, she set her plate down next to the pizza on the coffee table and let out a satisfied sigh.

“I’m stuffed. I don’t think I could eat another bite,” she said. “Thank you for dinner; nothing like comfort food to make you feel better.”

“You’re welcome, but all I did was make a phone call,” he said. “Maybe one of these days I’ll cook for you, I’m not half bad in the kitchen.”

“Hmmm.....a man who can cook,” she said, grinning at him. “I’ve really hit the jackpot.”

“You better believe it,” he said, grinning back. “And just to show you how lucky you are, I’ll clean this up.”

When he came back, she snuggled into his arms, sleepy from a full stomach and exhausted from the busy day, and it wasn’t long before she dozed off. Not completely asleep, she was aware of the movie playing in the background, the solid feel of Scott’s chest under her cheek, and the rhythmic beating of his heart in her ear. Letting herself completely relax for the first time in days, the comfort of Scott’s arms breaking down her last defense, she slipped into a deep sleep.

It wasn’t long before the dreams started, disturbing visions of smoke and fire, walls of flames that were slowly closing in on her, the heat growing until she was sure she’d be burned alive. In the dream, she screamed and screamed, calling for help, but heard only a deep voice laughing at her and telling her that she was going to die. Then suddenly her friends were all there, but they couldn’t get to her, could only watch as the flames closed around her.

She woke with a cry to find Scott looking down at her, his face creased with worry, “Are you okay?” he asked. “You started whimpering a few seconds ago. Did you have a bad dream?”

All she could do was nod her head, the dream still so fresh in her mind that she was sweating, “I was dreaming about fire,” she said. “It seemed so real, I’m actually sweating.”

“That must have been some dream,” he said, shifting so he could look at her. “You’re a little pale; maybe you should drink some water.”

She leaned over to pick up the glass, but everything began to swim, and she sat up again, “I don’t feel very well all of a sudden,” she said, putting her hand on her forehead. “I think I need some fresh air or something.”

Scott

Scott didn’t like the way the last of the color was slowly draining out of Shelby’s face, and moved so that he could put the back of his hand on her forehead, “You burning up, sweetheart,” he said. “When did you start feeling this way?”

“It must have started while I was sleeping,” Shelby said, beginning to shiver. “I felt a little dizzy earlier, but I just thought it was because I was hungry.”

“And now?” he asked, turning to face her completely. “Are you still dizzy?”

“Not if I sit still,” she said, but her eyes looked funny. “I think I need to lie down.”

“Me too,” he said, getting to his feet and scooping her up into his arms. “Let’s get you settled in my bed, and then I’ll see about getting you something for that fever. That’s probably what’s making you feel dizzy.”

Shelby laid her head against his chest and closed her eyes with a sigh, “This isn’t how tonight was supposed to go,” she said. “I’m sorry I got sick.”

“Don’t worry about tonight,” he said, setting her gently down on the side of the bed. “All you should be thinking about is getting better. I think you should get out of those clothes. I’ll get something for you to wear out of your bag, and then I’ll help you change.”

He started for the other side of the room, “No, you can’t.....I mean, I don’t want you to look in my bag.....it will ruin everything,” she said, tears in her eyes, her voice shaking. “Oh, who am I kidding I’ve already ruined everything. This night is a total disaster, I thought it would be so different. I’m all sweaty and gross, you’re probably revolted by me.....”

Shelby burst into noisy sobs, and he rushed back to her, put his arms around her and began to rock her, “Hey, I’m a doctor remember? I’m used to sick people, and even all sweaty and gross, you’re still sexy to me,” he said. “How about I lend you one of my shirts?”

“You don’t really mean that,” she said, looking up at him, a little smile on her face. “Now I feel silly, I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re sick,” he said, kissing her on the nose. “I’m going to get that shirt for you, and then you’re going to get in bed and stop worrying about me being upset.”

“I think I can manage by myself,” she said, a blush on her cheeks. “You don’t need to help me.”

“How about I just turn my back,” he said, handing her a shirt. “That way if you do need me, I’ll be right here.”

She studied him for a second, “Okay, but no peeking,” she said. “And don’t start telling me that you’re a doctor and have seen it all.”

“Yes, mam,” he said, turning around. “Let me know when the coast is clear.”

When he turned around, Shelby was tucked into his huge bed, looking even smaller than she was, and a warm feeling spread through his chest, followed by the instinct to protect her. But he couldn’t miss how pale her face was, the sheen of sweat covering her face and arms, and the desire that had started to grow quickly fizzled out. Crossing over to the bed, he sat down next to her and felt her forehead again, alarmed by how hot she was.

“I’m going to go get you something to drink and my medical bag. You need to take something for that fever,” he said. “Will you be okay alone for a few minutes?”

She nodded, “Thank you,” she said her eyelids heavy. “I’m just going to close my eyes for a few minutes while you’re gone.”

When he came back it looked like Shelby was asleep, but she opened her eyes and smiled at him, “That didn’t take long,” she said. “I wish it wasn’t so hot in here.”

He set the tray he’d been carrying down on the nightstand, “We’re going to see if we can do something about that in just a second,” he said. “But first, I want to poke and prod at you a little. Would that be okay?”

“Can I have a drink first?” she asked, looking over at the glass on the tray. “Is that Gatorade?”

“You need to replace some of those electrolytes you’ve been sweating out,” he said, picking up the bottle. “Do you want me to help?”

“I’ll be okay,” she said, sliding up in bed. “I’m just so tired, all I want to do is sleep.”

When she’d drained half the bottle, he took her temperature and gave her a quick physical exam. “Other than the fever, I can’t find anything wrong with you,” he said, shaking his head. “You might be fighting something off, only time will tell.”

“So, it just feels like I’m dying,” she said, managing to smile at him. “That’s good news.”

He shook a couple of pills out of the vial on the tray, “Take these, they should help,” he said, handing her a glass of water. “Then you can go back to sleep.”

“You won’t leave me, will you?” she asked, then shook her head. “I’m sorry that was pathetic; I’m sure the last thing you want to do is sit with a sick person.”

“You’re more than a sick person, Shelby,” he said. “I’ll be right here with you, and I bet you’ll wake up tomorrow feeling

much better.”

“I hope so, I hate being sick,” she said, closing her eyes.
“Maybe I just need some more sleep.”

CHAPTER 14



After a restless night, the sun woke Shelby the next morning, and for a second, she thought everything was fine, but when she opened her eyes, the sun felt like a hot knife piercing her brain. She gasped, closed her eyes again, and lay there, afraid to open them, the pounding of her heart making her head throb. Whimpering, she rolled over and buried her face in the pillow, forcing herself to take deep breaths when she began to panic.

She felt Scott stir beside her, “Shelby, what’s wrong,” he asked, gently putting his hand on her shoulder.

Pain radiated from where his fingers rested, and she sucked in a shocked breath, “Oh, that hurts where you’re touching me,” she said. “Please take your hand away.”

He pulled back, then she felt his weight shift in the bed, “Tell me what’s going on,” he coaxed. “I promise I won’t touch you again.”

She hurt too much to care if she’d upset him, “The sun is so bright, it makes my head pound,” she said. “My whole body hurts, and it’s freezing in here.”

“I’ll close the blinds,” Scott said, getting up from the bed. “Just try to stay calm.”

When he came back, she rolled over, wincing at the pain that shot through her body, but she was able to open her eyes. “I’m scared, Scott, this doesn’t feel like anything I’ve ever had before,” she said, tears sliding down her cheeks. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Your symptoms don’t match up, sweetheart,” he said. “I think we need to get you over to the hospital and run some tests.”

She nodded, her teeth chattering so much she couldn’t speak, “I’m going to give Dr. Ziegler a call,” he said, leaning down and kissing her on the forehead. “I’ll get you an extra blanket before I go; maybe that will help.”

Even burrowed under several layers, she was still cold and dreaded getting out of bed, but when Scott came back in, she put on a brave face and let him bundle her into the car. The short trip to the hospital felt like it took forever, and she was barely aware of Scott calling the bed and breakfast as she fought against the pain that seemed to be radiating from every joint in her body.

Dr. Ziegler met them in the parking lot, whisked them into the hospital and up to a private room on the second floor, then began to bark orders at the staff. Faces flashed in and out of her vision as his directions were followed, but she was aware of Scott standing next to her bed. Wishing she could reassure him, she opened her eyes and tried to smile at him, but the effort exhausted her, and she closed her eyes again with a little whimper.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been asleep when she opened her eyes the next time, but she had a catheter in her arm attached to a bag of fluids, and the blinds were drawn so the room was almost in darkness. The sound of raised voices in the corner of the room caught her attention, and she knew instantly that they were talking about her.

“We won’t know more until we get the blood tests back,” Dr. Ziegler said. “I would like to do a complete physical exam, make sure we haven’t missed anything.”

“I’ll help you,” Scott said, his voice ragged with exhaustion and worry. “There has to be something causing all this.”

“I think I’ll have Nancey come in to help,” Dr. Ziegler said, gently. “You’re too close to her, Scott. Let me be the doctor and you be the boyfriend.”

“I’m not leaving her,” Scott said stubbornly. “She needs me.”

“When was the last time you left this room?” Dr. Ziegler asked, clearly losing his patience. “It’s been hours, Scott, you know that’s not good. I want you to go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat, then take a walk and get some fresh air. I’ll update you when you get back.”

A few minutes later, Scott sat down on the bed next to her, “Hey, you’re awake,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Not so great,” she said. “Can’t you figure out what’s wrong with me?”

“We haven’t quite gotten there yet,” he said. “But I promise we’re doing everything we can, I just need you to hold on a bit longer.”

“Okay, I think I can do that,” she said, managing a smile. “Dr. Ziegler’s right; you need to get out of this room for a little while, you look exhausted.”

“I don’t want to leave you, but he’s not giving me much choice,” he said, leaning over and kissing her forehead. “I’ll be back before you know it, don’t go anywhere.”

“I don’t think that’s a risk right now,” she said. “Did you call everyone at the bed and breakfast?”

“They’ve all been here,” he said. “I think Jolene is out in the waiting room now. Do you want me to bring her back with me?”

“I’m sure they’re all worried,” she said, feeling tears prickling her eyes. “Maybe I should see her.”

“Your wish is my command,” he said, smiling at her. “I mean it, Shelby, anything you want, I’ll get it for you.”

“I just want to get better so we can have our night together,” she said, enjoying the flash of desire in his eyes. “So, you’d better take care of yourself, so you don’t end up sick too.”

“Now, how can I say no to that?” he said, giving her a quick kiss on the lips.

Scott

It was the morning of the third day of Shelby's stay in the hospital. Scott was exhausted from being pulled in two different directions and beginning to think that she wasn't going to get better. He tried not to show his worry when he popped in to see her between patients or when he settled down in the chair next to her bed for a night spent sleeping next to her. But it was getting harder and harder when every test they sent out came back negative, and options for a diagnosis became more limited.

Standing by the bed looking down at her as she slept, he did what he'd been doing for days and begged anyone who might be listening to show them the cure. He wasn't sure if it was doing any good, but at least he felt like he was doing something instead of just standing by and watching the woman he loved suffering.

When Shelby's eyes popped open a few minutes later, he knew that it was going to be a good morning, and sighed with relief. "Good morning," he said, smiling down at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad," she said, pulling herself up in bed. "My head barely hurts, and I think I might be a little hungry."

He reminded himself not to get too excited that she felt better, "Well, then I'll go see what I can do about getting you something to eat," he said, leaning over to give her a kiss. "Don't move, I'll be right back."

Shelby's symptoms seemed to come and go, the peaks and valleys impossible to predict, but he'd learned to take advantage of the high points. Wondering what would tempt her and still be easy on her stomach, he rode the elevator down to the cafeteria, hoping for some inspiration. After piling more food than she would ever be able to eat onto the tray, he took it back up to her room, pleased when she chose a bowl of oatmeal, apple juice, and a scrambled egg.

When the tray was empty, she lay back on the pillows with a sigh, "I'm full and sleepy, but in the normal kind of way,"

she said. "I think I almost forgot what it felt like to feel this way."

"I'm glad you're feeling better," he said. "Why don't you try to sleep for a little while before Dr. Ziegler comes by."

"I hate to sleep when I feel this good," she said, patting the bed next to her. "Come and sit with me, it feels like it's been forever since you touched me."

"Are you sure it won't hurt?" he asked, but sat down on the side of the bed. "You're finally feeling better, I don't want to rush it."

"Come here," she said. "I'm fine for right now, let's not waste the chance."

She was snuggled in his arms when Dr. Ziegler knocked on the door a little while later, "Well, you must be feeling better," he said when he saw them. "I'm glad because I have a surprise for you, and I'm afraid it might be a bit of a shock. It was for me, but I don't think it can wait."

"Did you figure out what's wrong with me?" Shelby asked, suddenly tense. "Is it something terrible?"

Dr. Ziegler shook his head, "It's not that kind of surprise," he said. "Why don't I just bring them in, and you'll see for yourself."

"Them?" she asked, picking up her head and looking at him. "Did he say them?"

"I think so," he said, a feeling of alarm beginning to grow inside him. "I'm just going to....."

