

DANAE
LITTLE

Hope

LAKE

Hoping on Love



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BOOK THREE



DANAE LITTLE

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About the Author

Prologue

KEVIN ARMSTRONG DROVE INTO downtown Hope Lake feeling a settling come into his bones. The first snow still lay in patches on the valley floor, existing in shady spots under trees near the lake and in clumps from where the plow had removed it from the road. Mountains in the distance gleamed white and sparkling as if ice giants looked out over the town.

He had missed this place.

Glancing at the glove compartment where he had locked his gun and badge, he sighed. Only a year into the FBI and he already had to take a paid leave of absence. The latest kidnapping case had hit too close to home, and he poured himself into it so much he stepped over too many lines.

He had saved the girl, though. Didn't that count for something?

The cost didn't matter to him. That girl was now home with her family, playing with toy horses in her pink, frilly room

rather than chained to a heater vent in a bathroom.

His hands clenched the steering wheel until the ache in his forearms had him releasing his grip. The locals walking along the street stopped to peer into his windows and then wave with recognition.

A small chuckle escaped him. The entire town would know he was back by dinnertime.

He had thought about going home to his parents' ranch, but when he called Derrick to let him know what was going on, his old boss had urged him to come back to Hope Lake. Besides, he didn't really want to tell his dad that he was on paid leave...pending an investigation.

He pulled up in front of the Sheriff's Office, and a pang of longing filled him. Why had he thought being a big, bad FBI agent would be better than this?

As he parked, a familiar car pulled past him, and he swore he had seen that same car multiple times on his drive to Hope Lake. He shook his head. His time in the FBI had made him paranoid.

"Armstrong!" Derrick greeted him from the entrance of the station.

Kevin released the crazy thoughts in his head and smiled at his old boss, a man he had come to see as a friend. "Hey, boss," he said, meeting him at the steps and giving him a slapping man-hug. "Looks like fatherhood is treating you well."

“It’s the best, but my wife is amazing and gets up with the baby to let me sleep.”

“Well, you won out with Chasity.”

“I agree.” Derrick laughed. “Come inside. Everyone will be excited to see you.”

Kevin greeted Bertie and Tony, having a few minutes of small talk before Derrick invited him into his office. “You haven’t told them?”

“Of course not. That’s your business, man. You tell the people you want or don’t tell anyone.”

Kevin sat in the chair on the other side of the desk, placing his cowboy hat on his knee. “So, uh, no other excitement after I came to pick up those perps who caught Jordan’s gal?”

“Back to the same old boring Hope Lake: only mountain lion calls and complaints about out-of-towners.”

“Ah, the good ol’ life.” Kevin chuckled.

“How’re you holding up?” Derrick asked quietly.

Kevin shrugged. “It’s tough on the ego, you know, but what I did saved that girl. I wouldn’t change it.”

“Sounds like the right call to me.” Derrick pushed back in his chair and studied him for a moment. “If you ever decide that the big city life of the FBI wasn’t what you thought it would be, you’ll always have a place on my force. Even if I have to make a position.”

Kevin smiled with embarrassed appreciation. “Thanks, boss.”

“Call me Derrick, please.”

“Whatever you say, boss.”

Derrick shook his head. “How’re your parents and the ranch?”

“They’re good.” His leg shook, bouncing his hat. “I haven’t told them.”

“Why worry them until you know what the decision will be?” Derrick shrugged.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Hang out here. Tyler and Megan’s house on the lake is open right now, and they said they’d be happy to have you stay there. Free of charge.”

“Oh, I can pay.”

“It’s their way of saying thank you,” he said. “And tonight you’re coming to Jordan’s renewal of vows celebration.”

Kevin rose as Derrick stood up. “I am?”

“Yep. There’s an open invite to all locals of Hope Lake. Our town really stuck together to save Caitlin, and Jordan wants to honor them.”

“That’s very hospitable of him.”

“It will be fun, plus Mrs. Manning’s niece will be there.” Derrick elbowed him. “She came in last month, and it looks like she might be here for a while.”

“Oh, uh, that’s nice.” Kevin pulled at his collar, doing his best to let the heat that traveled up his neck escape.

He pictured the sweet face of the woman he had met several times while dealing with her nosy but well-meaning aunt. Angelica.

A funny quivering feeling started within him as he thought of seeing her again...and at a wedding of sorts on top of it.

“Hey, everything happens for a reason, man.” Derrick slapped his back as they walked out onto Main Street. “You remember where Megan’s house is, right? It’s where Chasity was staying, you know, when all that stuff went down.”

“How could I forget?”

Derrick handed him a set of keys. “Make yourself at home. Get all gussied up, and be at Jordan’s by four.”

“Really? Are they sure? I was planning on getting a room.” He waved toward the hotel across the street.

“Just be there at four. You can thank them yourself then. The whole town will be there.”

Kevin held onto the cool keys, stunned at the hospitality of the small town he had fled...and for what? To save that girl. He squeezed the keys, letting them dig into his palm, then glanced back at Derrick once more. “I’ll be there.”

“Good. You won’t regret it.” Derrick waved and stepped back into the warmth of the office.

Kevin sat in his car, staring at the keys to the little house on the lake that had started it all. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to come back to this town.

It took him less than two minutes to pull into the driveway where Chasity, Derrick's wife, had stayed until they married. Then he thought about the perps they picked up here, both the one after Chasity and the one after Megan. A shiver went through him, wondering if this place had bad karma.

He stepped out of the car and waved a greeting to Mrs. Fields who peered at him from her porch swing.

"Is that you, Officer Armstrong? Well, welcome back to town."

"Thanks, ma'am. Looks like I'll be your neighbor for a bit."

"Then I imagine I won't have to call Sheriff Davis to come tell you to be quiet, will I?"

"No, ma'am. You'll hardly know I'm here." He tipped his cowboy hat to her, then went inside, liking the way the sun came through the slider at the end of the house and lit it with a warm welcome.

A little card on the table drew his attention. It held a brief welcome and thank you from Tyler and Megan.

He set down his duffel and relaxed into the recliner, letting his gaze fall on the sun-sparkled lake and glistening mountains. Life could get a lot worse than this.

ONE

*S*PACE BETWEEN PAST AND present does not exist during flashbacks. They come when they want and rip you from the reality in front of you, leaving you breathless in fear once again.

Fear whipped around Angelica Payne as tight as the restraints on her wrists, pulling tighter every time she struggled. The musty air in the dark basement choked her almost as much as the dirty rag stuffed in her mouth.

The monster had taken her best friend into the side room yesterday, and during the night, her screams turned to exhausted moans of torment, but now there was nothing. Angelica gulped, knowing what the silence meant.

Tears stung her eyes, blurring the already darkened vision. Her best friend was gone, and she was next.

Panic wasn't a strong enough word to describe the crazy sensations filling her mind and body, numbing her against the

pain in her hands and wrists as she pulled and squeezed, trying to release her binds.

Escape.

That was the only word that existed. She couldn't think of anything else, couldn't let herself think of Brittany...or the monster coming back at any moment. She could only focus on the one thing...escape.

“Angelica,” Aunt Martha pleaded, sounding far away, pulling Angelica out from the snares of the flashback.

The strangest things set them off. A sound, a voice, a sensation against her skin. What was it this time?

She sneezed. That's it, the musty air in her aunt's attic. The dusty room came back to her, so much different from the horror of that monster's basement.

“Angelica?” Aunt Martha called again, stuck in the bedroom below, needing a walker to get around. The independent woman didn't like not knowing how Angelica's hunt for her fancy dress was going.

“I'm okay, Aunty,” she said, sneezing again. “I think I got it.” She tugged on the dress bag until she could reach the zipper. Peeking inside, she saw the snippet of beige lace and breathed out in relief. Soon she'd be breathing clean air again.

She pulled the bag back to the ladder that she had climbed to get into the attic. Hefting the dress bag over her shoulder, she

eased down the rungs, feeling tendrils of anxiety and shoving them away before another flashback could grasp her.

“Oh, there you are,” Aunt Martha said, breathless and standing next to the ladder. “I was worried you had another one of those flashback things up there.”

“I’m okay, Aunty.” Angelica pushed forth what she hoped looked like a reassuring smile, holding the dress bag in front of her so her aunt couldn’t detect the falsity of her expression. “Look what I found.”

“Oh, good. I hoped I had kept it.” Aunt Martha grasped the dress bag, unzipping it with a sigh of delight. “It’s been a while since someone invited me to a wedding.”

“It’s not really a wedding, Aunty,” Angelica said, brushing back her bright blonde hair and slapping the dust off her clothes.

“Close enough. I know, a restatement of vows and all that, but everyone knows Caitlin broke things off four years ago, even if they don’t say it.” She laid the dress on the bed. “Either way, I’m glad she’s back, and that she and their cute little girl are safe.”

“Yes, we’re all glad she’s safe,” Angelica said as a shiver went through her. “Thank goodness you were there to help.”

Aunt Martha waved it away. “I only did what anyone else would have if given the chance. The entire town pulled together; that’s what did it.” She turned to Angelica and rested a knobby hand on her face. “That’s why you need to be here,

my darling. Nothing like what happened to you would happen here.”

Angelica blinked back the tears. “Well, I’ll need a shower after going into that attic. We have an hour, right?”

“Yes, but you know how I like to be early.” Aunt Martha’s hands caressed the dress again. “I can manage getting into this myself. You go on and get your shower.”

“Thank you,” Angelica said, stepping into the hallway as the phone rang.

“I’ll get that. Enjoy your shower.” Aunt Martha used the walker as she shuffled as quickly as she could manage to the phone, muttering, “I wonder who this is. Maybe someone’s come into town.”

Angelica smiled to herself as she left her aunt to the business of town gossip. Aunt Martha had always been her favorite aunt. Her family complained about her constant need to gossip and collect information, but with everything that Aunty knew, it sure made her a wonderful storyteller, and Angelica loved stories.

While showering, she scrutinized the rings of healing scars around her wrists, grateful that the weather was cool enough to wear long sleeves to Jordan and Caitlin’s restatement of vows.

She hadn’t gone to school with them, but she visited often enough in the summer since she was a kid that she knew who they were, even if her aunt hadn’t told her stories about them. They belonged together, as Aunt Martha believed. Anyone

could have seen that ever since they were in high school. She sighed as she thought of Jordan's faithfulness that had held out, ready to welcome Caitlin back when she finally came to her senses.

Their little girl was the surprise, but who knew what went on behind the closed doors of their neighbors? She didn't have a right to judge.

Once she dried off, she wrapped a towel around herself and went back to the room her aunty had turned into a bedroom just for her. She sat on the soft bed adorned with a flowery quilt that Aunt Martha had made, running her hand along the hand-worked pieces.

When Aunt Martha had called to say she needed help after her hip replacement, Angelica took it as a sign and readily jumped at the escape from the city and all the memories that filled her. Her fear had increased to where leaving the house had become a massive, anxiety-producing ordeal.

From their exasperated sighs, she knew her parents had grown tired of her inability to continue on with a normal life. Though they tried, they didn't know how to help her, and they agreed that spending some time in Hope Lake to heal would be a good thing.

So she came, happily. Though the flashbacks still plagued her, Hope Lake gave her a sense of safety. One she greatly needed.

Angelica slipped into a flowy, long-sleeved blouse and an ankle-length skirt. After braiding the sides of her long hair, she

tied them together behind her head and held up a hand mirror to see how it looked from the back.

She shrugged, then turned to poke at the puffs under her tired eyes. The dreams were the worst and kept her from wanting to sleep. Some color had come back into her cheeks since coming to Aunt Martha's, but she still looked pretty pale.

A touch of makeup could fool most people, and no one at this party knew her well. She kind of felt silly for going. If it wasn't for her aunt needing help, she would have stayed behind. Her hands shook as she reached for the doorknob, wishing that she had a choice.

This would be her first social event since...since... She blew out a breath and straightened her shoulders. This afternoon and evening was about her aunt, not her. If she focused on Aunt Martha's needs, she could get through this.

“Great timing, my darling. Oh, look at you. Very elegant.” Aunt Martha primped Angelica's clothing here and there. “I think that will do fine.”

“Ready?” Angelica asked. “Should I bring your pills in case you want to stay late?”

Aunt Martha waved her comment away. “The late hours are for the youngsters like you. It will be a good excuse to leave when the time comes.”

Angelica smiled at the foresight of her aunty as she helped her out of the house and down the porch steps. A neighbor

slowed down to wave as they reached their car, and Aunt Martha waved back.

“That’s the Smiths. They’ll be late if they are just getting home.” She grunted as she bent to get into her seat. “Well, the doctor said twelve weeks, and I think I’m doing pretty well for six.”

“You kidding?” Angelica said as she folded the walker and put it in the backseat. “I don’t think anything could stop you.”

“Well, one day that something will come, but I still have several good years left. I’ll simply have to get a few parts changed out so my body can keep up with me.” She laughed, ending with a sigh as Angelica eased into the driver’s seat. “I sure am grateful to have you here, Angie. You’re a God-send.”

“Sometimes, I feel like you’re the one helping me heal,” she said, giving a soft smile.

“Well, that’s the way it should be, dear. Now come on. There’s a surprise waiting for you at the party tonight.”

Angelica’s stomach flip-flopped so strongly she almost slammed on the brake instead of easing on the gas as they pulled out onto the road. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“Oh, only an old friend of yours has come back to town.” She tried to shrug it off, but that twinkle in her eyes when she was up to her matchmaking sparkled like it was the Fourth of July.

Angelica’s heart raced as she focused on driving. She knew exactly who her aunt was talking about. It wasn’t too long ago

that she would have reveled in a visit with the handsome deputy that Aunt Martha kept throwing at her. Now...now things were different. She was different.

It had been at least a year since she had seen Kevin. Long enough that she should have been able to get him out of her mind. Yet, his image came instantly into her memory, those flashing hazel eyes, his gentle touch from hands so large they didn't seem like they could be gentle, and his smell...spicy and earthy, just like a cowboy should smell.

She sighed without thinking, noticing Aunt Martha's pleased expression. "Turn right up here, dear. There you go. That long driveway right here."

Angelica's heart hammered, and she gripped the steering wheel tightly as she wove up the long, winding driveway to the front of Jordan's large estate.

They were one of the first ones here, but she didn't have to guess where to park. She stopped the car behind the one in front of her, leaving enough room to pull out if they needed an early escape. Some lessons are ones you can't forget.

Always leave an escape route. Always.

A shiver coursed through her, but she shook it off and focused on her aunt.

"You'll do fine," Aunt Martha said, patting her arm before Angelica left the car to retrieve the walker. "I really wish I

could leave that behind.” She scrunched up her face as Angelica set up the walker in front of her.

“You heard the doctor. Not yet. At least another few weeks. When we go to your appointment, he’ll reassess.”

“Reassess...” she muttered, using the walker to help her stand. “I think I know my own body.”

“You’re too stubborn to admit it if your body wasn’t ready, Aunty. Listen to the doctor so you can heal right the first time.”

“Always the voice of reason.” She rolled her eyes but gave Angelica a smile. “Come on. I want to get a good seat, so I can see all the action, being as I’ll be stuck in one place most of the night.”

The remnants of their first snow sat in drifts under the trees and in shady areas, but the late afternoon sun had warmed the air and melted the rest. Guided by the signs, they followed the deck around the back of the house.

They had transformed the backyard into a magical wonderland with twinkling fairy lights strung among the trees, creating a cozy and romantic ambiance. A delightful scent of hot apple cider teased Angelica as Aunt Martha led them to a table where a kerosene heater was lit, radiating warmth.

“Ahh, this will do nicely.” Aunt Martha looked at the few people milling about. “I can see whoever comes and goes, as well as the ceremony and the dance floor. And here’s the blushing bride now.”

“Oh, Mrs. Manning,” Caitlin said, rushing over to them. “I’m so glad you found your table.” She drew Aunt Martha into her arms with a warm squeeze.

“I’m glad we got it right. I hadn’t thought to look for placements,” Angelica said.

“Oh, we don’t have arranged seating, only one particular table for a very special woman.” Caitlin winked.

“You know me too well, Caity, dear.” Her smile warmed.

Caitlin took Angelica’s hands in her own. “It’s good to see you, Angelica. I’m so glad you were available to come help your aunt after her surgery.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Angelica said, surprised at the warmth of Caitlin’s hands.

Caitlin reached up to adjust the outdoor patio heater. “There, I’ve turned it on max. Right now, it’s not too bad, but after the sun goes behind those trees...” She shivered as she glanced at the sun just above the tall evergreens surrounding her house. “I want you two to stay warm.”

“Thank you, dear. Now, I know you have more important things to do than fiddle around with us. So go on...and Caitlin, you look stunning.”

Caitlin beamed before pulling up her poofy skirts and rushing back to where Jordan and Derrick were setting up lights near the dance floor.

“Looks like it will be a delightful party,” Aunt Martha said. “See, there’s a DJ setting up now. Oh, is that little Ronnie

Piper? It is. He went off to the big city last year to try out his fortune. I wonder if he made it.”

Angelica watched the young man as he set up the expensive-looking gear with efficiency. “Well, we can wish the best for him.”

“That’s right, my darling,” Aunt Martha said, patting her hand. “Now, there’s one particular cowboy we’re keeping an eye out for.”

Angelica’s cheeks heated. She distracted herself by fingering the winter-themed centerpieces of pinecones, holly, and candles. The breeze brought the scent of apple cider to them once again.

“How about you get us some of that cider? I see you draw in a deep breath every time the wind shifts towards us.” Aunt Martha waved her toward the table where cider was warming in crock pots and cups waited to be filled.

As Angelica poured out the second cup, people streamed around the house as if the floodgates had opened, washing the entire town of Hope Lake into the Myers’ backyard. The wave of people started towards her, the sound of their voices a cacophony that threatened to send her into a flashback.

She focused on the warmth of the cups in her hands, watching the hot liquid ripple with each step. Closing off all other senses, she maneuvered through the growing crowd to where her aunt waited, no longer people-watching, but eyes intent on her.

Angelica glanced up at Aunt Martha, doing her best to give her a confident smile to show she was alright. Her aunt's eyes widened, but the warning expression didn't come soon enough. A cowboy stepped back into her, jostling the hot cider onto her hands and wrists.

Angelica gasped, then sucked in her lips against the pain that lanced her hands. *It's only hot cider. I'm okay. I'm okay.*

"Oh, geez, miss, I'm sorry," the older cowboy said, dipping his hat.

She tried to give a nod, but the sounds of laughter, conversation, music, and cups clinking came rushing in at once and black spots danced before her eyes. Through the dimming light, she saw Aunt Martha through the crowd, leaning on the table as she reached for her walker.

Angelica took a step toward her, all of her senses feeling muted in the odd way that happened as she struggled against flashbacks. She tensed as a warm hand touched her low back, and a slow, deep voice spoke soothingly.

"Here," he said, taking the cups from her hands and wrapping cloth napkins on her scalded skin. "Is it bad?"

The scent of earth and spice enveloped her, teasing her back from the edge of the past that wanted to consume her. He came around her then, bending low to look into her eyes. His flashing hazel eyes met hers, only to darken in concern.

He pulled his gaze from hers, scanning the crowd until it rested on her aunt. "Come on. Let's get you seated."

“The...the drinks...” she squeaked out.

“I’ll come back for them,” he said. He reached for her hand, but stopped before he touched the red flesh, wrapping an arm around her waist instead. Guiding her through the crowd, or more like bulldozing a way through, he helped her reach her seat without further incident.

“Oh, dear. Angie, are you hurt?” Aunt Martha fiddled with the napkins on Angelica’s hands.

“Let’s see how bad the damage is, huh?” Kevin said, gently turning her hands this way and that way in the fading light. He grasped the edge of her sleeve, pulling it up.

Angelica tugged it back down and hid her hands in her lap. “They’ll be fine. Thank you. Just a little scalded.” She couldn’t meet his eyes. The way he had frozen as he pulled up her sleeve, she knew she hadn’t been fast enough. He had seen the raw marks on her wrists.

“I...I’ll go get those drinks,” Kevin said, glancing at her, but she kept her gaze on the hands in her lap.

“Dear, maybe you should tell him,” Aunt Martha wrung her hands before reaching for hers again. “Are you sure you aren’t hurt?”

“The burns aren’t bad, Aunty,” she said, looking at her red skin, but the sting was already fading and no blisters were rising. “It wasn’t that hot. It was the shock.”

Angelica glanced up then, following the tight Wranglers through the crowd. As if he could feel her stare, he turned

back toward her, his look of concern fading into a soft smile as he met her eyes.

“Maybe he could help you heal,” Aunt Martha whispered in her ear.

“I’m different now, Aunty...I’m not the same person I was the last time he saw me.” She kept her eyes on Kevin as he mingled his way back toward them.

“You are, my darling; you simply have more layers now.” Aunt Martha gave her a squeeze. The show of love and understanding made Angelica’s eyes sting, and she blinked back the tears as Kevin slowly closed in on their table once again.



Kevin smiled politely, answering questions as briefly as he could without being impolite. All he wanted to do was get back to the table where Angelica sat, looking like the angel she was...although something had happened to the lady who had filled his dreams for the past year.

The horror that he had seen in her eyes hadn’t come from the hot cider spilt on her hands. It went deeper. He had seen the look before...in the eyes of the girl he had rescued. Then the mark on her wrist that he glimpsed right before she pulled her hands away.

He gulped, a sensation like liquid fire slipping down into his stomach. It seemed like everyone and their cousin wanted to

welcome him back to town, but all he cared about was finding out who had hurt his girl and getting his hands on him.

“Armstrong!” Jordan slapped his back, pulling him from his dark thoughts. “Glad you could make it.”

“Congratulations, man,” Kevin said, forcing his focus on the man of the hour. “Love how you dressed the place up.”

“Yeah.” He glanced around the now very full backyard. “That part was all Caitlin. She has an eye for dressing things up.”

“She does,” Kevin said, nodding toward Jordan’s sleek suit and dark, felt cowboy hat.

Jordan laughed. “You think that’s good, wait until you see our little gal,” he said, glancing through the throng of people. “She’s probably charming some poor soul right now. She could talk anyone into giving her the moon.”

“I believe that. She has her mama’s good looks and her daddy’s persistence.” Kevin chuckled.

“Her mama is beautiful.” Jordan’s eyes strayed to his wife, who laughed with a group of ladies but looked toward them with sparkling eyes. “Man, I’ve missed her.”

“I’m glad she came to her senses.” Kevin slapped his shoulder, moving back toward Angelica. He could feel the weight of her eyes on him.

“It’s the town. It just keeps pulling everyone back,” Jordan said, glancing at Angelica and back at Kevin with a wink.

“Maybe you two will stay this time? Or are you too much of a big shot these days to move back to our quiet little town?”

“Quiet?” Kevin arched a brow. “There have been three pretty heavy-duty cases here...including your wife’s in the last couple of years.”

“Yeah, well, how many does that big city of yours get a day?” Jordan folded his arms.

Kevin laughed. “You got me there,” he said.

“I heard you’ve solved some pretty big ones...what was the last one you were on—” Music started playing, freezing Jordan. “Oh, I gotta go, man. We’ll catch up after the talky-talk part!” He waved as he made his way through the crowd.

Kevin’s heart sped as he weaved quickly through the people, intent on getting the seat next to Angelica before anyone else grabbed it. His stomach soured when he saw several others sitting around the table. As he approached, Angelica glanced up at him with a small smile, dispelling any ill feelings. She scooted from her seat to the one between her and her aunt, who hastily removed her purse.

“You didn’t think we’d leave you high and dry after you saved my niece, did you?” Mrs. Manning said with a wink.

“No, Ma’am, I guess I shouldn’t think any less of you,” Kevin said gratefully as he sat next to Angelica, breathing in her faint floral scent. “How are your hands, Angelica?”

“They’re fine. Thank you.” She pulled them into her lap and tugged on her sleeves.

He watched her closely, wanting to demand to know what had happened to her, but the tense way she held her shoulders and her averting eyes...he knew he needed to bide his time. She watched him from the corner of her eye, and he smiled amiably.

“How long are you in town for?”

“At least until my aunt heals,” she said.

“I had a hip replacement,” Mrs. Manning added helpfully.

“Oh, did everything go well?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. It just takes forever to heal. How about you? How long are you staying?”

“I, uh, well,” he stammered while the older lady watched him closely and Angelica bit her lip, though she still wouldn’t meet his eyes. How could he tell the town gossip why he was here, or that he did not know how long? The music shifted, drawing eyes toward the arbor where the ceremony was to take place.

“Oh, they’re starting,” Mrs. Manning cheered, turning from him to watch as Jordan and Caitlin walked hand-in-hand to the arbor where Pastor Ramsey waited.

Kevin didn’t really listen to everything the pastor was saying about marriage and the steadfastness of love. Some of it filtered in, but mostly his thoughts were preoccupied with the gal sitting next to him.

Her body softened as the preacher went on, her head bobbing in agreement from time to time, making him wish he had been

listening better. When Jordan said his piece, something about fate and time and nothing keeping them apart, Angelica dabbed at her eyes.

It seemed the entire crowd wiped their eyes and cleared their throats as Caitlin's emotion-strained voice spoke of the forgiveness of love and how fear would never separate them again. Angelica's shoulders shook slightly, and without taking the time to think about his response, he wrapped a comforting arm around her.

She stiffened slightly; then, with a heavy sigh, she leaned against his arm as if his touch was everything she needed at that moment. That feeling caused his heart to gallop as fast as the cows while in a stampede on his family's ranch.

Somehow that one action, or was it the reaction to his action, made him feel more like a man than getting sworn into the FBI. That instinct to protect her kicked into high gear, and he decided he wouldn't leave her side that night unless it was to get something for her.

Applause deafened him as joyous cheers filled the backyard. He stood with everyone else, whistling and cheering, while Jordan and Caitlin, with their little girl in their arms, greeted the crowd.

"Let's party!" Jordan yelled, and the joyous cheers turned into hoots of excitement.

As the evening progressed, the sun set, and the backyard came alive with the warm glow of candles and string lights. The dance floor filled with couples swaying to romantic

melodies, and the laughter of children playing in between the tables and at the edge of the trees added an extra layer of joy to the celebration.

The small-town wedding in the backyard was a testament to the magic of winter, the beauty of nature, and the power of love. It was an unforgettable night that brought together a close-knit community to celebrate two of their own, and it filled Kevin's heart full of homesickness.

"You okay?" Angelica asked, resting a tentative hand over his. "You look like you swallowed an egg."

At the joke, he exaggeratingly swallowed. "Got it down now."

She awarded him with a small giggle, her smile lingering. "Really. You're okay?"

"Yeah, just, you know how some moments strike you harder than others? I think I missed being here. The city...well, it's just not Hope Lake."

A shiver shook her thin body. "No...no, it's not."

Mrs. Manning leaned over. "You two don't need to babysit me. Go on. Dance. Have fun. Be free. That's what your twenties are all about."

Kevin forced a chuckle, thinking how little left of his twenties he had. When he caught Mrs. Manning's eye and nod of the head, he rose and lowered a hand to Angelica. "Care to dance?"

“Oh, I, uh, I don’t know...” Her eyes widened as she looked from him to her aunt and back.

“Go on, dear. I won’t go anywhere, I promise. I’m going to people-watch for a while.” Mrs. Manning gently pushed her. “You need some fun, Angie. Let yourself have some.” She had lowered her voice, but Kevin had heard the words of encouragement that had Angelica looking down at her hand as she slipped it into his.

Her fingers were so slender and small, and his hands seemed to swallow them up. He led her toward the dance floor, and she came easily with him. The song changed as they stepped onto the wooden floor to one with a slow beat, an emotional song of love and forever, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He held her hands up to get a closer look under the strung lights. “No blisters,” he said. Then he kissed the tops, telling himself not to try to glimpse the scars under the sleeves as much as he wanted to. He set her hands on his shoulders and placed his on her back to gently pull her closer. “You don’t mind?”

She shook her head slightly, but she bit her lip again. He traced a hand up her back, pulling her closer, urging her to rest her head on his chest. Her cheek felt perfect and warm on his chest, and the top of her beautiful, almost white-blonde head came up to his collarbone. She was light in his arms, almost as if he held an angel.

The homesickness must be getting to him, making his emotions all sappy and filled with longing. Not that he hadn’t

already had thoughts about Angelica, but they had simply been flirty possibilities. These thoughts were different—possessive, and long-lasting.

Had he matured that much in the last year? Or had it been the circumstances that made him realize how fragile a human life was...and now he held fragility herself in his arms.

Though he could see the difference in her, the innocence had somehow melted and yet grown, and under the fear dancing in her eyes, there was a hardness that he had never seen in her before.

He licked his lips, wanting her to know that she could confide in him, although he didn't know how to bring it up without her pushing him away and leaving his arms. He opened his mouth, the rumble of her name coming from his chest as Derrick danced over with Chasity.

“Hey there,” Derrick said, grinning.

“Hey, boss,” Kevin said, heat screaming up his neck.

Angelica gently pushed away to smile sweetly at the other couple.

“Hi, Angelica! It's good to see you,” Chasity said, reaching out to squeeze her arm.

The song transitioned to a faster tune, and they stood more at ease, his arms longing for Angelica to return to them. “Where's the baby?”

“With Grandma.” Chasity smiled, peeking over to see her tiny son being adored by his grandparents. “And Kami is

running after Isabelle.”

“Life is grand,” Derrick said with a sigh. “So, Sunday after church, some of us are going to the lake for a BBQ. You guys will be there, right?”

Kevin glanced down at Angelica when she stiffened slightly.

She blinked several times as everyone looked at her before replying hesitantly, “Oh, well, my aunt...”

“Think she’d be okay for a couple of hours?” Chasity asked. “I could ask Mrs. Fields or one of the other ladies from church to come keep her company. You need time to relax, too. I’m sure she’d agree.”

“I know she would,” Kevin said. “What do you say?”

“Well.” Angelica pressed her lips together for a moment, but Chasity bobbed her head encouragingly. “It’s been quite a while since I’ve had BBQ.”

“Great!” Derrick said. “Then we’ll see you at the lake in a couple of days.”

“Oh, Marshal’s getting fussy.” Chasity drew Angelica into a brief hug and then pulled Kevin into one as well. “I’ll see you two on Sunday.”

Derrick gave Kevin a wink as he followed his wife off the dance floor, leaving Kevin staring after them for a moment. Then he turned to Angelica, who looked as stunned as he felt.

“Uh, I didn’t mean to have myself invited by...maybe they think...” She looked at him with wide eyes.

“They can think whatever they want. I’m just glad you’re going with me.” Kevin wrapped an arm around her as he walked her back toward her aunt.

“As long as my aunt feels comfortable with that...”

“Of course,” Kevin said, pulling out her chair so she could sit.

“Comfortable with what?” Mrs. Manning asked, her eyes dancing, though her brow furrowed with what looked like pain.

“Derrick invited us to the lake on Sunday for a BBQ,” Kevin said, meeting the curious stare of Mrs. Manning.

“Oh, I see. Together?”

Angelica’s cheeks turned a pretty pink. “I don’t have to go. I don’t know if you should be alone yet...”

“Pshaw, I can nap or watch a show. I’ll be fine. You go and have fun.” She winced slightly as she adjusted her position.

“Oh, Aunty! It’s hours after you should have taken your medicine. I’m sorry.” Angelica rose, pulling things together.

“I’m fine, but several people are leaving now. I think it wouldn’t be rude...”

“Of course it wouldn’t,” Angelica said, holding her walker for her as she stood. She looked up at Kevin. “I’m sorry to run out on you like this.”

“You aren’t running out on me. Besides, I’ll see you on Sunday, right? Pick you up at 11:30?”

Angelica opened her mouth, but it was Mrs. Manning that answered. “She’ll be ready.”

Kevin swallowed the laughter that built up in his throat as he watched Angelica, still in shock, leading her aunt through the emptying celebration. Maybe being back wouldn’t be so bad after all.

TWO

“IT’S NOT A DATE, Aunty,” Angelica said for the third time that morning, sighing as she did.

Who had a BBQ in December? And on a lake...a windy lake?

She wrapped her arms around herself as she turned her attention back to her sparse closet. She hadn’t thought about being social during her visit out here, and her closet reflected that.