Before he could move, Dr. Ziegler was back with an older couple, "Shelby, I'm not sure how else to do this but to just go right at it," he said. "These are your grandparents, Parker and Sophie. They were your mother's parents, and they're very worried about you."

The clock ticking was the only sound in the room for a long time, then Sophie stepped forward, "I know this is the last thing you expected to hear, but it's true, Shelby," she said. "Your grandfather and I have been close by for a long time,

although we've stayed hidden for your safety, but I think you need us now."

Shelby's face turned pale, and she looked up at him helplessly, "But how.....why....." she finally stammered, then shook her head. "I must be dreaming; this can't be real, it can't be."

"It's real, sweetheart," Scott said, pulling her a little closer. "Dr. Ziegler wouldn't let them in here if it wasn't."

She shook her head, "Oh, I think I'm going to be sick," Shelby said. "I have to get to the bathroom."

"I've got you," he said, sweeping her up off the bed and carrying her into the bathroom.

They made it just in time for all the food Shelby had eaten at breakfast to come back up, and he stood over her, holding her hair back, silently cursing Dr. Ziegler. When the storm was over, he moistened a washcloth, then knelt beside her, sponging off her neck and face. She looked so miserable it made him feel powerless, and he had to fight back a wave of anger and frustration.

"I'm okay now," she said. "Will you help me up?"

He grabbed her by the hips and lifted her off the floor, knocking her hospital gown open in the back. He reached over to close it but froze. "Dr. Ziegler," he called. "Could you come in here for a second?"

"What's wrong?" Shelby asked. "Is there something on my back?"

"How long has this been here?" he asked, turning her around so she could see in the mirror.

Shelby gasped, "I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "What does it mean?"

"It means I think I know what's wrong with you, sweetheart," he said, resisting the urge to scoop her up in his arms. "And all your symptoms make sense. If I weren't such a city boy, I would have figured it out sooner."

“Well, will you look at that,” Dr. Ziegler said from the doorway. “I haven’t seen a bullseye like that in years. Young lady, you clearly have a case of Lyme’s disease.”

CHAPTER 15



S helby threw down the magazine she'd been trying to read, too anxious for celebrity gossip and self-help articles. Looking out the window, she watched the cars coming and going from the hospital parking lot, wondering if her grandparents were in one of them, then forced herself to think about something else. Trapped in the hospital like she was, there wasn't much to entertain herself with, watching television and reading had gotten old days ago, and she wasn't a crafty type of person, so she'd spent most of the time, wandering the halls.

It was no surprise that she was bored. She was on her fifth day of antibiotics, and she felt back to normal, if still a bit weak. She'd adjusted to the presence of her grandparents, had even come to care about them over the last week as they started to get to know each other, but there had been a huge gap between them that she hoped would be filled that day. Her grandmother's refusal to tell her about her parents until she was better told her that what she'd hear wouldn't be good, but knowing the truth would finally put their ghosts to rest.

She was standing by the window looking out at the mountains, wondering if her mom had ever stood where she was, when a voice that she was coming to love broke the silence in the room. Turning from the window, a smile already spreading across her face, she found her grandparents standing in the doorway, her grandfather holding a big gift bag. Nancey came bustling in behind them and began preparing some supplies on the table by her bed.

“You’ve got a busy day ahead of you,” Nancey said, pointing to the bed. “Let me get that catheter capped off, and then you can go get dressed.”

Confused, she looked around, “Where am I going?” she asked. “I thought I had to stay here for a couple more days.”

“You do,” her grandfather said, bringing the bag over to her. “But we managed to talk that doctor of yours into letting us take you out of here for a picnic.”

“It’s time you got some fresh air and sunshine,” her grandmother declared. “Being cooped up here all the time isn’t good for you.”

Excitement surged through her, “But what about Scott?” she asked. “Does he know about this?”

“Of course, I do,” he said, coming into the room. “And I think it’s a fantastic idea, and since it’s my day off, I can join you.”

Nancey finished with her arm, “You are free to go,” she announced. “Have fun today, but don’t overdo it; you’re still recovering.”

“I’ll be good, I promise,” she said, sliding down off the bed. “Where are we going?”

“That’s a surprise,” her grandfather said. “Scott doesn’t even know.”

“There’s a reason these two have been able to stay under the radar all these years,” Scott said. “Getting anything out of them is impossible.”

Her grandmother laughed, “We’ve had years of practice,” she said. “Now let’s get moving, we’ve only been given permission to have you out for the day, and we have some driving to do.”

“I’ll go get the car while you get ready, Shelby,” her grandfather said. “I’ll meet you all around back.”

Wearing the new outfit from her grandparents, Scott’s hand firmly in hers, they followed her grandmother through the back halls of the hospital, down the stairs, and out in the bright

sunshine. She took a deep breath of the fresh air and stood with her eyes closed for a second, soaking in the sun's rays, then opened them when she heard the whine of a motor. An old Suburban pulled up to the curb in front of them, her grandfather behind the wheel, a huge grin on his face.

"This is Betsy," her grandmother said. "She's been with us for thirty years."

"This is your car?" she asked, unable to hide her surprise. "I didn't think.....I mean, I expected....."

Her grandmother laughed, "None of those stuffy sedans for us, we'll be driving Betsy until she falls apart, or we do," she said. "Now come on and get in, we've still got a long way to go."

Scott opened the back door, helped her in, then climbed in and shut the door, "It looks like we're in for an adventure," he said, grinning down at her. "Are you up for it?"

"Definitely, it feels so good to be back out in the world," she said, nodding her head. "You really don't know where we're going?"

"Not a clue," he said, shrugging his shoulders, then pulling her into his arms. "Let's just enjoy the ride and see where it leads."

She snuggled into his arms and watched out the window as they drove through town, then took the highway north deeper into the mountains, happy just to be free of the hospital for the day. An hour later, her grandfather slowed and turned off the highway onto a dirt road that began to twist and turn as they climbed higher into the peaks surrounding them. The old engine purred happily, not the least challenged by the steep roads, and she rolled down her window, sucking in deep breaths of the crisp air.

After an especially steep climb, they came to a crossroads, and Scott suddenly sat up and began to look around. "I think I know where we are," he finally said, relaxing back against his seat. "I came this way when I was looking for the town where

I was born. I don't know why we're coming up here, there's nothing left."

"Appearances can be deceiving, Scott," her grandfather said, looking at them both in the rearview mirror. "You saw what we wanted you to see."

They drove on for a few minutes, then her grandfather pulled over to the side of the road, "Scott, would you mind giving me a hand," he said. "Sophie usually helps, but since you're here....."

"Of course, I'd be happy to help," Scott said. "But what am I helping with?"

"You'll see," her grandfather said, jumping out of the Suburban.

Scott

Scott was all for a good adventure, he thought, looking around him at the piles of dead trees and almost impenetrable undergrowth, but he couldn't see where the adventure was at the moment. He started to question Parker, but the older man started wandering around up and down the side of the road as if he was looking for something, mumbling under his breath to himself and kicking at the fallen trees.

"I knew it would be bad, but I didn't think it would have completely disappeared," Parker finally said, scratching his head. "It's only been five years since we were here last to check on the place. I was sure my markers would still be visible."

Before he could ask Parker what he was talking about, Sophie jumped out of the truck, "I told you those little pieces of metal wouldn't be enough to mark the road," she said, then began thrashing her way through the undergrowth to a huge tree. "But lucky for you, there's one right here."

Above Sophie's head there was a shiny piece of metal nailed into the bark of the tree, "Well, what do you know, there it is," Parker said, shaking his head. "I forget how much these trees have grown since we planted them."

Even more confused, Scott looked over at Parker, “You planted these trees?” he asked, looking around at the dense forest around them. “Why would you plant trees out here?”

“Camouflage,” Parker said with a cheery smile. “The best way to keep something a secret is to hide it. Come and help me pull all this away.”

Parker started uncovering a large dead tree that had fallen next to the live one with the marker. Still full of questions, Scott kept his mouth shut and put his back into helping him. Soon all they had was the dead tree, and he stopped to catch his breath, not sure they could move the huge thing by themselves. Wondering if there were some chains in the Suburban that they could use to pull it out of the way, he wasn't prepared when Parker reached down and moved it aside with one hand.

It hit the ground with a funny thunk, and he realized for the first time that it looked a little strange, and looked over at Parker, who burst into laughter. “I wish I had a picture of the look on your face,” he said. “That was so worth stringing you along.”

“Is that thing hollow?” he asked. “That's the only way you could have moved it by yourself.”

“That's one of Sophie's creations,” he said, still grinning. “We used to use real trees, but they were always half rotten by the time we came back. This works much better.”

He looked around, still confused, “I must still be missing something,” he said. “What exactly are we doing here?”

Parker walked over to him, put his arm around his shoulders, and turned him away from the fake tree, “Look very carefully,” he said. “What do you see?”

It took him a second before the vague outline of a road came into focus, “It's a road,” he said, looking over at Parker. “You hid a road.”

Parker slapped him on the back, “Now you've got it,” he said. “I'm going to pull through, then I want you to swing the tree back into place. We'll cover it up when we leave.”

Sitting next to Shelby in the back seat, he took her hand and grinned at her, “You wanted an adventure,” he said. “I think you got one.”

They bumped along the overgrown road for a few miles, then climbed a steep rise and started down into a little valley with a stream running through the center. “Oh, isn’t this pretty,” Shelby said, rolling down her window and poking her head out. “Look Scott, there are some buildings down there at the bottom.”

He followed her gaze, “It looks like a little town,” he said slowly, the truth of what he was seeing finally sinking in. “I think it’s Andersonville.”

“And you would be right,” Sophie said, turning around to look at them. “The town died about twenty years ago. We just made sure that it stayed that way.”

“What are we doing here?” Shelby asked as they drove slowly past the abandoned buildings. “It’s a little spooky.”

Parker drove slowly down the only road that went through the tiny town, then pulled up in front of a three-story house with a wraparound porch and a bay window. From the peeling strips of paint, it was clear that the house had once been painted white, and in his mind, he could see a big rose bush to one side of the steps that led up to the porch.

“I remember this house,” he finally said, his mind spinning as snippets of memories came back to him. “My mother had a big rose bush on the left side of the steps. It had these big red blossoms that smelled so good, I can remember sitting on the steps, losing myself in the scent.”

“Your parents moved in here after they got married. The house was a wedding gift from your father’s parents,” Parker said. “And a way for them to keep your father under their thumb.”

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but your grandparents weren’t very nice people,” Sophie said. “They were very wealthy and powerful people who never approved of your mom. They thought she wasn’t good enough for your father

and made sure she knew it. But your parents loved each other, and they made it work for the first few years, they had you, and it seemed like everyone had settled down. Then all the troubles started, and everything went crazy. By the time it was all over, you and your mom had disappeared, and your sister was gone.”

“The town had barely been hanging on, but something changed after that day. The spirit went out of it, I guess you could say, people started leaving,” Parker said. “Eventually, even your grandparents and your father gave up and moved on. A few years later, a storm came through here and did a bunch of damage. Most of these buildings aren’t safe anymore.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, glad that Shelby’s hand was firmly locked in his, grounding him to the here and now. “Nate told me what happened, but it’s different being here, knowing this is where it all started.”

“We’ll move on when you’re ready,” Sophie said. “Take your time, there’s no hurry.”

“I think I’ve seen enough,” he said, not wanting to dwell on the past any longer. “We can go now.”

CHAPTER 16



As they left the town behind, Shelby began to question if she wanted to know what happened to her parents, wondered if it made any difference if she knew the truth. They were gone and never coming back, no amount of knowledge could change that, but she sensed this was part of the journey she was on. Looking over at Scott, she realized that he was part of the journey as well, that falling in love with him completed a circle long ago broken by the crazed rantings of one man.

Scott looked over at her and squeezed her hand, “Are you okay?” he asked. “If this is too much for you, just let me know.”

“I’m fine; even though a part of me doesn’t want to hear what they have to say, I know I need too,” she said. “Are you okay? That was intense back there.”

“As difficult as this has been, each time I hear the story, things make a bit more sense,” he said. “I wish my mom was still around so I could thank her for the sacrifices she made for me. I just hope she’s somewhere watching, that she knows how this all turned out.”

Parker brought the Suburban to a stop, and she looked out, surprised that they’d stopped, then gasped when she saw the pretty little cabin sitting on a hill right in front of them. “Welcome home,” her grandfather said, turning around to face her. “Although technically you never lived here, this is where you would have lived had things been different. Your father

built this cabin for your mother. We've kept it up, hoping that someday you'd be free to use it."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she stared at the cabin, then opened her door, "Can we go inside?" she asked. "I feel like this is as close as I'll ever get to them."

"Of course, we'll go inside," her grandmother said. "I was thinking we could have lunch on the porch."

"Is it locked?" she asked, opening her car door. "Do you have the key?"

Her grandmother laughed, "It's right here," she said, handing her a metal ring with a single key. "Take Scott with you, we'll be along in a few minutes."

She jumped out of the vehicle and started for the trail that led up to the cabin, "Hey, slow down," Scott called, catching up to her. "You're still getting better, take your time."

"But this is my parent's house," she said, then sighed and slowed down. "Okay, okay, I'm just excited, I thought this was all going to be terrible."