Aunt Martha grunted as she sat down on Angelica’s bed without an invitation. “I’d go with the pink sweater. It makes your complexion look so pretty, but wear a shirt under it so you don’t get cold. You’ll probably have your winter coat on most of the time, anyway.”

Grudgingly and with no other real options, Angelica took the pink sweater off the hanger and slipped it over the tight thermal top she was already wearing. Then she turned to look in the full-length mirror her aunt had placed in the bedroom.

“Maybe I should just stay here,” she said, hope fleeing with her words.

“Nonsense. Besides, Betsy is coming over to play cribbage and tell me all about the Brown girl. She’s back in town, you know, and lives right across the street from Betsy. And you know that old ninny won’t talk if someone else is here.”

A smile attempted to tug on Angelica’s lips, but the trembling was too great. “I can hide out in here.”

“Look,” Aunt Martha began, her voice softening. “There are things in life that happen to us. They aren’t our fault. They aren’t fair. But if we let those things decide who we are, then we let them win.” She patted the bed next to her.

Angelica sat down heavily, keeping her focus on her hands in her lap.

“Angie, it’s time to take your life back. It’s easy to get stuck in wallowing it away. What happened to you was horrific, but if you stay here,” she tapped Angelica’s head, “then that monster, as you call him, wins. Is that what Brittany would want?”

Angelica snapped her head up and glared at her aunt, both startled and upset that she would mention her lost best friend.

“I’m sorry, my darling.” Aunt Martha laid a hand on hers and gave them a little squeeze. “Sometimes being honest hurts, but what kind of aunt would I be if I didn’t push you to return to life? It can be wonderful...it can be full of love.”

Angelica pulled her eyes away again, feeling the sting of tears filling them. She knew her aunt was right, but it didn't help the feeling of betrayal or aloneness.

Aunt Martha didn't understand. Her parents didn't understand. No one had been through something like her... they did not know what that ordeal had done to her, how it changed her into someone else...someone who didn't want to live life like normal.

Aunt Martha's soft sigh filled the room with sadness as she used her walker to pull herself to a stand. "I love you, Angie. You will get through this. I know you, and you are not one to give up. That's why you're still here with me today."

Guilt tore through Angelica, and she swallowed back her self-pity. "Thank you, Aunty." She knew her words didn't sound convincing, but she did her best...she always did her best.

A timer dinged from the kitchen. "Oh good. They're done in time enough to cool." Aunt Marha paused at the door. "Finish getting ready, dear, and try to find a way to live in the moment while you are with friends." She hastened down the hall as quickly as her walker would let her, the tantalizing scent of cookies breezing into the room in her wake.

Friends.

They really weren't her friends. Sure, Jordan and Derrick and all their wives had always been friendly with her, but that didn't make them friends. Her throat swelled as images of

Brittany flashed through her mind. Brittany was her friend... and now she was gone.

And Angelica hadn't saved her.

The sound of a truck rumbling as it parked in front of her aunt's house had her breathing in her sobs and running to the bathroom. She couldn't go out there all red-eyed and puffy-faced.

After splashing some cool water on her face, holding the cold wash rag against her eyes, and applying a touch of mascara, she ran the brush through her hair a few more times and gave herself a once over.

Angelica shook her head as she averted her eyes from the image in the mirror. It never did any good. She didn't look the same, and never would. Her eyes stared back at her, haunted, and she couldn't see that ever changing.

"Angelica," Aunt Martha sing-songed down the hall.

Angelica drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly before pushing herself through her doorway and taking the steps down the hall. Kevin's deep voice filled the house, the low rumble unintelligible but soothing.

"Hello, Angelica." Kevin stood from the table where an empty napkin and a few cookie crumbs were. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You know, I've always loved your aunt's cookies."

"Oh, good, because I made extra so you could take some to the BBQ." Aunt Martha finished wrapping a plate loaded with

cookies and handed them to Angelica. “Now, you two have a good time and don’t worry about me. No rush to come home.”

Angelica kissed her aunt on the cheek and whispered to her, “I thought you were making these for Betsy?”

Aunt Martha patted her back, gently pushing her toward the door. “You just enjoy yourself, dear. Thank you, Officer Armstrong. I know my niece will be in good hands with you.”

“You bet,” Kevin said, “but it’s not Officer anymore...”

Aunt Martha waved away his comment and rushed them out the door.

“Well,” he said with a laugh, “I guess you’re ready?” He glanced at the coat she had barely had time to grab.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said, pushing forth a smile.

“I thought you might be the shy type,” he said as he opened the door for her. “That’s why I offered to pick you up. Sometimes it’s easier to arrive with someone else. You know, a backup.” He winked before he shut the door and rounded the truck to the driver’s seat.

“Having a backup is always a good idea,” she said, her voice sounding tiny and weak. Her fingers unconsciously went to her wrists, feeling the warbled healing skin, unable to stop thinking that having a backup hadn’t worked for Brittany.

“It really is,” Kevin said, a little more seriously. “Though sometimes even a backup is not enough.” He stopped the truck at the stop sign and turned toward her. “Are you sure you want

to go? We could go for a drive instead or do something with fewer people?”

She glanced at him in surprise, her pulse racing and her heart swelling at the thoughtfulness of the man next to her. She had seen his eagerness, though, and knew that he was looking forward to the BBQ. “It’s okay. I’m sure you are hungry and want to see your friends.”

“Hey, we’ve got your aunt’s cookies. That’s all I need.” He laughed, and she let herself smile a little. “Besides, I mean, I know them all, but it’s kind of one of the first times they’ve invited me to hang out with them socially.” He shrugged.

“All the more reason to go. I’ll be okay.” She gave him a nod.

“Okay, if you’re sure,” he said, putting the truck back into gear and pulling down the road.

“I had thought you knew them all better. Guess you’re more in the same boat than I thought.” She smiled at him, the expression feeling more genuine.

“I couldn’t think of better company to have in my boat,” he said, his neck slightly reddening as she felt the heat filling her cheeks. “Derrick was my boss. He’s always been friendly and talked about hanging out, but we never did. Now...” His jaw clenched for a moment and he blew out a breath. “Well, let’s just say he’s no longer my boss...for now.”

“For now?” she asked, though she knew she had no right to do so, which had her quickly backpedaling. “I’m sorry. It’s not

my place to ask.”

“It’s okay.” He pulled up to the park to hoots and hollers while Derrick, Jordan, and a couple of other guys waved them over. “Obviously, I don’t have time to go into it right now, but a lot of things are up in the air.” He shrugged and hopped out of the truck, striding to her side and standing there as she opened the door.

He held out his hand to help her down. Though she didn’t need the help, it felt nice to be cared for, so she took his hand. After he shut the door behind her, he didn’t let go of it. Instead, he seemed to search her eyes as if asking permission to hold on to it.

“Backup?” He squeezed his fingers around her hand and gave her a lopsided smile that melted her heart.

She had no business leading him on by holding his hand or looking at him as she knew she was doing right now. There was a sense of safety in his touch, though, and that feeling filled so many holes in her heart.

“You guys made it!” Chasity said as she bounced her son.

“Sodas are in the cooler, man!” Derrick said, nodding to the cooler next to Jordan as he flipped the burgers.

“We’ve got coke, root beer, orange soda, and a few of these bubbly water things the girls seem to like.” Jordan sifted through the drinks.

“Grab a watermelon water for Angelica,” Caitlin said, taking it from Jordan while giving him a brief kiss. “Thanks, my

love.”

“I’ll take a root beer, thanks,” Kevin said.

“Hey, how are you at tossing the ball?” Tyler spun a football in the air and caught it.

“I did rodeo in high school, but I kept up with my jock buddies in PE,” Kevin answered with a smile. “That’s been some years ago.”

“For all of us,” Jordan joked, slapping Kevin on the back. “Let your gal go get warm with the wives, and we’ll warm up the way men do.”

Caitlin rolled her eyes. “They never grow up,” she said, taking Angelica’s arm.

Kevin met Angelica’s eyes. It surprised her they could pass so much meaning with one glance. With just that look, she knew he asked if she would be okay in the hands of the ladies, or if she wanted him to stay. The knowing both warmed her and scared her.

“Have fun,” she said, stuffing the whirling emotions filling her.

The guys ran onto the sand, laughing and teasing each other as they tossed the football, even playfully semi-tackling each other as they went for the catch. She noted another guy joined them, the quiet friend she had seen around.

“Oh, glad Shane made it.” Chasity nodded toward the newcomer. Tyler is moving pretty well these days.”

“Yes, his leg is healing nicely. I don’t know if he’ll ever leave that limp completely behind, and he’ll be sore tonight, but he doesn’t let it stop him.” Megan smiled, then turned to Angelica. “I’m Megan, by the way. I know we’ve seen each other around, but I don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced.”

“Angelica,” she said, swallowing her shyness as she took the other woman’s hand.

“How long have you and Kevin...?” Megan asked.

“Oh...uh...we, well, we aren’t...I mean...” Angelica’s face felt like it was on fire as she dropped her gaze to her hands.

“It’s okay,” Caitlin said, giving Megan a wide-eyed look. “We all started in that *not sure what to call it, if anything* phase.” She laughed.

“Even you?” Chasity asked. “The way I hear it, you and Jordan always were an item.”

“Well, as friends we were stuck in that *not sure what to call it* phase for a looong time,” Caitlin said.

“I hear ya there,” Chasity said, her face taking on a thoughtful expression.

A car door slammed nearby, the loud sound surprising a gasp from Angelica. Blackness began invading her sight, and she drew in a deep breath. *Not now. Not now.*

“Hey,” Megan smoothed a hand down her back. “It’s okay.”

“You’re safe,” Chasity chimed in.

Angelica drew in deep breaths, slowing her heart rate. Soon the black spots disappeared, and her eyes focused on the three women's faces...all with expressions of understanding.

How in the world did they know...?

"Ugh, I hate those," Caitlin said, sitting next to her. "Wait..." She turned to Angelica. "What...when...?" She glanced out to Kevin. "Does he know?"

Panic raced through Angelica, causing her heart to speed up once more. She licked her lips and stared wide eyed at the women.

"It's okay," Megan said, sitting on her other side. "Gals, she might not be ready to talk yet."

"All of you?" Angelica asked, shaking her head.

"Well, some of us had it worse than others," Megan said, glancing at Chasity.

"True, well, I'm sure you know my story," Caitlin said, wrapping an arm around Angelica in a supportive way. "Your aunt is the one who saved me. The entire ordeal was over in a matter of minutes because of her." She looked at Chasity. "And your hubby and Jordan, of course."

"It was a town doing," Chasity said, though her tone had turned solemn and internal. Angelica hadn't noticed it before, but looking at the woman now, she could see that same look she saw in her eyes when she looked in the mirror.

"We kind of recognize our own, you know?" Megan said. "When you're ready, we're here."

“We actually get together every Wednesday morning, right here, go for a walk on the lakeshore while the kids run around, and we talk.” Chasity gazed out to where her daughter and Krista followed little Isabelle as she ran around in the sand.

“Anytime you feel like it, just show up. Nine a.m.” Caitlin gave her arm a squeeze and stood as the men came stumbling over.

“Food’s ready,” Derrick said, setting a tray of burgers down on the table with a flourish.

Kevin took the place Caitlin vacated, sliding a hand down Angelica’s back and leaning toward her as he sat. “You doing okay?”

“Yep.” She glanced at the ladies, then back at him. “I am actually. You?”

“Yeah. Felt good to have some active fun.” He smiled at her, his eyes lingering for a moment before he answered Derrick by taking a plate and filling it up.

Angelica drew in a deep breath. Today hadn’t erased all her fears, but it had given her hope that one day...one day, maybe she could be at least somewhat normal again, like the other gals.



Kevin didn’t want the day to end, but as the sun sank lower in the sky, Angelica glanced at her phone more often. He knew

she was worried about her aunt. The queasy feeling of selfishness wormed into his gut, so he slid next to her as she watched Isabelle twirling.

“Hey,” he said, keeping his voice soft so as not to startle her.

“Isn’t she adorable?” Angelica asked, a gleam in her eyes that he hadn’t seen on this visit.

“She is.” He leaned back a little, laying his arm on the table she sat against. “I could see you like that as a little girl.”

“Me?” she asked, glancing at him before focusing on the girl again. “No. I was much too shy to perform in front of a group like this.”

“Well, most of them are like family to Isabelle. That’s different, isn’t it?” He watched her profile, loving how her nose scrunched slightly when she thought.

“Maybe for some, but not me. I wouldn’t even perform for my parents, really.” She shrugged. “But this one, she has confidence.”

“Who?” Caitlin asked from the other side of Angelica. “My little girl? No way,” she said with a laugh. “She’s her daddy’s little girl, all show-offy.”

“Hey, I’m not a show-off,” Jordan called from the other end of the table, and everyone burst into laughter. “Fine,” he said good-naturedly. “When you got it, you got it. What can I say?”

Kevin’s heart warmed at hearing a soft giggle come from Angelica’s lips, and he hated to dispel the mood. So he waited

until she checked her phone again. “Anything from your aunt?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “She’s stubborn. Probably wouldn’t call me even if she had fallen and broken the other hip.” She sighed.

“Wanna go?” Kevin asked.

“I feel like I should,” she said, sucking in her lips and meeting his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s been a wonderful day.”

“Mama, I hungry again, and horsy is cold,” Isabelle said, climbing into Caitlin’s lap, clutching her toy horse.

“Looks like it’s time,” Caitlin said, standing up with Isabelle in her arms.

Chasity bounced her little one who was fussing in her arms. “I think so, too.”

“The ladies have spoken,” Jordan said, grabbing up the food containers. “Well, guys. Let’s do this again. Maybe next time at my place where it’s not so cold for the little ones.”

“Christmas is coming soon,” Derrick said.

“Soon as in two weeks,” Chasity added, raising her eyes like his mom did when his dad had forgotten something. “We still have to finish our shopping.”

“Everyone staying in town?” Jordan asked, looking at each family until they nodded. Then he came to Kevin. “What about you, man?”

“Oh, I, uh.” Kevin tugged at his shirt. “You know my family’s ranch is only down the road.”

“Good, so you’ll be able to make it. What about you, sweet thing?” Jordan asked, looking at Angelica, whose cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink.

She stepped closer to Kevin, making his heart gallop at the feeling that rushed through him.

“Don’t tease her; she doesn’t know you well enough to know that’s just how you talk.” Caitlin elbowed him and rolled her eyes. “Ignore him. Will you still be in Hope Lake, Angelica?”

“I, uh, I think so. I’ll know for sure after my aunt’s appointment next week...but don’t feel like you have to...I mean, I’m only...”

“...a friend. We’d love to have you over,” Caitlin said, taking her into a quick embrace, with Isabelle squealing and giggling in the middle. “Won’t we, sweetie?”

“Yes!” she squealed and blew a kiss to everyone. “Bye-bye!”

Kevin rested his hand on Angelica’s back as they said goodbyes and walked toward his truck. They remained silent until he climbed into the driver’s seat. After starting the engine, he glanced at her. “So, was I a good enough backup?”

She smiled, a genuine smile that stayed on her lips. “Yes, thank you. Did you have fun?”

“I did,” he said, realizing that surprised him. “I haven’t really been social since school, but I think I might like it.”

He backed the truck out of the parking space and stopped at the exit, seeing the tail end of a blue sedan screech around the corner toward downtown. It pulled him from his thoughts, and he turned the wheel in anticipation of racing after the familiar car that he kept seeing.

“You okay?” Angelica asked, startling him, making him turn back to her and see the worry etched on her brow, turning her eyes into pure sweetness.

“Yeah, I thought...” He shook off the feeling and rolled his shoulders, pushing a smile to his face. “Yes, I’m fine. Let’s get you back to your aunt.”

He thought he pulled it off, but Angelica continued to watch him with that same sweet, concerned expression. When they pulled up in front of her aunt’s, she didn’t move to get out, but turned toward him instead.

“You must have seen a lot of...scary things in the FBI, huh?” She sucked in her lips, but she didn’t tear her gaze away. In fact, she seemed to search his eyes.

He shut off the truck and blew out a breath. “I saw that there is more evil in this world than I had hoped, yes.”

They sat there, their eyes searching each other, and in hers, he saw a fear and a knowing that he wanted to ask about. A fierce protectiveness raged through him, but he felt the walls just beyond his reach and knew she wasn’t ready yet.

“I know you have to go in now, but...” He swallowed, an entirely different kind of fear snaking its way around his heart.

“It would be nice to have someone to talk with...maybe even for both of us?”

She averted her gaze. “I...I, uh, I’m not sure I’m ready to hear about the evil in this world, Kevin. I want to be here for you...I...I don’t know...I’m not the...” She sighed and blinked rapidly. “I’m sorry.”

“I see,” he said, clearing his throat, not sure he really did see or what had just happened. Whatever it was, he knew she was pulling away, and that hurt. It was only a bruised ego, of course. “Well, thanks for coming today.”

She nodded, keeping her face averted though he saw the strain at the corner of her mouth. “Thank you. It was...a good day.” She slipped out of the truck, gently shutting the door behind her.

On the porch, she turned for a moment to raise a hand in farewell before sliding into the house. He swore there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

The day had not ended at all like he had hoped it would, not after they seemed to get along so well and how she settled against him with every touch. He scratched his head, took one last long look at the house where she had disappeared, then drove back to the beach house where Megan and Tyler were graciously letting him stay.



The next week he had online hearings to attend where the Special Agent in Charge (SAC) of the field office he was assigned to question him relentlessly about the case with the little girl that he saved. Sarah. Her name was Sarah.

Sarah was home now with her parents, safe in her house, surrounded by her toys and sleeping in her own bed. Had he overstepped in order to get her there?

Well, that's what they were investigating, he guessed. In his mind, though, who cares what it took to get her out of the hands of the man who was hurting her? He hadn't harmed any innocent civilians, and the bad guy would never hurt another little girl again.

He pushed away his laptop in disgust, leveling his gaze on the lakeshore instead. The view of the lake only reminded him of his failure with Angelica. It seemed everywhere he turned, he hit another wall...another failure.

Frustration and self-pity...or maybe it was self-loathing, had him pushing back his chair and grabbing his running shoes. He needed to let off steam, to work out his frustrations the only way he knew how—through physical activity.

He had already been on a run that morning but had to call it short as the frozen air burned his lungs. The afternoon sun glittered on the lake as he stepped onto the deck and drew in a deep breath. The air had warmed, still cool, but no longer made his lungs feel on fire.

He let his muscles warm up the first mile, then turned on the speed, enjoying the feel of his feet digging into the sand.

Running hadn't come naturally for him. If he had been home at the ranch, he would have taken out his horse and let the horse do the running for him as he let the wind whip across his face.

He slowed his pace back to a jog as a surprising sense of homesickness filled him. Maybe he would go to the ranch for Christmas...he missed his siblings and his parents. The pain clenching his chest had him easing into a walk, holding his hands on his head. What would they think when they found out that not even a year in and he was under investigation?

They had been so proud of him when he was accepted into the FBI. Their faces beamed, and he heard them raving about his accomplishments throughout their small town and on the phone with family and friends. And now?

He lowered his arms, slowing further as he realized he had arrived downtown. His throat was raw, from the cold air of course, and he wiped the sweat from his head with his sweatshirt sleeve, heading toward Mom & Pop's to grab a water bottle.

As he reached for the door, a blue car caught his eye, and he stood frozen, looking at it.

"Ooof," a quiet, sweet voice muttered as a slight lady ran into his chest.

His hands went out to steady her, knowing already by the scent that it was Angelica, before his eyes tore away from the car to verify his prediction. "Are you alright?"

“Yes, I, oh, hi, Kevin,” she said, stepping back to look up at him, her cheeks turning that shade of pink that made her face glow. “I’m sorry...I didn’t see you.”

“No, it was my fault. There was a...” He turned, remembering the car, but it had gone. He shook his head, giving his attention back to Angelica. “How are you?”

“Okay, and you?”

“Okay. Actually...not that great.” He let out a nervous chuckle, taking her elbow and leading her out of the doorway as the mechanic’s garage owner came out of the store with a bag in his arms. “Good afternoon, Henry.”

“Good to see you, Officer Armstrong. You coming back to Hope Lake?” Henry stopped.

“I, um, we’ll see,” Kevin said, smiling. “Tell Betsy we say hello.”

“Will do. See you around. Bye, Angelica,” Henry said, nodding to them before crossing the street to his shop.

“So, you were saying you’re not doing great?” Angelica asked, that sweet furrowed brow almost making him forget what troubled him.

“Oh, uh, just work stuff,” he said with a shrug.

“You’re working while you are here?”

“Well, no, not really.” He shrugged again, remembering how she reacted the last time he started talking about his work. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to trouble you. Here. Let me take that

for you.” He took the bag from her hands and looked down the street for her car.

She followed him silently until he stopped at her car, opening the passenger side to set down the bag. “I guess it shouldn’t surprise me that you know what car I drive.”

Kevin chuckled. “I learned the art of observation even before I was a deputy...especially when it involves pretty girls...I mean, women...I mean...” He rubbed the back of his neck as heat seared his skin.

Her smile was soft and sweet, like it was before he had mentioned unloading about his work...and her trusting him enough to talk to him.

She glanced down the road, then at his sweats. “You ran down here?”

“Got to stay in shape,” he said.

She glimpsed color between the store and the lake, where the sun created glorious colors across the water melding with the horizon. “Oh,” she said, turning fully toward the sunset.

“This, right here, is one reason I missed Hope Lake.”

“The city has nothing on this,” she said breathlessly.

They stood side by side as the colors shifted from pink and orange to purple as twilight covered the lake. She shifted her weight then, smiling shyly at him as if she had forgotten he stood next to her. “I’m sorry...those sunsets...they remind me that life can be miraculous.”

He watched her for several moments before nodding. “Yes, it can be.” The last rays of the colors glowed around her, reflecting in her soft, beautiful hair, making him want to reach out and touch the silky strands.

She delicately cleared her throat. “Would you like a ride home? It’s getting dark now...” As she said the words, her eyes scanned the area, and she moved hesitantly to the driver’s side.

He reached for the passenger seat door without thought and took the bag he had set in there, holding it on his lap as he sat. “Thank you,” he said, as she started the car. “It’s nice to have backup.”

She smiled at that. While they drove through town, Christmas lights illuminated one by one, as if their presence triggered them, transforming the downtown area into a scene straight out of a holiday storybook. “Oh, look at that. That was kind of magical.” She laughed, a tinselly, magical sound itself.

“It was,” he said, unable to take his eyes off of her. She was a cautious driver, but still came to the beach house too soon. “Did I tell you I was staying here?” he asked, one eyebrow arching.

Her cheeks blushed. “No, but, well, you know my aunt.”

“Yes, I do. She probably knew the moment I came into town.” He laughed.

“Was it about an hour before Jordan and Caitlin’s event?”

His eyes grew wide. “Wow. She’s good.”

She giggled, one tiny hand covering her mouth as she did. “She’s quite the character, for sure.”

“And brave, too. I don’t think there is anything that woman won’t do for someone in this town.”

Angelica blinked her eyes rapidly. “Thank you for seeing her that way.”

“It’s only facts. That’s my job, remember? To state facts.”

“Oh, is that it? I thought it was to protect those who needed it.” She teased, but there was a serious note behind the words.

“Do you need protection?” he asked, keeping his tone light and flirtatious, but he knew his eyes spoke of the intensity that he felt.

She swallowed, her eyes widening. “I...I should get back...”

“To your aunt. I know.” He sighed, realizing he once again ruined what could have been a perfect moment. “It was wonderful seeing you again, Angelica. Thank you for the ride.” He reached for the door, awkwardly stepping out with the bag and setting it back into the seat.

“Of course,” she said, her voice quiet, almost regretful.

That sound of regret gave him a slight taste of hope, and he ducked back in. “May I be your backup next week for Jordan’s Christmas party?”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth made a perfect O before relaxing into a small smile. “Are you sure you want to?”

“Never been surer in my life,” he said. “Pick you up at four.” He closed the door and waved before she could give him a reason not to. The cool air pricked his skin, but he stayed watching her car until it turned out of sight.

“Good evening, Officer Armstrong,” said Mrs. Fields’ knowing voice from the rocker on her front porch.

“A little cold for a front porch sit, isn’t it?” he asked as he made his way to his door.

“Oh, a little winter air is good for the soul.” She winked at him as he slipped inside.

Maybe Mrs. Fields was right, for he felt more alive and happier than he had all week.

THREE

ANGELICA SAT ON THE floor by her aunt's fireplace, the warmth soothing her back as she wrapped presents. She had made a fire that morning, wanting the nostalgic feel of a fire-warmed house to set the holiday mood.

"Tell me again why three presents? I know who you said will be there...so why just three?" Aunt Martha watched her from her recliner where she rested as the last batch of cookies baked.

"One for the host. It's only a bottle of sparkling apple cider." Angelica shrugged. "This one," she pointed to the flat box that was already wrapped, "is for what they call The White Elephant Exchange. It's supposed to be funny."

"Well, I guess Twister is a funny game to watch." Aunt Martha shook her head. "Young people these days," she said, but with a humor-filled voice. "So, what's that last one?"

"It's for..." Heat filled her cheeks as she taped a green bow to the small package.

“Oh, for Officer Armstrong.” Aunt Martha’s eyes sparkled with knowing.

“Kevin, Aunty. He likes to be called Kevin.” She fiddled with the bow. “It’s silly, really. It’s only a beanie for when he goes running and a waist pouch so he can keep his phone with him. If I hadn’t driven him home, he would have had to run back in the dark.”

“It’s a gift that shows you care, dear.”

Her eyes widened. “Then maybe I shouldn’t...I mean I don’t want to lead him on.”

Aunt Martha raised an eyebrow. “And having him pick you up to take you to parties with his friends isn’t leading him on?”

“I...I...” Angelica pursed her lips. Of course, she knew it was, but how could she have refused him with the way he asked and the sideways smile that made her stomach feel all fluttery?

The oven timer went off, prompting her aunt to scoot in her seat and pull up to the edge.

“I’ll get them.” Angelica pushed into a standing position.

“Pshaw.” Aunt Martha waved her away. “How am I going to get stronger with you doing everything for me?” She let out a slight grunt as she pulled into a stand using her walker and grabbed her cane. “Doctor said I could.”

“I know, Aunty, but he said when you felt up to it.” Angelica pushed some chairs back to give her a clear path to the

kitchen.

“Then I will always feel up to it. It’s in here that we decide that, dear,” she said as she passed, tapping on her temple.

Angelica let out a small sigh, but it was filled with love for her stubborn aunt. She scooped down to pick up the presents she had wrapped and set them on the table near her purse. Out of habit, she double checked that her can of pepper spray, small taser, and personal alarm were in there, easy to reach.

“You really think you need those tonight?” Aunt Martha asked in a conversational tone from the kitchen.

How did she know what she was doing? However, Angelica knew why. She checked them anytime she went anywhere, a habit that she hoped she would eventually overcome.

“No, but I didn’t think I did the night they might have made a difference, either.” She kept her tone light, but a shiver went through her.

“I’m sure Offic—Kevin will be a sufficient deterrent, don’t you?”

Angelica joined her aunt in the kitchen where her deft hands wrapped up a plate overloaded with cookies. “Well, he is picking me up to be my backup,” she said, hearing the slight teasing tone she had allowed in.

“Oh, was that his excuse?” Aunt Martha smiled at her, then her smile softened. “So, you told him?”

Angelica’s chest tightened, and she shook her head. “No. I haven’t. He’ll see me differently...and...well, I don’t want to

be treated like a fragile flower.”

Her aunt gave her that look that pierced her heart. “A fragile flower wouldn’t have survived what you went through. I’m sure he knows that...after what he’s been doing.”

“I’m glad he’s back. I mean, I’m sure he did a lot of good in the FBI but to live that way every day.” Another shiver traveled through her.

“Oh, so he is back for good?” Aunt Martha leaned toward her, eager to soak up gossip.

“I...maybe. I thought so, but I haven’t asked him. Aunty, don’t go spreading that because it’s my assumption.” Angelica’s stomach soured thinking that she might have contributed to the rumor mill.

“Oh, I don’t spread any gossip about my niece’s personal life,” she said, cleaning up the kitchen from her baking.

“Hmm, sure you don’t. I saw the way Betsy looked at me on her way out the other day.”

“Oh, well, that’s just Betsy. I mean, if you can’t dream with your friends, then who can you?”

“Dream?” Angelica asked.

“You don’t think I dream of you settling down in Hope Lake for good? I would never expect you to...but if you fell in love with a local?” Aunt Martha shrugged, but Angelica saw the stiffness of her shoulders and the purse of her lips. It meant a lot to her aunt.

“Why have you never told me you wished I was here full-time, Aunty?”

“Oh, you have your life, dear. I don’t want to burden you with my dreams. You’re the type to make yourself feel obligated to make them come true at your own expense.”

Angelica opened her mouth to disagree but realized Aunt Martha was right. Even now she was picturing herself living in Hope Lake long term, something she had only dreamed of for most of her life.

“See?” Aunt Martha said, glancing out the window as a truck parked in front of the house. “Well, looks like your backup has arrived. Don’t forget the cookies.”

Angelica told her thank you as she picked up the smaller plate of cookies.

“Oh, not that one. That’s for Offic—Kevin. The other one is for the party.” Her aunt picked up the smaller plate, and using her cane, shuffled to the door as the knock sounded from the entry. “Merry Christmas, Kevin,” Aunt Martha greeted him.

Angelica froze to hear his reaction to being called by his name and wished she could see his face. As it was, his low voice only held soothing tones, the words too distant to discern.

She slipped her purse on her shoulder, added the presents and cookies to a bag to make them easier to carry, then met them at the door.

“Merry Christmas, Angelica,” Kevin said, smiling from ear to ear as he gave her a slow once-over. “You look beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas, Kevin. Thank you.” Her cheeks burned, heating even more from the look of triumph in her aunt’s eyes. “Ready?”

“Yep. Thank you again, Mrs. Manning, for the cookies. I’m sure everyone will love them.” Kevin tipped his cowboy hat to her.

“Oh, those aren’t for the party,” Angelica said, teasing. She held out the bag for him to see the overloaded plate. “She made the ones you’re holding only for you.”

“That’s right, those go home with you. I appreciate you taking such good care of my niece.” She gave Angelica a kiss on the cheek. “Now, don’t you worry about me. I know when I’m supposed to take my meds, and I won’t wait up for you. So just enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, Aunty. Love you.” Angelica kissed her and slipped out the door.

“Drive safe. The roads will be icy once the sun goes down,” Aunt Martha said, then waved and shut the door against the chill.

Kevin gave a little chuckle as he walked Angelica to the passenger side of the truck. “I love your aunt.”

Angelica arched a humored brow. “Was that sarcastic?”

Kevin shook his head as he held her purse and bag while she climbed in. “No, Ma’am.” He shut the door and hurried to his

side of the truck. “She reminds me of my grandma in some ways. A little gruff, but only to cover the sappiness that is constantly flooding her.”

“That’s a good way to describe her,” Angelica said with a nod. “Not many people understand her. My parents don’t, but I’ve always loved spending time with her. She’s so interesting.”

“She’s walking pretty well now,” he said, his voice sounding almost tentative. “Guess she won’t be needing help after too long.”

Angelica watched him, waiting to see if he would ask her right out, but it wasn’t until they pulled up Jordan’s long driveway that he cleared his throat and glanced at her again.

“Have you ever thought about staying in Hope Lake?” He didn’t glance at her again until he parked the car.

“Thought about it?” Angelica sighed. “Only since I was about twelve. That’s the first summer my parents sent me to stay with Aunty by myself.”

“You’ve been spending summers here since you were twelve?” Kevin asked, turning toward her.

“Yep, my parents liked to travel, and it beat out summer camps.”

“So, they’d travel and send you and your siblings to your aunt’s house?” Kevin’s face screwed up like the thought was so foreign to him.

“No siblings. It’s just me, and the kind of travel they do is not really kid-friendly. I loved my summers with my aunt.” She cocked her head. “What about you? Do you have siblings?”

“Yeah, three of them. My youngest sister is still in school. The other sister is off at college, and my brother has built his own place on the ranch and is slowly taking over for our dad.”

Angelica leaned back in her seat. “Wow. I can’t imagine growing up on a ranch and having brothers and sisters to play with. That must have been heaven.”