He took her hand, and they climbed the hill together. Then she handed over the key, knowing that her hands were shaking too much, "Here, you open it," she said. "I'm too nervous."

"It's just a cabin," Scott said, opening the door. "I don't want you to be disappointed."

She stepped through the door, then paused to let her eyes adjust to the darkness before taking a few more tentative steps into what must have been the living room and letting her eyes roam around the room. Everything was covered in a layer of dust, but the big fireplace that filled most of one wall was swept clean, and the furniture was covered by sheets yellowed with age. Tempted to throw the sheets off to see the furniture underneath, she walked around the cozy room, then saw the kitchen through the doorway.

After looking over at her shoulder at Scott, who stood watching her, she held out her hand. He took it, and together they walked around the kitchen, then down the hallway to the two bedrooms. One was decorated like a nursery, and as she

stepped inside, a feeling of sadness and loss slowly settled over her when she realized it was for her. Burying her face in Scott's chest, she rode the feelings, sure for the first time in her life that she'd been loved by her parents.

Aching deep inside, she let Scott lead her back to the kitchen, where her grandparents waited, the table piled high with food and supplies. Her grandmother was busy unpacking food but turned when she heard them approach, a look of worry on her face. Shaking her head, she rushed over and pulled Shelby into her arms, held her for a long time, then pulled back and looked at her.

"I knew this would be hard on you," she said, "but I wanted to make sure that you understood how much they loved you."

"They died because of me, didn't they?" she asked. "They died to keep me alive."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," her grandmother said. "We'll get to that part when we come to it."

"Scott, why don't you help me get us all something to drink? This stuff can wait until later," Parker said, pushing a box away. "Ladies, go make yourself comfortable on the porch, we'll be along shortly."

"Come on, you're going to love the view," her grandmother said, ushering her outside. "Your mother never got tired of looking at the mountains. That's why your father built the cabin here."

"Tell me more about them," she said. "I want to know everything."

"Oh dear, where should I start," her grandmother said, a wistful smile on her face. "Your dad moved here right after the first flood, his family was killed, and he was forced to move in with his aunt in town. He got a job in the general store, and I remember so clearly the day your mother saw him for the first time. She turned to me and told me that she was going to marry him someday."

“And she did,” Shelby said. “She must have really loved him.”

“And he loved her just as much,” her grandmother said. “They were meant to be together.”

“It’s so sad, they should have had their happily ever after,” she said. “It makes me so mad. It’s not fair, they missed out on so much. I’m just not sure love is worth it.”

“Oh, sweetheart, of course it is,” her grandmother said, pulling her into her arms. “I think what you don’t understand is that you were their happily ever after, the symbol of the love they shared. As long as you’re alive, that love lives on.”

Scott

When Scott and Parker came out onto the porch, Shelby and her grandmother were standing by the railing, looking out at the mountains. “Is everything okay out here?” he asked, setting the tray in his hands down on the table. “What a fabulous view.”

Shelby turned to him, tears in her eyes but a smile on her face, “We were just talking about happily ever after,” she said, walking over to him. “I think I may have been looking at it the wrong way.”

“Does that mean that you’re beginning to believe in them?” he asked, pulling her into his arms. “Because that sure would make everything easier.”

“I think I’m beginning to,” she said, smiling up at him. “But that doesn’t mean I want you to stop trying to convince me.”

He laughed, then leaned down and whispered, “If we didn’t have company, I’d work on it right now.”

“Hold that thought for now,” she said, a blush rising on her cheeks. “We can address it later.”

“That’s a deal,” he said. “Maybe a quick make-out session behind the bushes at the hospital before I take you back in.”

“I had something a bit more dignified in mind,” she said, laughing. “But I’ll take what I can get.”

They joined Parker and Sophie at the table, filled their glasses with tea, and munched on some snacks, the silence around them soothing. “Shelby, if you think you can handle just a little more, I think we can finish the story,” her grandmother finally said. “I know you’ve had to digest a lot already. I don’t want to push you too hard, and this is the sad part of the story, the part I’m sure you would rather not hear.”

“I have thought that it might be easier not to know,” she said. “But I don’t think it would be right. Their story needs to be told, and not just to me.”

“We’re going to pass it onto you,” Parker said. “What you do with it is up to you.”

“Thank you,” Shelby said. “I just don’t want their sacrifice to go unrecognized.”

“There are plenty of people around who still remember what they did, you just have to find them,” Sophie said, patting Shelby’s hand. “I’m sure now that the secret is out, Nate would love to talk to you about them. They were so close, knew each other all their lives. Well, not your father, Shelby, but he fit right into the group as soon as it was clear how much he loved your mother. Anyway, I think that’s why they were able to do what they did right under everyone’s noses. Of course, we knew what they were doing, and helped as much as we could, but in the end, it wasn’t quite enough.”

“The plan was simple. As soon as you were born, Nate was going to take you to Millie, and your parents were going to escape as soon as they could and pick you up there,” Parker took over. “Charlie, Nate’s brother, was going to do the same for Mary Ellen and her baby when the time came, but we didn’t count on both of them going into labor at the same time, or Scott’s dad ratting everyone out to his parents.”

“He told them the plan?” he asked, shock vibrating through his system. “He got my sister killed.”

Sophie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “I’m sorry, Scott, but it’s true,” she said. “He couldn’t stand the pressure, and was sure that they would change their minds when they saw the baby, but he was wrong. Charlie managed to get away

with her, but they chased him down, and well.....no one is sure what happened after that, but both he and the baby were found dead a few days later.”

“Nate was devastated and blamed himself for not trading places with him,” Parker said. “It took a long time and Shelby growing up healthy and happy for him to forgive himself.”

“And my parents?” she asked. “Did they get away?”

“It took a couple of days for us to find out that they’d been chased through the mountains that night, their car ran off a cliff, and they were both killed instantly,” Sophie said, tears in her eyes. “We could never prove that the clan was responsible and finally gave up trying. We knew that you were safe and that we could lead them to you, so we packed up and left. When we came back the town was gone, and that’s when we put together the plan to make it stay that way.”

There was a long silence, and he was surprised when anger rose to the surface over all the other emotions he was feeling. “I’d like to make someone pay for what happened back then, but I’m not sure where to start,” he said. “But my father and grandparents are at the top of the list.”

“That’s the problem with revenge, you’ll never know where to stop,” Parker said, then looked over at Sophie. “We’ve been talking about the man who showed up at the box dinner, and well.....it sounds a great deal like your grandfather, Scott.”

“You think they’re coming after Shelby,” he said, the anger growing and waking up his magic. “We’re not just going to sit around and wait for that to happen, not if we know who they are. I won’t let them hurt anyone else I love.”

Shelby’s head whipped around, “You love me?” she asked, a mixture of shock and pleasure on her face. “Never mind, I’m sure that’s not the way you meant it.”

His anger instantly melted away, his body filled with a familiar warmth, and he couldn’t help but smile at her, “No, that’s exactly what I meant to say,” he said, shrugging his

shoulders like it was no big deal. “I’m falling in love with you, Shelby.”

“That’s it, you’re just going to say it like that,” she demanded, then pretended to pout. “I was hoping for a big moment, you know, flowers and chocolates, a big flowery speech.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t think you were the kind of girl who liked those kinds of things,” he said, a little grin on his face. “But I’ll remember that for the next time something big like that comes up.”

Shelby gave him a shove, “I don’t know why I almost love you,” she said, then burst out laughing at the look on his face. “Two can play at that game.”

CHAPTER 17



Shelby looked around the hospital room, wondering when it had started to feel like home, then dismissed the thought and made a circuit of the room to make sure she hadn't missed anything. She'd spent the entire morning making rounds of the hospital, rehoming all the books, magazines, and plants that she'd accumulated during her stay, then distributed the thank-you gifts for the staff that she'd had Scott pick up for her.

She was more than ready to go home, the white walls of her room a sight she'd prefer never to see again, but there was still one person she had to talk to before Scott came to pick her up. Nancey had been scarce since she'd come back from the trip to Andersonville, and she wasn't sure why, only that it still felt like a little piece of the puzzle was missing. It wouldn't be hard to find her when she left the hospital if that's what it took, but a strange sense of urgency had her watching the door, hoping Nancey would walk in.

A few minutes later, she was standing in front of the mirror, running a brush through her hair, when there was a knock on the door, and Nancey poked her head in. "Well, look at you, up and dressed, all ready to go home," she said. "You had us all scared there for a while."

She looked at Nancey in the mirror, "I was a little scared myself, but I'm feeling much better now, so all is well that ends well," she said, then turned to face her. "Nancey, my grandparents told me that you were best friends with my mom. I don't suppose you feel like talking about her. I know it's

painful, and you don't have to if you don't want to, but I'd love to know more about her."

Nancey smiled at her, "I've been waiting for years to tell you about your mother," she said, taking the brush from her hand. "Let's sit down for a few minutes."

She sank into a chair, and Nancey came up behind her and began running the brush through the tangles. "Your mom had hair just this color; you look a lot like her, except for your eyes," she said. "Those are your dad's; he had the most beautiful eyes. Your mom always said it was his eyes that got to her first."

"They sound wonderful," she said. "I wish I'd gotten a chance to know them."

Nancey was quiet for a second, "Me too," she finally said, then hesitated. "They would have both been proud of you, and they would have been happy to see you and Scott together."

"Do you think so?" she asked. "I hope so, because I'm falling in love with him if I'm not already. I've never been in love, so, I'm not sure."

"Oh, honey, you'll know when it happens, especially with a passion like the one you and Scott share," Nancey said, her voice wistful. "It's one of the best and worst things that can happen to you, just like having kids, or at least that's what I hear."

She turned around to look at Nancey, then took the brush from her hands, "You're in love with someone," she said, getting to her feet. "Who is it?"

"None of your business," Nancey said. "It doesn't concern you, I'm here where I need to be. That's all we're going to say about it."

"You're not with him because of me," she said, shocked at first, then angry. "Nancey, that's not right, you can't stop living your life because of me, especially not now that everything is out in the open."

"We're happy with how things are," Nancey said, suddenly unsure of herself. "At least, I thought we were until lately."

She put her hands on her hips, “You cannot say something like that and then not explain,” she said. “Come on, spill it.”

When Nancey left the room, they were both smiling, and she was almost positive there would be a wedding in the future. Bubbling over with happiness, she checked the room once more to make sure she hadn’t left anything behind, then looked up at the clock, disappointed there was still an hour to go before she could leave. Grabbing the only book that she hadn’t given away, she sank down into the chair by the window and started to read, forcing herself to be patient.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door, but no one came in, “Come in,” she called. “I’m decent if you are.”

The door swung open and a man dressed in scrubs came into the room pushing a wheelchair, “I’m sorry to bother you,” the man said, clearly embarrassed. “But Dr. Ziegler ordered a few more tests before you go home. I’m here to take you down to the lab.”

“More tests?” she asked. “I don’t remember him saying anything about that.”

The man shrugged, then looked down at the chart he was carrying, “You’re Shelby Dennison, right?” he asked. “It says here we’ve got to draw some blood.”

“Do I have to ride in that thing?” she asked. “I’m perfectly capable of walking.”

“Sorry, it’s hospital policy,” the man said, shrugging his shoulders again. “Nothing I can do about it.”

With a sigh, she sat down, “Fine, I’m sorry to be such a grump, I just thought I was done with all of this,” she said. “I’ll be nice, I promise.”

“No problem,” the man said, wheeling her out into the hallway. “Just hold on.”

He turned the wheelchair in the wrong direction, but before she could say anything, a smelly cloth was suddenly over her mouth and when she took a deep breath to scream, a foul odor filled her lungs. Coughing and gasping, she only managed to suck more of the fumes into her chest, and only a

second later, her vision began to swim, then the world went dark.

Scott

Scott set the tray of food down, then collapsed into the chair and sat staring out of the cafeteria window for a few minutes, trying to find enough energy to eat, every muscle in his body aching with exhaustion. It had been too long since he'd had a real meal, knew that his body needed fuel, so he forced himself to pick up the fork and take a bite of the food, then another and another until he felt his hunger beginning to emerge.

After taking a long drink of water, he sat back for a second to let the food settle, already feeling better, then went back to eating. He looked up at the clock on the wall, a surge of excitement shooting through him when he saw that there were only a few minutes before he could take Shelby home. Hurrying through the rest of his lunch, he wondered which of the two of them were in worse shape, then decided it was probably him. Three days on call had taken its toll on him. He was desperate for some sleep and hoped that Shelby would understand when the first thing he wanted to do was take a nap.

Visions of what they might do after that nap popped into his head, and a rush of desire pushed the exhaustion aside, making him smile and shake his head. "Good afternoon, Dr. Dempsey," a male voice said, pulling him back to the cafeteria. "I wonder if I could have a few minutes of your Dempsey time?"

He looked up to find the man from the box dinner standing next to the table. His magic flared to life, instantly sending waves of distrust flowing through him, and he started to get to his feet. But the man quickly sat down across from him and pushed him back down into the chair.

"Let's not create a scene," the man said. "Listen to what I have to say before you do something that you'll regret."

"Who are you?" he asked, easing back in his seat but doing nothing about the magic that was humming through his blood.

“I’m not listening to anything you have to say until you tell me.”

“Oh, I think you already know,” the man said. “I have to tell you it was a pleasant surprise to discover you here. Your mother did a good job of convincing everyone that the two of you were dead. I thought I was coming to town to bring home one wayward member of the clan, not two, but I’m overjoyed to have you coming home, and your grandmother is going to be so pleased.”

He stared at his grandfather for several long seconds, his mind turning over the reality of the situation, and a sick feeling began to grow deep inside him when he realized that he was related to the monster sitting across from him. Reminding himself that he had just as much of his mother inside him, he leaned over, locking eyes with his grandfather, ignoring the feeling of evil that slowly crept over him.

“You’re wasting your time coming here; the last place I’m going is anywhere with you,” he hissed. “You killed my sister and would have done the same to my mother if you’d had the chance. That sure doesn’t say loving family to me.”

His grandfather sat back in his chair, a look of annoyance on his face, “It’s not for you to question the decisions of your elders,” he said. “You will come to us and bring the woman with you. This is not a request, it’s an order.”

“And if I refuse?” he asked. “Will you bring the wrath of your mighty clan down on us?”

“I’d advise you to show some more respect, I could crush you in a second if I chose to. The woman belongs to us, and so do you,” his grandfather growled at him. “It would be so much easier to do this the easy way, and if you agree, I can arrange it so that the woman will be yours. If you chose to make this difficult, well.....I can’t guarantee who she’ll end up with, it matters little to me. We just need her to produce offspring to keep the clan alive.”

He didn’t dare move, couldn’t guarantee that he would be able to control the animal inside him, “I see,” he said, finally said. “I think I’ve heard enough. As you can see, I’m not

exactly thrilled by your offer, and I can't imagine Shelby being either, so I think we'll both take a pass."

His grandfather sighed, "I was afraid it would come down to this. I just want you to remember that I tried to play nice. Everything that happens from now on is your own fault," he said, getting to his feet. "I do hope the little lady is okay up there in her room all alone; it would be terrible if something happened to her before she even left the hospital."

He was on his feet instantly and running out of the cafeteria, the sound of his grandfather's laughter following him out the door, his phone already halfway out of his pocket. Punching the number for Shelby's room, he listened to it ring as he took the stairs two at a time, the sick feeling in his stomach back. He burst through the door onto the third floor and ran for the nurses' station, alarmed when he found it deserted, then bolted for Shelby's room, starting to panic when he found it empty as well.

Nancey walked in behind him only a second later, "Where's Shelby? I thought she'd be ready to go home," she said. "There's no one at the desk either."

"Shelby is gone, my grandfather has her," he said. "Don't ask me to explain, just put out the alarm. They can't have gotten far; I still have time to go after them."

CHAPTER 18



Shelby woke with a splitting headache, her stomach rolling dangerously. She thought she was sick again for a second, but the sound of tires on the road broke through the panic. It all came back to her then, the man with the wheelchair, the sudden urge to run, the smelly rag over her face, then the darkness. Opening her eyes just enough to look around, she almost cried out when she saw the older man from the box dinner sitting in the passenger seat.

Forcing her brain to work it all out even though her head was still pounding, she came to the surprising realization that she'd been kidnapped, and had to force back a bark of laughter. It was a pathetic and desperate attempt by her old clan to get what they wanted, but she knew they had little hope of succeeding, and decided to let it play out for a while before she found a way to escape. Oddly calm considering her circumstances, she lay with her eyes closed, counting the miles they traveled, imagining everyone back home mounting a rescue.

When the car finally came to a stop, she pretended to wake up, "What's going on?" she asked, filling her voice with fear and shrinking back against the door. "Who are you?"

"It's okay, my dear, we're not going to hurt you. Let me introduce myself, since I didn't have the opportunity to the last time we met," the older man said. "I'm Lance Dempsey, and I've come to take you home. We've been looking for you for a long time, Shelby. Everyone is so excited to have you back.

I'm sorry if we've scared you, but you have to understand, there was really no other way."

She could only stare at him for a second, his view of reality so skewed it took a second to realize that he was serious, "Did you ever consider asking me if I wanted to come with you?" she finally asked. "That sure seems like it would have been a lot simpler than all of this."

"That's true, but I couldn't take the risk that you'd say no," he said. "This way I have a little insurance that you'll do as asked."

"And if I don't?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "You might as well spell it all out now, because you were right, I don't want to go anywhere with you."

"I'm afraid it's a bit soon for that," he said. "There are still a few issues that have to be worked out before I'll decide your fate. You might be interested to know that I've offered you to my grandson if he joins us. He didn't seem particularly excited about the idea. In fact, he made it very clear that neither of you were interested, but now.....well, he might see the wisdom of changing his mind. However, I do have to warn you, if he becomes too resistant, I'll just give you to someone else. I'm sure there are plenty of shifters in the clan who would love to have you. We seem to have an overabundance of men."

"Wow, I wonder why?" she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Oh, that's right, you killed off half your female population and drove the other half away."

She could see that she'd finally managed to make him angry, "Get her out of my sight," he said, through clenched teeth. "Lock her in the bedroom and don't let her out."

Shelby lay on the bed, conserving her strength even though she felt like pacing the floor. Getting out of the car had seemed like the first step to escaping, but now she had an even bigger hurdle. The little bedroom they'd thrown her into didn't have a single window, and even in her wolf form, she wouldn't be able to break through the wall, so she was trapped again. Staring at the four walls wasn't helping, so she closed her eyes, cleared her mind, and only seconds later, the answer

came to her. There was one room in the house that was guaranteed to have a window.

Getting out of bed, she walked over to the door and started banging on it, “Hey, I have to pee,” she called. “I really have to go, it’s an emergency.”

A big fist hit the door, “Shut up in there,” one of the men yelled. “The boss is trying to sleep, so you’ll just have to hold it.”

“Oh, please, I can’t hold it. I’ve already been holding it forever,” she called. “I’m going to pee my pants, and then you’re going to be in trouble.”

There was a whispered conversation on the other side of the door, then it was abruptly pulled open. “Okay, but you’d better hurry,” the man said, yanking her out of the room by the arm, “and one of us is going in there with you.”

She started fighting to get away, “No way, you can’t come in with me,” she said, shaking her head. “I’d rather pee my pants, and I will if that’s the only option.”

“Just let her go in there and pee,” one of the men said. “If she wakes Mr. Dempsey up, we’ll both be dead.”

“Fine, get in there, but if you’re not out in two minutes, I’m coming in,” the other man said, giving her a shove toward the bathroom. “Your time starts now.”

She slipped into the bathroom but didn’t bother to lock the door. Instead, she went right for the window, sending out a silent prayer to the universe that she could get it open. When she gave it a tug, it slid up without a sound, and a gust of fresh air hit her in the face, filling her with relief, but before she could jump through, a fist started pounding on the door.

“You’ve got one minute left,” the man called. “Sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight.....”

“I’m almost done, please don’t come in,” she called, then reached over and flushed the toilet. “I just have to wash my hands.”

Over the noise of the water, she flipped the lock on the door, then raced back to the window, took a deep breath, and called on the magic that flowed through her blood. Only a second later, she was diving out the window. The animal inside her was released as she landed on the ground, shook her head, then all that could be seen was a streak of red as she disappeared into the shadows of trees.

Scott

“Scott, you can’t just go running off without a plan,” Nancey said, pulling him to a stop. “Are you sure your grandfather has her?”

“He and I just had a little reunion down in the cafeteria, he offered me a place in his clan and Shelby as my mate, but I turned him down,” he said. “I know he’s got her; he’s planning on.....I can’t even say it.....I have to go after her.”

“We’re all going to go after her, Scott,” Nancey said, her voice hard. “But we’re going to do it the right way. They could have gone any direction out of town; we have no idea where she is.”

“Oh, yes we do,” Sophie said, walking into the room, Parker right behind her. “Just give me a second, and I’ll tell you.”

“You heard?” he asked. “I’m going after her.”

“We could hear you the second we stepped off the elevator,” Parker said, slapping him on the back. “Steady, there, Scott, my wife is brilliant as well as beautiful.”

“How can you be so calm?” he asked, shaking his head. “Shelby is out there somewhere. Terrible things could be happening to her already, you didn’t hear what my grandfather said.”

“I can just imagine,” Parker said. “But I think he’s going to try and reel you in first. It would be quite the prize to bring you both home with him. He’s using Shelby against you, don’t play into his game, he’s not going to do anything to her until he’s sure that you’re out of reach. That gives us some time.”

He took a deep breath, Parker's calm assurance melting away some of the fear and panic, "I guess you're right," he said. "But how are we ever going to find her?"

Sophie was tapping away on her phone as if her missing granddaughter wasn't that interesting, and he felt his temper rising. "Oh, she's wearing the earrings, that's wonderful," Sophie said, just as a pinging sound erupted from the phone. "I've got her, they're on their way out of town on the highway."

"What?" he asked, the pinging sound making him want to shout. "What is that noise?"

"That noise is Shelby," Sophie said, turning her phone around. "I thought it might be wise to put some trackers in her clothes and jewelry. I was going to tell Shelby about it this afternoon."

He grabbed Sophie and gave her a huge hug, "You are brilliant," he said. "Can I take that with me?"

Sophie handed the phone over, then pulled a little envelope out of her purse, "This isn't very manly, but if you wear it, we'll be able to track you too," she said, pulling out a gold chain and slipping it over his head. "Go find our granddaughter, Scott. We'll be right behind you. Don't forget about the cabin up in Andersonville, head there if you can."

"There's a satellite phone in the kitchen, call us when you get there," Parker said. "Now go, bring her back to us."

Sophie's phone jammed into his pocket, he raced out of the hospital, jumped in his car, started it up, then raced out of the parking lot, his tires squealing when he floored it. Forced to slow down when he hit Main Street, he dug the phone out and put it on the seat next to him, cursing when he saw that he was going the wrong way. Turning the wheel and pressing the gas, he swung the car around until it was facing the other direction, ignoring the honks of the other drivers, then floored it and began weaving his way through traffic.

He was flying down the highway only a few minutes later, ignoring the posted speed limit, his eyes darting from the road

to the phone on the seat, determined to close the distance between him and the dot on the screen. As if the way had been cleared for him, there was no traffic on the highway, and he ate up the miles in seconds instead of minutes, and he'd almost caught up when the dot suddenly changed direction and headed deeper into the mountains.

Forced to slow down to look for the turn they'd taken, he started searching the side of the road until a dirt road came into view and he twisted the wheel, tipping the car up onto two wheels for just a second. When the tires gripped the road again, he floored it, sending up a cloud of dust and gravel flying behind him. After a couple of bone-jarring jolts when he hit huge potholes in the road, he slowed down, but had managed to gain significantly on the car in front of him.

When the dot stopped moving, he drove on just a little more, then pulled over into the trees and shut the car off. He got out of the car, and looked around him, then after one more look at the phone, let his magic flare. Only a second later he was no longer human, but a fierce predator, and his only thought was to protect his mate. Flying through the trees, his instincts no longer just human, he lifted his nose into the air, and followed the scent of the woman he loved.

The cabin seemed to appear out of nowhere, tucked back at the end of the road, and he came to a halt in the shadow of a huge pine tree, his chest heaving, the urge to kill suddenly rising inside him. Sinking down to the ground, he began to slowly circle the cabin looking for a way in for man or beast, forcing himself not to think about what might be going on inside.

He was so focused on the cabin he almost missed the snap of a branch in the woods behind him, but he heard the second one loud and clear. Dropping down onto the spongy ground, he lay perfectly still, his senses alive, until a third snap let him zero in on where the sound was coming from. On his feet again, sticking to the shadows, he zipped through the trees, gathering his magic around him in anticipation of a fight.

CHAPTER 19



S helby knew that the men must be right behind her, the open window would have been too obvious even for them, but she wasn't about to stop; she knew that her only hope was to put as many miles between them as possible. Sticking to the shadows of the late afternoon sun was easier than not making any noise, and she found herself blundering a bit as she ran. Each snap of a branch or flight of birds made her wince, but she kept going, determined to get away or at least give her rescuers time to get to her.

She was just beginning to think she'd given the men the slip when she caught a slight movement behind her, then the flash of grey fur. Her heart beginning to pound, she slipped into an especially deep pool of shade, dropped onto her belly, and waited until the wolf who'd been following her appeared. Her first thought was to stay hidden and hope that the wolf moved on, then flee in the other direction. She wasn't a fighter, especially when she was all alone.

But watching the wolf, she realized that he would find her eventually, and before she could question the decision, she sprang out of the shadows, teeth bared and snarling. The wolf froze, momentarily surprised by her sudden appearance, and not willing to miss the slight advantage, she sprung at the wolf, sending it tumbling across the forest floor. It let out a surprised howl of pain, then sprang back to its feet, and braced itself to attack, but then their eyes met.

Almost instantly, she recognized the hazel eyes locked on hers, and a wave of warmth that only Scott could cause rushed

through her, and she began to relax until she saw that he was still poised to attack. Body still tense, his muscles twitching, Scott stared at her his eyes filled with confusion, and she knew she had to do something quickly. It only took a few seconds to figure out the solution and a few more to calm her magic enough that her human form took over again.