“Well,” Kevin hesitated as if he thought about it, “it didn’t always feel like it at the time, but looking back now, it was pretty close to heaven.”

“You going there for Christmas?”

“You know, it wasn’t until right now that I had decided, but I think I will go for the day. It’s only about fifteen minutes down the hill.”

“I bet they’ll be so happy to see you,” she said dreamily.

“They just might.” He glanced at the front door, which had been slightly left ajar, and he slid out of the truck to Angelica’s side. “Will your parents come up?”

“Here?” Angelica shook her head as she took his hand and slipped off the seat. “No. They’re going to Florence, actually. It will be only me and Aunty. We’re going to bake and cook and eat all day, then watch old Christmas movies until we fall asleep.”

“That sounds like quite the celebration.” He smiled and took her hand.

It wasn't until they started up the steps that she remembered they were going to a Christmas party, and the nervousness rushed back. He must have felt her stiffen, because he gripped her hand tighter and smiled.

“The hard part is entering the party. After that, you'll relax and have a good time. Just like the BBQ.” He led her through the door, the faint Christmas music becoming louder and filled with a cacophony of voices.

“Oh, Kevin and Angelica are here!” Caitlin called out, coming over and welcoming them into the house.

Kevin had been right. Once the arrival was out of the way, the women welcomed her into their circle. Her shoulders relaxed, and she actually found herself laughing with the others and really enjoying herself. She met Kevin's eyes from across the room; their silent conversation seeming to hold so much more than she ever thought a look could hold.

Could she really find her normal again and have a life that she had always dreamed of?



Kevin relaxed back into the love seat, placing his arm behind Angelica and breathing in her sweet scent. She glanced at him, excitement dancing in her eyes.

They were getting ready for the white elephant gift exchange. He hadn't done one of these before, but the way the guys couldn't stop laughing and the ladies giggled as they added presents to the pile filled him with curiosity.

The kids had completed a little version of it already and were playing in a playroom under Krista's watchful eye. She even took the baby for Chasity, and though the gal kept glancing toward the room, she seemed relaxed and content.

He glanced around, starting to really feel at home with these guys. There were Jordan and Caitlin, of course. Tyler and Megan. Then Derrick and Chasity, his boss...well, past boss, though every moment he spent here in Hope Lake had him wondering if maybe he would take Derrick up on his offer... And Shane, too, who sauntered over to them.

"Hey, can you guys make room for me?" Shane asked.

"Of course," Angelica said, glancing at Kevin before scooting closer to him.

"I don't mind squishing a bit," Kevin said. The heat from Angelica's thigh touching his traveled all the way up his neck. "The more the merrier."

Shane smiled and gave a brief nod. He didn't talk much, but was always calm and present.

"You went to school with them, right?" Angelica asked. Kevin's chest tightened as a sense of admiration went through him, as she did her best to make Shane feel comfortable.

“Yes, ma’am. Well, the ladies, I mean, Chasity and Megan, they’re imports, but all the others—we graduated together.” Shane tipped his head, going for his cowboy hat that hung with all the others in the entry.

“And you work with Jordan, right?”

“Some, but not as much lately. I’ve been working on taking over my parents’ ranch.”

“Hey, Shane?” Jordan called over after hearing his name. “Where’s Addie? I thought you said you saw her back in town?”

Shane shrugged. “She’s, uh, wanting to keep a low profile,” he said and shrugged again. “We ready to start this thing?”

Kevin saw the man’s neck redden and wondered if Addie was the gal that Derrick had hinted Shane had been waiting for all these years. It was the low-profile comment that had Kevin’s neck hair standing on end. He shook his head, thinking his job had got him too messed up, always thinking some crime was going on.

“Let’s do this,” Jordan said, rubbing his hands together. “You got the numbers, Caity?”

Caitlin came around with a cowboy hat holding slips of papers. Kevin reached in, grasped one, and pulled it out. On his paper was the number one.

“So, what’s the best number?” Kevin asked. “Better to go first or last?”

“Well,” Derrick said, wrapping an arm around Chasity. “The last person has their choice to steal whatever they want.”

“As long as it hasn’t been stolen twice already. Third owner is the keeper,” Megan said from next to Tyler, one hand holding her belly, and he swore he could see the slight swelling under her sweater.

Kevin tried not to gawk too long, but he’d have to remember to ask Angelica if Megan was expecting. At least by asking Angelica, he wouldn’t be committing social suicide if Megan wasn’t pregnant.

“But then, number one really is the best,” Jordan said, drawing Kevin’s eyes after he looked at the number one on his paper once more. “Number one gets to decide if he, or she, wants to give up their present to steal one last time.”

“Those are the best years, when everyone keeps on stealing again and again,” Derrick said with a laugh.

“So, who has number one?” Caitlin asked.

Kevin cleared his throat and raised his hand. “So, I choose any gift out there?”

“Yep, then you unwrap it and show it to everyone. Then when everyone has gone, you get the chance to steal something else...if it isn’t taken out of the game first.” Jordan urged him forward.

There were nine wrapped presents, and with everyone’s eyes on him, he wanted to grab one and sit back down. He chose the smallest one, since he didn’t even know where he’d be

living in the next month, and returned to his seat where Angelica made a little room for him.

Her eyes sparkled as she looked at the package in his hands. “What do you think it is?” she whispered.

“I have no idea...” He smiled and unwrapped the gift by carefully tearing the tape.

“We’ll be here all night at this rate,” Jordan said, rolling his eyes and laughing.

Kevin ripped into it at that point, but it had been wrapped several times in a variety of different wrapping papers, giving everyone a good laugh and causing the heat in his neck to travel up onto his face. “Will this torture never end?” he said dramatically, making everyone laugh harder.

Finally, he pulled out the item, which was a plastic reindeer. Caitlin covered her mouth, and Jordan laughed so hard he was falling off the couch.

“Oh, goodness,” Angelica said, quietly giggling.

Kevin turned the package around until he saw it was a reindeer that pooped out candy. “Well, if that isn’t...” but he didn’t finish because he had no idea what to say. He chuckled and sat the reindeer on the arm of the couch. “So, who has number two?”

The game continued on with so much laughter that Krista poked her head out several times, scrutinizing them suspiciously before returning to watch the younger kids. There were silly gifts like his reindeer, practical gifts like coffee

mugs with silly sayings, a funny shirt, games, and even a large can of green beans...seriously the largest can of green beans he had ever seen.

The hot ticket item at the moment was Twister. In fact, it had found its third owner with Jordan. “You know that our next party is totally going to involve this.”

Angelica’s eyes went wide as the room laughed. “I didn’t think that it would be that popular.”

“So, that one was yours?” Kevin asked, wishing the game would go on forever, because he didn’t want the feeling of her sitting so close to ever end.

She nodded, then looked down at her paper. “I’m next,” she whispered to him. “I don’t know what to do. I...I don’t want to steal.”

“It’s part of the game. People expect it.” He wanted to encourage her to steal because then the game would continue as the person she stole from would have to choose the last present or steal from someone else. Yet, when he saw her hands fidgeting, he said, “You can take the last one. It’s okay.”

“You must have number nine, Angelica. Are you going to steal or take the last one and end the game?” Caitlin asked.

Angelica sucked in her lips and tapped her foot. Kevin couldn’t stand her feeling uncomfortable. He leaned over to her and whispered, “Steal mine, then I’ll get up and find another one.”

She read his eyes and finally smiled a grin full of gratitude and took his pooping reindeer with a quick snatch. The room roared with laughter with raunchy jokes that made Angelica's face redden, but she still smiled at Kevin.

He stood up, walking around the room as people set out their mugs, games, and the can of green beans. Everyone watched, wondering what he would do. He stood in front of the last present, then swiveled around quickly and grabbed the can of green beans.

The uproar continued as the stealing went on. When Derrick stole a mug from Shane, Shane turned to Angelica and stole the pooping reindeer. Before he even knew what was happening, Angelica took the large can of green beans from him and said, "Third owner!"

Kevin's sides hurt from laughing so much. He bent over, thinking he'd surely die if he didn't get a moment without laughing. Krista stepped into the room and sat by Megan. "You guys are lucky the kids were tired. I can't believe they all fell asleep with the ruckus you *adults* are making."

"You're hired anytime you want a job," Chasity said through her laughter.

"Okay. Okay. This is torture. Just end it, Armstrong!" Derrick said, then laughed harder. "Old habits die hard, sorry, Kevin."

Kevin agreed with Derrick. It was time. It had been fun, but it was getting late, and he was sure everyone's sides and cheeks were hurting like his. He glanced around once more

just in case, but then realized something. “I don’t think I have a choice, anyway. Everything has been stolen twice already.”

“That has never happened before,” Jordan said. The look of complete awe on his face had everyone quiet for one moment before people were rolling on the floor with laughter.

Kevin snuck in to take the last present while they were all lost in fits of giggles, unwrapping to find a reindeer beanie filled with chocolate.

Angelica hiccuped and breathed out soberly. “That’s a cute hat,” she said, though for some reason her voice sounded sad.

He looked down at her can of green beans and felt awful. “Wanna trade?”

“Really?” she asked. “You want the green beans?”

He dumped the chocolate on his lap and put the beanie on her. “Well, the hat looks fantastic on you. How could I deny you that?” He smiled. “We could split the chocolate?”

“Deal,” she said, and he couldn’t help thinking that making her happy was the best feeling he ever had.

“Well,” Megan said, sitting on the edge of the sofa. “That was a really sweet thing to do, Kevin, and I think you may get a reward for it.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin asked, glancing at Angelica and then back to Megan.

“Let’s just say you can’t always judge a book by its cover.” She winked at them, then helped Caitlin pick up.

Angelica stood and started picking up as well, and soon everyone was doing a part. It didn't take much to have the place spotless again. When Chasity came out with a bundled and sleeping baby, Kevin at once felt relief and regret. He wanted to get Angelica alone, but he didn't want the night to end. The drive to her aunt's wasn't long enough.

"Well, backup," Angelica said, nudging into him. "You ready?"

"As long as you are," he said, and at her nod, he started the goodbyes, being sure to thank Jordan for inviting him and Angelica.

When he shook Shane's hand, the quiet guy said, "You're not too bad for an import, Armstrong."

"Well, that's because I'm not really an import...I mean, we're from the same county." Kevin slapped his arm. "See you around."

"Well, that explains a lot," Shane said, scratching at the stubble on his cheek. "See ya." He turned to Angelica. "Hey, are you sticking around for a while?"

Kevin stiffened. He hadn't thought about Shane making moves on his gal...except she wasn't his gal, at least not officially. Angelica went rigid and stepped closer toward Kevin. "I came with Kevin..."

Shane looked from her to Kevin, then back, his brow furrowed. "I meant staying in town. I've been helping at Camp Hope, and Josie's been looking for some help."

“You’re right, Shane.” Megan joined them. “I hadn’t thought about it before, but Angelica would be the perfect fit.”

“Perfect fit?” Angelica asked, then glanced at Kevin as if for support.

“What kind of job is it?” Kevin asked, his shoulders rolling back with the feeling of giving Angelica the support she needed.

“It’s not paid, just volunteering to spend some one-on-one time with kids that need a little extra love and care,” Megan said, looking at Angelica earnestly. “You know, the ones that have been through a lot of traumatic situations.”

Angelica held her breath, and he wrapped an arm around her. “Maybe that’s something to think about?” He couldn’t tell if she had reacted from the desire for that job or fear of it. Either way, she shouldn’t feel she had to give an answer right then.

“Yes,” she said, letting out her breath and relaxing against his arm. “I will think about it. Thank you for thinking of me.”

“That was a great call, Shane,” Megan said. “Angelica, why don’t you come by the camp sometime next week, and I can show you around? That way you can see what it is you would be doing...if you decide you might want to.”

They said a final goodbye, and Kevin took Angelica’s hand to pull her through the cold to his truck. “I should have warmed it up for you,” he said, rubbing his hands together after starting it and waiting for the heater to kick in.

“It’s okay; it will give me time to give you your gift,” she said, handing him the last present she had.

“You got me a separate gift?” Warmth flooded him as he held the present.

“Oh, it’s not much, just something I thought you could use,” she said, cute as can be, still wearing that reindeer beanie.

“That’s very sweet of you,” he said, opening the paper slowly and pulling out a beanie and a pouch of some sort.

“It’s for when you run. You keep your hair so short, I thought it would help keep you warm. The pouch is so you can keep your phone on you, but it won’t bounce. That way, if you run late, you have your phone and the flashlight app to get you back home.”

The caring and thoughtfulness that went into her gift overwhelmed him. “Thank you, Angelica...this is...it’s one of the most thoughtful things anyone has ever gotten me.”

The urge to lean in and kiss her almost overwhelmed him, and if she hadn’t been blushing and looking down at her wringing hands, he might have done it. As it was, he knew that would push her too far, too fast. Instead, he reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

But that moment solidified something for him...he would make sure to win this lady’s heart.

FOUR

THERE ARE STAGES OF healing, a timeline that virtually everyone who has faced trauma goes through. The trauma therapist had told Angelica about them.

The first stage was when she was back at home, withdrawing from everyone and everything in order to feel safe. She felt like she might be at the end of that stage and venturing into stage three of reconnecting.

It was stage two that terrified her. Reliving and grieving what had happened sent waves of nausea through her. Better to pass that stage by, stuff the horror into dark recesses as if it were a bad dream, and move on.

What better way to move on than not to return to the city?

“How many times are you going to pace this room? I mean, it’s not that big. I’m afraid you’ll wear down the wood floor.” Aunt Martha eyed her, the book now lying on her chest, reading glasses pushed down her nose so she could stare at her.

“I’m sorry, Aunty,” Angelica said, flopping onto the couch. “There’s so much going on, and I just don’t know what direction to take...or I do, but I don’t know if it’s the right one or if I’m running away.”

“Well, I guess that depends on what the decision is?” She pulled off her glasses and set them and her book on the lamp table next to her.

“I...I...” She blew out a breath. “If you’re okay with it, I’m thinking of staying in Hope Lake for a while.”

Aunt Martha leaned forward, her eyes twinkling.

“I know when we go to the doctor tomorrow, he’ll say you’re good to go. You’re a fast healer, and you really don’t *need* me anymore.” Angelica twiddled her hands together.

“Well, there is need, and there is *need*, my darling.”

Angelica lifted her head, returning her aunt’s smile. They had spent such a warm and relaxing Christmas together. Everything felt so easy here, almost too easy.

“You know you are welcome to stay as long as you’d like, dear. I’d be happy to have you.” She relaxed back into her recliner. “And, about running away, you know how I feel about cities. I don’t think you need any excuse to run from them.”

Angelica’s heart warmed for her opinionated aunt. There was such a story behind her life, a story that most people didn’t see, but one would do well to learn from those years of experience. That was something Angelica knew for sure.

“So, what else is left to decide?” Aunt Martha asked.

“Well, Shane and Megan, you know them, right?”

“Honey, I don’t think there is anyone in this town I don’t know...at least not a local. I even know that Shane’s gal, Addie, is back, though she tries to stay hidden. I do wonder what that’s about. Does Shane know?”

“Not that he said,” Angelica said.

Aunt Martha waved her questions away. “So, what did Shane and Megan say to you?”

Angelica sat forward, wanting to see her aunt’s thoughts. “Well, that Camp Hope needs some help. It’s not paid, and I know I’ll need an actual job if I’m going to stay, but for now, I thought...maybe I should check it out?”

“What kind of help does she need? I know you went to horse camps, but not western style, which is what Josie does at Camp Hope. Is it working with the kids or in the office?”

“It is with kids that have been through trauma and are having a hard time readjusting.” Angelica sucked in her lips, that nervous quiver back in her legs.

“Ahh, I see.” Aunt Martha folded her hands, and her eyes faded for a moment. Then she turned and looked her directly in the eyes. “Do it. I think it would help you heal, too.”

“But...what if I’m no good for them, Aunty? I mean, I’m still a mess. I still get flashbacks that incapacitate me, and I really haven’t gone through stage two yet and...”

Aunt Martha shook her head. “Honey, sometimes the best way to go through something is to help someone else go through it.”

Angelica’s foot tapped the floor rhythmically, and her hands wriggled. She pushed up to a stand, pacing the same stretch of floor again.

“Angie?” Aunt Martha waited until she met her eyes. “Go for a walk, dear. Maybe the fresh air and the lake will help you think clearly.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, bending to give her aunt a kiss before snatching up her purse and leaving to walk to the lake.

Aunt Martha’s house was only a block from the lake, but farther from town than where Kevin was staying. She felt strange walking the lake in front of his house and tried not to look at it in case he saw her and thought she was stalking him.

The Christmas party had gone well. In fact, each time she thought about it, a lingering smile came to her lips. She hadn’t laughed that much since...well, since she lost her best friend. That was the easiest way to put it.

Being with Kevin felt comfortable and safe, a feeling she hadn’t had the luxury of for quite a while. He seemed to know her limits and not push beyond them, though she could tell he wanted to.

She sighed and pulled down the sleeves of her coat to cover her wrists. The doctor said it might take a year for the pink of

the scars to fade. A year.

What would she do when it became tank top weather?

With a shake of her head, she went back to the question at hand. Summer would come and the problems of that time with it. Right now she had to decide what to do in this moment: stay and, if so, volunteer or go back to the city.

The afternoon sun held little warmth, and the wind that blew off the lake felt like it contained shards of ice, but the waves sparkled, and the snowy mountains behind the lake glistened. Something about the scene lent a state of peace, and she allowed herself to relax into it.

Slowly she became aware of the sound of children playing but didn't really pay them much attention until she heard her name being called.

"Hey, you came!" Caitlin called out, jogging toward her. "We're over here."

Angelica's step faltered. She glanced behind her to see if Caitlin could be talking to someone else, but only the lake answered back. She turned to Caitlin, forcing a smile.

"I'm so glad you came. I know how hard it is to, well, talk about things..." Caitlin stopped, her eyes widening as Angelica's face must have shown the horror that rolled through her. "Not that you have to talk. Just come hang out. No pressure." Caitlin linked an arm in hers as if she feared she would run in the other direction, which was exactly how Angelica felt at that moment.

“Glad to see you,” Megan said with a wide grin, and Chasity smiled and made room for her at the table.

“It’s freezing today, so Jordan set us up with the propane heater,” Caitlin said, sitting Angelica down right beside it. “Your hands are ice.”

“I’m not used to the mountain winters yet,” Angelica said, finding her voice and still trying to come up with an excuse to leave.

“Yet?” Megan leaned forward. “Does that mean you’ve been thinking of coming up to Camp Hope? We have our winter camp coming up. It would be the perfect time.”

“I have been thinking about it...” Angelica sucked in her lip.

“It doesn’t hurt to come for a visit. Sometimes Camp Hope decides for you.” Chasity gave a little shrug as she adjusted her sleeping son, pulling his thick blanket tighter around him.

“You helped there, too?” Angelica asked her.

“Well, kind of...by accident. Derrick was helping, and I showed up. That’s where I met my daughter.” She smiled as she looked over her shoulder at Kami, who was mimicking everything Krista did. “We bonded over...well, over our pasts. Somehow, we just knew that we were made for each other.”

Megan gently cleared her throat. “Not to, uh, sound all professional here, but Chasity, would you like to share your past with Angelica?”

Angelica’s heart raced, and all of a sudden, the heater felt like too much. Yet, she couldn’t take her eyes off Chasity.

Something in the woman's eyes spoke to her of an understanding that went far beyond what words could explain.

"I don't mind...but only if you want...if you're ready?" Chasity asked.

Angelica licked her lips but couldn't get her voice to work.

"You see," Megan said. "The three of us have all been through some sort of trauma. I was stalked. Caitlin was kidnapped."

"Well, for approximately fifteen minutes," Caitlin shrugged.

"Fifteen terrifying minutes that changed your outlook on life..." Megan held her gaze, and Caitlin nodded with a swallow. "We don't put down one person's trauma or say one is worse than the other...though..." She glanced at Chasity.

"I actually died..." Chasity said, softening her words with a gentle smile. "Obviously, I didn't stay that way."

"I'm...I'm glad to hear that," Angelica said, swallowing past the large lump in her throat. "I'm sorry you all went through what you did. I'm glad you're all okay."

"Well, thanks to our men," Megan said with a smile.

"And to yours," Chasity added. "I mean, to Kevin, not that, well, it's just...ugh. I always put my foot in my mouth."

Angelica covered her mouth, partly to hide her smile and partly to cover what she knew were her flaming cheeks. "It's okay. We aren't an item, but I'm glad he could help you."

"You aren't an item...yet," Caitlin said with a wink.

“One thing at a time, ladies. Can’t you see she’s overwhelmed as it is?” Megan said, but gave a laugh. “Anyway, I wanted you to know at least a bit of our background. You aren’t alone, and you have friends that are here to support you...should you want to talk.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.” Angelica smiled but did not offer any information.

Megan nodded at that, and they started talking about their Christmases with their families. Only Megan talked about her dad coming out for the holidays.

“So, do all of your families, except for Megan’s dad, live in Hope Lake, too?” Angelica asked.

“Mine do now. They moved away for a bit, but they’re back now that I am, wanting to play Gamma and Gampa.” Caitlin smiled as she turned to watch her daughter make her toy horse gallop in the sand.

“The only family I have left is Megan, and thankfully, she imported as well.” Chasity reached out to squeeze Megan’s with her free hand.

“Best decision I ever made. See, I wasn’t sure about staying either, but Camp Hope, Krista, and Tyler, well, they made the decision easy for me...not to mention my bestie was here.” Megan smiled.

“Hmm...I’m starting to notice a pattern here,” Angelica said. “Camp Hope, a local cowboy, and you’re stuck here forever.”

She laughed, but she realized as she did, that it didn't sound too awful a scenario.

The ladies laughed, but Chasity choked hers back to say, "Looks like your local guy came to find you."

"What?" Angelica turned around, seeing Kevin jogging on the beach, and her heart stirred with the wind. "Oh..."

"Kevin! Hi!" Caitlin waved, grabbing his attention.

Kevin raised a hand, slowed his pace, and came toward them. As he approached, his eyes kept returning to Angelica's. He rested his hands on his head as he caught his breath. "Hey, I didn't know it was a lake day. Where are the guys?"

"Oh, it's just a ladies' lake day," Megan said.

"Oh, I guess I shouldn't be interrupting," he said, but he met Angelica's eyes. Did he see the desperateness in them? He glanced around, his eyes scanning the parking lot, and then back to her. "Did you walk here, Angelica? If you wanted to walk back to my place, I could give you a ride home."

"Go ahead, Angelica," Chasity said with an encouraging nod.

"We'll be here next Wednesday, too." Megan nodded, urging her.

"And you have our numbers so you can call to chat any time," Caitlin said, standing to give her a hug goodbye.

"Thanks, ladies. It was great to see you," Angelica said, backing away toward Kevin, relaxing when she felt his warm

hand on her back.

“Tell the guys I said hi,” Kevin said, giving a wave before returning his hand to her back and leading her the way he had come. Once they were out of earshot, he leaned over. “Did I play a good backup?”

Angelica smiled and nudged into him. “Perfect timing. I’m sorry about ruining your run.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I already took one this morning.” His neck reddened. “I have a confession.” He waited for her to meet his eyes before he continued. “I saw you walk by, and I was looking for a reason to run into you.”

Angelica laughed. “Really? And here I was, worried that you might think I was stalking you.”

“You were worried about that, really?”

“Well, I hadn’t thought about it until I realized I was walking right by your house and...” She shrugged. “I’m glad you decided to run into me.”

“Hanging with the girls really that bad?”

“Oh, no. They’re great, but I hadn’t come here to meet with them. It wasn’t until I saw them that I remembered their Wednesday meetings.”

“Wednesday meetings?”

“Yes, they, well, anyway, do you know all of their stories?” Angelica asked in a rush of words.

“Oh...leave it to Megan to make a support group.” He smiled, resting a hand on the small of her back to turn her toward his back deck. “Yes. I was a part of most of their stories, in some way or another, actually.”

“Chasity said that you helped them.”

“Well, I only supplied backup for Derrick, but that was my job. Though I would have done it, anyway. It’s just who I am.”

“I was pretty sure about that,” Angelica said, her heart hammering.

“So, they, uh, they invited you to join their meeting, huh?” He cleared his throat and dropped his hand to open his slider and let her in first.

Angelica shrugged and looked around the room. “What a cute cabin! Oh, this is gorgeous.”

“It’s Megan’s...she bought it before she and Tyler, well, anyway. They live on Tyler’s horse ranch now.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“A horse ranch! That sounds lovely. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to live on a ranch.” She focused on pulling him away from the subject she had no interest in talking about, but she didn’t have to fake her excitement over the cabin or the ranch.

“Really?” he said, motioning for her to sit on the couch as he leaned against the table. “Well, maybe I’ll have to take you out to my family’s ranch one of these days. It’s a cattle ranch, but we have lots of horses, too.”

Angelica nodded enthusiastically. “I would really like that.”

“Great, we’ll make a date then.” He pushed off the table and shook out his hands. “Water?”

“Sure,” she said.

When he handed her a glass, he let his fingers trail off hers. “Do you have to get back right away? I, uh, I have something I want to talk to you about.”

Angelica sputtered the water she had been drinking as dread filled her stomach like lead.

Kevin handed her a hand towel and leaned back against the table. “It’s about my work...”

Her breath came back in easily, and her throat relaxed enough that she could finish her swallow of water. For a moment she had thought she went from the frying pan into the fire, and one look at Kevin told her he knew that was exactly how she felt.

“I won’t...I know something happened to you, Angelica, but I won’t push. Just know that I am here...when you’re ready to talk about it.”

Angelica swallowed again and gave a slight nod. “So...your work?”

She eased back into the couch, letting herself relax now that it was in the open, in the air, and yet no pressure existed with it. For once, she felt free.



Kevin paced the room for a few rounds, her eyes following him and remaining there as he sat in a kitchen chair across from her. Why he felt the need to tell her, he didn't know, but he woke with the incessant thrumming of it needing to be told.

"I'm on paid leave while being investigated," he blurted out.

Angelica's eyes widened slightly but softened in understanding a moment later. "What happened? I'm sure whatever you did, you did for the right reason."

"I did." He leaned forward onto his elbows, clasping his hands to keep them still. "If I hadn't done it, a little girl wouldn't be home with her family right now."

Angelica sucked in a breath and sat rigid. "Then you did the right thing."

"My superiors don't see it that way," he said, his right foot tapping, the rhythmic sound somehow comforting.

"Then they aren't the right superiors for you," she said matter-of-factly, and her eyes held a hardness he hadn't seen in her before.

He chuckled, the sound coming from him involuntarily and almost sarcastically. "You know that's pretty much what Derrick told me, and he's the only other person who knows about it...I mean, outside of the FBI, that is."

Her lips moved into a pretty O shape as her cheeks blushed in that rosy pink that looked so good on her porcelain skin. He dug his heels into the floor and squeezed his hands tight to keep him from going to her.

“I...thank you for trusting me with this,” she said. “I’ll keep it to myself.”

His lips pulled up into half a smile, thinking about her being the niece of the town gossip. “I’d appreciate that.”

“How long will the investigation take?”

He shrugged. “I guess they could drag it out as long as they want to, but I’m not really sure.”

“You’ll stay here, then? Until the investigation is over?” She lowered her gaze, the pink deepening.

“Yes, at least until then...and as long as Tyler and Megan don’t need their beach house.”

“It’s a cute house,” she said, glancing around again.

His half grin ripened into a full-blown smile. “I’m kind of getting attached.” To the house...to her...to being home.

She met his eyes, and they questioned him as if she could read his mind.

He rubbed the back of his neck and stood up. “Uh, you hungry?”

“It’s getting close to lunch,” she said, taking her phone out. “I should probably see if my aunt needs anything.”

“Tell her we’ll bring her takeout, whatever she wants from the cafe.” The spur-of-the-moment offer sprang out of his mouth as if a part of him had planned this all along. Yet his words surprised him, and Angelica as well.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he said as he grabbed up his wallet and keys. He turned back to her, seeing her text. “Your aunt really texts?”

“Sure does, better than my parents,” she said with a laugh. Her phone chimed, and she dropped her gaze to read the message. “She’s being her normal don’t-worry-about-me self.”

“You know what? Just tell her we’ll bring her something. I’m sure Sadie at the cafe knows what she normally orders, anyway.”

“Really?” She finished texting the message and slipped her phone back into her purse.

“Yeah, aren’t small towns wonderful?” He led her toward the door, opening it for her and locking it behind them.

“Yet, you still lock your door?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Old habits die hard,” he said, checking that it was locked once more before leading her to his truck and opening her door. “And even small towns have their...dangers.”

“Such as everyone knowing everyone else’s business?” Angelica arched an eyebrow.

“Such as that.” He closed her door gently and climbed into the driver’s seat. “But I guess that keeps a person honest.”

“I never thought of it that way, but yes, if there aren’t any skeletons to hide, it doesn’t matter if the closet is opened.” She kept her gaze out the window, her hands twined in her lap.

“But who doesn’t have skeletons?” Kevin regarded her closely as they stopped at the stop sign.

Out of the corner of his eye, a flash of blue went past. He leaned forward to see the car turning down the next street. It took everything he had not to chase it down. If Angelica hadn’t been with him, he would have. He glanced at his glove compartment, wishing he had brought his gun. He felt so undressed without it.

Instead of following the car, he pulled into Hope’s Cafe’s parking lot as he pried through his memory for anyone he knew who drove a blue sedan. He only drew a blank.

“You okay? Are you worried people will find out about the investigation?” Angelica touched his hand briefly, drawing his attention back to her and the conversation they had been having.

“No.” He shook his head, but mostly to clear it. “I mean, it might make it harder for Derrick to hire me back like he promised, but...it’s bound to come out eventually. I’d just like to know the outcome before people hound me with questions.”

“You might become a deputy here again?” Had he imagined the hope lining her question? He studied her eyes, trying to

figure it out.

“Maybe, but it will all depend.” He stepped out of the truck and met her at the passenger door. “What about you? Have you decided if you’ll stay?”

She took his offered hand, blushing again. “There’s so much to consider, but I’m not in a hurry to return home...I mean to the city.”

“I’m guessing it no longer feels like home there for you?” He read her changing expressions as they walked into the cafe.

“Just two?” Sadie asked, picking up two menus and guiding them back to a booth. “I’ll get you a couple of waters while you decide. Good to have you back, Officer Armstrong.” She winked and walked back to the counter.

Kevin only glanced at the menu before meeting Angelica’s eyes again.

She smiled, pushed the menu aside, and shrugged. “Is it weird to feel like the place you always knew as home doesn’t feel like home anymore?”

“Nope, places change,” he searched her eyes, “and people change. Besides, Hope Lake is kind of contagious.”

She smiled, but her eyes searched his as if wondering how much he could tell by looking at her. “Do I hear a taste of homesickness?”

“Maybe a skosh,” he said as he held up his thumb and a finger close together, then laughed.

They gave the waitress their order, and he settled back into his seat, sipping on a lemonade and wondering how he had convinced Angelica to go out with him without even technically asking her out.

Her smile was shy and wavering, as if she had mixed feelings about being there with him. Finally, she bit her lip, then asked, “Do you want to go back to the FBI?” She had lowered her voice and sat forward, and he appreciated her discretion.

“Honestly?” he asked and leaned forward. “It depends on the moment.”

She nodded, her lips slightly parting as she blew out a breath. “I understand. It’s a thrilling life, I’m sure.”

“Life is the right word. It’s a demanding career.” He watched her closely, doing his best to read her expressions.

“Was being a deputy here demanding?” Her eyes were so wide and such a clear blue, but he saw an agenda behind her questions, though he didn’t know if she entirely knew that herself.

“No, not most of the time, at least. There were a few cases, as you know; otherwise, the hours were the hours, and off time was really off time.”

“It’s not like that in the FBI, is it?”

“No, even when I’m not on the clock, I’m digging into files and thinking about the cases.” As he spoke, he realized why he

felt so lonesome and, well, bored since coming to Hope Lake. He shook his head. “Down time is not easy for me.”

“Maybe you should volunteer? You know, while you’re here.” Her fingers fiddled with the condensation on her water glass.

He leaned forward, gripping his own glass so he didn’t reach out and touch her fingers. “Did you decide to volunteer at Camp Hope?”

She shrugged, but a soft smile pulled at her full lips. “Maybe? I think I’ll go check it out at least.”

Unable to stop himself, he reached out to squeeze her hand before pulling his back to the safety of his side of the table. “I’m happy to hear that. Maybe after you check it out, you could tell me about it?”

“Sure,” she said as Sadie brought their plates over.

“Western burger for the officer and a large Cobb salad for the lady. Anything else I can get you?”

“Yeah, do you happen to know what Mrs. Manning orders?”

Sadie smirked. “I sure do. Want me to wrap up a to-go plate for her?”

“Yes, thank you.” Kevin smiled triumphantly at Angelica as the waitress walked away. “Small towns,” he said with a wink.

After taking Angelica home armed with a delicious-smelling BLT for her aunt, Kevin drove through the town. He told himself he just needed to think, but in reality, he searched the

small town for signs of any blue sedans. After he made it to town the second time, he parked in front of Mom & Pop's, ready to write himself off as paranoid.

As he opened the door, a young gal with a baseball hat pulled low over her face walked out past him.

“Oh, wait, Addie!” Mr. Montgomery, the owner, called out, squeezing by Kevin to hand the girl a gallon of milk. “You forgot this.”

She glanced up at Kevin with wide eyes, looking away quickly as she took the milk. “Thank you, Mr. Montgomery. Have a good evening,” she said and hurried toward a sporty white car.

Mr. Montgomery ushered Kevin inside. “Good to see you, Armstrong,” he said. “Now, I know you're seeing Manning's niece, but you don't need to go talking about running into Addie, got it?”

Kevin furrowed his brow while meeting Mr. Montgomery's eyes. “Is everything okay? Does she need help?”

Mr. Montgomery walked away. “Why would you think that? Maybe she just doesn't want everyone in town to know she's here.” He shrugged noncommittally. “You know how small towns are.”

Kevin glanced out the windows, watching as the little white car pulled away. He knew how small towns were. He also knew how to spot someone in trouble, and Addie Brown was in trouble.

He turned back to Mr. Montgomery. “I know how small towns are, and I know how you pull together in times of need. So, I’ll assume if you see or hear anything suspicious, you’ll let Derrick know.”

“You can count on me, sir,” he said with a grave nod.

Kevin hesitated, fighting the impulse to ask about a blue sedan but, thinking twice, walked away to grab the couple of things he needed. No need to bring anyone else into his paranoia.

Yet, on the way home, he wondered about the blue sedan and Addie. Thinking about Addie returning home when obviously running from something made him think about the feeling of safety in the small town.

Sure, his first stalking case—okay, first two stalking cases—were here, but the town pulled together, and the sheriff knew when certain lines had to be crossed for the safety of the town and the locals in it.

If his superiors at the FBI had understood that line, he wouldn’t be under investigation. Then his mind turned to Angelica, and he thought that maybe being under investigation was the best thing that had happened to him.

FIVE

IT WAS TIMES LIKE these that Angelica missed Brittany the most, and that made her feel selfish. Her heart ached, the pain physical, burning in her chest. Thinking of Brittany took her right back to that dank dungeon and the screams that filled her nightmares.

She wanted to remember Brittany how she was, her bubbly friend who always had her back and pushed her to be her best. It took all of Angelica's might, but she focused on a lunch they had in the past. They had sat on the veranda, picking at their salads to make their lunch date last longer.

"I'm afraid you're going to fall for that cowboy you keep talking about," Brittany had said, faking a pout.

"You mean Deputy Armstrong?"

"Yeah, you get all moony eyed talking about him."

"I do not," Angelica said, though she laughed, knowing the truth of it.

“I can just see you now, living in that white-picket fence, perfect small town with two and a half kids running around with the perfectly well-behaved dog...and leaving your best friend all alone in this ugly city.”

Angelica had sat forward, feeling a giddiness within her. “You could come with me. I’m sure he has some cute cowboy friends or a brother...besides, I’ll need someone to help with that half a kid. I’m sure they’ll need a lot of care.”

Brittany had laughed, throwing her blonde curls as she did, catching the eye of every single man at the restaurant. “It’d be a dream, Angie.” She sighed. “Maybe one day...”

Angelica wiped her eyes and rolled over in bed. If only she had known... If she had, she would have taken Brittany to Hope Lake right then. They would have been safe here.

Brittany would have still been alive.

Instead, Angelica was safe here in Hope Lake, wishing her best friend was still alive because she had no one else to talk about Kevin with. She was selfish and the worst friend ever.

She curled into a ball and lost herself to the sobs.

The sun shone through her window once she had emptied herself of tears, leaving her feeling raw and fragile, like a shell of what she used to be. A soft knock had her blinking and sniffing.

“Angie, you okay in there?” Aunt Martha’s worried voice had her pushing into a sitting position, swinging her legs off

the bed, and wiping her face.

“I’m fine, Aunty,” she said, trying to make herself look presentable. “You can come in.”

The door slowly creaked open, and her aunt peeked in like she didn’t know if she’d have to shut the door on a feral animal lunging to attack her. “I thought I heard...oh, dear.” She hurried as well as she could to Angelica’s side. “You can talk to me, you know.”

“I know, Aunty.” She sniffled as Aunt Martha drew her into her arms. “I’m just missing Brittany.”

Aunt Martha smoothed her hair. “She has been your best friend since you were ten. There’s no replacing her. I get that.” Her gnarled hands soothed her, petting down her hair as she drew in deep shaky breaths. “You know, that friend of yours was so full of life. I’ll always remember the time you two spent a week out here. She never wanted to stop, always dragged you to the beach, all day, every day.”

“She liked boy watching,” Angelica said, remembering the summer when they were fifteen. “She had such a zest for life.”

“She did, and she’d hate to see you wallowing in bed, pining over her loss.” Aunt Martha looked up at the ceiling. “I bet she’s up there right now, giving you a piece of her mind.”

Angelica forced out a small laugh. “You’re probably right.”

“What would she tell you?” Aunt Martha looked at her, taking her hands in her own. “What would Brittany tell you right now?”

“To stop being scared.” The words flowed out immediately, surprising Angelica.

“That’s what I thought she would say,” Aunt Martha said with a nod. “You know, the longer you grieve her loss here,” she said, touching her head, “the longer you won’t feel her here.” She tapped her heart.

A single tear slipped out of Angelica’s eye, trailing down her cheek as she nodded.

“She’s always with you, my darling, and always will be.” Her aunt drew her into a hug. “Now, go get a shower. I have cookies baking for Offi—Kevin that I want you to take to him.”

“Aunty...” Angelica’s breath caught in her throat.

“What? Can’t an old lady show her gratitude?”

“You keep trying to set us up, Aunty. You’ve got to let things work their natural course.”

“Dear, if I let you and him work your natural course, I might not still be alive to see it happen.” She patted Angelica’s leg and stood up. “Don’t blame me for encouraging the inevitable. I want to see some little great-great nieces and nephews before I go home to the pearly gates.”

Angelica rolled her eyes, but she got up to take a shower, and she drove the cookies over to Kevin’s. There she sat in the car for several minutes, staring at the door.

She glanced away as a blue car slowly passed and wouldn’t have thought anything of it, except the sneer of the man as he

saw her sent chills through her bones. She blinked, though, and only saw a man staring as if lost in his own mind before he sped away.

Shaking her head, she worried about her own sanity and wondered if she had quit the trauma therapy before she should have. Caitlin and the ladies filtered into her mind. Maybe she should take them up on their offer.

The sound of a door shutting pulled her attention back to Kevin's house and to the man himself sauntering toward her. He squatted down at her passenger window, and she pushed the button to roll it down.

"Now this behavior is a little more like stalking," he said with a wink, but the scent of her aunt's cookies had him glancing at the plate on the seat.

"Or maybe just cold feet?" Angelica asked, her cheeks filling with fire. "My aunt baked some cookies for you."

"Oh, she did, huh?" Kevin drew his eyes back up to meet hers. "You know, I'm going to pack on a few pounds if she keeps doing that."

"I rightly don't think she cares about how much weight you gain," Angelica said with a laugh.

"So, there's an ulterior motive, huh?" Kevin asked, his eyes shining with flirtation.

Angelica shrugged. "She's been known to meddle in others' business," she said, her heart feeling as if a million butterflies had landed upon it.

“Your aunt? No. Wouldn’t believe it in a million years.” His sideways smile broke through all her barriers, and an influx of emotions burst through her.

“I can’t return to the city...or any city,” she blurted out, horrified, and covered her mouth.

His eyebrows drew up, widening his eyes. “So, you’re staying here, in Hope Lake.”

She drew in a breath, calming her racing heart and queasy stomach. “I think so. For now.”

“This seems like a sit-down conversation. You want to come in?” he asked, adjusting his squatting position.

She nodded, not knowing if she had the strength to admit the words, and pushed her legs to move, hoping they would support her.

“Can I take these?” Kevin asked with a grin, pulling the cookies out the window.

“Of course,” Angelica found her voice. “They’re yours, after all.”

“Maybe you’ll share them with me? I have milk.” He held the door open, and she stepped inside.

“Nothing like chocolate chip cookies for breakfast,” she said, realizing as her stomach growled that she hadn’t eaten that morning.

Her mind became lost in the thoughts that had kept her in bed late, wallowing away in her grief. Her eyes stung, and

though she tried to blink them away, she saw from the look on Kevin's face that he had seen them.

"Maybe I should make you some eggs first," he said, leading her to the couch, his brows furrowed in concern.

"Oh, it's okay. It wouldn't be the first time I've eaten cookies for breakfast since being at Aunty's." Angelica pushed forth a smile, though she knew the sadness shone through.

"And you still keep such a lovely figure. The other women must be jealous," he teased, opening the plate of cookies for her to take one. He set the plate on the coffee table and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with two glasses of milk. "At least this will have some protein for you."

"What else does a woman need?"

He set himself on the couch next to her rather than the chair where he had sat last time and turned to her. After devouring a cookie, he continued to hold his gaze on her until he finally cleared his throat. "I told you I wouldn't push, but you really look like you could use a listening ear right now."

She took a sip of milk, half to wash down the cookie and half to give herself time to think. Her insides quaked at the thought of releasing the horror she went through. She hadn't spoken about it with anyone except to tell the officers that had rescued her and the trauma therapist they demanded she see.

"I'm really missing my best friend," she said, her lip quivering.

“Oh.” Kevin adjusted his seat, obviously not hearing what he expected. “Is she...in the city...or...” He swallowed.

“Or...” she said, feeling her throat swell.

“I’m so sorry,” Kevin said, reaching for her hand, tentatively at first; then he thrust his forward and took hers as if his life depended on it. “Losing friends is not easy. How...if you don’t mind me asking...how...” He glanced down at her wrists, and she followed his gaze to ensure her sleeves still covered the scars.

“She was...was...murd...murdered.” She breathed out a breath as if the act of saying those horrific words had freed her soul somehow, not all the way, but enough that she felt as if she had space.

Kevin sucked in a breath, hissing, and his hands gripped hers firmly. She couldn’t meet his eyes, knowing that seeing his sympathy would make her lose the little control she had over her emotions.

“So...so you see, I can’t return to the city. It’s too dangerous. There are monsters there and...and...and I just can’t go back to a place like that...” She blinked rapidly, clamping her lips shut before she spewed out the entire story. She wasn’t ready...she couldn’t go there, or it would consume her and drag her back to the darkness she was struggling so hard to free herself from.

“Shh, you don’t have to convince me, sweetheart,” he said, drawing her into his arms. “You’re safe. You’re safe here.” He held her, and despite her resistance, she relaxed in his arms,

letting the panic go bit by bit and matching the rhythm of her heart to his.

Once the anxiety had eased, heat filled her cheeks and throat and chest, and she gently pushed away, feeling like she would ignite any minute. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. What you have been through...is traumatic. It takes time to process these things... and longer to trust again.” He cupped her face, making her look at him. “You have time now. Utilize it, but don’t push those who care for you away.”

“I...I didn’t mean to push anyone away...wait, are you saying that...”

“I care for you?” He searched her eyes. “Have I not made that clear?” He released her face and sat back, but his gaze continued to hold her. “There’s a lot going on, in both of our lives, right now. If I am holding back, that’s why, but, yes, Angelica, I care for you.”

Angelica swallowed, her throat all of a sudden dry and sticky. Her entire body felt like it would burst into flame, and she wiped her wet palms against her shorts and licked her dry lips. Was she supposed to say something in return? Could she admit even to herself that she felt something for Kevin?

She squeezed her eyes shut, remembering the feeling of safety she felt in his arms. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes, meeting his intense gaze. “I...I feel safe with you,” she said, her voice barely audible.

Kevin smiled, a slow, sweet half smile. “I’m glad to hear that. You are safe with me.”

The air between them was heavy with unspoken feelings and an electricity that she didn’t quite understand. It overwhelmed her, and she quickly grabbed another cookie and took a bite, needing something to break the current that ran between them.

Kevin laughed, then took a cookie himself. “So, what are you up to today?”

Angelica swallowed and took another drink of milk, making up her mind about a few things as she did. “I’m going to call Megan and see if I can get a visit in at Camp Hope.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” he said. “Megan is a great person for you to get to know more. If anyone will understand what you are going through, it’s probably her. At least to a point...Chasity survived.” As he searched her eyes, she read the worry in them, and she knew he didn’t want to upset her.

“I’ve heard at least bits of the story,” she said, focusing on their story rather than hers. “Do you think it strengthened their friendship? I mean, she moved out here after Chasity stayed.”

Kevin smiled. “Well, that may be. I think some bonds are just strong to begin with, but certain events can definitely strengthen them. There’s a trust that develops, you know?”

Angelica nodded and pulled out her phone.

“What’re you doing?” Kevin asked.

“Texting Megan right now, before I lose my courage.”

“That-a-girl,” Kevin said, rising and kissing the top of her head as he passed by her toward the kitchen.

That one simple act had her thumbs freezing midtext. He did care for her, and the feeling warmed her down to her toes.



Kevin paced the small living room in the cottage, his eyes flicking toward the beauty of the lake as if reminding him there was more to life than what lay before him at this moment. Yet, everything depended upon the outcome.

He had worked so hard to get into the FBI. It hadn't been easy; the tests were grueling and the hours relentless, but saving people was what made him thrive. It was when he felt most alive.

Though in the last couple of weeks, there were other moments when he had that same rush. He smiled as he thought of Angelica in his arms, then of her meeting his eyes in that shy way of hers and telling him that she felt safe with him.

That feeling right there beat out all the others.

Maybe it didn't matter what the outcome was, after all?

He shook his head, ridding himself of the daydream. He knew the feeling of first falling in love and that it didn't last. Eventually, that rush would fade, and he'd be left bored and unhappy without the next thing to run after.

He needed this job. He needed the thrill, the constant infiltrated exhilaration of getting closer and closer to solving the case until the final elation of capturing the perp. Capturing or... He swallowed.

The image of what had happened in the moments he held his breath after his gun went off flashed through his mind--the startled expression and the body dropping as if in slow motion.

It wasn't that he regretted what he had done. The man needed to be kept from hurting little girls, but it was never easy taking a life, no matter how needed it was.

Besides, it had been either him or the perp. The man's gun had flashed on its way up, barely missing Kevin's hip, before he had succumbed to Kevin's bullet.

The problem was the forensic team couldn't find the wayward bullet, and some said he had planted the gun after the fact. His superiors didn't believe that rumor, but they knew he had entered without a warrant and without what they would call probable cause.

It didn't help that his partner had been out that day, dealing with a personal matter.

Kevin had followed a hunch, a hunch that brought that little girl, Sarah, back to her family.

His phone vibrated, tingling his hand numb as he answered. They were ready for him. Two long strides brought him to his laptop, already set up. He shook out his hands and clicked the button to join the meeting.

“Morning, sir,” he said to his direct superior, Gunther.

“Morning, Armstrong.” Gunther cleared his throat. “This here is Special Agents Anderson and Burton. They’ll get you caught up.”

Kevin listened as the agents disclosed the evidence of finding the bullet lodged in a bookcase. Apparently, it had ricocheted off the metal furnace, turning it almost ninety degrees in the opposite direction of where anyone was looking. They further explained that the forensic team had discovered a defect in the original bullet casing that made it release at an odd angle.

Kevin breathed out a sigh. “So, we’re good?”

“Not quite,” Gunther said. “Thank you, Agents Anderson and Burton. I’ll take it from here.” The two other agents disappeared from the video call, leaving his boss’s face taking up most of the screen.

“What’s going on, sir?” Kevin sat forward, peering at the computer screen.

“Headquarters isn’t happy with the way you handled the acquisition. Your vigilante style can cause havoc for the PR department.”

“The girl is safe, sir. She’s home with her family. Isn’t that our job?”

“Yes and no,” he said, rubbing a hand through his hair. “You got yourself in a tight spot here, Armstrong. The problem is,

another agency was monitoring this guy. We didn't have the approval to go in. Supposedly, he's working with a partner..."

"What?" Kevin said, incredulously. "That wasn't this guy's MO. He was a lone wolf, a solitary killer."

"That's not what Mendez is saying."

Kevin started. What did his partner have to do with this? Weren't they on the same page? "Mendez?"

"Supposedly, you have a disgruntled informant, and you missed something when you went barging in during your last cowboy act."

Kevin shook his head. None of it sounded right. Everything in the killer's files pointed to a man working alone. There was no evidence to support a partner. What was Mendez playing at?

"That doesn't make sense," Kevin said.

His superior shrugged. "It's your word against Mendez's, and he's not the one on mandatory leave. The case is slow going, but I'll let you know when something lets up or a decision's been made. Until then, lie low and keep out of trouble."

"Yes, sir," Kevin said, almost choking on the words as he ended the call. He set both his palms down on the table, focusing on his breath as rage built up inside of him.

Mendez, his brown-nosing, two-faced partner. What game was he playing at, and how did he win by putting Kevin on the spot? He grabbed his phone and scrolled for Mendez's

number, but his finger hovered over the green button. What good would it do to call him? It's not like he'd tell Kevin the truth, nor would it do any good to let him see how riled up he was.

He slammed the phone to the table and tied on his shoes instead. Something had to be done, but he couldn't do anything, not here, not now; he would explode without doing something. The edges around his vision darkened as he shoved open the sliding glass door, and not even taking the time to go around the deck to the steps, he leaped over the railing, his feet already running as they hit the sand.

He ran until his breath gasped out of him as he came into town. Several curious stares turned toward him, but the locals only waved. They had gotten used to him running in the mornings. With his hands on his head, he walked, easing the cramp in his side and slowing his racing heart as he drew breaths as deep as possible.

Without realizing what he did, he climbed the steps of the Sheriff's Office. He paused when he saw the blue car pull onto the main road. It hesitated, like it had thought better of the decision and wanted to turn around, then continued on. The driver ducked his head, letting a baseball hat shield his face.

Kevin peered closer. Something about the scruffy jawline under the hat felt familiar. The car took the first left and hurried away, leaving a nagging stirring within him as a shiver traveled down his spine.

He shook the feeling off as he stepped into the heated office. Tony nodded toward him and covered the end of the phone he held to his ear. “Boss is in his office. Go on back.”

Kevin tipped his hat, realizing all he had on was the beanie Angelica had given him. He had left his cowboy hat at home as he always did on runs. Rapping on Derrick’s office door, he opened it as Derrick beckoned him in while he was still on the phone.

“Yes, Mrs. Fields, I will tell him. Yes, I agree that is suspicious. Okay, he’s actually here right now. Thank you. Goodbye.” Derrick hung up the phone and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You bring back trouble with you?”

Kevin pulled off his beanie and mopped his dripping forehead with it. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, Mrs. Fields says that this blue sedan keeps driving by,” Derrick said, peering closer at him. “Do you know anyone with a blue sedan?”

“Nope, but I’ve seen the same car several times now. In fact, he passed by as I came in. Baseball hat, Caucasian, scruffy jaw, slight build...” He paused his summary as he realized he might know who that was.

“Know him?”

“I...I might. Reminds me of an informant I have back in the city.” He ran a hand across his short hair. “I think I better leave town, boss.”

“Since when do you quit?” Derrick leaned back into his chair, his ever-present gaze watchful.

“I’m not quitting, boss. I just...I don’t want to bring danger to this town, to you...to...”

“Angelica?” Derrick asked, leaning forward. “And do you feel this possible informant would lead to danger?”

“I don’t know,” Kevin said, then told Derrick everything from his meeting this morning.

“So, on the one hand, they find the bullet which shows you were telling the truth about the gun, but on the other, your partner is pulling something over their eyes.”

“That about sums it up,” Kevin said. “And there’s an informant involved. He didn’t give a name, but if it’s this guy...that could spell trouble.”

“Then I suggest we bring him in and get to the bottom of this,” Derrick said, pushing away from his desk.

Kevin stood, placing a staying hand on Derrick’s arm. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, boss.”

“What happened to you calling me Derrick?” He stepped back, letting Kevin’s hand drop. “You really going to take the only fun we’ve had in months away from us? It could be nothing. Could be a tourist that reminds you of an informant. Of course, it could be your informant, and then we’d know more about what’s going on.”

Kevin shifted his weight, the decision weighing heavy on him.

“We’ll just bring him in. You can decide what’s to be done after that. Ball’s in your court, man,” Derrick coaxed.

“I ride with you,” Kevin said.

“You got it.” Derrick broke into a grin. He slapped Kevin’s shoulder and pushed out his office door. “Tony, get Miles on the line. We need to put an ATL out for a blue sedan driven by a Caucasian man, slight build, wearing a baseball hat.”

“Yes, sir.” Tony put out the call and typed into his computer.

“Boss,” Gertie called from the dispatcher’s office. “Got Miles on the line for you.”

Kevin paced the room, feeling incompetent with nothing to do. Derrick returned a moment later, a look of disappointment deepening the lines on his face.

“Well, Miles spotted our car leaving the county line not even five minutes ago.”

“It must have been him then...he knew I spotted him and fled.” Kevin pounded his fist into his other hand. “I have to go back.”

Derrick led him back to his office. “I thought you said your boss specifically told you to lie low.”

“He did, but man, if he knows I’m here, who else does? What mess did I bring back with me?” Kevin dropped his head in his hands.

Derrick leaned against his desk and waited until he looked up. “I don’t know. It could be nothing, but if it proves to be

something, what better place to face it than with friends?”

“Friends that could get hurt in the process,” Kevin muttered.

“It’s not like we haven’t been through it before, and it sure didn’t stop you when it was me and my gal in trouble, did it?”

Derrick patted his shoulder. “Come on. I’ll drive you home. Get a shower, and we’ll keep the ATL on our guy. If he comes back, we’ll know it.”

Kevin followed him out and did as Derrick bade, but something in his guts told him he had opened a can of worms...worms that should have been left in the city.

SIX

THERE ARE MOMENTS IN life that hit you over the head with the feeling of it just being right, like you're actually exactly where you are supposed to be the moment you are supposed to be there.

Angelica was having one of these moments.

She turned her attention back to Megan as she led her back out of the barn and toward the cabins. The smell of horse, hay, and leather hung on her in a soothing aroma.

"You like the smell of horses, too, don't you?" Megan asked.

"I do, actually." Angelica smiled a little self-consciously.

"You keep whiffing the air. I was like that at first, too. Now, it's just a part of my life, but I still love the scent." She turned her back to the cabins, stepping backward as she let her gaze fall on the arena. "That right there is where I fell in love."

"The arena?" Angelica asked.

“Well, yes, a big part of it, at least. Krista taught me how to ride in that arena, and it’s also where I started spending time with Tyler. I fell in love with both of them.” Megan turned back around. “In different ways, of course.”

“You have a beautiful family,” Angelica said. She glanced at Megan’s slightly bulging belly. “And it’s growing, isn’t it?”

Megan blushed and laid a gentle hand on her belly. “It is. I didn’t think we’d start this quickly, but...” She shrugged.

“It all aligned, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Megan said, reading her eyes. “Are you ready for your life to align?”

Angelica’s mouth dropped open, and she quickly closed it, averting her eyes. “Guess we’ll have to see.”

“You know, we all have things to work through. You and Kevin aren’t alone in that.” They came close enough to the first cabin to hear the hollering of excited boys as they prepared for their day. “Are you ready to meet the boy that you’ll be working with?”

“Oh...I thought today was only a tour...I didn’t know I’d jump right in...” Angelica paused her step, her heart hammering.

“He’s simply going to accompany us on the tour. There’s no expectation today. He won’t know that you may come back to spend time with him. I’ll introduce you as a friend of mine, and we’ll go from there.” Megan squeezed her arm and searched her eyes.

Angelica blew out a breath. “Okay. I can do that. Sorry, I just want to make sure that...that...I’m what he needs.”

“I think you are, but let’s see how you feel after today.” Megan waited for her nod before knocking on the door.

A boy of about nine opened the door, his glum face pulling slowly into a sad sort of smile. “Hi, Megan.”

“Hey there, Brodie. You ready to help me with the tour?”

“Yeah, if...if you’re sure?” He glanced past Megan to peek at Angelica, and she smiled.

Brodie’s lips twitched as he pulled back, his brown hair long in a bowl cut, swinging against his forehead. The freckles on his cheeks paled slightly, and he licked his lips. “I’ll, uh, let them know.”

“And grab your jacket, too. It’s cold out here.” Megan turned to smile at Angelica when the boy went inside. “He’s a cutie, huh?”

“Adorable, but he seems so sad.”

Megan nodded. “That’s where you come in...hopefully. He’s been through a lot. I’m not at liberty to give you personal information, but it’s okay if he tells you. If you build up that trust, I think he will.”

The door opened again, and Brodie slipped out, zipping up his jacket as he did. “Okay. Ready. Are you sure you want me to be responsible for this?” He eyed Angelica cautiously.

The careful way he said responsible touched Angelica's heart, and she wanted to reach out to him already. Yet, she had a similar feeling. Could they really trust her with a boy who seemed to need so much?

"You are the perfect guy for the job, I promise." Megan laid an arm around the boy's shoulder. "This is Angelica, a good friend of mine. She wants to learn more about Camp Hope."

Brodie held out his hand, and Angelica took it in hers as he gave her a brief handshake. "It's nice to meet you, Angelica."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Brodie. How long have you been coming to Camp Hope?"

His lower lip trembled slightly, and he glanced up at Megan before answering. "Since I was six. I...I know it all, but I especially like the horses. I think most of the kids do."

Angelica noted how he said *the kids* rather than *us kids* and wondered about that. "I like the horses, too."

"Why don't we start with the cabins and work our way back to the horses?" Megan said, leading the way up.

"Okay." Brodie cleared his throat. "Well, Camp Hope has ten cabins for the campers. Some are for boys and some are for girls. Each one has a name. The one I'm in right now is called Owl Cabin. This is another boy's cabin, and it's called Marmot Cabin."

"Are all the names animals?" Angelica asked.

"Yes, it helps kids remember which cabin they're in. Some cabin leaders make it really fun; like when I stayed in Wolf

Cabin. We'd always howl like a wolf when we came together or got ready." Brodie gave her a small smile. "The little ones especially like it."

"These are the girl cabins," he said, and as giggling erupted from one, he blinked several times and pounded his chest. "How about we show her the trails now?"

A sad gleam came to Megan's eyes as she looked down at the boy. "Sure, Brodie. I think that's a good idea."

Angelica's heart hurt at the sadness that filled him and wondered why the girls' cabins seemed to bring some of it to the surface.

"This is my favorite trail. You can see the whole camp from the top." Brodie led them on the trail, glancing back to make sure they followed. "Careful right here. The roots stick out, and you could trip."

"Thank you, I was so focused on the tall trees I think I would have stumbled there," Angelica said.

The boy gave her a nod, but he smiled with a sense of pride in his expression. As they hiked, he told her about the different trees and plants and pointed out patches of snow that stayed in the shady areas.

"In the summertime, there's a lot of flowers here. You should come back then. Women like flowers," Brodie said seriously.

"Most of us do. How did you get to be so smart?" Angelica asked.

He shrugged. "I pay attention." He leaned in a little closer. "Cody brings Miss Josie flowers all the time, and they make her smile really big."

"Have you met Josie?" Megan asked.

"She's the Camp Director, right? I've met her a few times. She was at Jordan and Caitlin's party, right?" Angelica asked, remembering the spirited woman with a commanding presence.

"Yes, exactly. With all the time you've spent here in the summers, I thought you might have," Megan said. "Oh, here we are." Her radio crackled as someone called out to her. "I've got to take this. Brodie, show her the sitting area."

"It's over this way, Angelica." He followed a little path through the trees, then stopped as the trees opened up. "It's a cliff. Here, I'll help you to the bench." He reached out his hand, and she took it, letting him lead her to the bench made of what looked like a long stump split in half.

"This is beautiful," she said, gazing across the little valley where the camp lay.

"It's Camp Hope." Brodie made sure she was settled on the bench, then let go of her hand and sat next to her. "You ever think about why a place or a person has a certain name?"

Angelica turned to the boy, her eyes stinging slightly as she searched his serious face. He scanned the land before them, though, and did not meet her gaze. "Sometimes, yes. What brings that to mind?"

“Well, Camp Hope is all about bringing kids like me hope, you know. To make us not give up on...life.”

Angelica’s throat tightened, but she swallowed. “You know, I think that’s why I came back to Hope Lake...for that hope. Is that why you come to the camp?”

“Yeah, that and the horses,” he turned to her with a flash of a smile. “You know what horse I like the best?”

“Which one?”

“Jellybean.”

“Jellybean? What meaning does a name like that have?” Angelica asked.

“Nothing, it just makes me smile.” He shrugged.

“Well, you have a great smile.”

“So do you. It’s real...not one of those fake smiles that some adults feel like they have to give.”

“Why would they feel like they have to smile?” Angelica asked.

“To make you happy...to pretend to be a friend when really they’ll just end up leaving. People don’t like sad people.”

“Huh,” Angelica said, letting the wise words of the child sweep through her. “But sadness is a part of life. Are we supposed to pretend to be happy even when sad things happen?”

“I can’t,” he said. “That’s why I still don’t have my forever home. Sad makes people uncomfortable.” He kicked his legs

on the bench, his toes barely scuffing the gravel underneath.

“I’m sad a lot of the time, too,” Angelica said, realizing that she was opening up to a small boy, but the look he gave her erased her fear.

“Really? Or are you just saying that?”

“Really.”

“Why?” His brow furrowed.

She swallowed and blinked rapidly. “I lost my best friend.”

He gasped. “Did she die?” He searched her face, his eyes widening when she nodded, and he leaned forward and whispered. “My baby sister did, too.” His eyes filled with tears.

Angelica didn’t think; she drew the boy into her arms and held him tight, feeling their pain mix. “That must hurt so much,” she whispered into his hair, and his little head nodded on her chest.

When she released him, she wiped her eyes, then wiped his. “Maybe, maybe when I come visiting, we can just be sad together.”

“It doesn’t make you uncomfortable?” he asked as he sniffed.

She cocked her head in realization. “No, it actually makes me more comfortable because I think we understand each other.”

Brodie met her eyes. “I think your name has a special meaning too, just like Camp Hope.”

“Oh, really?” she said, her trembling lips pulling into a smile.

“Yeah, angel...Angelica. You look like one, too.”

“Why, Brodie, I think that’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever told me.” Angelica’s eyes stung for an entirely different reason.

Brodie’s lips pulled into the brightest smile she had seen on him yet. “Wanna meet Jellybean?”

“More than anything,” she said and took his offered hand. As they walked back onto the trail, she caught Megan’s misting eyes.

Megan gave her the okay sign and a questioning look. Angelica smiled at her and nodded. She glanced back down at Brodie, who clung tightly to her hand even though they were away from the cliff, realizing that this brave boy had more courage than she did. She didn’t know who would help the other more, but she was drawn to the kid as if...well, as if things were beginning to align.

As soon as she returned home that afternoon, she felt an urgency to share the day with Kevin. Which both terrified her and warmed her.

Before even leaving her car, she pulled out her phone and hit his number before she could talk herself out of it. She bit her

lip as the phone rang until finally his voicemail picked up.

She pulled the phone away and almost hit end, but at the last second held it back up to her lips. “Hey, it’s Angelica. Uh, well, I just got back from Camp Hope.” She drew in a deep breath. “It was amazing. I can’t wait to tell you about it...if you want to hear about it, that is...this kid. Oh my goodness, Kevin, this kid is incredible. He...well...he’s going through a lot...kind of like us, you know. Anyway, I hope you are doing well. Guess, um, we’ll talk later. Bye.”