The confusion in his eyes slipped away, replaced by surprise, then relief, before the air around him began to shimmer and the wolf disappeared. Scott held his arms out to her, she ran to him, threw herself at him, and held on until he pulled back and looked down at her. In the far distance she could hear the two men yelling loudly to each other, but right at the moment, she couldn't have moved if they'd been only a few feet away. For the first time, she allowed herself to be scared, to think about what would have happened if she hadn't gotten away.

Knowing there wasn't time to indulge in her fears, she took a deep breath, pushed them away, and looked up at him. "You didn't tell me.....I mean I knew that Erin could shift.....but you're....." he stammered, a look of astonishment on his face. "You're the most beautiful wolf I've ever seen."

Laughter bubbled up, she couldn't help herself, "We can all shift, Scott, I thought you knew," she said, still grinning. "I wish I had a picture of the look on your face."

A shout behind them, this time closer, rang through the forest, "I think this discussion had better wait," he said, shaking his head. "We're supposed to head for the cabin in Andersonville, we're about halfway there. Do you think you can find the way from here or do we need to go back for the car?"

"We're south of town then?" she asked, looking around them. "If we are, then we'd be better off going on from here, but we need to lose those guys. I don't want them following us all the way there."

"Then we'd better get moving," he said, stepping back from her. "I'll follow you since you know where you're going,

but if you get tired don't be afraid to stop.”

She reached up and kissed him, “Just try and keep up with me,” she said, then let her magic begin to flow.

Only a heartbeat later they were flying through the darkening forest, the red wolf in the lead, leaving the two men far behind. Shelby pushed them hard, enjoying the power that flowed through her, her instincts guiding her through the mountains that had been her home for her entire life. Their powerful legs ate up the miles as they cut across streams, climbed steep slopes, and sped through beautiful little valleys until they finally reached the deserted town just as the sun was beginning to set.

Stopping in the trees on the outside of town, Shelby sank down into the undergrowth and studied the dark buildings, then lifted her nose into the air. Satisfied that they were the only ones there, she looked over at Scott. He nodded his head, and they crept slowly out of the trees together. It was eerie walking down the empty street as the sun set behind the mountains, and a little shiver ran down her spine as she imagined the ghosts that could be hovering just out of sight in the dilapidated buildings they passed.

When they reached the end of the street, he paused in front of his parent's house and stood staring at it for a few seconds, before turning away and urging her on with a nudge of his head. Realizing that she wasn't the only one thinking about ghosts, they pushed on, taking the winding road up to the cabin at a comfortable lope, their eyes penetrating the darkness as if it was still broad daylight. Relief poured through her at the sight of the little cabin, and she stopped at the bottom of the stairs with a satisfied huff, thinking that she'd finally come home.

It was such a strange feeling that she stood looking up at the front door for several seconds before letting her magic slowly fade, taking the red wolf with it. She felt Scott shift next to her, and she reached out to take his hand as they climbed the stairs. Pausing before opening the door, she looked over at Scott, the feeling that nothing would ever be the

same once she did, settling over her, then understood why, and smiled up at him.

“I think we’re exactly where we’re supposed to be,” she said, turning the door knob and letting the door swing open. “It’s been here waiting for us all this time.”

Scott

Scott followed Shelby into the cabin, then pulled her into his arms and held her for a long time, trying to sort through all his emotions. Finding the panic and fear, he swept them away with the memory of her sending him flying across the forest, a little smile breaking out on his face. That left him with the shock and surprise of discovering that she didn’t just carry shifter blood, she was a shifter, which quickly turned to desire so powerful it took his breath away.

He finally pulled back and looked down at her, “I didn’t think I could want you more than I did before, but I was wrong,” he said, then lowered his mouth to hers, the instinct too powerful to resist.

She melted into his arms with a sigh, opening her mouth to him and wrapping her arms around his neck, then kissed him back with an abandon he’d never felt before. A thrill shot through him, not just because Shelby was pressing her breasts against his chest as her nipples hardened or because she was purring with pleasure as he kissed her. He knew in that moment that what they shared was real, he understood that Shelby was his, and he was hers, that the love they shared would last a lifetime.

A gust of wind from the open door reminded him they hadn’t even shut the door, and he reluctantly ended the kiss, and gently let her go. “Maybe we should get settled,” he managed to say, the urge to sweep her back into his arms almost overwhelming. “I’ll see about getting a fire started, maybe you could see if there are any candles.”

Shelby stared at him for a second, then walked over to him and took his hand, “That can all wait. This can’t, we’ve already waited too long. I’m not taking the chance that someone will show up here to rescue us,” she said, pulling him

down the hallway and into the bedroom. “I want you, Scott, I have since that day we met at the hospital, and I can’t think of a better place than here for you to make love to me for the first time.”

Without a word, he walked over to the bed and slipped the dust cover off, revealing a bright-colored handmade quilt, then turned back to Shelby and pulled her into his arms. His mouth came down on hers in a possessive kiss that swept them both away as the passion between them burst fully to life, the magic running through their veins only making it burn that much hotter.

When he finally let her go, they were both breathless with desire, the air around them crackling with energy, but he paused to look into Shelby’s eyes. “I want you too, Shelby, I’ve wanted you since the first time I saw you,” he said, stroking her cheek with his thumb. “But I think you should know that this isn’t just about tonight or tomorrow or the next day for me, this is about forever.”

“Forever sounds pretty good to me,” Shelby said, slipping her shirt over her head. “But if you don’t mind, maybe we could discuss that later, I have a few other things on my mind right now.”

Before he could answer, she flipped open the button on her jeans, slowly unzipped them, then slid them down her hips and stepped out of them. A growl escaped from his chest when he saw the matching lace bra and panties, and his hands itched to cup her full breasts in his hands, but he didn’t move as she approached him. She ran her hands up and down his chest, then unbuttoned his shirt and shoved it off onto the floor before stripping off his pants.

Unable to resist any longer, he pulled her into his arms and captured her mouth with a searing kiss while his hands roamed over her body, finally focusing on her breasts. He toyed with the swollen lobes, his body beginning to throb with need, teased her nipples with his thumb and finger until she was trembling in his arms, then scooped her up and threw her down on the bed.

He stripped the scraps of lace off her body with a flick of his wrist, then stood over her, letting his eyes drink in her luscious curves until the need to touch her, to feel her writhing with pleasure beneath him became too much. Sinking down next to her, his hand found her breast and she gasped, then began to purr deep in her throat when he sucked the hard nipple into his mouth. He teased the stiff peak with his teeth and tongue before switching to the other breast while his hand trailed down her stomach between her legs.

He gently pushed them apart, then slipped his finger between her folds to find her hot and slick, making his body begin to throb even harder as need rocketed through him. Growling deep in his throat, determined to have Shelby begging him, he began to stroke her swollen pleasure button, making her gasp and spread her legs wider. He took her higher and higher until, crying his name, she tumbled over the edge, her entire body trembling and bucking. A wave of pleasure washed through him, quickly followed by the overwhelming drive to claim Shelby in the most primal way, and he slipped between her legs.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, “Please Scott, I need you,” she whimpered, lifting her hips to him. “Take me now, I need you inside me.”

“You’re mine from this night on, Shelby,” he said, grabbing her by the hips and driving himself deep inside her. “You belong to me now and forever.”

Eyes still locked on his, she gasped, then moaned as he moved inside her, pulling back then gently sliding into her again, “Say it, sweetheart,” he encouraged. “Tell me who you belong to.”

He pulled out of her and waited, “I’m yours, Scott, oh please, I’m yours,” she panted. “Now and forever, I’ll always be yours.”

With one powerful thrust of his hips, he buried himself inside her, and she cried out with pleasure as the connection between them became deeper than just physical, robbing him of his control. Pleasure thundered through him, his and

Shelby's, as he drove himself into her again and again, taking them both soaring higher and higher, until they tumbled over the edge together, her body clenching him tightly deep inside. Long minutes passed as they floated on a cloud of pure sensation before coming slowly back to Earth, unaware that the air around was glimmering with magic.

CHAPTER 20



S helby surfaced from a haze of pleasure, Scott's hard body pressing her into the mattress, and opened her eyes to find the bedroom with shimmering light. "Ummm..... Scott, maybe you should look above our heads," she said. "I've never seen anything like it."

He rolled over, severing the connection between them, and the glow instantly began to fade, "Well, will you look at that," he said. "Our own little light show."

"Did we do that?" she asked, turning her head to look over at him, still not sure she could move. "I mean, is that even a thing?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to take it as a good sign," he said, rolling over and leaning up on one elbow to look down at her. "But if you want to know for sure, I can think of a few ways to test out the theory."

When his hand started to creep down her stomach, she gasped, "Scott, we just.....I mean.....you can't possibly....." her words trailed off when his finger found its target.

He laughed, "Sweetheart, I haven't even gotten started," he said, grabbing her by the hips and lifting her on top of him. "And now that we have a mystery to solve, I believe we should proceed at once."

When he slipped inside her, his manhood already throbbing, she forgot what they were talking about, and when he began to thrust his hips, she forgot about everything but

him and the pleasure coursing through her. Much later, their limbs intertwined, they watched the sparks in the air fade silently away again, then looked at each other and started laughing.

“One of these days, we might cause a fire if we’re not careful,” he said. “We’re going to have to be very careful because it would be a shame to burn the bed and breakfast or my house down.”

She laughed, then sat up in a panic, “Oh, no, they’re all probably worried about us, and we’re.....” she stammered, then started to get out of bed. “We have to find a way to let them know that we’re okay.”

“Hey, slow down a second,” he said, pulling her back onto the bed. “This necklace and those earrings that you’re wearing have a tracking device in them, compliments of your grandmother. That’s how I found you. She was going to tell you, but she didn’t get a chance.”

“So, they know we’re here?” she asked, letting out a relieved breath when he nodded his head. “Then we can wait until tomorrow morning to find a way back to Hogan Falls.”

“We won’t even have to do that,” he said, grinning at her. “Your grandparents left a satellite phone behind when we were here a few days ago; if we’re lucky, it’s still charged.”

She was out of bed and scrambling for her clothes before he could stop her this time, “We have to go call them. I’m sure they’re all worried,” she said, holding up her jeans and shirt. “Where are my bra and panties?”

He grabbed them off the floor, “Right here,” he said, holding them up. “But I don’t think I’m going to give them back.”

“I can’t get dressed without them,” she said, putting her hands on her hips.

“That was my plan,” he said, grinning at her. “But I might be willing to make a compromise; you can wear my shirt.”

She plucked it up off the floor and slid it over her head, then picked up his jeans and threw them at him, “Put those on

and let's go find that phone," she said. "And I'm starving; I hope there's some food in the kitchen."

Louisa picked up on the first ring, "Shelby, is that you?"

"It's me, and before you ask, we're perfectly fine," she said. "I escaped, and Scott found me a little while later. We made it to the cabin, and I'm pretty sure we weren't followed."

"Well, that's a relief," Louisa said. "By the time we got to the cabin, no one was there, but I don't think Scott's grandfather drove himself away, so I'm betting they left to regroup. They're going to come looking for you here, so for now, we want the two of you to stay there until we come up with a plan."

"Is everything okay there?" she asked. "Are my grandparents there?"

"We're right here, honey," her grandmother said. "We've been waiting for you to call. I'm glad that you're okay."

"There's plenty of food there to keep you fed for the next few days," her grandfather said. "You're a brave, resourceful woman, Shelby, and we're both very proud of you. We'll get this figured out; I promise."

"I know we will," she said, her eyes full of tears. "And then I'll finally be free."

Scott came up and put his arms around her from behind, and she leaned into him, comforted by just his presence, "I think we all need to get some sleep, the three of you have me all weepy," Louisa said, her voice husky with emotion. "I called a meeting of the leadership council and the guardians for tomorrow morning. If there was any doubt that the clan should get involved, I don't think there is any longer. Keep in touch, and I'll do the same."

Shelby disconnected the call, shut off the phone before putting it back in the case, then turned in Scott's arms and looked up at him. "The clan isn't going to let your grandfather get away with coming into our territory and kidnapping me," she said. "I can't say for sure that there will be bloodshed, but it may come to that, and I'll understand if you don't want to be

involved. Good or bad, he's your grandfather, your blood, and I know that you've sworn an oath to preserve life. I wouldn't expect you to break that oath, not even for me."

Scott looked down at her, his eyes brimming with emotion, "And that's just one of the reasons why I love you," he said. "But that oath I made doesn't cover evil grandfathers trying to kidnap the love of my life. I'll do whatever it takes to protect you, Shelby, even if that means spilling my own family's blood."

"Oh, Scott, I love you too," she said, throwing herself into his arms. "So much that sometimes it scares me."

"Well, you just let me know when you get scared, and I'll make it my personal mission to remind you how perfect we are together," he said, grinning at her. "Actually, now that I think about it, now might be a good time to remind you as well. Why wait until you're scared?"

When he scooped her up in his arms, she let out a yelp of surprise, then started laughing, "Have I mentioned that I have a terrible memory," she said. "You might have to remind me a lot."