She ended the call and threw back her head with a groan. “Could you be any more awkward?” Letting her breath out, she grabbed her things and went inside. At least her aunty would be there, eager to hear all about it.



Kevin glanced at his phone as it rang, seeing Angelica’s number. His heart raced, but he turned the ringer on silent and went back to looking at mugshots.

“You didn’t want to answer that?” Derrick asked, one eyebrow raised.

“No,” he said simply, moving on to the next mugshot.

“Does she call you often?” Derrick asked, leaning back and staring at him.

“No,” he said again.

“What if she needed something?”

Kevin tore his gaze away from the computer screen and glared at Derrick. “There might be someone stalking me, looking to do me harm or set me up or who knows what, and you think I should focus on getting together with a girl?”

“So, Chasity said they aren’t girls anymore, and the proper way to address them is women, but yes, I do.”

Kevin rolled his eyes.

“My life might have gotten more complex when Chasity returned, but it got so much better, too.”

“Look, boss. I’m interested in Angelica...and yes, in that long-term forever kind of way, which is pretty crazy.” He shook his head. “And even crazier that I’m telling you, but... it’s not safe to be around me right now. I could put her in danger. That’s not something I can live with.”

Derrick watched him for several moments, then leaned forward. “You think he might use Angelica as bait or something?”

Kevin dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his temples. He needed sleep, but he couldn’t stop without knowing what this guy was about. “I don’t know...but I can’t take that risk.”

“What are you going to do about Angelica?” Derrick asked, scratching at the stubble on his cheek. “I mean, if you ignore her, she’ll be hurt and won’t understand. By the time you figure this all out, it could be too late.”

Kevin glared at Derrick.

“Sorry, it’s just that I acted too late before. If I had done what I knew I should have the first time I was with Chasity, my life would have been a lot happier.” He leaned in close. “Not everyone is given that second chance.”

Kevin’s gut churned. He didn’t want to lose Angelica, but better to lose her and she stay unharmed than for him to be the cause of something to happen to her. Right?

He turned away from Derrick, watching the screen absentmindedly when his eyes caught something. “That’s him. Dominic Peters. We call him Peters.”

“That’s the guy driving the blue sedan. You’re sure?”

Kevin shook his head. “No, I’m not willing to stake my life on it, but that’s who he reminded me of.”

“I’ll revise the BOLO on him—”

“No, that would only scare him off, and if he’s working with my partner or someone in the FBI, they’ll know. Let’s just keep it local.” He turned to Derrick. “Can you do that?”

“Sure, I’ll get my men on a secure line and tell them.”

“Thanks,” Kevin said, drawing a hand down his face.

“You should go rest now. You’ve been at this for over twenty-four hours.”

“I’m used to pulling all-nighters.” Kevin shrugged it off.

“Go and call the lady back. Make an excuse if you don’t want to scare her, but tell her something. Don’t screw it up before you even get the chance to start it.”

“Thanks, boss,” Kevin said sarcastically, but he took his beanie off the desk and pulled it on. “Let me know if any of the guys see Peters.”

“Will do. Sleep, Armstrong...but after you call the lady.” Derrick waved, retreating into his office.

Kevin muttered to himself as he left the Sheriff’s Office and climbed into his truck. The sun glared past the mountains into his rear-view mirror as he drove out of town to the cottage. When he pulled up to the house, the sky had turned orange, with rays of pink spreading across the clouds above the lake.

He stopped at the side of the house to watch the changing colors, following to the back deck.

“It’s a beautiful one tonight, isn’t it?” Mrs. Fields asked from a porch swing on her back deck, gently rocking back and forth.

“It is,” Kevin said, leaning against the corner of the house.

“You find the guy?”

“Nope, but I found a lead.” The pink faded into purple, and soon the darkness filtered down, leaving the lake reflecting a deep, dark expanse of sky. “Keep your eyes open. I’ll appreciate any more tips you have.”

“At the rate of these last few years, I feel like they should give me junior deputy status.” She laughed and gave him a wink. “Get some sleep, Officer. You look like you’ve been up too long.”

“Will do. Good night, Mrs. Fields.”

“Good night, son,” she waved as he wandered back to the front door to unlock the house.

Inside, he placed his keys, his wallet, and his phone on the table. The little light on his phone flashed repeatedly, and he stared at it in indecision.

He didn't want to lose her...she was finally opening up, but telling her what was going on would be sure to scare her away and probably for good. She needed to feel safe, and he had told her Hope Lake was safe...but was it?

After pulling off his boots, he glanced at the phone again, but his rumbling stomach forced him out of the chair to scrounge the fridge for some dinner. The leftovers from the cafe called to him, and he pulled out the box and put it in the microwave.

The flashing light caught his attention again while he waited for his food to heat. He picked up his phone and listened to the voicemail, his lips curving into a smile as Angelica's voice met him. A warmth settled as he listened about how well her time at Camp Hope had gone, and he yearned to go pick her up and let her tell him while they watched the stars twinkle on the lake's surface.

He shook his head. Better to call or Mrs. Manning might send her over with more cookies tomorrow, and he needed her to stay away from this place. Peters obviously knew he was there, and the last thing he wanted was for Angelica to get pulled into whatever was going on.

With a deep breath, he hit the call button and listened to the ring. It rang twice before she answered in that breathy way she had. A longing filled him so powerfully that he almost hung up and drove over. He ground his feet onto the floor and forced himself to sit.

“Hey, I’m glad to hear you had such a good day,” he said. “So, it wasn’t as scary as you thought it would be?”

“Oh, it was, but it turned out to be okay,” she said, and he could hear the echo of her feet walking.

He pictured her walking down the hall to her room for privacy. “Tell me about this boy.”

“His name is Brodie, and he is just a doll. He talks like an adult, but he’s only like nine. But, Kevin, he’s so sad. He lost his little sister.” Her voice choked up.

“Oh man, that’s a hard one. So young, too. Do you know how?”

“No,” she said with a sniffle. “I don’t want to push him, you know. Got to let it come organically.”

Kevin let out a small chuckle, thinking she was giving him a bit of advice about her. “I get it.”

“I...I told him I lost someone, too. I think it kind of bonded us.”

“Sharing those kinds of things strengthens your bond with someone, you know?” He could play the same game and use this conversation as a safe way to share what he wanted as well.

“I know,” she said, her voice softening, as if she really understood the depth of his meaning. “I’m going back there tomorrow.”

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s good to keep busy.”

“You want to join us?” The shy hesitancy in her voice stirred something deep inside of him.

“I wish I could.”

“Oh, okay. Well, maybe next time.”

He knew he had hurt her, but he didn’t know how to make an excuse, until... “Something opened up in my case. It’s going to keep me busy for a while”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hey, it’s not like that, Angelica.” He ran a hand over his hair. “There’s no place I’d rather be than wherever you are. This won’t last forever. What I said the other day, it’s still how I feel. There are some things I have to take care of.”

“I understand. Work comes first.” She kept her tone neutral, but he heard the undertones of what she implied.

“It’s not just work, Angelica. I...” He blew out a breath. “I can’t explain it right now, but I will. I’ll tell you everything when it’s all over. I promise.”

“Hey, you don’t have to share your secrets.”

He heard the message behind that one as well. “I want to, and I want to know yours as well. Just give me a few days to figure this out.”

“Of course, Kevin. Take the time you need.” The microwave chimed. “Sounds like your dinner is ready. I’ll talk to you... well, whenever you have the time.”

“It’ll be soon, Angelica. Good night.”

“Good night.”

The line went dead, and he dropped his head to the table with a groan. Why did things like this have to happen right when he thought something was finally going his way?

He ate his dinner without really tasting it, then stumbled to bed, lying on top of the covers until sometime in the middle of the night when the chill of a storm battered against the slider, waking him up and forcing him under the blankets.

The wind whipped snow against the glass, tiny shards of ice pitter-pattering with each gust. He watched it until his lids closed once again.

The next time he awoke, the world was covered with a pristine, glistening white. He lay in the warm bed, letting himself wake up slowly, something he had missed since starting with the FBI. Memories washed over him, but with a clear head, his perceptions held a different note.

Thinking about Angelica, he realized how much their conversation showed. She was interested in him, in having more with him. Sure, she didn’t come right out and say it, and it sounded like it scared her half to death, but she showed her interest.

As for the case, things really popped out. One, what could Peters really do to him? He wasn't a criminal mastermind. Could he really come up with something that would harm him or Angelica? That was what bothered him. The guy was a weasel. Running small-time gigs from behind the scenes, he wasn't one to instigate anything. Something about this new behavior, if that scruffy guy in the blue sedan was him, was off.

Then something completely different shot into his mind: the girl with the baseball hat, Addie. He hadn't registered it before, but he swore he saw a faded, yellowing bruise on her cheek below her sunglasses. Addie had nothing to do with the other two thoughts, but since it popped up, he felt he had to do something about her.

The thundering, low grumble of the snow plow passing propelled him from bed. More than likely there wasn't much traffic today, and wherever Peters went, he had probably holed up for a few days.

With Mrs. Fields aware, and Derrick and the deputies on the lookout, and it being the off-season, if Peters showed up again, he'd know about it. That knowledge changed a few things.

He started his coffee and called Derrick.

"Morning, boss," he greeted when Derrick answered.

"Well, you sound more chipper this morning," Derrick said.

"It's amazing how sleep can clear a head." Kevin pulled his things together, stuffing his wallet in his pocket and holstering

his gun. "I have some ideas that I want to run by you, but first I'm going to drive Angelica to Camp Hope. She's not used to snowy roads like this."

"Glad to hear you came to your senses," Derrick said, sounding pleased with himself.

"Well, I'm betting on Peters lying low for a few days, and this storm helps. Easier to see who comes into town."

"Very true," Derrick said. "So I'll see you in a bit?"

"Yeah, and I want to talk with you about Addie."

"Addie...you mean Shane's Addie? What about her?"

"I ran into her in town a couple of days ago and something about it has been bothering me. Just thought I should run it by you."

"Of course, just...just don't go sharing that stuff with everyone. She's a friend."

"I get it, and my lips are sealed. See you, boss." Kevin slipped his phone into his pocket and poured his coffee into a commuter cup, racing out the door, hoping he made it to Mrs. Manning's house in time.

It might come to him having to pull away from Angelica like he had thought last night, but for the moment, he wanted to make sure that Angelica knew exactly where his heart lay.

SEVEN

ANGELICA COULDN'T BELIEVE HOW heavy snow could be. She dug the shovel into the wall of snow the plow had left blocking her driveway. Her breath came out in puffs of white that crystallized and fell, and her heavy coat and hood made her feel like she worked in a sauna.

With a grunt of effort, she threw the shovelful of snow into the growing pile where her aunt's lawn would have been if snow hadn't covered everything last night. She had thought several times of calling in, but Megan had said they have their activities no matter the weather, and she had promised Brodie that she would be there.

Promises were important, and keeping promises to kids who have abandonment issues was even more important.

Turning back to the pile of snow still waiting to be cleared, she leaned on the shovel, pulling off her hood and doing her best not to let defeat get the better of her. The blast of cool air helped, and she dug the shovel back into the hard chunks of snow.

The strange sound of tires squeaking on snow pulled her attention to the road as she hefted her shovel. Her breath caught in her throat, and her jacket felt even more stifling as she watched Kevin's truck pull to stop in front of her.

“Hey beautiful, want a ride?” He grinned, then laughed self-consciously as he hopped out of his still running truck. “You are quite the gal, out here shoveling snow to volunteer.”

“Well, if you had met this boy, you would know how important it is to keep a promise.”

“Oh, I know.” He stepped over the piled snow to stand next to her. “Why do you think I'm here?”

She licked her lips. “You said...you said you weren't going to be able to...”

“I had an epiphany this morning. I'm sorry about last night. Pulling all-nighters isn't so good for clear thinking. I had let... things get to me.”

“Things are that bad...with your case?” She bit her lip, searching his eyes with concern.

“They'll be okay, but sometimes precautions have to be made.” He opened his mouth as if to say more but hastily shut it. After glancing around the snow-covered yard, driveway, and car, he met her eyes again. “So, how about a ride? I can pick you up whenever you're ready to come home.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” he said, his smile holding a slightly sheepish quality.

“Well, I’ll let my aunt know. Do you want to come in while I do?”

He shook his head and took the shovel from her hand. “Nope, I’ll work on this while you let her know. If she needs to go anywhere today, tell her I’ll take her. Your car isn’t made for driving in the snow.”

“Well, mine isn’t, but Aunty has all-wheel drive. She said she would take me this morning, but I would not let her. It would be awful if she slipped in this and hurt her hip before it fully healed.”

“Definitely. I’ll help however I can.” He smiled and went to work on the driveway.

Angelica hastened inside, grabbing her lunch and purse while talking to her aunt.

“I thought I heard you talking to a deep voice out there,” Aunt Martha said, pushing to a stand to walk into the kitchen. “I don’t have any fresh-baked cookies, but we have some leftover pie...”

“Aunty, you don’t have to feed Kevin every time he comes over.” Angelica helped her aunt back to the couch. “You just rest. He’ll bring me home later today, and he said if you need anything today, let him know. I left his number by the phone.”

She waved away the suggestion. “I don’t need anything. Invite him for dinner, if you want. He’s been such a help.”

“We’ll see, Aunty. Love you and don’t push it today! You know that’s why you are sore right now. You aren’t supposed

to be up so much. I can't leave you if you won't follow doctor's orders while I'm gone."

"I'll be fine." Aunt Martha waved her away, but Angelica narrowed her eyes. "Yes, dear, I'll sit here like a good girl and rest."

Angelica kissed her aunt on the cheek. "Thank you. I'll be home after lunch, so don't wait for me to eat."

"Have a good time," she said, "and tell that handsome young officer thank you."

"I will." Angelica waved as she went through the door, closing it tightly behind her as the icy chill blasted against her cheeks.

She turned back toward the now cleared driveway, her mouth opening in astonishment.

"Ready?" Kevin said, wiping a sleeve across his sweaty brow before pulling his cowboy hat back down.

"How...I mean...I wasn't gone that long..."

"Years growing up shoveling snow, hay, horse and cattle dung, dirt. You name it, I've shoveled it." He laughed, a lingering nostalgia filling his eyes.

"You're incredible," she said, slowly walking toward him again. "I...I mean it, you really are."

"Aw, shucks," he said jokingly, but his cheeks held more rosiness than the effort and cold warranted. He helped her into

the truck, whose heater was still blasting, making her skin tingle in the warmth.

She didn't know if it was the slam of the door, or the heater blasting her in the face as her coat made her feel overly warm, smothered, and claustrophobic, but it sent her straight into a flashback.

The room was dark, so dark that the only way she knew Brittany was with her was the sound of whimpering behind her. They lay on a dusty sheet in such dank warmth that sweat beaded on her forehead and dripped down her chest.

The gag tasted awful, like the dirty rags she saw at the mechanics. Her arms ached from being tied behind her, pulling on her shoulders and making any position awkward.

Brittany mumbled through the gag, her fright so evident in the sound that Angelica's anxiety grew even stronger. Angelica scooted back until her hands touched Brittany's leg. Her friend ducked her head until it nestled against her back.

Together they trembled in fear as the creaking footsteps came down the stairs.

A door slammed, propelling Angelica back into the present, leaving her gasping and ripping at her jacket's zipper.

"Whoa..." Kevin's gentle voice reached her as his hand, cool on hers, stopped her frantic movements. "It's okay. You're safe. I'll help you with this."

She dropped her hands, staring at the handsome cowboy unzipping her jacket as she blinked and gulped in the clean air. He continued murmuring soothing words, though she didn't make them out as he helped her out of her jacket. Then he turned down the heater to low.

“Better?” he asked, his deep hazel eyes peering into hers.

She nodded and averted her eyes as reality came crashing down. “Sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I...I never know when they'll happen. I didn't mean for you to see me like that...I just...” She bit her trembling lip, blinking back tears and hanging her head as shame and embarrassment fired inside of her.

“Was it a flashback?” he asked gently, with no judgment or blame, simply a neutral question.

She nodded again, drawing in deep breaths to settle her emotions.

“They happen. It's not something you can control, you know, and they aren't your fault.”

“If I...if I could heal, could face my fears, then...then others wouldn't have to see me go through them.” Her body shook, whether from the fear the flashback created or from her emotions, she didn't know.

Kevin pulled her into his arms, smoothing her hair back, and murmuring soothing sounds again. “They'll fade when it's time, and no one knows that time.” He let her go enough to tilt

her head up so he could meet her eyes. “You never have to worry about having them around me. I told you, I’ll keep you safe...whether it’s from something in the present or in the past.”

His touching kindness released a flood of tears, and she let them stream down her face. “Where did you come from, Kevin Armstrong?” she asked when she could finally speak, her voice only slightly strained. “They just don’t make men like you anymore.”

He let out a chuckle and wiped her tears with his thumbs. “I could say the same about you, my angel.” He leaned in, and she knew he was going to kiss her.

Half terrified and half wanting to lean into him to speed the touching of their lips, she froze, her pulse pounding in her ears. He stopped mere millimeters from her lips, his breath warming them, smelling of coffee and mint.

“May I kiss you?” he asked, his words puffing out against her lips.

In answer, she pressed her lips against his. The warmth filled her first like a soothing balm, then filled her head with fireworks and her stomach with butterflies.

His hands cupped her face, smooth and strong and protective. She closed her eyes, allowing the flood of emotions to fill her until all she was aware of was being connected with Kevin. A sense of safety and rightness filled her.

He scooted to close the distance of their bodies, but his knee must have hit the radio, filling the cab of the truck with a loud strumming of guitar in a popular country song.

The shock of the sound had her breaking their kiss, pulling away to stare at him with something between awe and fear.

“Well, that’s one way to ruin a moment. Thanks, Garth,” he said, his lips turning into that half smile that melted her heart. “You okay? I’m sorry if I rushed...” He shrugged, his neck turning red.

“You...you didn’t rush,” she said, her fingers touching her lips as if to make sure it really happened. “I just didn’t expect...I mean...”

“The most magical moments are unexpected, aren’t they?” He settled back in his seat, but kept his eyes on her. “You really okay?”

She nodded, feeling the start of a smile pulling at her lips. “Amazingly...yes...it feels...right,” she said, searching his eyes.

“That’s the perfect way to describe it,” he said. He put the truck in gear and slowly drove down the snowy road.

Her mind went a million miles an hour in about a thousand different directions, but when they pulled into Camp Hope, the chaos settled on one thought. “What does this mean?”

Kevin put the truck in park and turned to her. “What do you want it to mean?”

She laughed, the feeling odd and airy. “I asked you first.”

“So you did.” That sexy half smile was back, making her feel even more light-headed. “I guess it means I like you...I mean, really like you, and you like me?” She gave him a small nod. “We both are going through some...things...but I think this means that we’ll see where it goes. If we can make it work. I want it to work...”

“But?” she said, her heart thundering like a hundred horses breaking into a run all at once.

“I’ll need you to be patient while I figure out this case.”

She licked her lips. “And I’ll need your patience while I figure out my...well, my stuff.”

“Then, it’s a deal?” He leaned forward. “Should we seal it with a kiss?”

Her lips pulled into a grin, eager to feel that moment when nothing else existed. It was brief. Just a simple, sweet kiss, but enough to leave her lips tingling and mind humming.

“What time should I pick you up?” His voice deepened, rumbling within her and making goosebumps dance across her skin.

“Two? If it’s different, I’ll text you.”

“I’ll be here. Good luck with the boy. I hope you’re able to help him,” he said. “I look forward to meeting him at some point. Brodie, right?”

“Yes, Brodie. I think you’ll like him.” She scooted toward the door. “Thank you, again, for...everything.” The icy air blasted against her as she opened the door, and she quickly

pulled on her jacket, leaning in once more. “Good luck with your case today.”

“Thanks,” he said, his smile having nothing to do with the case but with her, and she knew it...knew it by the intense, flirty look in his eyes.

She stood, watching as Kevin pulled away, her fingers going to her lips again. The door behind her opened as the truck turned down the driveway.

“You made it!” Megan said, ushering her inside. “I wasn’t sure...are you okay?” Megan searched her face and led her to the couch.

“I’m fine, really...it’s just been quite the morning.”

“Well, my first appointment is delayed because of the snow, so I have time for you to tell me all about it.” Megan poured her a cup of coffee and sat down next to her. “So?”

“I had a flashback,” the words poured from Angelica as she tugged off her coat, folding it and laying it in her lap. “In front of Kevin.”

Megan nodded. “So you told him...about what happened?”

She shook her head. “No...I didn’t. He just seemed to understand.”

“What did he do?” Megan asked.

“He...he kissed me,” Angelica said, unable to stop the smile that spread across her face.

Megan's eyes widened. "Well, that's one way of dealing with the situation."

"I thought so," Angelica said, touching her lips again. "I don't know why I'm telling you all of this...I think I just need to know that it really happened."

"Well, by the look of love blooming on your face, I would have to say it did." Megan patted her leg. "Want to tell me more about what triggered the flashback?"

Angelica stiffened, but when Megan said nothing else, she hugged her coat tighter to her and started. "They come out of nowhere..."

The more she talked, the more she realized she needed to. She didn't go into detail about what happened, but the freedom to speak about her current state of mind took off a heavy weight she hadn't realized she'd been carrying around.



Kevin burst into the Sheriff's Office, flying high on cloud nine, but the moment he saw Derrick rushing out of his office, his face fell.

"Let's go." Derrick grabbed his arm and turned him around. "Sighting on the south border. Tony is just observing at the moment."

"Our guy?" Kevin picked up his pace to match Derrick's as they stepped back into the cold air toward his patrol car. They

climbed into the SUV, and Derrick flipped on his sirens as they sped out of town, heading south.

“Fits the description,” Derrick finally said, turning off the siren as they exited town. “We can bring him in under suspicion, but you know as well as I do we can’t hold him unless something turns up.”

“I know,” Kevin growled. “I’m hoping the guy will talk...I mean, if he followed me all the way out here, he must have something to say to me.”

“You would think...” Derrick focused, intent on the street ahead of them, going as fast as one would dare on the snowy roads.

“I didn’t think he had it in him to drive in this,” Kevin said. “But nothing is fitting his profile right now. That’s what has me worried.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“Part of it, yeah,” he said.

The radio squawked as the deputy passed along information.

“We’re almost on top of him,” Derrick said, narrowing his eyes.

Kevin focused on the road ahead of them, a blue dot coming closer with every turn of the windy road. “It doesn’t look like the same car.”

“The guy fits the description. Baseball hat, scruffy beard, stranger.” Derrick turned on his lights, spinning the wheels to

block the road as the deputy pinned the guy in the middle.
“You armed?”

Kevin shook his head in disbelief that he had forgotten his gun in his truck.

“Stay here,” Derrick said as he jumped out of his vehicle, hand on his gun and holster unclipped. “Come out of the vehicle with your hands raised,” he yelled, his breath leaving icy clouds.

The deputy stood behind his open door, gun trained on the man leaving the car. It was an all-wheel drive, sporty car, nothing like the older blue sedan he had kept seeing.

Kevin peered around Derrick, trying to get a glimpse of the guy whose arms shook as they rose high in the air, but the glare of the window blocked his view. The guy was yelling something muffled by his window. Kevin rolled it down.

“Don’t shoot. Don’t shoot! What did I do?” The guy stood outside his car, his legs quivering like he would fall any moment. He definitely didn’t act like a man who had faced arrest before.

It was the clothes that eased Kevin’s heart rate first. The man dropped on his knees in the snow, his snow pants gleaming in the sun. A snowboard sat in the passenger seat.

Kevin stepped from the car to get a better look, and seeing the kid’s face, for that’s how young the man was, he shook his head. “It’s not him,” he muttered. Then he came close behind Derrick. “It’s not him, boss.”

“I’m just trying to go skiing...” the guy pleaded.

Derrick took his hand off his gun and nodded for his deputy to stand down. While Derrick looked over the guy’s license and gave him a lecture about driving fast in the snow, Kevin paced by the patrol car. His heart rate had returned to normal, but the event caused him to realize a few things.

When Derrick climbed back into the car, Kevin joined him. His former boss hung his head, then glanced at Kevin before turning them back toward town. “The kid only wanted to get in some powder turns. I’m sorry, man.”

“Hey, he’ll have quite the story to tell his buddies. Maybe it’s better that it isn’t Peters. Driving in this would really be outside what I would expect from him.”

“So, tell me more about this guy.”

“Well, I can’t share too much. He’s an informant and therefore protected. Not a big man, if you know what I mean. A behind-the-scenes guy, not someone I would expect to follow me out of the city.”

“I’ve learned in my years as the sheriff that it’s when someone acts atypical, it’s time to watch closely.”

“Exactly.” Kevin gave a nod.

“Speaking of that, tell me about your run-in with Addie. I didn’t realize you knew her.” Derrick glanced at him as he continued driving.

“I don’t. Saw her coming out of Mom & Pop’s and Mr. Montgomery called her by name.”

“And? What has you concerned?”

“Well, after working in the department I’ve been in the last year or so, you notice trends. You know, profiling.” He glanced at Derrick to make sure they were on the same page. With a nod from his old boss, he continued. “Well, she wore her coat pulled up, her hat down low, and barely looked up... which is why she ran into me.”

“Lots of locals return to town to visit family and try to keep a low profile so the whole town doesn’t know they’re back.”

“I get that. I’m from a small town, too...or should I say rural, but I thought you said her family’s all gone?”

“They are...you’re right. She’s at her grandmother’s house, but she passed several years ago, and her brother’s back east. So, what else?”

“Well,” Kevin said, filing through his memory. “It wasn’t until this morning that I realized what I had actually seen. She had bruising on her face. Yellowing...like a bad bruise a couple weeks old.”

Derrick stared straight ahead at the road, his face contorted into deep thinking. “She’s always been on the quieter side, kind of like Chasity and Angelica, you know? Did you notice anything else? A wedding band? We heard she got married.”

Kevin closed his eyes, going over the encounter that had only lasted a few moments. He saw her left hand reach out to get the milk from Mr. Montgomery. No ring, but an indention. He relayed as much to Derrick.

“Hmm,” he said. “I’ll have everyone monitor her place. Since we’re keeping an eye out for strangers anyway, it will be easy to ask the men to report anyone out of place.”

“You’re not going to talk with her?”

“Not yet...” Derrick said. “I need to respect her privacy.”

“Even if she’s in trouble?”

“For now,” he said. “The town will be watching. It always is. Besides, her grandma’s place is right across from Henry and Betsy’s, and Betsy is a close friend to your gal’s aunt. If something is amiss, she’ll hear about it.”

Kevin shrugged. He had more pressing concerns to think about as well. After much pondering, he turned to Derrick as they entered town. “I think I need to tell Angelica.”

“Why worry her when you aren’t even sure this guy is Peters?” Derek asked as he pulled up in front of the Sheriff’s station.

“She’s been through something...I don’t know what, and it’s not my place to share my guesses, but I feel like it’s the right thing to do—to make sure she knows the dangers of...of being with me.”

“Was she the reason you looked like the sun had risen twice this morning?”

Kevin’s lips pulled into a quasi-smile. “Yeah, I would assume so.” He blew out a breath. “But I can’t hide something like this from her...not in her...delicate position.”

Derrick shrugged. “You know better than I, but maybe talk with Megan about it? Could be that she has some ideas.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Angelica’s a pretty private person.”

“Kevin, our group of friends pull together. That’s how we make things work. You’re one of us. It’s time you recognized that.” Derrick punched him lightly on the arm before hopping out of his patrol car.

Kevin thought about what Derrick said the rest of the day as he searched the databases for any clues to what could be going on in his case. When his phone chimed, he glanced down to see a message from Angelica.

Running about a half hour late. Hope that’s okay. She left a heart emoji after it, and for some reason, that slight gesture twisted his heart with a sensation of guilt.

He shouldn’t have kissed her. Why couldn’t he have waited until after all this was settled? Though he knew why. He knew he feared she would see him as not serious and some other knight in shining armor would swoop in while he was neck-deep in his own mess.

Later on, when he pulled up to Camp Hope, he still fought with what to do. Pretend like all was well and risk her being hurt, or finding out later and feeling like she couldn’t trust him, or tell her the truth and risk her shutting him out forever.

Megan met him at the truck. “She’s getting Brodie settled in his next activity. I’m sure she’ll be down momentarily.” She

smiled, and something in the smile told him she knew what had happened this morning.

“Thank you,” he said, not knowing what else to say, but Derrick’s voice filtered into his subconscious.

“Of course. You know, people in this town really stick together.”

“They do,” he said cautiously.

“I hope you can get her to open up. She needs someone she can trust,” Megan said, her words tentative yet calculated.

“And what if her trusting me will put her in danger?” He stood stock still, wishing he had kept his mouth shut.

Megan narrowed her eyes. “Why would that put her in danger?” She peered closer at him. “Are you here on a case?”

“No, well, not really.” He tipped his hat up and ran a hand through his hair. “Let’s just say that a case might have followed me here.”

Megan froze, her feet, her body, her features. She didn’t move for two full breaths, leaving Kevin antsy. “You need to tell her.”

“Will it, uh, ruin, what we, well, what we started?” He kicked at the gravel under his boots.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I know about women who have been through things like whatever your gal has been through. Trust is hard-earned and easily lost. If you don’t tell her...and she finds out...and this is a small town...you will most likely lose

her forever.” Megan held his eyes, the line between her eyebrows showing her concern, and he realized at once it was for them both. “I’m sorry.”

He nodded and swallowed, looking away. “I should have told her before...I chickened out.”

Megan squeezed his arm, making him meet her eyes again. “You have to believe that all things happen when they are supposed to. You know, Tyler and I went through something kind of similar. Be honest, and it may get tough for a time, but I have a feeling it will work out in the end.”

She dropped her arm, looking up at the hill that Angelica walked down. Kevin turned toward her, pushing a smile to his face, and digging deep for the courage he needed to face what he knew he had to tell her.

As she approached, she said hello, her head dropped in shyness as she looked at him through her long eyelashes. He wanted to scoop her into his arms right then, but he knew what he had to do, even if it momentarily broke her heart.

EIGHT

THE ANXIETY STARTED IN the truck on the way home when Kevin told her about his probable stalker. She had handled it well in the moment, still riding high from her time with Brodie and the memory of Kevin's kiss that morning.

She was pretty sure that Kevin had expected a different reaction than her small show of concern for his safety, because he had narrowed his eyes and peered at her closely as they sat in front of her aunt's house.

The conversation started a small internal buzzing within her, but she compartmentalized it, refusing to let it surface. She liked how light and carefree she had felt during the day and rebuked anything that would change that.

Yet, the brief touch of their lips as he said goodbye didn't last long enough, and soon that buzzing turned into a humming she couldn't fully ignore. She tried turning on the music as she cleaned her aunt's house, which Angelica insisted on doing in return for rent. The humming then turned into a quivering.

After dinner, she sat with Aunt Martha to watch one of their cozy mysteries, but even that didn't help as uneasiness flooded her, leaving her feeling the need to do something. When her aunt went to bed, Angelica tried to fall asleep, and when she couldn't stop tossing and turning, she pulled out her book and read until her eyes wouldn't stay open.

This morning, the quivering was still there. She paced the kitchen, helping Aunt Martha with breakfast and staying busy as much as she could.

"What day is today, dear?" Aunt Martha asked, watching her as she dried the last dish for Angelica to put away.

"Wednesday." She set the plate in the cupboard and searched for something else that needed to be cleaned or put away. Maybe she should scrub the floors...though she knew they didn't need it.

"So no Camp Hope today, right?"

"Right, today they focus on more classes, which doesn't really leave room for what I'm doing with Brodie. Megan even takes half the day off." Angelica scrubbed the sink and the surrounding counter.

"What does she do with her morning off?"

"Oh, the girls meet at the lake." Satisfied with the sink and counter, she dried them, deciding to wash the kitchen towels and replace them with clean ones.

"Have they ever invited you to join them?" Aunt Martha asked, easing herself into a chair and watching her as she

returned to the kitchen.

“Yes, in fact, they have...but...I don’t know...you see, it’s not just social time, they talk...about things.” Angelica slowed her pace as she replaced the last towel.