Scott

Scott put the coffee pot back on the hot stove, then opened the door and poked around at the dying embers of his cooking fire, unable to hold back the burst of pride as he surveyed the kitchen. The biscuits rested on a baking sheet in the middle of the table, glistening slices of ham resting beside them, while a brightly colored bowl of peaches and a jar of jam rounded out the offerings. His stomach began to growl at the thought of food. Grabbing the two cups he'd filled with strong hot coffee; he headed back to the bedroom and gently pushed the door open with his foot.

Shelby was still sound asleep, her red hair spilling across the pillow. When he walked into the room, he almost abandoned his plans for the day and climbed back into bed with her. But he pushed away the desire, sat down on the edge of the bed, and waved the coffee under her nose, laughing when her eyes popped open with excitement.

“You made coffee,” she said, sitting up in bed and pushing her hair back from her face. “You are the most wonderful man in the world.”

“Wow, all it took was a cup of coffee,” he said, handing it to her. “I wonder what you’re going to say when you find out I made breakfast too.”

“Coffee and food, now I know I’m in heaven,” she said, pushing back the covers. “Lead the way, I’m starving. You didn’t let me eat last night.”

He got up and pulled her bra and panties out of the nightstand’s drawer by the bed, “You might want these now,” he said, holding them up in front of her. “We’re going exploring after breakfast, and I don’t think you want to wear my shirt.”

She grabbed them out of his hand, a blush spreading across her cheeks, “Exploring?” she asked, slipping out of bed. “Where?”

“I’d like to see where they all lived. Nate said it was a couple of miles outside of town,” Scott said. “It can’t be much further up the road. I guess I’m just curious; I mean, if things had been different, you and I would have grown up here.”

Shelby paused with her shirt halfway on, then finished pulling it over her head, “I didn’t think about that,” she said, then studied him for a second. “We would have known each other our entire lives. Now I feel even more cheated than I did before.”

“All it means is that we have some time to make up for,” he said, grinning at her. “And I can think of a few ways.....”

“Don’t you start,” she said. “Get out of here and let me get dressed; now you have me curious too.”

After breakfast, they scavenged through the cabinets and filled an old picnic basket with food, added the phone and a jug of water from the hand pump in the kitchen, then set off down the road. It was a beautiful day, the sky a bright shade of blue, marred only by the white puffy clouds that floated lazily

over their heads, and for a few minutes he shut off his brain, just enjoying the moment.

After an especially steep climb, they came to the top of a rise, and a small clearing opened out before them. He paused to catch his breath, then noticed that the road had disappeared. “Oh, Scott, I think we’re here,” Shelby said, pointing to the trees around the clearing. “Look over there, I can see a cabin through the trees.”

He looked where she was pointing, then set down the basket and looked around, “There’s another one over there,” he said, pointing in the other direction. “And two more between them.”

“Let’s go check them out,” she said, pulling on his hand. “I wonder if we’ll be able to tell who lived in which one.”

They spent the next hour tromping through the empty cabins, scaring dozens of mice, a raccoon, and several squirrels who had made the empty structures their homes, but there were few clues to the people who had lived there. A bit disappointed, they returned to the picnic basket, carted it over to some shade and sat down to rest, the silence around them louder than it had been.

“I guess I shouldn’t have expected so much,” Shelby said, pulling food out of the basket and stacking it on the tablecloth he’d spread out. “It’s kind of sad, people lived here and loved here, but there’s nothing left except a few empty cabins.”

“We’re here, Shelby,” he said. “We’re the proof that people lived here.”

“We’re the happily ever after,” she said. “At least that’s what my grandmother said.”

“And I think she’s right,” he said, then looked around and shrugged his shoulders. “Who knows, maybe after this is all over, we might be able to bring some life back to this place.”

“That would be nice, another way of completing the circle,” she said, smiling at him. “I keep forgetting that you’re a romantic at heart, Dr. Dempsey.”

“Now don’t you go spreading those kinds of rumors,” he said, reaching for her and pulling her into his arms. “I already have women throwing themselves at me because I’m a doctor; if something like that gets out, they’ll never leave me alone.”

“And who are these women throwing themselves at you?” she asked, looking up at him. “I demand names.”

He laughed, “Well, there might only be one,” he said, grinning at her. “A spunky redhead who likes to take pictures and turns into a gorgeous red wolf.”

“Oh, her,” Shelby said, grinning back. “Well, then, I’m not too worried, because I have it on good authority that she’s deeply in love with you.”

“Well, that’s a good thing since I’m deeply in love with her too,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers. “And now I’m going to kiss her until she forgets about the rest of the world.”

CHAPTER 21



The worst of the afternoon heat was starting to drain from the day as the sun sank lower in the sky, but Shelby was in no hurry to move, too comfortable with her head on Scott's chest. They'd spent most of the day lounging in the shade, talking about anything but what was happening back in town, and she was nowhere near ready to let the world intrude on their time alone.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes, thinking about taking a short nap, when Scott broke the silence, "Shelby, I know we've been avoiding the topic, but I just wondered what you think the clan is going to decide to do about my grandfather," he said. "This is all kind of new to me, and I'm not sure how it all works."

She rolled over, leaned up on her elbows, and looked down at him, "Well, by now, they've thrown around ten or twelve different solutions, from just ignoring the whole thing to hunting him down and making him pay," she said. "But in the end, they'll come up with some kind of plan to confront him on our own territory, and if I'm not wrong, your grandfather will fall right into the trap."

He was quiet for a second, then sat up, "What exactly do you mean by a trap?" he asked. "I'm not sure I like the way that sounds. They're not going to use you as bait, like they did with Erin."

"I didn't say that's what we're going to do, but it's certainly an option," she said. "Scott, one thing we've learned is that being in control is half the battle. If we can arrange to

have them come to us when and where we choose, we can dictate the outcome.”

“It’s risky, Shelby, I don’t know if I could stand by and watch you put yourself in danger,” he said. “I’m new to this love thing, but I’m telling you right now, I may not be able to do it.”

“Then we’ll just have to figure out a way for us to be together,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “Besides, we don’t even know that’s what the clan will suggest. Let’s not cross that bridge until we come to it.”

“Just promise me that you won’t agree to anything without talking to me first,” he said. “We’re in this together, Shelby.”

She leaned over and gave him a kiss, “I would never do that. We’re a team now, we make the big decisions together,” she said. “And since we’re a team, maybe you could help me pack up this mess. We should be getting back to the cabin; it’s going to be dark soon.”

“I’d be happy to help you clean up, but before we go home, I want to show you something,” he said. “Nate told me about a swimming hole where they used to go as kids. I never thought I’d get to see it, but since we’re here, it doesn’t make sense not to check it out. It might not even be there anymore…….”

“I would love to take a swim,” Shelby interrupted him, starting to repack the picnic basket. “Aren’t you going to help me?”

Scott laughed, “Okay, then I guess that answers my question,” he said, sitting up to help her. “We can leave this here and pick it up on our way back.”

Ten minutes later, they were picking their way through the undergrowth between two of the cabins, searching for the trail to the swimming hole and beginning to lose hope, when Scott let out a triumphant cheer. “I found it over here,” he called. “It’s hard to see, but I can just make out the trail.”

They battled their way through the forest on the overgrown trail that began to follow a stream, “This must be the right

way,” Scott said. “Nate mentioned fishing in this stream when we were talking.”

Only a few minutes later, they emerged from the forest into a clearing and followed the stream over to the other side, where the ground dropped abruptly, creating a small cliff. The stream flowed over the edge and tumbled over the rocks to collect at the bottom, forming a pool just big enough to swim in, and she started to look for a way down. Scott spotted the steps carved into the rock first, and they started carefully down the steep slope, arriving at the bottom out of breath.

“People have been swimming here for thousands of years,” she said. “Those steps weren’t put there recently.”

“Well, I think we should join all those people,” he said, slipping off his shirt. “Unless you’re chicken.”

“No way,” Shelby said, already pulling off her shirt. “Last one in is a rotten egg.”

She beat him into the water but just by a couple of steps, and he swept her up in his arms, the feel of his naked skin against hers making her body come alive. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she kissed him, the growls that erupted from his chest encouraging her to deepen the kiss. When they were finally forced apart, their chests burning for oxygen, she took a deep breath, then pushed away from him, and dove into the water.

The sun slowly sank behind the mountains as they played in the water like a couple of kids, then came back together as the adults they were when the passion between them slowly began to awaken. Eventually, Scott lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the water, and laid her down on the still-warm moss that grew around the pond, then lay down next to her. After kissing her deeply and passionately, he looked down at her and began tracing a pattern with his finger over her naked breasts, making her body begin to tingle and tighten in all the right places.

“I’ve been thinking about the plan the clan is going to come up with to confront my grandfather,” Scott said, his hand still toying with her breasts, making it hard to think. “You

suggested that we find a way to stay together so I won't freak out, and I've come up with one."

"Hmmm.....that's good," she said, closing her eyes as pleasure began to spread through her body shutting down her brain. "But you're making it very difficult to think right now."

"Am I?" he asked, trying to sound surprised. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Don't you dare," she said, opening her eyes and looking up at him.

His hand slipped lower, "That's good, because I don't want to," he said, grinning at her as his finger found her sensitive nib, making her gasp. "I think the most obvious solution is for us to get married, a big wedding right here in Andersonville. That should be enough to drive my grandfather crazy and flush him out at the same time."

Scott

Scott couldn't help but laugh when Shelby's eyes popped open, a look of total shock in them, "What?" she asked, sitting up and looking over at him. "I don't think I heard you right."

"It was really your idea," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "You told me to come up with a way to be with you if the clan decides they want to use you for bait, so I did."

"Scott, that's not a good reason to get married," she said, shaking her head, but he noticed she hadn't said no. "Besides, it takes months to put a wedding together, and we don't have months."

"Not necessarily. We could do something informal: invite anyone who wants to come, roast a big piece of meat, and have everyone else bring the rest," he said. "We could have the ceremony in the clearing by the cabins, then move the party back into town for food and.....I don't know, music or something."

Shelby was still staring at him like he had two heads, "What?" he asked, suddenly embarrassed. "I put some thought into it, that's all."

“A lot of thought, obviously,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re always a step ahead of me, but I think you’ve forgotten one very important thing.”

He knew what she was talking about, but played dumb, “I know we’ll need someone to perform the ceremony,” he said, then paused as if thinking. “And we’ll have to do something about the road.....and bathrooms; we’ll need bathrooms.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” Shelby said, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “I think I should get at least one grand gesture. After all, this is only going to happen to me once in my life.”

“Oh, that’s what you meant,” he said, trying to look panicked. “Okay, hold on a second, let me think.....”

Shelby let out a sigh, “Should we come back to this later?” she asked. “It’s starting to get cold out here.”

“Wait, I’ve got it,” he said, turning his back on her and reaching for his pants, then pretended to search through the pockets. “I know it’s in here.....I’ve been carrying it everywhere with me.....okay, phew, here it is.”

When he turned back to her with a small black velvet box in his hand, her eyes got big, “Shelby Dennison, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” he asked. “You said that we’d talk about forever later; well, that time is now. I love you more than I ever thought I could love someone, and I can’t imagine my life without you.”

He popped the box open to reveal a brilliant blue sapphire surrounded by sparkling diamonds, “It’s the same color as your eyes,” he finally said, when Shelby just stared at him. “I thought you would like it.”

“How long have you had this?” she asked, tears filling her eyes. “It’s beautiful, Scott.”

“I bought it when you were sick and we didn’t know what was wrong with you,” he said. “I saw it in the window of the jewelry store, and I don’t know.....I guess I thought that if I bought it that would mean that I’d have the chance to give it to you.”

The tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks, then she threw herself into his arms, “Yes, yes, yes,” she said, kissing him all over the face. “I’ll marry you anywhere you want, any time you want, just tell me when, and I’ll be there.”

He laughed, “Are you sure?” he asked. “I couldn’t tell for sure.”

She slapped him on the chest, “Very funny, but just in case there’s any room for doubt, I love you, Scott, and I can’t think of anything I want more than to become your wife,” she said, grinning at him through her tears. “Now, put the ring on me.”

Her hand was shaking as he slipped the ring onto her finger, “Look at that, it fits perfectly,” he said, smiling at her. “Like it was made just for you.”

“Just like you,” she said, looking up at him. “I never thought this would happen to me, I never thought that I’d fall in love, but here you are, so perfect for me. For the first time in my life, I feel complete, and it’s because of you.”

“I feel it too, Shelby,” he said. “At first, I didn’t understand what it was, but when I thought I was going to lose you, I knew. We’re soul mates, bound together for eternity.”

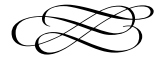
“I love you, Scott,” she said, smiling up at him. “Eternity doesn’t sound long enough, but I’m going to take advantage of every minute of it.”

“I love you too, Shelby,” he said, noticing for the first time how cold her skin was. “You’re freezing. We should get dressed and go back to the cabin.”

“I’m not that cold,” she said, grinning up at him. “Besides, I can think of a few ways to warm up.”

“Oh, really?” he asked, his body instantly responding when he saw the look in her eyes. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

CHAPTER 22



Shelby pushed Scott down onto his back onto the soft moss, then leaned over him, “Well, I thought we’d start with something like this,” she said, then kissed him like he’d kissed her many times, teasing and taking in equal measures, until he groaned and pulled her down on top of him.