“Things?”

“Yes, like the things they have been through.” Angelica sat across from her aunt at the little breakfast nook table. “Isn’t it strange that such a small town seems to have so many that have experienced...things?”

“*Things*,” Aunt Martha said with emphasis, “happen everywhere, Angie. It’s only that in a small town more people know, and I think it creates a bond. They have come together to support each other...and they’re offering you that support, my dear.”

“I...I don’t want to think about it,” Angelica said, pushing out of the seat.

“Yet you are, aren’t you? It’s constantly buzzing within you, making you stir crazy and antsy enough to drive this old lady batty.”

Angelica paused and turned toward her aunt. “I’m sorry, Aunty. I don’t mean to add stress to your life.”

“Oh,” she waved her comment away, “you don’t add stress, dear, but I think you should talk with the girls. If you’re not ready to talk yourself, maybe listening would help ease some of that anxiety you have coursing through you. Sometimes

knowing you aren't alone in your experiences can make all the difference.”

“I guess,” Angelica said, catching herself before she continued and told her about Kevin's situation. She couldn't betray his confidence, even as much as she wanted to talk about it with someone.

“You are a brave woman, Angelica. You have been through more than most and survived. I think it might take more of that courage to embrace life again.”

Angelica's phone chimed, and eager to see if it was from Kevin, she reached for it to check the message. It was from Caitlin, letting her know it was too cold to meet at the lake, so they were going to Chasity's house and hoped she could join them.

“Speak of the girls...” she muttered.

“What's that, dear?”

“Oh, uh, Caitlin texted to ask if I wanted to join them today, but they aren't meeting at the lake. They're going to Chasity's house. I don't know where that is, and my car shouldn't drive in the snow, so I guess that answers that question.”

Aunt Martha looked at her smugly and raised an eyebrow. “You sure about that? I know where she lives, and my car is all-wheel drive.”

The phone in her hand chimed again. She read the message and looked up at her aunt again. “Caitlin asked me if she could pick me up...”

“Be brave and tell her yes.” Aunt Martha patted her hand.

Angelica blew out a breath and sat with a heavy heart. It was hard to be brave when all she wanted to do was curl up in her bed and hide or lose herself in cleaning her aunt’s house... anything but face reality. She stared at the phone for several seconds and finally, with a shaky hand, texted: *Yes, a ride would be great, thank you.*

Too many times to count, she wished she had never sent that text. She pulled on her sweater and looked at herself once more in the mirror to make sure she was presentable. Nothing could hide the circles underneath her eyes, though. How was she supposed to do this?

The thought of talking to other people about what had happened overwhelmed her with such an intense sensation that she almost lost her entire ability to put on a bit of mascara or do anything. She took a deep breath in and remembered her aunty’s words.

Just listen, and know I’m not alone. That’s all she had to do today. She promised herself that she didn’t have to push too hard. Kevin would be proud of her, and that thought sent warmth through her body. She needed to tell him. Yet, how could she burden him with such a scary situation with everything he was already going through?

He already had so much going on with the stalker and the fact that he might lose his job. No, he didn’t need any extra stress. Better to talk with the ladies. They’ve been through it. They would understand, right?

There was no mistaking the sound of tires squeaking on the snow. Her heart hammered as she peered out the window, seeing a small SUV pull up and Caitlin hop across the snowbank to the area that Kevin had shoveled.

The gal was beautiful and confident, smiling as she came up to the door. Angelica moved away from the window and went to meet her as her aunt opened the door.

“Welcome, Caitlin, dear!” Aunt Martha ushered the tall, athletic woman into the house, bringing in a gust of frigid air.

“It’s sure cold out there. I’d forgotten how cold the mountain winters are.” Caitlin rubbed her arms.

“You’ll acclimate in no time. How are you holding up? How’s that sweet girl of yours?”

“She’s great. She’s at Gamma’s right now. Can’t get enough of them.” Caitlin laughed. “It’s nice to have a brief break now and then, though I miss her every time I do.”

“It’s good for her to have time with her elders. Isn’t it, dear?” Aunt Martha smiled at Angelica as she came to the entryway and retrieved her jacket.

“It is. I always enjoyed my time here.” She kissed her aunt on the cheek. “Thank you for offering to pick me up, Caitlin.”

“Of course! That’s what friends are for. Besides, I knew your car didn’t have all-wheel drive. The guys have been talking about that.” She winked.

“They’ve been talking about my car?” Angelica didn’t know whether she should feel cared for or picked on.

“Oh, you know men. They have this inherent need to protect, and one way is to ensure we are driving the proper vehicles.” She shrugged.

Aunt Martha glanced up at her. “Well, you know, dear, if you decide to stay, you might want to think about getting a different car. Though you can always borrow mine if you need.”

“Thanks, Aunty. I’ll see you soon. Don’t push too hard.” Angelica waved as she walked with Caitlin to the door.

“Great to see you again, Mrs. Manning!” Caitlin waved, and they headed outside.

Caitlin wasn’t joking. The air hit Angelica’s face with an icy force, and a shiver traveled through her as they ran to Caitlin’s car. The SUV was still warm. When Caitlin started the car, Angelica pivoted the heater vents away from her face, remembering all too clearly what had happened the day before.

“Oh, is it too warm? I could turn it down.” Caitlin asked.

“It’s fine. I just don’t like it hitting my face.”

“Well, let me know. It’s only a couple of minutes to Chasity’s house. I’m sure she’ll have a roaring fire. Derrick always makes sure that they stay warm in the house.”

“I kind of miss the fire warmth after my aunt got central heat, but I understand. It was a lot for her to do after my uncle passed.”

“Yes, men may have some weird quirks, but they are handy.” Caitlin gave a brief chuckle. “I’m glad you came. Megan says you’ve been going to Camp Hope?”

“I’ve been working with a boy named Brodie. He’s such a sweet kid, and I think it’s helping. Megan says that he’s interacting more with the other kids and smiling more often.”

“I’m so glad you’re doing that! It’s wonderful to make a difference in a child’s life.” She paused, then glanced at her as they turned off on Chasity’s driveway. “It’s not really for sure yet, but later on, Jordan and I are talking about adoption.”

Goosebumps rose across Angelica’s skin. “Like one of the Camp Hope kids?”

“Well, we think so. Josie does such a good job of matching kids with families.” Caitlin shrugged as she parked. “Again, it’s not for sure yet, but it’s something that we talk about every once in a while.”

Angelica thought about little Brodie. He hadn’t talked much about his foster family, but she could see how a stable home with loving parents could do wonders for a boy like him. He deserved that.

“Looks like we beat Megan,” Caitlin said before opening the door.

Angelica followed Caitlin up to the small but homey cabin nestled in the forest. In some ways, it reminded her of the beach house, but in the woods instead.

Caitlin was right. The air in the home was warm and snug. Chasity greeted them at the door and showed them where to hang their coats.

“Little Marshal is sleeping, and Kami is back in school. So we have freedom!” she said quietly, pumping her fists in the air, then giggled self-consciously.

“When you have little ones, you celebrate even five minutes of breathing time.” Caitlin told Angelica.

“Or even one,” Chasity said with a laugh. “I love being a mom, more than pretty much anything, but we have to remember to fill our own buckets so we have what we need for the kids.”

“Well, my bucket needs to be emptied. Can I use your restroom?” Caitlin asked as she tiptoed down the hall.

Chasity leaned in the moment Caitlin disappeared. “I’m glad I got you alone for a second. Derrick told me what’s going on with Kevin. Are you doing okay with that?”

Angelica’s heart hammered, and her eyes widened. “I...I guess I’m still processing.”

Chasity nodded. “After you’ve been through situations like us, any mention of similar events can really throw you for a loop. I wanted you to know that I understand, and if you ever need to talk...I’m here.”

“Thank you,” Angelica said. “I appreciate that.”

“Of course. I know you have your aunt, but sometimes it helps to talk to someone who’s been through something

similar...and if you're like me, you don't want to burden Kevin with your worries.”

Angelica's lips parted, but Chasity just squeezed her arm.

“Come on, I've got tea and these yummy blueberry muffins I found. They're scrumptious.”

Angelica sat on the couch and eased her nerves, letting herself find comfort in the presence of the ladies. She might not be ready to break the seal on her own struggles, but her aunt was right. It eased her anxiety knowing that others had been through similar ordeals and were leading normal, even happy, lives.



Kevin couldn't stop thinking about Angelica's reaction to his news about Peters. Could he be wrong about her history? No. He shook his head. He had seen the scars on her wrists and watched her reactions, plus the flashback she had in his truck.

So, what was it that was bothering him?

Shouldn't he be happy that she didn't freak out and refuse to see him? Or had he played it off too casually?

The memory of her warm lips on his and how the world seemed to magically align the moment their lips touched pulled him out of his worry. Everything had felt so perfect. Maybe he should focus on gratitude and appreciate this time with Angelica.

He had made plans to pick her up for dinner that evening, which meant he had the whole day to while away. Just the thought of that made him go stir-crazy. The snow on the ground made going for a run on the beach difficult and even running on the plowed road treacherous with the slippery ice.

The phone ringing stopped his pacing, and he answered it in relief.

“Hey, we got another lead,” Derrick said as a greeting, his voice muffled as he obviously rushed.

“Great,” Kevin said, his heart thrumming with urgency.

“I’m picking you up in less than five,” Derrick said and ended the call.

Kevin checked his gun and holstered it, throwing a jacket over it. Then put together a few things, including filling a water bottle. He was waiting in the driveway when Derrick pulled up.

Kevin hopped into the SUV patrol car, and Derrick took off as he clicked on his seatbelt. “So, where’s the lead?”

“In Hope City, at the rundown hotel on the east side of town.” Derrick glanced at him before looking in his mirror and taking off down the highway.

“Yeah, I know that place, something like The Last Resort.” Kevin chuckled, feeling the high of a chase. “I always thought that was a funny name.”

“I agree. Your guy, if it is him, has made himself quite comfortable there since the storm hit.”

“Well, at least he’s in the county, so you still have jurisdiction.”

Derrick smiled at him. “Exactly.”

“Well, we got, what, fifteen minutes until we get there?”

“Ten,” Derrick said as he flipped on his lights and increased his speed. “I got new shoes on this guy. Tires grip like a well-made saddle.”

Kevin chuckled. “Oh, I have missed these days. My partner now is a stick in the mud. I doubt that guy knows how to joke, much less smile.”

“Then come back,” Derrick grinned. “I know the pay is dismal in comparison, but the hours are better and so is the scenery.”

Kevin let his eyes drift out the window to the mountains in the distance and the speeding forest whizzing by. “Yeah, you got that right.” Then he turned back to Derrick. “I don’t know, boss. I mean, I felt like I was making a difference there, you know?”

“Saving lives does that.” Derrick nodded, his smile lessening. “You’ve saved lives here, too. Don’t forget that.”

“True...just less frequently,” Kevin said, punching his arm, trying to keep it light.

“You’ve got friends here, too, and, of course, your gal.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Who would have thought that Mrs. Manning would get her wish to set her niece up with one of us?”

“I’m just glad Chasity came back when she did, otherwise we might be at odds. I mean, once you found out that Angelica was more than only a pretty face...”

“Nah, man. I think we know when we have the right one. I knew whenever I looked at every other gal that they weren’t the one. I knew it with Anna...that’s why I didn’t go through with the wedding. Now Chasity...there was no doubt in my mind that we were made for each other. Not when I was eighteen, nor when she returned ten years later.”

“You don’t hear of love stories like that anymore,” Kevin said.

“Well, in Hope Lake you do.” Derrick winked then turned serious as he slowed the SUV and pulled into Hope City. “Heads up.”

He turned off his lights and slowed to a normal speed, staying with the little traffic that braved the icy roads. Kevin knew where the motel lay and kept his eyes peeled for any movement, vehicle, or person.

Derrick picked up his radio. “Tony, you copy? We’re approaching the location now.”

“Watching from down the road, boss. No movement.” The radio crackled to life with Tony’s voice.

“Keep vigilant and stay out of sight unless trouble erupts.” Derrick set the radio back into place.

“Copy that, boss,” Tony said.

“So, what’s the plan?” Kevin asked.

“He’s in room six. We pull up behind the blue sedan to block off escape.” He nodded with his head, and Kevin’s heart raced to see the car that had been following him. “And knock on the door to have a little chat.”

“What about the back window?” Kevin asked, trying to peer around the building to see what escape options there might be.

“The manager says the bathroom only has a small, high window. Unlikely your guy will try to wiggle out of that.”

“That’s what you think,” Kevin muttered. “But it would take time. We could burst in the door before then.”

“No busting needed. The manager gave us the code to open the door.” Derrick stopped the patrol car behind the blue car and smiled at him. “Know what’s better than a small town?”

“What?”

“A small county,” Derrick said, double-checking his gun and unlatching the safety loop. “Ready?”

“More than.” Kevin grinned and hopped out of the car. He glanced across the parking lot, taking in the entire surroundings, looking for potential threats or escape routes.

Derrick stood at the door, and at a nod from Kevin, he knocked. The sound of scrambling came from behind the flimsy door. Derrick knocked again. “Hope County Sheriff, why don’t you open the door, and we’ll have a little chat?”

The noise behind the door increased until on the other side of the long building there was a scratching and a thud. Kevin slipped out his gun and started toward the end of the building

after whispering, “He’s trying for it, boss. I’ll go around back as you come in this way.”

Derrick nodded and started to enter the digits into the lockbox on the door.

Kevin rounded the corners until he could see down the back of the motel. Sure enough, there was a suitcase and a few other items in the gravel underneath the window where two hands and a head facing the other direction had squeezed through and now looked stuck.

Kevin slowed his pace, stepping silently as he approached Peters. One of the informant’s hands held a gun loosely as he tried to wedge himself out of the window. From his position below, Kevin didn’t think he was going to make it.

He reached up to yank the gun from Peters’ hand. “I’ll take that,” Kevin said, flipping the safety on the man’s gun and sliding it into his jacket pocket.

“What? Who’s that? Is that you, Armstrong?” Peters’ wheezy voice rasped as the man tried to turn his head to see him.

“You look a little stuck, Peters.” Kevin chuckled, holstering his gun and moving to where he could see the man’s face. “What was your plan?” Kevin looked from Peters to the eight-foot drop to the gravel. “Gonna go head first?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” Peters wheezed. “What are you doing here? This isn’t your territory.”

“I’m on vacation, but my good friend is the local sheriff. The question is, what brings a weasel like you to this nice, small, mountain county?”

Peters sputtered and murmured random insults and excuses. “Just get me out of here, man. Can’t you see I’m stuck?”

“You give the sheriff permission to come into your room and help you out?”

Peters cursed under his breath. “Yeah. Fine. I ain’t done nothing wrong anyhow.”

Kevin lifted his radio. “You got verbal to enter and get him out of the predicament he’s got himself into.”

“Copy that,” Derrick said.

“Well, once we get you out of this mess, we’ll have that friendly chat.” Kevin patted his grungy hand, glancing down at the suitcase and grocery bags on the ground. “Then you can come clean up your mess. You know, littering is a big fine in Hope County.”

“I ain’t littering,” he spewed.

“I guess that will depend on how well you cooperate, man.” Kevin cocked his head, listening for Derrick. “You in there, boss?”

“I’m here,” Derrick’s muffled voice came through behind Peters. “Trying to figure out how to get this guy out without damaging him.”

“He’s resilient. I wouldn’t worry about being gentle.” Kevin laughed as Peters glared at him.

“Hold on, I’ll grab the end table and see if it fits in the tub.”

“See how nice the sheriff is? I would have just yanked you out.” Kevin folded his arms, staring at the man. “While we’re hanging around, want to tell me what you’re doing up here?”

“I don’t have to tell you nothing,” Peters said.

“Suit yourself. You can do it while you’re sitting in jail, too. I’ll figure out what you’re all about soon enough.” Kevin shrugged.

“Alright, the table’s an inch or so shy of your feet. Can you lower yourself back down?” Derrick asked.

“If I could, would I still be up here, man?” Peters snarled, but he wiggled and shimmied. “Ow! Don’t pull so hard!” he hollered, and Kevin swore he heard Derrick’s muffled chuckle from inside.

A moment later, Peters’ head disappeared. “You good, boss?”

“I’m good. He’s not going anywhere, are you?”

Peters grumbled, and Kevin took off at a jog to meet them in the room. Upon entering, he heard Peters complaining grumpily about his rights being violated.

“Shut your trap, Peters,” Kevin said, taking the guy by the shirt collar and plopping him on the edge of the bed. “Tell us

what you're up to, and maybe we'll let you go...though maybe not."

Peters scowled and crossed his arms. "You got nothing on me, man. All I do is help you out, and this is how you treat me? All I get is trouble from you."

"Oh, that's all?" Kevin leaned back against the wall. "I remember a few incidents that could have landed you behind bars...but here you are. You swore to pass on any information that could help us." He leaned forward. "But somehow I don't think you followed me all the way here to tell me something like that, did you?"

Peters licked his lips and looked anxiously around the room, anywhere but on Kevin. "Doing your spying always gets me on the bad side of bad guys, man. I'm done. I don't want no more of this."

"Then why are you here?"

"I don't got to tell you nothing, man. I'm a free citizen just going about my own business."

"Oh," Derrick took a step closer to the guy. "And what business do you have in my county?"

"I ain't gotta tell you, neither, man." Peters crossed his arms.

"Well then, what can we take him in on, Armstrong?"

"Littering for one. He trashed the back of his hotel room."

"I ain't littering. That's my stuff. I'm gonna get it as soon as you two let me go. Besides, that's just a ticket. You can't take

me in on no littering charge.”

“He’s right on that account,” Derrick said, scratching his chin.

Kevin pushed off the wall in irritation. He paced as he thought. “What about resisting arrest?”

“You ain’t got no warrant, man. Besides, I was just trying to fix that window. It’s been stuck and letting in all that cold blasting air.” Peters stuck his jaw out, showing more confidence now. “Just let me go, and I won’t charge you for barging into my room.”

“Oh no, see, you gave us permission, remember?” Kevin winked.

“Don’t move,” Derrick directed, taking Kevin by the arm and walking him out. “He’s right. We really have nothing to hold him on.”

“There’s got to be something. He’s following me for a reason.”

“I agree, but we don’t have any evidence of that.” Derrick scrunched his brow. “I half wish he would have come at us.”

Kevin shook his head, then, feeling the weight of the gun in his pocket, he pulled it out to show Derrick. “We have this? He was holding it when I saw him stuck in the window.”

“Well, let’s see if our friend has a permit for that,” Derrick said with a satisfied smile. He took the gun and produced it for Peters. “Want to tell me about this?”

“I got a permit, man,” Peters said smugly.

“Let’s see it,” Kevin said, folding his arms.

“It’s in my wallet,” Peters nodded to his back pocket.

“Go ahead and get it, but move slowly,” Derrick said, hand on his own weapon.

Peters pulled out his wallet and took out a ratty old piece of paper. Kevin yanked it from his hand, disbelief rolling through his belly. “Where’d you get this?”

“Your partner.” Peters grinned, showing several missing teeth, wheezing out a laughing cough.

“Did he threaten you with this?” Derrick asked Kevin.

Kevin shook his head, heat billowing into him as he realized there was nothing they could hold the guy on. He turned toward the weaselly man. “Why are you following me?”

“Who says I’m following you, man? You paranoid or something?”

Kevin glared at the man, the wicked gleam in his eyes making him seem even more crazy than normal. “You stay away from me, you hear? Leave and don’t step foot in this county again.”

“You got no right to do that, and you know it,” Peters said, his self-righteous air making Kevin rigid with the desire to smack the cocky grin right off his face.

“He might not, but I do. Don’t let me or any of my officers see you in this county again. You hear me?”

“Whatever,” Peters muttered, the cocky grin sufficiently smothered.

Derrick nodded to Kevin, and they walked toward the door.

“Watch your back, man, and that pretty blonde of yours, too.” Peters wheezed out a laugh, squirming to the wall as Kevin leaped back into the room.

Derrick grabbed Kevin by the arm. “Leave it, brother. We’ll be watching him.”

Kevin shook Derrick off him and glared once more at Peters. “You’re lucky he’s here, weasel. Next time, maybe you won’t be so lucky.” Kevin spun on his heel and stomped through the snow to the patrol car, his heart racing and his body on fire.

NINE

ANGELICA GLANCED AROUND THE restaurant nervously before ducking her head and trying to read the menu. She knew what she wanted, but if she didn't read it, her anxiety and hypervigilance would make her crazy.

"You okay?" Kevin's warm hand covered hers, instantly soothing her nerves, at least slightly.

"Yep, yes," she said, pushing forth a smile, though she didn't think it convinced Kevin all that well.

"Want to eat it at my place?" He searched her eyes.

Relief filled her at the suggestion, and it must have shown because Kevin nodded and told the waitress exactly that when she arrived to take their order.

Once back in his truck, she relaxed even more. The food was warm on her lap, buffering the chill outside.

Kevin started the truck and turned on the heater. "The weather's supposed to warm up tomorrow. Won't be the last of

the snow we'll see this winter, but it should clear the roads for a while at least.”

“That would be nice. Between you and the ladies, I've been able to get around, but I really don't enjoy relying on people.”

“Really?” he said with a note of sarcasm.

“Ha ha. There's nothing wrong with being independent.” She sat up straighter.

“Independent is one thing; stubborn is another,” he said with a light chuckle.

“Kevin Armstrong, are you teasing me?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. What are you going to do about it?” The flirtation in his words made Angelica's cheeks burn, and she lowered her gaze, watching him as he smiled at her before pulling out onto the icy roads.

“I really appreciate you being willing to eat at your house,” she said, a shiver overtaking her.

“Yeah, what was that? Last week when we had lunch there, you didn't seem bothered by it.”

She lifted one shoulder. “Each day is different.”

“There's more,” he said, though he didn't push, simply stated the fact. When they stopped in his driveway, he turned toward her. “Is it because of what happened with my informant?”

“Doesn't seem like it should be, but maybe,” she whispered.

“I won't let him hurt you,” he said, cupping her cheek.

She met his eyes. “What makes you think I’m worried about him hurting me?”

Her words shocked him. She could read that in his widening eyes and his hand dropping from her cheek. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Why not?” she challenged him. “Because being an FBI agent is a super safe job? Because no one dies in that line of work? Because you don’t deal with a lot of dangerous situations?”

Kevin’s mouth dropped open before he slowly closed it. “I see.” He sat back, then slowly exited the truck and came to hold the food while she slipped out. He remained silent as they walked inside.

Mrs. Fields waved from her lighted window, and Angelica lifted a hand to the older woman, forcing herself to smile. Kevin lifted a hand as well, then unlocked the door and led them inside.

She set the meals on the table and opened them, placing napkins and utensils next to the to-go boxes. When Kevin still stood there, looking out at the moon reflecting on the lake, she cleared her throat.

“I didn’t mean to ruin our evening together,” she said meekly, walking to him and placing a hand on his back.

“You needed to say it. It’s something that really worries you, isn’t it?” He turned and searched her eyes. “You’re worried about being with a man in my line of work.”

Angelica gulped. She couldn't lie, and she shouldn't. "We... we don't need to talk about that yet. I mean...we don't even know where this," she motioned between them, "is going yet...or what will come of the hearing. Right?"

"But if I am reinstated?" he asked, his body rigid.

Panic rose within her, leaving her throat clenched. Her eyes stung as she met his, and the reality she didn't want to face stared down at her. "I don't know," she said so quietly she almost didn't hear the words herself.

He nodded and moved toward the table. "We better eat before it gets cold."

They picked at their food for a while, with an awkward conversation that felt stilted and heavy. Angelica wished she had said nothing, but should she have left it hidden, letting whatever they currently were turn into a genuine relationship? What would have happened then...if he went back to work for the FBI?

"You know, Derrick will welcome me back," Kevin said, but the heaviness in his voice told her what she already knew.

"But you wouldn't be happy as a deputy, would you? You weren't happy before. You wanted more." She tried to hold his gaze, to be strong and unselfish, but inwardly she screamed, *just stay!*

"I did want more," he said, holding her gaze, searching her eyes. "So, where does that leave us?"

Angelica shrugged and turned her attention back to the food on her plate, shoving a piece of chicken around before she finally popped it into her mouth as an excuse for a few more moments before answering.

She finally finished chewing and looked at him, feeling sorrow well up inside her. “How would you feel about keeping things casual until we know...you know, what happens with your career?”

“Casual...” He repeated. “Does that mean I can’t kiss you anymore?”

Instinctively, she bit her lip as heat burned her cheeks. “Well, I, uh, well.” She cleared her throat, but her face still felt on fire.

“I mean, it would be a shame to stop something that feels so right, wouldn’t it?” He leaned closer, that half smile that made her toes tingle, doing her in.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice hoarse and burning her mouth. Kissing was pretty innocent, right? She told that to herself, though she knew it would only make walking away harder in the end.

“Hey, let’s not jump ahead too far in the future. Why would the Big Guy bring us together only to not let us be together?”

She cocked her head, liking his thinking. “Okay, you’re right. No jumping into future maybes.”

Kevin smiled fully now, although there still seemed a lingering sadness in his eyes. She felt lighter for having shared

some of her fears, at least.

The tension was still there, lingering in the unspoken words, but the evening had relaxed into a more comfortable experience. By the time he took her home, there was only a slight tension, or maybe fear, but it was more of the unknown, not of each other.

When he kissed her good night, his hand cupping her head and fingers twining in her hair spoke of his earnest wish that there was nothing holding them back from fully committing to each other. She felt it and wished for it as well, but that unknown still troubled her.

She stood in the doorway, waving as he pulled down the street, then continued staring long after his taillights had disappeared. Was it too late for her heart already? Her gaze blurred as she drew in an uneasy breath.

The fear of losing someone else she loved ripped her apart.

Wait...did she really just think that? Had she fallen in love with Kevin Armstrong? Her stomach flip-flopped, and she didn't know whether to be excited or full of fear.

“You going to stand out in the freezing cold all night?” Aunt Martha said from the doorway.

Angelica shook herself out of her pondering and stepped inside to the warmth of the house. Aunt Martha watched her with a curious stare while she took off her jacket and outer gear and hung them on the coat rack.

“You might as well tell me, dear. I am pretty sure I see it in your face anyway,” she said, then motioned for her to follow her to the living room. “I made us hot chocolate and cookies.”

The sweet scent soothed Angelica as she sat and sipped the delicious drink. “You know how to prime your victims,” she said, teasing her aunt.

Aunt Martha laughed. “Years of practice, my dear.” Then she sat back in her chair, mug in hand, and lifted an eyebrow. “So? You going to tell me you’re in love with him?”

Angelica narrowed her eyes, then swallowed, then shrugged. “I...I guess I am, but, Aunty, I...I don’t know if I can handle the stress of his career.”

Aunt Martha set down her mug and sat forward again. “You’re afraid of losing someone else.”

Angelica’s eyes burned, and she blinked back the tears as she nodded. “I am,” she said, her lip trembling.

“Oh, my darling. That’s only natural. We all fear that, but once you’ve tasted loss, it makes you hold on a little tighter to those you have left.” Aunt Martha reached out and squeezed her leg before sitting back again.

“If he was here...I mean, in this small town, maybe I could handle the law enforcement...but he deals with really dangerous situations with the FBI. He would hardly be home...and probably be all up in his head about his cases when he was.” She blew out a breath and slumped back onto the couch. “I should have never let this happen.”

Aunt Martha chuckled, not a humorous sound but a sound suggesting that it was silly to think we had any power over that. “You don’t get to choose who you fall in love with, dear. It’s not how the Good Lord works.”

“I’d be a mess...wondering every day if he would come home or if I would get a phone call saying he had been hurt... or worse.”

“That’s why we have friends and family. They help us shoulder those fears.”

Angelica paused with that thought, and her mind went to Chasity. Sure, Derrick was the sheriff of a small town, but he still dealt with danger, right? After what Chasity had been through...but she hadn’t lost someone. She hadn’t lost her best friend.

“You should reach out to them more, Angie. They’re good women.” Aunt Martha watched her with sympathetic eyes. “And you know I’m always here for you, too.”

“Thanks, Aunty. You always know what to say.”

Aunt Martha laughed and ended with a sigh. “Well, that’s simply experience, dear. So, when do you see the handsome cowboy again?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, her cheeks burning. “He wanted to show me his family’s ranch...but we decided to keep it more casual, for now. So, he’s taking me to Tyler’s and Megan’s so I get the feel of what a ranch is like.”

“And does he know how you feel?”

Angelica licked her lips before responding. “You mean about my concern with what he does for a living?”

“That and how you feel about him.” She peered closer. “You know, communication is important in any relationship, no matter how far it goes or doesn’t.”

“I know, and...yes, I’m pretty sure he knows.”

“Well, you should make that a for sure, dear. You never know when it might be too late to share it.”

The statement sat heavy on Angelica’s heart. She knew it better than most. When she faced death, she had wished many things, but especially to see those she loved one last time so she knew they understood how much they meant to her.

The next morning, before she left for Kevin’s, she mustered the courage to call Chasity.

“Hey! Great timing, Marshal is down for his morning nap. How are you holding up?”

“Oh, okay. How are you?”

“We’re good here. It’s wonderful having you join our Wednesdays together. We all feel you fit right in.”

“Thanks. It makes me feel good to hear that.” Angelica pondered how to broach the subject, the silence feeling heavier and heavier.

“You want to know how I do it, don’t you?” Chasity finally said. “Kevin and Derrick are a lot alike, and the job has its dangers.”

“How do you do that?” Angelica asked, feeling breathless and strange that Chasity kept seeming to read her mind.

“Well, I guess it takes one to know one.” She gave a small laugh. “So, I won’t lie. It’s not easy, but Megan and I have a pact that on the nights Derrick is late or takes a suspicious call, I call her, and she distracts me. Plus, Derrick knows to keep me updated. He’ll text me before taking a call he might be worried about, and text me when he’s done.”

“Ahh, that communication thing my aunt keeps talking about,” Angelica said.

“That’s it. The more he communicates, and you reciprocate, the better.”

“I...I just don’t know if I can go through losing someone again,” Angelica said, feeling the tears threatening and her throat tightening.

“It’s scary, I know; but look, you are learning to live again. You’re resilient and strong, probably more than you know.” Chasity took a breath. “And the real question is, can you live with yourself if you didn’t take the chance?”

“You mean can I live without Kevin?” Angelica said, though more as a statement as she wondered.

“Exactly.” A faint cry came through the phone. “Oh, shoot. I’m sorry. Marshal is right at that transition from needing three naps going into two, so the morning nap is hit-and-miss right now. I’ve gotta go, but can I call you back once I get him settled?”

“It’s okay. Thank you, Chasity. I think you said exactly what I needed to hear. I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Sounds good. Glad I could help. Feel free to call back if you need to talk more. Bye.”

Angelica slipped the phone into her pocket, feeling an urgency as she hurriedly got ready for her day with Kevin. She kissed her aunt goodbye and drove down the snow-free roads to Kevin’s.

She was scared to death with what she was about to do, but there was a powerful knowing that she had to do it.



Kevin paced the house, glancing repeatedly at the clock, wishing that the time for Angelica to arrive would get here sooner. Downtime was his nemesis. It gave him too much time to think, to worry, to build up anxious stories in his mind...like Angelica not accepting him as he was.

He loved his job; but the more time he spent with Angelica, he realized he loved her. All he wanted to do was spend time with her, but his work...

Was it worth losing her?

His speech to her about letting the future stay in the future and not worrying about it now sure sounded good as he said it. Following his own advice proved harder than he had thought.

He glanced at the clock again. Fifteen more minutes until Angelica would arrive. He paced to the front door and unlocked it, then busied himself in the kitchen.

He heard the click of the front door shutting as he put away the last dish. The first thought was surprise because Angelica had never let herself in before, even though he had told her to. He wiped the last residue of dishwater off his hands, but when he turned to leave the kitchen, what he saw froze him.

It wasn't Angelica, but the grungy weasel Peters pointing a gun at his chest.

"You know, I thought long and hard about how I was going to do this." Peters cocked his head, stringy hair hanging down on that one side.

"What are you doing, Peters?" Kevin hissed.

"You see, you've made my life complicated, man. Ever since you come into it, all crazy broke loose. Now, you got me in an ugly position."

"What position is that?" Kevin kept him talking as he edged closer to the counter where the knife block sat. His own gun was holstered, hanging with his jacket, ready to go when Angelica arrived.

Angelica!

His heart, already racing, sped into a full-speed gallop. He had to get Peters out of here before she showed up.

"You know what that is, man. You and that partner of yours is up to something. I know it, and now you all got my sister

involved. My baby sister, man. That's not cool."

The switch of topic shook Kevin enough that he momentarily forgot what he was striving for. He paused and looked at Peters. "Your sister? What does she have to do with this?"

"Hands up, man! And away from the knives." Peters shook the gun at him, and he raised his hands, though he spun, hoping to turn Peters away from the front door, towards the back, maybe even get him outside where there was room to counterattack. "You know exactly what's going on. Don't play the fool with me."

Kevin shook his head as he continued to edge toward the slider that led out to the deck. "No, man, I don't. I've been out of the loop. You know that. I mean, you even followed me here. That was you, wasn't it?"

"You are real good, man. Real good. But no, you know what happened, and you know it happened before you left."

Kevin wracked his memory while continuing toward the door and planning the next steps, feeling like he wasn't doing either of those things very well. "I really don't know. Is that why you're here? You think I have something to do with your sister? Ask her. I'm sure she'll tell you."

"Ask her? Ask her!" Peters closed the distance between them, jamming the gun against his chest as he reached the slider. "If I could ask her, don't you think I would?"

“I don’t understand, man. Easy. You don’t want that to go off.”

“Oh, you think I care about splattering you in this nice little place? I don’t care about you, man. I care about my sister!” Peters’ eyes were wild, giving Kevin’s heart a start, realizing that he wasn’t running on all cylinders right then.

“Calm down, Peters. Calm down. We can get to the bottom of this together.”

“You know...” Peters eased the pressure of his gun but didn’t take it away completely. “I thought it would be fair if I took that pretty little thing you’ve been hanging with. Let you know how it feels to have someone’s grimy hands on someone you love, not knowing if they would kill her or not, or whether they’d let her go if you did as they said.”

“Wh...what? Someone took your sister?”

“Stop playing the fool, man,” Peters yelled, shoving the gun into his chest again. He swiped his greasy hair with his free hand. “You take her, keep her away from me, give her to those...those vile creatures that you make me rat on...and...and for what, man? For what?”

Movement caught Kevin’s eye, and he glanced up, horror leaving his blood running cold as he saw Angelica coming toward him, something shiny in her hands. He glanced at Peters, seeing the man lost in his head as he muttered more of the craziness he’d been saying the whole time. Kevin gave Angelica a quick shake of his head, but her eyes only narrowed in what looked like pure determination.

“You know, man. I should just kill you right now.” Peters pinned Kevin against the glass of the slider, and Kevin wished for once he was as paranoid as his partner called him. If he was, he would be wearing his bulletproof vest right now and would have already incapacitated the guy.

He didn't dare turn to look at Angelica for fear that Peters would follow his gaze, but he saw her from his peripherals as she slowly closed in on them. Now close, he could see the taser clearly in her hand. At least it wasn't a gun...though that might have been better for her.

“I'll help you find her,” Kevin said, doing his best to keep Peters' attention on him, but not taking his peripherals off Angelica. If she tasered Peters while the gun was still shoved into his chest, it would cause Peters' hand to squeeze that trigger.

He had to play this right, perfect, in fact, so that everyone would be safe. Especially Angelica. It took all his willpower to keep from watching her straight on, seeing the bright determination shining from her eyes.

“You help me? Ha!” Peters said in a laugh, caught off guard enough that he released the pressure off Kevin's chest, with the muzzle pointed toward the window instead.

Peters' eyes narrowed as he looked above Kevin's head, seemingly out the window. It hit Kevin right then what the man saw...not out the window, but in the reflection. The realization came at the same moment that Peters understood what he was looking at.

Kevin grasped the gun, aiming it up, as Peters went to spin toward Angelica. As he did, Angelica shoved the taser at Peters' neck.

Peters convulsed, the gun blared, and Kevin's hands tingled as he yanked the gun from Peters' hands. He shoved the man away to writhe on the floor, immediately putting the safety on the gun.

"What were you thinking?" he asked, pulling Angelica into his arms.

"S...saving you," she whimpered. "The...the gun went off. I...I didn't know...if it had been pointed at you...I didn't know."

"Shh," he said, smoothing back her hair, watching as Peters twitched on the floor. "You did good. Now, we need to truss him up before he gains his senses again."

"What...what can I do?" She clenched her trembling hands into fists.

"In the first drawer in the kitchen are some zip ties. Grab them for me." Kevin squatted, placing a knee on Peters' back and pulling his arms behind him as the taser's effects wore off and the grungy man's body eased enough to manipulate. Peters moaned in pain.

Angelica returned a moment later with a handful of zip ties, which he quickly cinched around Peters' wrists and then ankles.

“We need to call Derrick,” Kevin said, feeling the adrenaline rush ease, leaving him weak as he stared at the wide-eyed woman looking down at him.

“He’s already on his way. Mrs. Fields called right as I pulled up.”

Kevin stood up on wobbly legs. “You came in here knowing what was going on?”

She jutted her chin out. “I wasn’t going to let another scumbag take away someone I love.”

The sirens came at a distance, getting louder as they pulled onto the road, and Kevin continued to stare at her, dumbfounded. “You...you love me?”

Angelica gave him a brief nod, her eyes never leaving his. “I do.”

Kevin broke out into the silliest grin he had ever felt on his lips. He pulled her to him, holding her against the chest that ached with bruised ribs, but he didn’t care. “You are the most stubborn, bravest woman I have ever met, Angelica Payne.” He released her, only to let his hands cup her face. “I love you, too.” His body was strumming too high for him to make the kiss last, so he kissed her briefly and brought her back into his arms.

The door slammed open then, Derrick coming in, leading with his gun. Seeing them, he eased his stance.

“It’s all clear, boss. Got him trussed up for you.” Kevin nodded toward the moaning Peters, who was curling into a

fetal position on the floor, but he didn't let go of the angel in his arms.

"Nice work, brother," Derrick said, holstering his gun and eyeing Angelica. "Everyone safe? No injuries?"

"Thanks to my angel here," Kevin said, kissing the top of Angelica's head as it nestled right under his chin.

Derrick gave him a peculiar look. "I'll look forward to the debriefing," he said. "Tony, take Peters and lock him in a cell."

"I ain't did nothing!" Peters said, finding his voice. "Where's that little devil that done zapped me?"

Tony sliced the zip ties on Peters' ankles and pulled him up, facing him away from Angelica, and making sure he kept him that way. As he pushed Peters down the hall, he read him his rights.

"Well, we can definitely keep him this time," Derrick said, rubbing his chin. "Want me to call Chasity to come pick Angelica up? I'm sure she could use a friend right now."

"Not yet. She's not leaving my sight for a while," Kevin said, wrapping an arm around her. "You don't mind coming to the station with me, do you?"

"I...I need to give a statement anyway, don't I?"

Kevin's lips tugged into a smile. "That you do. We'll go together, and that's how I plan to keep it going. Together." He kissed her forehead and led her down the hall, knowing at that moment he would do anything to keep that promise.

TEN

ANGELICA'S LEG BOUNCED SO rapidly, the plastic chair she sat on in the waiting room of the Sheriff's Office rattled. She had given her statement and stayed until it was time for Kevin and Derrick to interrogate the prisoner... the informant.

They had offered to call Chasity or her aunt to come get her, but she had to talk with Kevin, alone, before she would have any peace. So she waited.

She texted Aunt Martha to tell her she was alright, a good call since she had over a dozen messages from her already. News sure traveled fast in this small town.

Chasity also texted to make doubly sure that she didn't want to wait in a more comfortable environment. It was nice to feel the support, but even nicer knowing that she could refuse it without hurting her feelings. Right now, there was only one comfort she wanted, and that came in the muscular arms of a certain officer.

Gertie, the dispatch officer, gave her a bottle of water and a package of pretzels from the vending machine, then left her in her own space. The lighting outside shifted, the sun on its way down over the horizon, but still, she did not want to leave.

When Kevin left the back offices, he drew a hand down his face, looking shaken and haggard, but his lips broke out in a smile as he met her eyes. “I can’t believe you’ve waited this entire time.”

She stood, moving toward him more out of necessity than any desire, throwing herself into the refuge of his arms. “I had to wait for you. There are things I have to say.”

“Well, let’s grab some food and say them at the house where there are more comfortable seats, huh?” He wrapped an arm around her and led her out of the station. “I called in our order already, so we only have to pick it up. I don’t feel like having the town stare at us while we eat or ask us questions, for that matter.”

“Thank you,” she said, leaning her head against him.

When they pulled up to Hope’s Cafe, Sadie ran out with the boxed meals in her hands. “I thought you’d appreciate not having to face everyone right now.”

“Thanks, Sadie. We do. Have a good night.” Kevin waved, and they drove to the beach house in exhausted silence.

As hungry as she was, Angelica couldn’t seem to eat very much, and after Kevin inhaled his meal, he looked at her, once again seeming full of life.

“Okay. Now that I feel human again, what is it you wanted to tell me?” He glanced at the couch. “Want to do it there or here?”

She followed his gaze, and after hours on a plastic chair, the cushions called to her. “There. Most definitely there.” They moved over to the couch, and he pulled her against his body. “What are the next steps?”

“Well, we found out the guys we’ve been after kidnapped Peters’ sister. That’s why he was after me. He was told my partner and I arranged it. I called it in to my supervisor...and now I have to wait for his directions.”

“That’s it?”

“For now...unfortunately there’s a lot of the hurry up and wait game with the FBI, or with any law enforcement, I guess.” Kevin shrugged, pulling her closer. “But that’s not what you wanted to talk about.”

“No,” she said, licking her lips, and trying to remember the speech she had rehearsed over and over during the hours she waited. “I need to tell you what happened to me.”

“Oh.” He tightened his hold on her. “You sure you’re ready?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready, but after today...I know I can’t wait.” She drew in a shaky breath. “He grabbed us after an evening exercise class...”

She continued with the story, getting lost in the retelling, feeling oddly detached as she went on with how the monster

had held something to their mouths that knocked them out. They awoke, trussed up in the dusty, mildewy, hot basement.

“There was no way to tell how much time had passed, no windows, no light beyond the constant light coming from under the basement door.” She shuddered, remembering the moment they heard the creaking of his steps for the first time. “He toyed with us at first. His eyes would light up in such an inhuman way when he caused one of us to scream.”

Kevin soothed her hair, then her back, constantly making contact, and murmuring soothing words whenever she paused to take a breath.

“Then...then he took Brittany into the other room. She screamed for me...but I couldn't move. I couldn't help her.” Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her lips trembled, making talking nearly impossible.

“Shh. There was nothing you could do, angel. Nothing. It's not your fault.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to shut out the memory of her best friend's pleas. “When he finally left her...for the last time...he glared down at me, telling me not to worry, that my turn was coming.”

Her entire body shook, and Kevin held her, his strength seeping into her. “I knew my best friend was dead. I knew he killed her. So when he came for me, I was ready, and I fought.”

She had seen him slice the bindings on her best friend's ankles first, then her wrists. She let her body go limp as he fiddled with her, but the moment her wrists were freed, she'd spun and fought like a wildcat.

"I'm not big, but I'd been kickboxing for a few years by then, and we took self-defense classes before. I don't know if he was tired or wasn't used to the women he captured fighting back, but I caught him off guard, and he landed hard. I didn't stay to find out how hard he hit. I fled, running up the stairs and right into a task force team."

"They found you then?" Kevin sat up, searching her eyes.

"Yes, if only...if only they had gotten there before Brittany...but, yes, they found us."

"And the perp?"

"That monster won't be hurting anyone else." She felt her stare harden, a certain grisly satisfaction burning in her gut.

Kevin reached out and gently pulled up her sleeves as he watched her closely, she assumed to make sure she didn't mind. The scars weren't as blatantly noticeable, but they still shone pink in the lamplight.

He traced each scar gently with his fingertip, then brought them up to kiss the healing flesh. "I feel awful you went through what you did, but I appreciate you sharing that experience with me. I know it wasn't easy to talk about."

She only nodded. What else could she say?

He drew her into his arms and held her until finally, she felt herself relax. Was it odd that she finally found her refuge in a man's arms? There were times she may have thought so, but right now it felt right, as if Kevin was meant to help her heal.

When she finally stirred, he let her go and met her eyes. "You know," he said, gently, almost tentatively. "That's why I do my job. I try to get there before the perp can harm the victim."

Angelica nodded. "I know, and I shouldn't be so selfish, but...but I am. I'm trying...but right now, especially after today, I just don't want to lose you."

He smoothed back her hair and looked into her eyes with such love, her entire body seemed to bloom. "You won't lose me."

"I feel like that's a promise you can't keep...and today proved that."

Kevin chuckled, although it held little humor. "I admit he had the upper hand at that moment, but I would have found a way out." He touched her cheek. "Probably with a lot more pain, I'm sure. You were amazing. Though, I have to admit it really surprised me...especially after all you've been through."

"But don't you see? Yes, I'm nervous and anxious from what happened to me, but it's the fear of losing someone I love...of having to sit by and listen or watch as they...as they..." She couldn't finish the sentence, her throat swelled to the point of blocking off any more words.

He pulled her to him. “I get it now. I understand. You did everything you could for her, and you kept me from getting hurt.” He kissed her head, then her face, her forehead, cheeks, nose, chin, and finally, his warm lips hit her mouth.

His kisses were the distraction she needed to pull her out of the past, where she had wallowed while retelling her experience. The feel of his lips on hers and his hands sliding through the hair at the back of her neck kept her in the present, in the safety of his arms, finally feeling whole once again.

When he walked her out to her car moments later, the longing to stay with him increased. It wasn't proper, and he'd get the wrong idea, but there was a part of her that wanted to sleep where she felt the safest. The idea of going home, alone in her bed, in her dark room, made her shiver.

“Call me when you get home, okay?” He searched her eyes.

“How about I text when I get in the driveway and call once I'm in my room? My aunt will have twenty questions for me.”

So, that was what she did, and that night she fell asleep to the sound of his voice, barely murmuring a goodnight before she was lost to the world of dreams.

She thought nightmares would plague her, but she woke gently to the sound of the few winter birds that were left and a splash of sunshine that streamed across her face. Lazily, she stretched under the warmth of her covers, staying as long as she could in the bliss of just waking.

It wasn't until her phone chimed that she let one hand brave the chilly air to retrieve it and read the text:

Good morning, my angel. Give me a call when you wake up. I've got news.

Her heart raced and fell all at the same moment. Without the word *good* before news, she could only assume it was bad...at least bad for her. Reluctant to call, she got up and showered instead, then dressed, then sat on the bed staring at the phone.

The scent of breakfast cooking came sweetly through the door, and her tummy grumbled, but she knew she had to get this call over with first; otherwise, she'd continue thinking the worst.

"Hey, angel," his deep voice greeted her. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Actually, I did," she said. "Did you?"

"Not really. My mind was going a million miles a minute. I dozed right after talking with you and woke up a few hours later with it running through scenario after scenario. I have a theory now that I need to look into...and my boss wants me to bring Peters to headquarters."

There it was. The bad news. He was leaving.

"I know that's not what you wanted to hear," he said. "I've got to finish this."

"I...I know," she said.

“Can I see you before I leave?” The hope in his voice tugged at her heart. “Derrick says that they should have the paperwork finished by one. Maybe an early lunch?”

“Okay, though I’m just about to eat breakfast.”

He chuckled. “Nice to sleep in every once in a while. We don’t have to eat if you don’t want to. I can pick something up on the road. I’ll pick you up at about 10:30ish?”

“Sure,” she said, biting her lip against the sob that wanted to come out. “See you then.”

“Hey, it’s going to be alright. Okay?”

“Okay,” she choked out.

“See you in a few.”

She set down the phone after he ended the call and drew in three shaky breaths until finally they became settled. With a glance in the mirror to make sure her eyes wouldn’t give her away, she followed her stomach out to the kitchen and her aunt’s welcoming smile.



Kevin sat in his truck in front of the Sheriff’s Office. Everything was loaded into it and ready to go as soon as he picked up the paperwork and Peters...and said goodbye to Angelica. His mind and heart warred within him.

His mind fired away, his blood pumping as he thought about getting back into the field and saving another person. His heart

ached and grieved for leaving Angelica. Leaving felt wrong, but so did staying while there was someone to rescue.

He lowered his head to the steering wheel, gently banging it a couple of times, as if that could clear his thoughts.

The knock on the window jolted him into action as he chastised himself for not paying attention to his surroundings. He'd gotten comfortable in the small town; that never would have happened down in the city.

Jordan stood grinning at the window, his cowboy hat traded out for a beanie. "Roll down your window," he said, exaggerating his lip movements.

Kevin rolled his eyes and lowered the window.

"You all right in there?" Jordan asked, peeking into the truck and looking from his packed bag to him.

"Just fine," Kevin said. "What are you up to?"

"Oh, waiting for the wifey to be done, then we are headed for an afternoon of skiing. Our little Isabelle is getting quite good." His smile widened, and Kevin's heart longed for a child of his own to brag about.

He shook the thought from his head, wondering what had gotten into him. "Well, it's nice weather for it. Have a great time."

"Oh, we will." Jordan stood there, rocking up on his toes and back on his heels, watching him. "You not gonna say goodbye?"

“Goodbye,” Kevin said, his brow furrowing with confusion.

“How long you leaving for? I mean, you aren’t going back to the city, are you? Not with Angelica still here?” Jordan’s eyes narrowed.

“I’ve got to finish some things up. I...I...don’t know where the future will take me...us...” He shrugged, a prickly sensation of irritation filling him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Shane approached them, shoving his hands in his cattleman’s jacket as he joined the group.

“Oh, our friend Kevin is taking off without saying goodbye and leaving his little lady alone,” Jordan said, winking at Kevin.

“Oh, man, don’t do that,” Shane muttered and shook his head.

Kevin looked from one to the other. “I gotta go, guys.”

“Suit yourself,” Jordan said, stepping back.

Shane stepped forward and cleared his throat. “I don’t know you that well, man, but I know that gal of yours is in love with you. We all see it, and see it in you, too.”

Kevin sighed, but the guy had always been so reserved that him taking the gumption to say something now made Kevin lean forward with the intent of hearing him out.

“I played my deck all wrong. Now look at me.” Shane shook his head and kicked his boot. “And look at her...” He sighed and met his eyes. “Don’t make my mistake, man. Make her

yours.” Shane gave the window frame a solid thunk, then stepped away with Jordan.

“Thanks for the pep talk, guys. I’ll see you when I get back into town,” he said, giving them a wave and pulling down the road.

Man, this small-town living had its drawbacks...everyone knew everyone else’s business. Yet, his chest warmed as he thought of what Shane said: *That gal of yours is in love with you. We all see it...*

Was he making the wrong decision?

He gripped the steering wheel in thought as he turned onto Angelica’s street. There was no choice but to go back to the city today. He had to take Peters in and had to share his intel about Peters’ sister. This job, at least, had to get done.

Once at Angelica’s, he couldn’t seem to unglue himself from the seat of his truck. He didn’t want to say goodbye and feared what she would say when he did. What would he say if she said that was the end? What if this was his only chance, like Shane counseled?

The sound of the front door closing drew him out of his pondering. Angelica glided toward him. There was no other way to put it. It’s like she moved effortlessly with a grace that went beyond any walk he had ever seen.

Her platinum blonde hair flowed out behind her, a deep blue scarf made her eyes look like the azul waters you see around

an island paradise, and her soft smile with ruby red lips...he shivered. Goodbye would be impossible.

She climbed into the truck, and his face reddened with shame for not getting out, opening the door for her, or even getting out of the truck at all. There was only one thought on his mind.

He leaned forward, cupping her cheek even before she closed the door. After a lingering kiss, he rested his forehead on hers. "This is not goodbye."

"Okay," she whispered. "Hello, then?"

He pulled back and chuckled, the spell somewhat broken. "I'm sorry I took so long to get out that you had to come to the truck yourself."

"Well, I figured you have a lot on your mind." She handed him a container that she had been holding. "A care package from my aunt."

"She really does want to fatten me up," he said, his chest warming. "So, where do you want to go?"

"How about a drive?" she asked, biting her lip, and he wondered if she didn't want to sit with him some place for a reason...temptation or emotion.

"How about I take you on a drive by the ranch? I don't want to stop." He met her eyes. "I don't want to share you today, but I want to show you where I come from."

"I'd like that," she said, settling back into her seat and pulling on her belt. "So, tell me about what will happen when

you get back to your, what did you call them, headquarters?”

“Yeah, headquarters. Well, a lot will depend on what my supervisor thinks about my theory...and on Peters. If he is forthright, and if my partner is forthright, then I’m hoping we can figure out who has Peters’ sister and where.”

“So, then you’ll go off on another rescue mission?” Her voice sounded hoarse but void of emotion, as if she had to shut down to talk about this.

“If I’m allowed to, yes.” He stopped at the stop sign and turned toward her, the empty small-town streets giving him the ability to face her. “I don’t want what happened to Brittany to happen to anyone under my watch. If I can prevent that, how could I not do this?”

She nodded. “I understand...and I app...appreciate you doing things like that. Without those men who found me...” She swallowed, twisting her hands together.

He laid a hand on hers, holding them and wishing his strength could seep into her. “Exactly. I’m good at my job, my angel. I can find people when others have no idea where to look.”

She opened her hands to envelop his, giving them a squeeze as a honk startled them. He glanced in his rearview to see someone behind him, looking irritated. “Must be lost,” he muttered. He rolled down the window and motioned them beside the truck. “Looking for the ski resort?”

“That’s right,” the startled guy said, glancing at his passengers.

“You missed a right-hand turn back there. Turn around and take your second left. You’ll see the signs from there.”

“Thanks, sir.” The guy waved as he took off.

“Sir, huh?” Kevin muttered. “Do I look that old?”

Angelica laughed. “No, but the kids sure look younger all the time.”

Kevin enjoyed the slow smile that pulled on his lips. “I like your outlook, ma’am.”

“Hey!” She playfully smacked his arm. “I’ll have you know they still card me when I buy Aunty’s cooking sherry.”

“Mr. Montgomery cards everyone, probably even your aunty.” He joined her in laughter that ended in pleasant sighs. “I’m going to miss this time with you...until I can get back, that is.”

“I will, too. It will be lonely without you,” she said.

“You have the girls and little Brodie. You’ll stay busy. Derrick promised to look after you while I’m away.”

“That’s sweet of you.” She touched his arm tenderly, letting her fingers slip off. “I’ll be okay. It’s not me I’m worried about. Who will have your back?”

“Well, I’m hoping my partner will after we clear the air,” he said.

“So, you don’t feel he’s in on this?” She shifted toward him like she really was interested in what was going on in his work life.

He shook his head. “No. I mean, the guy is a stick in the mud, doesn’t smile, but he doesn’t go outside the lines. He’s a strictly by-the-book kind of guy. I can’t see him doing anything like this.”

“Then why go against you with your supervisors?”

“That’s the thing. He’s strictly by the book, whereas he sees me as a loose cannon. So when word gets around that we are the ones being set up to look like we kidnapped Peters’ sister, he immediately worried that I actually did it.”

“How could he think that? You may be more, what did you call it back then...a vigilante...but you wouldn’t ever put someone in jeopardy.”

“It makes me happy that you know that about me, and you’re right. I wouldn’t. We haven’t been partners for very long, and he doesn’t communicate much.” He shrugged. “He doesn’t know me well enough to judge if I would or wouldn’t go that far.”

“So, who do you think kidnapped her, and why?”

“Oh, I believe Peters is right that they kidnapped her because of him being my informant, but I think they did it themselves.”

“Why?”

“To control him. He won’t go spilling their secrets if they have his sister as collateral.”

“What will happen to them, assuming you find her and rescue her?”

“Both Peters and his sister will go into witness protection, more than likely. They’ll have to uproot and change their whole lives, but they’ll be alive to do it,” Kevin said, slowing the truck down until he could safely pull over on the dirt.

“This your ranch?” she asked, transfixed by the view out the window.

“Yep, home sweet home. Or was anyway,” he said, realizing how much he missed being home and the simple life he grew up in.

“You don’t feel like it’s your home anymore?” She glanced at him before turning back out to the expanse of fields and pastures. One barn stood alone amongst all the bare, golden land.

“In some ways, maybe, but my brother’s slowly taking over. Did I tell you they are working on a smaller house closer to the main road for my parents to retire into?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“They told me at Christmas. It’s what my mom wants. Less house to take care of and to know her grandchildren will be raised in the farmhouse. My brother just got married earlier this year.”

“Oh...they’re expecting little ones that soon?”

Kevin laughed. “That’s what my brother said, but his eyes sparkled as he did, and his wife blushed. They may already be

starting on that family.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“Well, I definitely haven’t started on a family, if that’s what you mean.” He smiled a teasing smile. “Do I want kids? Of course, having a little guy to carry on my name sounds pretty good.”

“Oh, uh, that wasn’t what I was meaning, but since we’re on that subject...what if it’s a girl? Or what if...if we, um, you and your wife can’t get pregnant?”

“Well, if *we* can’t get pregnant, *we* could always adopt. Derrick loves his little girl as if she was of his blood. I don’t see why it would be any different for us.”

Angelica’s cheeks turned redder than he had ever seen. “I thought we were keeping it casual?”

“Well, I wasn’t the one who brought up kids...” he said, searching her eyes.

“I had meant...what about you...as in where do you fit into your family?”

The blood drained from his face, leaving it feeling waxy and his mind a little loopy. “Oh, I, uh, well, I’m sorry I went down that...uh, path.”

“Oh,” she smiled sweetly, the smile that left him feeling he sat next to a bona fide angel, “it was good intel to have.”

“So, you’re okay with adoption?” He gulped, knowing he should leave well enough alone.

“In truth, I hadn’t thought about that until I met Brodie, but, yes, that’s definitely something to consider...once we’re not taking things casual, you know?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said, tugging on his shirt collar. “So, anyway, about me and my family...I love the ranch. I’ve thought about building a little place on the east side, here.” He pointed past her to a patch of cottonwoods. “It’s not that far from Hope Lake. It’d be like the best of both worlds.”

“I never thought about commuting, but it was really only about fifteen minutes to get out here, wasn’t it?”

“Yep, and we were taking it easy.” He sighed as his gaze settled on the land.

“It feels like we’re way out in the boondocks, though.”

“Do you not like being in the boondocks?” He met her eyes, searching them.

“Oh, I actually do...it’s very peaceful. Would you have a dog, too?”

He smiled at her. “Would you want a dog?”

“Oh, I always thought about living on a ranch with a trusty dog as a sidekick,” she said.

“Really?”

Her cheeks pinked as she shrugged. “Girls have dreams, you know?”

“And was there a cowboy in this dream?” He leaned forward.

She met his eyes with such innocence he was almost afraid to touch her. “Oh, there definitely was a cowboy in the dream.”

He closed the distance between them, letting his lips take hers, starting them on a journey where time stopped, and for that moment, he forgot what lay ahead of him.

ELEVEN

ANGELICA DIDN'T WANT TO get out of bed the next morning. She lay under the covers, letting herself replay the day before, specifically avoiding the goodbye at the end. As she realized she was avoiding it, the scenes came back full force, and her throat choked with emotion.

He had said it wasn't a goodbye, but if he was reinstated, if he continued his risky work with the FBI—she pushed the covers down and welcomed the chill of the air against her skin. Anything to distract her from going down the horrific what-ifs.

She would have to figure it out before he returned, but not right now, not today, when emotions were so fresh from the farewell yesterday. Her alarm blared to life, and she quickly silenced it.

Right now, there was a little boy who needed her, and he needed her fully present, not lost in her head about possible futures. Yet, she couldn't help replaying what Kevin had said

about adoption, and wondering if everything worked out...if...if...that little boy who had worked his way into her heart...

She jumped out of bed and strode straight to the shower. Going down that road could lead to a lot more broken hearts than only hers. She couldn't afford to do that, not now, not yet.

By the time she made it to Camp Hope, she had wrangled her thoughts into submission. Josie met her at her car. "Morning, Angelica. Pleasure to see you as always," she said, but there was a gleam to her eye, one that Angelica had started to become aware meant she had some idea up her sleeve.

"Morning, Josie. How's everything going?"

"Oh good, great, in fact. How's it going with Brodie? He sure seems a lot happier and more interactive with his peers these days. I think you're doing him loads of good."

"I'm happy to hear that. He's a sweet boy." Angelica waited, knowing something was coming.

"It's too bad his foster family decided they aren't taking him back after winter camp." Josie read her face.

"Wh-what?!" Angelica's heart dropped, feeling like it shattered into pieces. "How can they do that...I mean, poor Brodie. What's going to happen to him?"

"Well, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about."

Angelica swallowed, her throat feeling dry and sticky. "What are you saying?"

“Well, you and Brodie get along so well. I’ve seen the love shining from your eyes when you spend time together...” Josie raised an eyebrow.

Angelica squeezed her eyes shut. “It’s not...it’s not the right time. My life is in upheaval right now, and I don’t know where it’s going yet. I mean, I’m living with my aunt, remember?”

Josie nodded. “What if everything aligned? What would you do then?”

“I would adopt him in a heartbeat,” she said, the words flying out of her mouth, surprising her with the intensity in them.

“Thanks. That’s what I wanted to know.” Josie turned to walk away.

“Wait!” Angelica took her arm, making her turn back towards her. “What do you mean? What will happen to him?”

“I’m going to move some mountains, my girl, and get Brodie placed with a Hope Lake family, so you can continue bonding with him until everything falls into place for you.”

“But what if it doesn’t?” Angelica’s lip quivered.

“Oh, I can see the influence of God’s hand at work. Trust me, it will.” Josie squeezed her arm before turning toward her office again, but she paused, cocked her head, and turned back to her. “Speaking of that...what kind of work are you in?”

“Oh, uh, well, before...I was an administrative assistant.” She shrugged.

“Ever do grant writing?”

“Yes, definitely did some of those,” Angelica said, peering closer at the lady who always seemed to have a reason for anything she said.

“Huh,” Josie said, her eyes going spacey for a moment. “I might have an opportunity for you...since you’re staying around. I’ll be in touch.” She strode toward her office, leaving Angelica stunned. Then Josie turned again, walking backward, to say, “He’s in the barn, by the way.”

Angelica stood frozen for a moment before slowly making her way to the barn. She tried to process what had just happened but still was overwhelmed as she entered the sweet, pungent smell of the barn.

The soft sound of sniveling greeted her as she rounded the corner to find Brodie with his head buried in his favorite horse, Jellybean. Her heart ached, and she quietly went to him.

“Hey there,” she said, gently touching his shoulder.

He turned toward her, wiping his eyes, his lip trembling. He opened his mouth to speak, but wrapped his arms around her instead, burying his head now into her. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him as she wished she could take his pain away.

When he finally calmed and stepped away, he kept his face averted, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hands. He picked up a brush and absentmindedly stroked the horse.

“Hard day, huh?” she asked. “I get those sometimes, too. They hit me out of nowhere.”

“Sometimes it’s like that,” he said, his voice small. “But this time...this time there is a real reason for it.”

“It’s always a real reason, Brodie.” She turned toward him and sat on the bench. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“My social worker came this morning. She...she had all of my things.”

Angelica’s heart raced. Josie hadn’t told her that he knew... why would they tell him before they figured out where he would go?

“They don’t want me anymore. Another family that I couldn’t make happy.” He sniffled. “I’m no good at making people happy.”

“That’s not true, buddy.” She reached out and took his shoulder. “You make me happy every day I see you...and sometimes even on the days I don’t.”

He stopped sniffing, and his features took on a curious expression. “How can I make you happy when you don’t see me?”

“Because I think of you and remember the good times we have together.”

“Really?” He narrowed his eyes. “You pulling one over on me?”

“Nope. Never.” She stared him right in his eyes.

“I wish I could just stay here. I’m actually making friends... well, kinda. At least I’m talking with other campers.”

“That’s a great start,” she said, sitting back. “You know camp doesn’t go on forever. You gotta go back to school.”

“I hate school,” he muttered. “No one likes sad people.”