But when he tried to take control, she pulled away from him and began kissing his neck, “Then I was thinking about something along these lines,” she said, kissing her way across his chest and down his stomach, making him squirm. “But you have to hold still.”

He groaned, “You’re killing me, Shelby,” he said. “You have no idea.....”

His words died away when she slipped between his legs and placed a gentle kiss on the tip of his throbbing manhood. “And then just to finish things off just right, I thought I’d do this,” she said, then took him into her mouth.

The growl that came from deep in his chest was so primal, so full of pleasure, that her entire body responded, tingling and tightening. Moisture pooled between her legs, and deep inside she began to throb with need. It surprised her to discover that giving pleasure could be just as powerful as receiving pleasure, and Scott’s groans and moans only made her try harder. She lavished him with the same attention he’d given her, using her mouth and tongue to take him higher and higher until he pulled her roughly off him with a strangled cry.

“If you don’t stop now, this will be over too soon,” he said, dragging her up his body, then flipped her over onto her back. “It’s my turn to warm you up.”

His kiss left no question about who was in charge, and she gave up control willingly as his hands began to roam over her body, finding all the most sensitive spots until she was the one squirming. When he finally dipped his finger between her folds, pleasure flooded her entire body, and only seconds later, she was flying on a wave of pure sensation, her nails digging into his shoulders as it went on and on.

When she finally came down, it wasn’t to a sense of satisfaction. Instead, her body was throbbing deep inside, demanding more. “Please, Scott, I need you now,” she said, opening her legs for him. “Take me now, make us one, complete the circle.”

He pulled away from her and she whimpered, but only a second later, he grabbed her, flipped her over onto her stomach, then pulled her up onto her hands and knees. When he slipped between her legs, shoving them open with his knees, and grabbed her by the hips, she gasped, anticipation making a tight coil of pleasure form deep inside her.

With one hard thrust of his hips, he drove himself into her, burying himself as deeply as he could, a groan of satisfaction escaping both their lungs, then fingers digging into her skin, plunged his throbbing member into her over and over again. The knot of pleasure deep in her belly began to spread, sending out a wave of sensation that overwhelmed her until all that was left was the man joined to her and the passion they shared.

When she finally tumbled over the edge, she took Scott with her, and his pleasure only intensified hers as he emptied himself inside her with a roar of satisfaction that filled the quiet of the night. Their hearts pounding, breath coming in short gasps, Scott collapsed onto his side without breaking the connection between them, and they lay watching the sparkle of light above them until all that was left was the glitter of stars in the sky.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” she said, snuggling closer to him.

“Stop wiggling like that, or we’ll be making more,” he said. “And I really think we should get back to the cabin.”

She twisted her head to look at him, then wiggled a little, then laughed, “As tempting as that is, I think you’re right,” she said. “But I’m going for a quick swim first.”

It took over an hour for them to get back to the picnic basket, and her heart dropped as soon as she saw it, “Scott, we forgot to call and check-in,” she said, popping open the lid and searching for the phone. “They’re going to think something happened to us.”

“It’s okay, Shelby,” he said, stopping her. “I’m sure they know we’re fine. We’ll call as soon as we get back to the cabin; it’s dark out here.”

Louisa wasn’t happy when she picked up the phone, “Do you have any idea what time it is?” she asked, then when Shelby didn’t answer. “It’s after nine o’clock and we haven’t heard a word from you all day.”

“I’m sorry.....we just got caught up.....” she said, knowing how lame that sounded. “Let me explain.....”

Before she could, Scott took the phone and hit the speaker button, “It’s my fault, Louisa, don’t blame Shelby,” he said. “I asked her to marry me tonight, and I guess we got a bit caught up. Sorry about that, we didn’t mean to make everyone worry.”

There was a long silence and a lot of voices in the background, “I’m sorry, did you just say that you and Shelby are getting married?” Louisa asked. “I just want to make sure we heard you right.”

“Yep, I gave her a ring and everything,” he said, grinning over at her. “We’re thinking about having the ceremony up here as soon as possible.”

After another long silence, Louisa cleared her throat, “You are aware that we have a situation going on right now, aren’t

you?” she asked. “This isn’t exactly the right time for a wedding.”

“It’s the perfect time,” Shelby said. “Don’t tell me that the council and the guardians weren’t trying to figure out a way to lure Scott’s grandfather out, I know how this clan works. This will solve that problem.”

“And could turn your wedding day into a blood bath,” Louisa said after only a moment’s hesitation. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “Let’s show these jerks who they’re messing with.”

Scott

Scott looked around the dusty kitchen, then over at Shelby, who stood waiting patiently for him in the doorway, “It’s just a house,” he said, looking around one more time. “I don’t feel anything negative, or positive for that matter. I don’t really remember living here. If it wasn’t for the memory of that rose bush, I would swear I’ve never been here before.”

She walked over, slipped into his arms, and looked up at him, “I think that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” she asked. “No memories are better than bad ones.”

“I have the rose bush, and that’s enough,” he said, smiling down at her. “We can go now; I’ve seen enough.”

They made their way through the vacant house and out the front door onto the porch, “Do you want to go across the street?” Shelby asked. “I doubt you remember your grandparent’s house if you don’t remember this one, but.....”

He shook his head, “That won’t be necessary. If I have my way, that house will be torn down, or better yet, burned to the ground,” he said. “It doesn’t belong here, not if we want to see this place thriving again. It just feels wrong.”

“That would be a shame, it’s a beautiful building,” she said with a sigh. “I can understand how you feel, knowing how much pain and heartache came from the people who lived there. It makes it hard not to see those emotions when you look at the house. But I was wondering, what if it was turned

into something completely different? If it was used for a good purpose?”

“You mean like Millie turning Hogan’s Folly into an orphanage?” he asked, looking at the house again. “I don’t know; I guess I never thought about it that way. You’re talking about redemption or something like that.”

She nodded, “Not that we have any say in what happens here,” she said, shrugging. “It’s just fun to think about.”

“There’s a lot of potential here for the right person or people,” he said, trying to gauge her reaction. “I bet someone could sweep all this land up for a bargain.”

“I suppose they could,” she said. “It would be a big project to restore everything, but the tourists would love it.”

The sound of an engine filled the quiet around them, and they both looked over at the road, smiles breaking out on their faces when they saw her grandparents’ old Suburban come into sight. “Well, I guess there’s no turning back now,” he said, looking over at her. “This is your last chance to change your mind.”

“You’re not getting off that easy,” she said, grinning up at him. “Don’t forget this was your idea. I was all for flying off to Vegas and eloping.”

“Oh, really?” he asked. “I don’t remember that conversation.”

When the vehicle came to a stop, Sophie was out before he could open her door and hugging them both, “I’m so happy,” she said, then pulled back and looked up at them. “Shelby, your parents would have been so happy, and Scott, your mom would have been so proud of the man you’ve become.”

“Let’s not start all the waterworks already. Nancey’s been driving me crazy with the leaky eye thing,” Nate said, stepping around the Suburban. “Congratulations, you two, I hope you know what you’re getting into.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Nancey said when Nate opened the door and helped her down. “He’s been bugging me for years to

marry him, and now that I've said yes, he's acting like it's the end of the world."

Nate pulled Nancey into his arms, "No, just the beginning of a new and better one," he said, then gave her a big kiss. "Speaking of weddings, I wonder if we could talk to you two about that. The thing is, we've been waiting so long, we don't really want to wait anymore. And well.....you can always say no.....that is, we wouldn't want to intrude on your day....."

"You want to get married today too?" Shelby asked, a huge smile on her face. "Oh, Nate, that would be wonderful; I'd be happy to share our day with you and Nancey."

When she looked up at him, "I wouldn't want to miss it for the world," Scott said. "It would be an honor and a privilege to share our day with the two of you."

"Oh, this is so exciting," Shelby said, then her face fell. "But I was going to ask you to give me away, Nate. I guess I can find someone else."

"We were thinking maybe we could have two ceremonies," Nancey said. "Nate and I don't want anything too fancy, so it shouldn't take long; then he could still give you away."

"Then it's settled," Nate said, grinning like a kid at Christmas. "This is going to be one hell of a party."

"And just what this place needs to bring it back to life," he said, looking around at the empty buildings. "It's long past time the ugly stain of what happened all those years ago was washed away, and I can't think of a better way to do that than for all of us to start our new lives together here."

"Well, then we'd better get to work," Parker said. "In about five minutes, this place is going to be overrun with the volunteers we recruited, so we'd better figure out how we're going to pull off a wedding for two hundred people in a few hours."

CHAPTER 23



S helby took another package of paper plates out of the box, unwrapped them, and set them on the table, then paused to look up and down the street, a smile spreading across her face. In a couple of hours, the depressing little town had been transformed by a small army of people who'd started at one end and worked their way to the other, cleaning, repairing, and generally improving everything that got in their way.

Another wave had arrived shortly after and filled the dusty streets with tables, chairs, and awnings for shade, then dug a huge pit and began to roast a pig over a bed of hot coals, filling the town with a wonderful aroma. Only a few minutes after the streets began to empty again, a caravan of mini-vans came up the road, parked behind the tables that had been set up for the food, and more food than she'd seen in a long time started appearing out of the sliding doors.

Spotting Scott across the street, deep in discussion with Nate, she forgot about the plates and started walking over to them, but Nancey came rushing up to her. "There you are! We've been looking for you everywhere," she said. "It's time to go get ready; only two hours to go until show time."

"Nancey, I don't need two hours to get ready," she said, distracted by Nate and Scott. "What do you think they're talking about? It looks serious."

"Nothing you need to worry about right now," Nancey said, pulling her the other way. "Come on; we're already

supposed to be at the cabin, Louisa is going to have a fit if we're any later."

She let Nancey pull her away, but not before she saw Nate take a wad of papers out of his pocket and hand them to Scott. "What are they up to?" she asked, looking over at Nancey, who wouldn't look at her. "You know, don't you?"

"All I know is that we're late," Nancey said. "Come on, I have a surprise for you, and I need to give it to you before you have your makeup done."

When they walked into the cabin, her friends swarmed her, "Where have you been?" Louisa asked. "We're already behind schedule."

"Your bath water is getting cold," Felicia said. "I should know, I lugged it all in there."

"Come on, we'll help you get undressed," Jolene said, tugging at her shirt. "We don't have that much time."

Yvette poked her head out of the kitchen, a pastry bag full of frosting in her hand, "I would just give in if I were you," she said, shaking her head. "I'll be in here if you need me."

"Don't listen to her," Erin said, shoving her back toward the bedroom. "You're going to be fine, now get into the bath. When you're done, Darcy is going to do your makeup, and I'll take care of your hair."

Penny was waiting for her in the bathroom, "I'm not sure what I'm doing here," she said. "I think they were just trying to get me out of the way."

They both laughed, "I think I can handle this part by myself," she said. "And I bet you're glad."

"You got that," Penny said, then slipped out of the bathroom.

When she stepped out of the bathroom twenty minutes later, she did feel better and was grateful to her friends for going to all the trouble, but she wanted a few minutes to herself and slipped quietly across the hallway. She'd just closed the bedroom door with a sigh when there was a quiet

knock, and Nancey poked her head in, her hair already styled and her makeup on.

“Are you decent?” she asked, then stepped inside, a white garment bag draped over her arm. “I know you were probably looking for a few minutes alone, but I have something for you.”

She laid the bag down on the bed, then looked over at Shelby, “I’ve been saving this for you,” she said. “It was the only thing your mom made me promise to do.”

With shaking hands, tears already in her eyes, she reached for the zipper and pulled it down, then pulled her hand back when she saw the lace peeking out through an opening. “Oh, Nancey,” she said, reaching out and spreading the bag open. “Is this her wedding dress?”

Nancey nodded, then walked over and pulled the dress out and held it up, “She looked so beautiful that day,” she said. “And you’re going to look just as beautiful.”

Afraid for a second to touch the dress, she just stood staring at it, then slowly brushed the lace with her fingertips as tears rolled down her cheeks. “It will be like she’s here with me,” she said. “Do you think it will fit?”

“Why don’t you try it on and see?” Nancey suggested, tears in her eyes. “I have a feeling it will be perfect.”

A few minutes later, she was standing in front of the mirror, wiping the tears off her cheeks, afraid they would get on the dress. “Oh, it is perfect! It’s just what I would have chosen,” she said, then turned and gave Nancey a hug. “Thank you so much, I can’t tell you how much this means to me.”

“Your mother would have been so proud of you, Shelby,” she said, hugging her back. “I have one more thing for you. I couldn’t give it to you until today, so it didn’t ruin the surprise.”

She handed Shelby a picture of her parents on their wedding day, “You look so much like your mother,” she said. “There are more pictures of them in the box of things of theirs that I saved for you, it’s yours when you want it.”

Scott

The sun was just beginning to set, turning the sky alight with streaks of red, orange, and yellow, the lanterns hanging from the trees had just begun to glow, and Scott was more nervous than he'd ever been in his life. Shifting nervously from foot to foot, his eyes glued to the trees where Shelby would appear in a few minutes, he forced himself not to think about all the things that could go wrong. Parker gave him a nudge and a little smile of encouragement, but he knew that he wouldn't be happy until Shelby belonged to him officially.

"We're almost there," Parker said. "Hold steady for just a few more minutes, and she'll be yours."

Just then, the last rays of sunshine dipped behind the mountain, throwing everything into shadow except where the light from the lanterns gave off its happy glow, and he found himself holding his breath. A moment later, Shelby appeared, carrying an old-fashioned lantern covered in flowers, and dressed in a flowing lace gown, her red hair hanging loose over her shoulders. His breath caught in his throat as his eyes drank her in, and he had to force himself not to move as his magic slowly began to awaken, sending tendrils of desire racing through him.

Nate was waiting for Shelby at the end of the aisle between the two rows of chairs, and she handed the lantern off to Louisa, who gave her a quick hug, then took his arm. She looked up at him and their eyes met for the first time, a smile slowly spread across her face, and the warmth of her love filled him with a glow. A smile plastered on his face, he waited for her to reach him. After shaking Nate's hand, he took her hands in his, and together they turned to face the justice of the peace.

He barely heard the words of the ceremony until the moment he'd been waiting for arrived, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" the man asked. "Do you promise to love and cherish her for the rest of your life?"

"I do, for the rest of my life," he said. "And all of eternity."

The man turned to Shelby, “Do you take this man to be your husband?” he asked her. “To love and cherish for the rest of your life?”

“I do, for the rest of my life,” she said, smiling at him. “And even longer if I have anything to say about it.”

“Then I declare you husband and wife,” the justice said. “You may kiss the bride.”

He swept Shelby up into his arms as a cheer went up, and covered her mouth with his in a kiss that was both tender and demanding, leaving her breathless and wobbling when he let her go. Hand in hand, they walked back down the aisle, two new gold rings glittering on their fingers, a public statement of the love and commitment they shared. When they reached the end of the aisle, Louisa led them over to a pair of chairs set up under a tree with a perfect view of the altar, then hugged them both, before returning to her position.

Only a few minutes later, Nate and Nancey came walking up the road from the cabin together, their eyes shining with happiness, and he looked over at Shelby. “I’m going to count this one as a happy ending,” he said, smiling at her. “They’ve waited for a long time for this day, and I’m glad we could share it with them.”

“They’re like family,” Shelby said. “I don’t know what I would have done without them all these years, and it’s about time they had some time for themselves.”

When Nate and Nancey were officially married, the crowd poured down the hill back to town and the feast that awaited them, their excited chatter echoing off the mountains around them. Scott and Shelby took their time making their way to the table reserved for them, both aware that it wouldn’t be too much longer before they were facing the one man who wanted to destroy what they had together.

Scott squeezed Shelby’s hand reading her mind, “Don’t worry, we’re ready for them,” he said. “The clan has a plan in place, Shelby, all we have to do is play our part, and this will all be over tonight.”

“I hope that you’re right. I’ve spent my entire life looking over my shoulder,” she said. “I want all that to be done, I want to be free to live my life without the shadow of my old clan.”

“New beginnings, sweetheart, that’s what today was all about,” he said, pulling her to his feet. “Now, let’s go eat some of that food before it’s all gone, and then we’re going to dance until our feet hurt.”

“And kick a little butt in between,” she said, grinning up at him. “I’m looking forward to that part.”

“Easy there, tiger,” he said. “You’re not exactly dressed for kicking butt.”

She laughed, “Okay, maybe I’ll let someone else do that part,” she said. “I’ll just stand by like a helpless female while you defend my honor.”

It was his turn to laugh, “Somehow, I don’t see that happening either,” he said. “Maybe we can find a compromise between the two.”

The next few hours passed in a blur of good food, well wishes, and heaps of advice that they took with polite smiles, then laughed about afterward. He was beginning to wonder if their plan was going to fail but tried to hide his disappointment from Shelby, who seemed to have forgotten about his grandfather and was glowing happily next to him, but he caught her looking over at him occasionally with a look of concern.

By the time the food was gone and the musicians started tuning up, he could tell that Shelby was worried as well. “Do you think something went wrong?” she asked. “I thought they’d be here by now. Louisa said they made a big deal about it in town. No one could have missed the fact that we were getting married and where we were having the ceremony.”

“I really thought it would work, that my grandfather wouldn’t be able to resist showing up here,” he said. “But maybe he’s smarter than I thought.”

CHAPTER 24



“*Y*ou weren’t wrong,” Shelby said, pointing to the light coming through the trees. “He’s here, it just took longer than we thought it would. I don’t know if I’m ready for this.”

“Of course, you are,” Scott said, leaning over and giving her a kiss. “You’ve been preparing for this moment your entire life, you’ve got the clan, and now you have me. Together we’re stronger than we are alone, and I’ll be with you every step of the way. This isn’t just your battle, Shelby; this is my battle too.”

“And I’ll be right there by your side, fighting for both of us,” she said. “I love you, Scott. Let’s go make sure all the sacrifices people made for us don’t go to waste and show your grandfather what a real clan looks like.”

“I love you too, Shelby,” he said. “We’re going to have that happily ever after, I promise.”

Around them, people began to shift, mothers pulled their children to safety, tables and chairs were shoved out of the way, and dark shadows could be seen slipping into the forest around town. Scott took her hand and led her down the sidewalk until they reached the end of the block, where they joined Louisa and Derek, then walked to the middle of the street. The four of them stood waiting for the approaching lights, while behind them, one by one, her friends formed a semi-circle behind them, followed by the guardians, then the leadership council.

When the big black vehicle she remembered all too well came to a stop, she stepped a little closer to Scott, who squeezed her hand and flashed her a confident smile. “We’ve got this,” he said. “Don’t let him get to you; he’s just an old bitter man who destroyed his clan with his ignorance and arrogance.”

She planted her feet more firmly and put her chin up in the air, feeling powerful again, the fear that had been threatening receding, and she watched, her heart steady as Scott’s grandfather got out of the car. Behind him, several other vehicles pulled up, and men began pouring out of them, striding toward them in a solid group, then stopped behind the old man.

“If that’s all he’s got, this won’t take long,” Scott leaned over and whispered. “Frankly, I expected more, some men out in the forest or something.”

“You don’t know they’re not out there,” she said, looking around. “He can’t possibly think this is going to scare us into giving in to him.”

Just as the words were out of her mouth, there was a long howl from the trees just outside of town, followed by another, this time full of pain, and her stomach fell. “Hold steady, that wasn’t one of ours,” he said. “My grandfather might be a little smarter than I thought, but not much. Are you ready?”

She nodded, and together they stepped forward, “Well, it looks like you’re just in time for dessert,” Scott called. “Oh, except you weren’t invited to this little gathering, so I’m going to ask that you leave.”

“You don’t belong here,” Shelby called, “Take your men and go back where you came from.”

“I don’t belong here,” Scott’s grandfather said, letting out a bark of laughter. “All of this is my land, land my family has held for generations. You are the trespassers.”

“There are several things wrong with that statement,” Scott said. “First, as much as I hate to admit it, we’re family, which makes this land just as much mine as yours. Second, according

to the county and the state, this land officially belongs to Shelby and me. I paid off the tax lien this morning.”

For a second, Shelby forgot about Scott’s grandfather, “What?” she asked. “When did you do that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” Scott said, pulling the deed out of his pocket and handing it to her. “It’s my wedding gift to you, three hundred acres of prime mountain property, including the former town of Andersonville, and all the buildings on the property, except your cabin. That belongs to only you, Shelby.”

“Scott, I don’t know what to say,” she said. “I thought we were just dreaming.”

“We were, I just decided to make this one come true,” he said. “I hope you’re not mad.”

“Mad? How could I be mad?” she asked, throwing her arms around him. “I can’t think of a better wedding gift, I just wish I’d gotten you something.”

“You have,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “You’re more than I could have ever dreamed of, a home, a family, a clan where I finally feel like I belong.”

Scott

“Enough,” his grandfather roared. “This is going to end right now, I’ve tried to be patient with the two of you, but I can see that isn’t going to work. I just want you to remember that you asked for it. You and your little band of pathetic losers are going to pay for disrespecting your clan and me. You seem to have forgotten that I’m your alpha, I own both of you, I control you. Do you hear me? I own you!”

“This is beginning to sound like a bad movie,” he said, rolling his eyes at Shelby. “Shall we put an end to this for good?”

“Yes, let’s do it, I’m getting bored, and we haven’t cut the cake yet,” Shelby said, then looked over at his grandfather. “You have no authority over me, and you don’t own me. I don’t belong to your clan; you forfeited that authority when

you ordered my death. I have pledged my allegiance to Louisa and Derek, the Hogan Falls clan, and the guardians who protected me all these years. Go away and leave us alone, we have no business with you, and we'd like you off our land."

"You think you can challenge me?" his grandfather roared. "I'll show you who has authority here! Boys, it's time to show them who is in charge. I don't want the woman harmed, but I don't care what happens to my grandson. In fact, I'd rather he didn't survive; that should be just punishment for his crimes against the clan."

Scott burst out laughing, "Just punishment," he quoted. "Now, this really sounds like a bad movie, but here's the thing, while you've been threatening us and putting on a show, the rest of our clan has quietly been on the move. You might want to look around."

His grandfather just stared him down, but Scott didn't move, just lifted his eyebrows as a chorus of growls came from the woods around them, "You're bluffing; this is some kind of a trick," the old man sputtered, but the growling only got louder. "What are you waiting for? Attack them, do what you've been paid to do."

The men looked at each other uncertainly until what had been only shadows before slowly transformed into a pack of snarling wolves. Faced with overwhelming odds, the men began climbing back into the vehicles in a flurry of activity. His grandfather shouted at them, and screamed threats, but to no avail. Finally, he turned back to Shelby and Scott, only two men standing with him.

"I'll kill you myself if I have to," he shouted. "You won't beat me! The clan will rise again, and I will rule the land."

Only a heartbeat later, his grandfather disappeared, and a big shaggy grey wolf stood in his place, growling and showing its teeth. When it lunged for Shelby only a second later, she sidestepped and shifted at the same time, then waited, every muscle in her body tensed as his grandfather got back to his feet. Scott thought about shifting, but was enjoying watching

the confusion in his grandfather's eyes, which quickly turned to fear when Shelby began slowly stalking him.

Following her lead, everyone standing in the street shifted, "Are you sure you want to try that?" he asked. "I don't think you'd last very long, do you?"

His grandfather started toward the big black car, then shifted back to his human form, "You'll never get away with this," he said. "I'll....."

One of his own men shoved the old man into the car while the other ran around and started it, and they pulled away in a cloud of dust. "Well, that worked better than I thought it would," Scott said, walking over to Shelby. "Come on back, sweetheart. He's gone, and you did great."

Shelby let out a long sigh. The red wolf disappeared, and his wife was standing in its place, "I've never wanted to kill anyone, but I would have tonight," she said, collapsing into his arms. "I really wanted him dead."

"You did great," he said, tipping her head up to look into her eyes. "He won't bother us again. We're free."

"I love you, Scott," she said. "And I'm going to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much."

"I love you too, Shelby," he said. "I came here looking for my sister and some peace for my mother, but I found something even better, and I won't ever forget how lucky I am."

"Then let's go start our happily ever after," she said. "And I believe it starts with cake."

EPILOGUE



Felicia was flying high. The summer had been perfect, her tour business was booming, and before long, she was sure that she'd be ready to go out on her own. She wasn't sure how she was going to tell her friends, but it was time for a change, time to think about how she wanted to spend the rest of her life. Forcing her mind away from the much too serious thoughts, she looked over her shoulder to check on the group hiking behind her, pleased to see that they were all keeping up with her pace.

Their campsite for the night was just around the corner, and she was looking forward to soaking her hot feet in the stream after they set up camp. "Okay, everyone, we're almost there," she called. "Just a few more minutes, and we'll be done for the day."

There were cheers from behind her, and she picked up the pace just a little to test the group, but stopped short when she came around the next corner, not sure what she was seeing. Her campsite was filled with tents, and two cooking fires were sending up plumes of smoke as smiling campers lounged around them, and she felt confused for a second.

As she stood staring, a man got up from one of the campfires, a friendly smile on his face, and she felt a zing of attraction when their eyes met. Wondering if she'd lost her mind, she turned to look back at her campers, then back at the man, who was staring at her now, a funny look on his face.

"Hello, there," he finally called. "Is there something I can help you with?"

“This is my campsite, I had my gear here,” she said, then started looking around. “What did you do with it?”

“Oh, was that your stuff?” he asked, then shrugged and pointed over to a pile of gear under a tree. “That must be it over there.”

“You can’t just move people’s stuff,” she said, anger finally taking over. “It’s just not done.”

“Unless I’m wrong, this is National Forest land, and camping is first come, first served,” the man said. “You weren’t here, we were.”

She had to take a deep breath to keep from screaming at him, “I don’t know who you are, but that’s not the way we do things around here,” she said. “You can’t just.....”

The man held out his hand, “Michael Simpson, it’s nice to meet you,” he said. “I’m sorry about the misunderstanding. I just opened a new tour business, and I guess I don’t know all the rules.”

Forced to shake his hand, she reached out but wasn’t prepared for the charge of electricity that shot up her arm and made her feel warm all over. “Well, Mr. Simpson, I’d suggest that you have a little more respect in the future,” she said. “Now, are you going to move your camp, or should we move it for you?”