“Well, that’s not true, and there is more to you than only sad, silly.” She lifted his head with a finger. “You’re the coolest kid I know. You are intelligent, you know all the best trails, you’re an excellent horseman, you’re super cute...I mean handsome, and you have a smile that others can’t help but return.”

“You really believe that.” The words were not a question, more like an amazed statement.

“I do.” She stood up and took the brush from his hand, wishing she could tell him that Josie was right now working on a miracle for him.

“Well, maybe I’ll go to a new school, and people there might see me differently.”

“Would you like that? To be in a different town at a new school?”

“Yeah, maybe this new family will like me better...now that I’m not always sad.” Then he grabbed her arm with a strength she didn’t realize he had. “But...what if they live far away, and I won’t see you again?”

“I will do everything in my power to not let that happen,” she said, squatting down to eye level with him.

“I didn’t want to like you. I didn’t want to, you know...I thought every day that you would stop showing up, that you would get tired of me, not think I was good enough. But you kept coming back...and I...I thought just maybe it might be okay to hope again.” A single tear rolled down his face.

She took him in her arms again. “It’s always okay to hope.” As she said it, she realized how much *she* needed to hear that. She shoved down the fear that had been plaguing her and instead allowed herself to hope again. She pulled back to look at him. “You know, when you lose someone you love, it’s hard to allow yourself to love someone again.”

He nodded as if he completely understood.

“But I think we are both strong enough to do it. Should we try again?”

He nodded, sucking in his trembling lip. “But...but what if that new person you love dies, too?”

Angelica squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the fear like ice in her veins. She blew out a breath. “Then, like we do with the ones we already lost, we remember the good times we had with them and the love we shared.”

He threw himself in her arms again, staying there until the signal for schedule shifts rang through the camp. “It’s art time. You coming?” he asked, swiping his arm across his face.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said, and he slipped his hand in hers as they walked to the auditorium for art.



Time passed, and the snow melted as the winds warmed, bringing rainstorms rather than snow. Green shoots started popping up around the lake, and her aunt's daffodils grew tall, sporting promising buds that would bloom any day now.

Each evening, as promised, Kevin sent her a short text letting her know he had made it through another day, but not much more than that. She missed the sound of his voice, the feeling of safety in his arms, and that sexy half smile on his lips.

Ever since talking with Brodie, she knew what she would decide, even though it terrified her to the core. She couldn't walk away from that love. She had to trust that everything would align.

It had aligned so far with Brodie. Josie, true to her word, got him placed in a foster home with the Wilsons, the same family that housed Kami, Chasity and Derrick's daughter, while they waited for their lives to align. Brodie liked it there. Almost every day after school, she would pick him up for some sort of adventure, whether they walked along the beach, hiked on some nearby trails, or just went to the park. The important thing was they were together.

Today, she was taking him to Megan and Tyler's for horseback riding lessons from Krista. He fidgeted in his seat, glancing at her, then out the window.

“I can’t believe you are taking me to horseback riding lessons,” he said, his excitement showing in his wide eyes. “How far is it?”

“We’re almost there now. Your teacher’s name is Krista. She’s a high schooler, but she knows a lot about horses. I think you’ll like her. She’s Miss Megan’s niece.”

“Oh, yes! She helped at Camp Hope before. She has pretty, green eyes. I mean, I like yours better, but they’re cool.”

Angelica glanced at him with a smile as she turned down the driveway. “I think yours are pretty cool, too. So, how’s school? Everything still going well?”

“Yep. I like being friends with everyone, but I think Benji might be my best friend. He calls me his best friend.”

“It’s nice having a best friend,” Angelica said, her throat only choking slightly.

“He has a real family, but he doesn’t care that I don’t.”

Angelica’s heart ached. She longed for stability, to know what, where, and with whom her life was going.

“Oh, look! There it is! Do you think that’s the horse I’ll be riding?” He pointed at a big black gelding.

“I’m not sure, buddy. Let’s get out and see.”

Krista immediately took Brodie under her wing, and Megan leaned on the fence next to her as they watched Brodie’s lesson.

“He’s come such a long way,” Megan said with a contented sigh.

“He has. Such a wise little guy, too,” she said, watching him as her heart grew like it did every time she saw him.

“You going to make him yours?” Megan asked her outright.

“Well, if all aligns right, I would love to.” She sighed a long lonesome sigh.

“What does Kevin think?”

“Well, that’s a part of the alignment.” Angelica laughed nervously. “He’s not against adoption...but an older boy? And...that’s assuming that, well, you know...” Heat filled her cheeks.

“Yes, I know.” Megan knocked into her. “I’m glad you are trying to trust. It’s not easy, I know.”

Angelica eyed her, realizing how close she had become to all the ladies. She couldn’t call them her best friends, but she surely appreciated the friendship they gave her. “I gather you would.”

“You’re waiting for him, right?”

“I have no choice. He holds my heart,” she said. Speaking those words made her feel free. “I’ll follow him wherever he goes...no matter how scary that is.”

Megan wrapped an arm around her and gave her a little squeeze before letting go. “Trust. You never know when

something you have never thought of happening might be the best thing for you.”

“Thanks,” Angelica said, thinking of those words. She hadn’t thought of falling in love with two people, one a young boy who worked his way into her heart, filling a hole she never knew she had, and the other a man who held her heart and the key to her future.



Kevin flattened himself against the wall. Instead of it reassuring him, he felt it was a flimsy, false screen of protection as bullets flew around him. The weight of his bulletproof vest brought little comfort as he squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the volley to stop.

Please let me make it back to Angelica.

As quickly as the thought entered, it fled again, leaving him focused on the shouting voices from inside the building. Within those walls, Peters’ sister was held captive, an innocent in this disaster.

He felt the responsibility for her situation heavy on his soul and knew he had to see her safe before he could even think about his future. Distant sirens sounded as soothing as jazz music in elevators. The calvary was on the way.

Once again, he had jumped the gun, had disobeyed orders, and gone in without waiting for backup. His partner still sat behind the cover of their car, waiting like he was supposed to.

Kevin knew men like the ones in the room behind him too well to let fate decide if they chose to keep their victim alive or not leave witnesses as they fled. Losing this gal wasn't something he could live with.

The guns had ceased momentarily, the click-click of reloading, cueing him to move. That, and the muffled scream from a female. With a deep breath and a prayer for protection, he dropped low and spun to rush through the open doorway.

Utter chaos reigned inside the room, with most men fleeing out back doors and windows as the sirens increased their wails. Two men were standing behind a table, reloading, and another pulled at a woman, who was bound and gagged, and crossed the room.

Three shots from Kevin's gun left them incapacitated, at least long enough for him to run in and grab the lady before they fled back out the door.

With his free hand, he pulled out his knife, sliced through the bindings on her hands, and she pulled down the gag in her mouth. He set a finger on his lips, listening for pursuit. The yelling and screaming from the men inside had no organization to it, so he grabbed the lady's hand and ran down the hallway.

At the next corner, he peeked out, only to draw back immediately as a volley of shots fired at him. One slammed into his chest, knocking him backward. He gasped for breath, his ribs spasming against the assault.

Though the sound was now dim, he heard more shots as he pushed through the pain, moving his body behind the protective wall. The hallway darkened as spots hovered in his vision, but soon the air came rushing back and with it the searing pain of what he knew were broken ribs.

He was alive; his vest did its job.

The woman didn't make a sound, though she panted, throwing herself against the wall as if it were her refuge.

"Jill, right?" Kevin panted, his chest searing in pain and hands shaking with shock as he loaded another clip into his gun.

She nodded, her eyes wide and her pulse frantic in her neck.

"We're going to get you out of here. Just hang tight and do what I say, okay?"

She nodded again, eyes dry, but the trace of tears down her grungy face told that she had cried recently.

Kevin dropped into a squat, then sent off a few shots down the hall, leaving one man groaning before another volley came at them. He peered down the opposite direction to where the stairs would lead them to freedom.

"Where are you, Mendez?" he muttered. The gunshots eased off as footsteps of their enemy approached. They were coming. He had one chance of making a run for it but didn't like the odds.

He grabbed the lady's hand, turning toward her to prompt her to run once he started shooting, when, out of the corner of

his eye, a reflection off a black helmet caught his attention.

“The calvary,” he whispered, letting a smile crease his lips.

A moment later and the eyes under the helmet came high enough up the stairs to catch his. The officer nodded in acknowledgement, then turned to motion to the men following him. It only took a minute, probably less, from the time they started shooting until they stopped and surrounded them in a shield of safety.

“Agent Armstrong, I presume?” The lead officer eyed him, then glanced at Jill. At a nod from Kevin, the agent grinned. “You have a lot to explain, sir. Glad that’s not my job.” He turned and motioned his people to take Jill down to the safety of their vehicles.

Kevin followed them, leaving the officer in charge to go after any more perps. He had done what he came to do, and the adrenaline eased off within him the moment he came out of the building into the awaiting safety of his fellow agents.

His partner sauntered toward him. “Well, you did it again, Armstrong.”

“Yeah, and I saved the girl again, too.” Armstrong shrugged, yanking off the bulletproof vest, wincing as he did, tenderly touching his broken ribs and feeling grateful there was no blood. He turned the vest, seeing the bullet wedged in its armor. “Saved me again.”

“I know I did,” Mendez said down his nose.

“I was talking about my vest,” Kevin muttered. “Would have been nice to have backup in there.”

“You’re reckless, Armstrong, but man, do you get things done.” He held out his hand and gave Kevin’s a firm squeeze. “I doubt Gunther will let you come back after pulling this stunt again, and I can’t say I won’t be relieved to have a less reckless partner, but it was an inspiration watching you work.”

Armstrong gave him a nod and limped toward his car, waiting for the butt chewing he would get from his supervisor when he showed up.

Gunther waited until Kevin was debriefed and released from the medic with a diagnosis of bruised and broken ribs, and cleaned up. Then Gunther called him into his office. Kevin felt an unnatural sense of calm as he walked in.

“Armstrong,” his superior started in. “Once again, you have pulled a vigilante stunt that put you, the victim, and your fellow agents and officers at risk.”

“That’s one way of looking at it, sir.” Armstrong held his hands behind him, looking straight ahead. “Another way is that I successfully rescued another victim who was sure to be shot in mere moments if I hadn’t jumped in when I did.”

“That’s the problem with you. You assume your actions are the only way. There are protocols, protocols that keep you and everyone else safe.”

Kevin knew there was no convincing Gunther, so he continued to stand there and take the berating lecture that

lasted for the next five minutes. His superior dropped his head into his hands.

“The problem is, you keep finding them. You’re one of the best profilers we’ve ever had at this office. It’s the field work you keep screwing up...” He held up his hand as Kevin opened his mouth to argue. “I know the way you see it.”

Kevin shut his mouth, knowing what was coming next and having to stop the grin pulling on his lips as a sense of relief filled him.

“I don’t know what you’re grinning at, Armstrong. I’m pulling you from the field. You’ll be bound to the desk from here on out.”

Kevin dropped his eyes to Gunther. “That’s not what I signed up for, sir.”

“No, it isn’t, but that’s how you can serve your country.”

“I can’t do a desk job. I’d go crazy. I’ll be sending in my resignation—”

“Now, wait a minute. You went through years of applying and training to get this position, and you’re just going to walk away from it?”

Kevin grinned, feeling the goofy thing pulling on his lips with no way of stopping it. “I’ve got a girl in a small town that needs a ring on her finger, sir. I’m not going to waste my life away behind a desk in the city where she won’t step foot.”

Gunther sat back in his chair, scratching his chin. “I see.” He continued to regard Kevin in a thoughtful way until he leaned

forward. “What about contract work?”

“Sir?” Kevin met his eyes again, the feeling of euphoria dissipating somewhat.

“Go back to your Hope Lake, which I assume is where your gal is. Marry the girl. Heck, return to being a deputy, though it’s a waste of your skills, but stay on staff as an independent contractor, profiling people on the side for us.” He leaned back in his chair with a self-satisfied smile. “The best of both worlds, right?”

“May I...I think on it, sir?” Kevin stood straighter, his mind filling with possibilities.

“Just don’t take too long. We’ve got a case of a missing child that needs your expertise...of profiling, that is. You’re too reckless for the field, Armstrong. You’d get killed sooner rather than later and leave that girl of yours a widow before you’re married a year. You find them. We free them.” He stood up and held out his hand. “I’ll expect to hear from you Monday morning.”

“Will do, sir.” Kevin gripped his hand in a firm shake, then left the room, a new lightness in his step.

This entire time, he had thought he needed to rush off to the action, but as the relief filled him, he realized what he wanted most...and he wasn’t going to let anything stand in his way of making that dream come true.

After a stop at a jewelry store, he gave notice to his landlord. Then he loaded the meager possessions from his apartment into his truck and left the city behind.

He watched it fade away as he pointed his truck toward the mountains. It was funny how he had once thought working for the FBI would be the only thing that would make him happy. His whole life focused on that one goal, but that focus shifted after he crossed the line from possibility to reality with Angelica.

On the drive, he played with the idea of contract work with the FBI and working with Derrick again. He could build that dream house on the ranch that his brother kept bringing up every time they saw each other. He could marry Angelica and have it all. The wife, the house, the small town, the profiling, which he enjoyed, and the kids...

A settling filtered within him. The closer he came to Hope County, the more his shoulders relaxed, and the stress eased from his bones. He stretched, wincing as his cracked rib reminded him how close he had come to not having this life he dreamed about. That one moment had shifted everything for him.

The sun was close to setting as he pulled into Hope Lake; street lights flicked on along Main Street and banners announcing their annual Spring Celebration flapped in a gentle breeze. People waved at him as he slowly cruised down the streets and parked in front of the Sheriff's Office.

He sat there for a moment, breathing in the new warmth in the air. Then he leaned against his truck, waiting for Derrick to walk out of the office. As Derrick came out, he hesitated only for a moment before grinning in that *I told you so* way of his.

“So, you want to start Monday?” Derrick said, stopping in front of him.

“What do you think about part-time?” Kevin asked, a roll of laughter bubbling up at Derrick’s confused expression. “They want to keep me on the payroll as a profiling contractor—remote work.”

“But you’d go crazy at a desk all day.” Derrick crossed his arms, considering. Then nodded. “You got it, brother. I’ll write something up and get you started on Monday.”

“How about the following Monday?” Kevin winced as he pushed off his truck, grasping his chest. “I need a little time to heal...and I’m thinking a vacation is in order.”

“You mean a honeymoon?” Derrick raised an eyebrow.

“Whoa there, a wedding takes time to plan. The honeymoon is for later.”

“Well, I would tell you to call when it’s official, but I have a feeling Chasity would know before you even thought to share the news.”

Kevin chuckled. “I’m glad that Angelica has found friends in your wife and the other ladies. It’s good for her.”

“It’s good for us, too.” Derrick pounded his back.

“Ouch,” he said, wincing again. “Take it easy. The vest saved my life, but man, my chest is killing me.”

“Glad you were wearing one.” Derrick waved, tossing him a set of keys. “The cabin’s yours for as long as you need it. Tyler’s orders.”

“Well, this time, I’m paying rent whether he likes it or not,” Kevin yelled back before hopping into his truck.

Now all he had to do was make amends with Angelica and make it official. He knew she would more than likely know he was in town, but he couldn’t talk to her without saying everything...and he wanted that to come out right, which would take planning.

TWELVE

ANGELICA RETURNED HOME LATE from her time with Brodie. She'd been out all day. Josie had asked her to lunch to go over some ideas. Finally, she knew why Josie had asked those questions months before about what she did career-wise. The job wouldn't start for a couple of weeks, but she was looking forward to working again. Of course, she hadn't worked since...since the time before she lost Brittany.

Angelica sighed, feeling a little lighter around that memory now that she had told Kevin. Meeting with the ladies every Wednesday morning helped, too. They actually seemed to understand, at least to some extent.

She entered the house to find Aunt Martha busily cleaning an already clean kitchen. "Well, you sure seem all healed up now, Aunty." She kissed her aunt's cheek and leaned against the counter, inhaling the rich scent of lasagna. "Guess what?"

"Okay, you tell me yours first, but then I have news, too." Aunt Martha's eyes sparkled with her secret. She always had some tidbit of gossip to share, but today her sparkle seemed a

little brighter. Maybe that was because Angelica felt so happy that it fed off into her perceptions.

“I got a job,” she said, feeling a grin pull across her face. “Josie asked me to be her administrative assistant, write grants, and do some other paperwork-type things. The pay isn’t near what I earned in corporate, but I don’t need that much to live on here. Plus, the stress will be less.”

“So, you’re staying for good?” Aunt Martha wrung her hands together.

“Well, I can’t say where life will lead me, Aunty. A lot depends on, well, you know...when Kevin returns...if he does.” She slumped into a kitchen chair trying not to let that worry cloud her sunny day. “And then there’s Brodie...”

“Oh, he’s such a sweet boy. When are you bringing him over again?”

“Funny. He asked me that today, too.” Angelica smiled, remembering the excitement he shared for her when she told him about working at Camp Hope.

She felt happy enough that she actually wanted to call her parents and tell them the good news. They didn’t understand why she wasn’t applying herself and wouldn’t return to the city and her career. Her dad always pushed his business associates on her, wanting her to get back to work, and her mom kept asking about her love life.

At least she had good news for them on one account...the other, well, time would tell.

“When do you start work?” Aunt Martha practically bounced as she squeezed her hands tightly together.

“As soon as I want, but there isn’t a rush for another couple of weeks. Okay, Aunty. Tell me. You look like you’re about to explode.”

Aunt Martha grinned wide and reached for her hand. “He’s back! I don’t know too much, but he was talking to the sheriff and is staying in that beach house again.”

“What?” At first, Angelica’s heart soared with the thought of seeing Kevin, but her face fell right along with her heart. “He didn’t tell me...”

She had received a text last night, like she had for the past couple of months, but he didn’t mention anything about coming back. Had he changed his mind about her? Or was he going back to the FBI and worried she would end whatever it was they had started?

“Maybe he wanted to surprise you?” Aunt Martha’s face fell, too, and she reached out to her with sympathy lining her voice.

“Maybe...”

The clouds had fully covered the sun in her mind as she leaned back in the chair. Was it wrong to wish she had been the first one he came to?

“I’m sure he’s exhausted,” Aunt Martha lamented until the oven timer beeped. “Well, a good home-cooked meal will ease your worry.” She busied herself with getting together the last few things for dinner.

Angelica knew she should get up and help her aunt, but she couldn't muster the energy. He's back, and he hadn't even told her. She only picked at her meal, not even tasting what she knew to be the best lasagna she had ever had. Her favorite meal her aunty made didn't pull her out of her misery.

Aunt Martha glanced at her sorrowfully. She had tried pulling her out of the glum by telling her all the other tidbits she found out during the day, and asking more about the job at Camp Hope and Brodie, but she couldn't stop thinking about what it meant that he hadn't even called to tell her he was here.

She apologized to her aunt as she helped clean up after dinner and went to her room for the night. As always, at about eight o'clock the text came.

Still kicking. How about you?

She sighed, so confused at what he was doing, but she replied. *I'm alive.*

That sounds ominous... What have you been up to today?

I hung out with Brodie, of course, and...I got a job. Her lips quirked a little at the thought. Though, did she want to stay here if Kevin wasn't?

Really? Where?

At Camp Hope, with Josie. Admin assistant stuff.

That's great! Congratulations!

She didn't know how to reply, so she sent a happy face. Should she keep playing the game, or let him know she knew

he was there and ask him why he wasn't telling her?

What are you doing tomorrow?

She read his question several times, wondering if it had been so long that he felt awkward. Or he really was going back to the FBI, and he didn't know how to break it to her. She finally drew in a breath and typed: *Taking Brodie to his horseback riding lesson at Megan and Tyler's. You?* There, she asked something, giving him the opening to tell her the truth.

It's so cool you are doing that for him. What time?

Angelica pursed her lips, wishing he would just come out and say it. *Ten.* She waited a moment, then typed again. *What about you?*

The response seemed to take forever, but finally, it came through: *Oh, I'm not sure yet, but something fun I hope.*

Fun...that's unusual for you. She smiled as she texted it.

Ha ha. I do fun.

Not since you've left...that I know of at least. She hesitated on hitting send, hoping it didn't sound like she was jealous.

Time for that to change

She growled at the phone, frustration over his vagueness getting to her. *When?*

Soon

How soon? She glared at the phone.

Very soon. Lol Get some sleep, my angel

That was it. The extent of their conversation. She turned off her phone with an angry press of the button and plugged it in. Throwing herself on the bed, she worried her lip trying to figure the man out. Yet, their conversation was longer than any they had had in a while.

The next morning, she still worried about Kevin. In fact, it took all of her willpower not to drive over there and confront him. He should know that news would spread of his homecoming. That's how it always worked.

She dragged her feet in getting ready to pick Brodie up, making it take longer than usual so she didn't have extra time to lose her resolve and drive to Kevin's.

"Still nothing?" Aunt Martha asked, looking up from her crossword puzzle book.

"Nope." Angelica grabbed her purse and her lightweight jacket. The days were warming up, but the mornings especially were still a bit on the chilly side. "Maybe he's changed his mind."

"About you?" Aunt Martha set her book aside, took her reading glasses off, and shook her head. "Silly girl. Is that what you're thinking?"

"Or he's going back to the FBI, and he doesn't know how to tell me..." She blew out a breath.

"And if he does?" Aunt Martha watched her closely.

Angelica shrugged. "I don't know, Aunty, but I have to go or we'll be late. You know what Brodie goes through when I'm

late.” The poor kid had so many abandonment issues, and though he was getting better, there were some things that still sent him into anxiety. She leaned down to give her aunt a kiss.

“Well, don’t get stuck in your head until you know what’s really going on, dear. It’s a waste of energy.” She patted her cheek.

“Thanks, Aunty. I’m taking Brodie out for ice cream afterward for acing his last test. I’ll text you if I’ll be longer than that.”

“Thank you, considerate girl.”

Angelica waved as she went out the door and kept her focus on Brodie. As normal, his face was pressed to the glass in the front room, watching for her. Mrs. Wilson opened the door to let him run out, staying there and waving.

“We’ll be a bit later today, if that’s okay?” Angelica called out.

“For sure. Have a great time.” She waved again and closed the door as Brodie hopped into the back seat and buckled up.

“Good morning, Angelica.” He bounced in the seat, his cowboy hat slipping down into his eyes as it hit the back of the seat.

“Morning, sweet boy. How are things?”

“Great! Krista says I can try cantering today. I can’t wait!”

“You sure have a knack for horseback riding.” She smiled at him through the rearview mirror before pulling out onto the

highway toward Megan's house.

During the drive, he told her all about the horse he wanted when he grew up and had his own ranch. He was so detailed that she realized he had spent quite a bit of time planning it all out.

“Do they have ranch college? You know, a school where they teach you to be a cowboy?” he asked as they pulled into the driveway.

Angelica tried not to laugh. “I don't think so, but you never know. I guess you could get a degree in agriculture or even business, so you know how to run that side of a ranch.”

“Hmm,” he said, but as soon as the car stopped, he raced out, slowing himself to a fast walk when he approached the horses.

“Smart kid,” Megan said, greeting her with a glass of lemonade.

“I think so. Thank you,” she said, taking the drink. After a couple of minutes of silently watching Brodie's lesson, she turned to Megan. “Did you know Kevin's back?”

Megan choked on her lemonade, then cleared her throat. “I heard something along those lines.”

Angelica scowled. “He hasn't had the decency to tell me.”

“Huh. Men are strange.” Megan turned back to the lesson, but then asked without looking at her. “Why do you think he hasn't told you?”

Angelica blew out a breath. “I can only think of two reasons. One, he changed his mind about me...though his texts would be confusing if that was the case. So, that leaves me to think that he is probably returning to the FBI, and he doesn’t know how to tell me.”

“Was he not planning on returning?” Megan asked.

Angelica shrugged, realizing that not everyone knew about his pending investigation.

“Oh, you’re not okay with him working in that position. I see.” Megan turned back to her. “After losing Britany, you worry about losing him, too.”

“It’s a dangerous job. He gets shot at...I...I just...” She blinked rapidly and turned away.

“Hey, it’s understandable.” Megan squeezed her hand, then after a moment, continued, “We don’t choose who we fall in love with. All we can do is ask ourselves if the chance of losing them is worth not having the time we are given with them.”

“That’s...that’s kind of what Brodie said,” Angelica whispered.

“You told Brodie about Kevin?” Megan’s eyes widened.

“Oh goodness, no. Not about that at least. No.” She watched Brodie as he concentrated on his lesson. “I think he was talking about me.”

“Oh,” Megan said as if that fully made sense to her. “Kids can give the best advice at times.”

“Seems like it,” she said, but her thoughts were on that advice now as she wondered if giving Kevin up was something she was willing to do because of a chance. “I think you guys are right. I can’t not experience life because of the fear of losing someone I love.”

“No,” Megan said, softly. “At least it’s no way to live a happy life. We all lose people we love: parents, friends, spouses...some even lose children.” She wrapped her hands protectively around her growing stomach. “We have to learn to love them and appreciate each day we have with them.”

Angelica nodded, but she bit her lip as she figured some things out. “I think I need to tell him that.”

Gravel popped in the driveway, and Megan turned toward it. They were expecting Tyler to return from the store, but Megan nudged her. “I don’t think you’ll have to wait too long to tell him...”

Angelica spun around, her mouth dropping open as she saw Kevin’s truck parking in front of the house. She didn’t know how, but her heart stopped and raced all at the same time, and her head felt like it was going to explode while her knees threatened to buckle.

Part of her wanted to run toward him and jump into his arms. Another part wanted to turn and run toward the hills. And the last part decided to freeze her, filling her mind and body with a numbing sensation that made it difficult even to breathe.

“I’m, uh, going to check on...something.” Megan squeezed her arm, the sensation feeling prickly like her body was asleep.

Angelica couldn't form a word, much less move in response. Kevin tipped his hat at Megan, but his eyes captured Angelica's after that mere moment of straying. He walked as if sore or hurt, but his smile was wide, and he held one arm behind his back.

She should have walked out to meet him, should have greeted him in some way, but there she stood. At least she found the strength to close her mouth.

"Well, if that wasn't the longest walk," Kevin said with a nervous chuckle. "Surprise?" He said it as a question while pulling out a beautiful bouquet of white roses from behind his back.

"I...I..." She swallowed and tried again, but the words still would not come. She closed the foot between them, ignoring the gorgeous flowers, and nestled against his chest.

"Oomph," he groaned as she did, though he wrapped his arms around her, resting his head on top of hers. "Gentle," he coaxed.

His words didn't really register; all that she was aware of was the safety his arms provided and the feeling of rightness she had within them.



Kevin watched Angelica congratulate the little boy after his lesson. The reunion hadn't gone quite as he had hoped. An

inner romanticism had him picturing her running into his arms, cooing over his injuries, and professing her undying love.

He laughed at himself and his silly daydreams.

The reality was okay; she did, eventually, throw herself in his arms. As painful as that was, he wouldn't have wanted it any other way. The pink in her cheeks as she finally accepted the flowers was worth it, too.

He hadn't thought about the complication of the little boy. Brodie. He sure rode like a champ. For some reason, his palms grew sweaty as he thought about finally meeting the kid. He wiped his hands on his pants, watching the little cowboy.

The woman of his dreams, the one he intended to make his, had fallen in love with this boy. The longer he watched them, the more he realized that this would be a package deal. One came with the other.

A stirring of protectiveness rose within him as he realized how much he wanted that...a family. A wife and a son...a son who rode horses like a champ. And a little house on the ranch...and a dog.

The whole picture, all of it, and it all stared at him right across the fence.

However, when the boy looked at him, his eyes narrowed, and his lips thinned. When they walked over, he saw the concern in Angelica's eyes as the boy walked stiffly, holding tight to her hand as if in possession.

Angelica leaned down. “Brodie, this is my...friend, Kevin. The one I’ve told you about.”

“Well, I’d like to think we’re past only friends.” Kevin smiled at her, then held out his hand to the boy. “Brodie, it’s a pleasure. Angelica has told me so much about you.”

The boy took his hand in a hard grip, squeezing him probably as tightly as he could.

Kevin shook out his hand for effect. “You’ve got quite the grip, cowboy. It’s a good thing that Angelica had such a strong protector while I was gone.”

“I’m not stopping, neither,” the boy said, his tone even and hostile.

“Brodie!” Angelica gasped.

Kevin held up his hand. “That’s quite all right. I like his spunk, and really like that he is so committed to you.”

Brodie’s hostile glare eased slightly, but he kept his stare on him in a way that made Kevin roll his shoulders.

“Well, ice cream, right?” Kevin said.

“You don’t mind if Kevin comes to celebrate with us, right Brodie?” Angelica asked, smoothing a hand down the kid’s back. “We’ll have to go into Hope City or New Hope. Someone really needs to open that ice cream shop back up in town.”

“I agree,” Kevin said. “We can leave your car at the end of the driveway and all hop in my truck?”

“Sure. Oh, Brodie, let’s say goodbye to Krista and Megan.” Angelica took the boy by the hand, pulling him out of his death stare with Kevin.

Kevin watched them again, realizing how much work he had in front of him. Whatever had happened to the kid, he didn’t trust men...at least not him. He would have to work on that fast, because if things happened like he wanted, it would take Brodie’s willingness to make it happen.

When they came back to his side, Kevin took Angelica’s other hand and they walked toward their cars. “Here, champ, hop up into my truck. Angelica will meet us at the end of the driveway.”

Brodie froze and stared up at Angelica in horror. She squatted in front of him to meet his eyes. “It’s okay, sweet boy. As soon as we get to the end of the driveway, I’ll hop in with you guys, and we’ll all go have ice cream. Do you want bubblegum again or do you think you’ll try a new flavor?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, looking sideways at Kevin as Angelica helped him into the back seat. As soon as Kevin hopped in and the door shut, he met the glaring eyes in the rearview mirror. “You aren’t going to take her away from me.”

The tone was clearly a threat. What the boy thought he could do to a full-grown man, Kevin didn’t know, but the words themselves cut him to the quick. He turned toward the boy as well as he could and looked him right in the eye. “I wouldn’t dream of it, champ. She’s just as much yours as mine. We’ll

simply have to figure out how to share her. Think we can do that?”

Brodie crossed his arms and stared at him but gave a little nod.

“You know. I could use a cowboy like you.” Kevin turned back in his seat and started the truck.

The boy’s eyes widened slightly. “Me. For what?”

“Well, you see, I’m thinking of building a house on my family’s ranch.”

“A ranch like with horses?” Brodie’s arms fell onto the seat and pushed him forward.

“Well, yes. Horses, but it’s a cattle ranch. You know, cowboys always need horses.”

“To round up the cows! I have seen that.” Then he fell back into the seat. “But why do you need me? I don’t know how to build a house.”

“Are you willing to learn?”

“Well, Angelica says that,” he scrunched up his face as if trying to remember the words, “the willingness to learn shows a wise man.”

Kevin smiled. “I like that, and you’re wise, aren’t you, Brodie?”

The boy gave a nod that tipped his cowboy hat forward over his eyes, and he shoved it back up.

“Good, let’s keep this a secret between us, then.”

“A secret? You mean don’t tell Angelica?” His eyes widened into big blue circles.

“Well, for now. It’s going to be a surprise for her.”

Brodie narrowed his eyes again. “So you are going to try to take her away,” he said.

“No, sir. We can build the house as big as we want.” He turned to the boy and winked as Angelica hopped into the truck.

“Everything alright in here?” She glanced at Kevin but held Brodie’s eyes.

Kevin watched the kid, waiting to see if he had won the first step. Brodie glanced at him, then back to Angelica. “Yep, we were talking horses.”

“Oh,” Angelica said with a smile. “Did he tell you about his dream horse?” She looked at Kevin as she pulled on her seat belt.

“We hadn’t gotten that far.” He glanced in the rearview mirror and winked at Brodie. “Tell me about this horse you want.”

Kevin listened as Brodie haltingly started; then as excitement built up, he described the horse in detail.

“And do you plan to take care of this horse yourself?” Kevin asked him.

“Yes, sir. Krista has taught me how to do all of that. I know how much to feed them and when. I know how to brush them

and curry comb. I even know how to pick their hooves.”

“You can’t ever miss a day with a horse. Even when you’re sick, you’ve got to go out and take care of them. You sure you’re ready for a responsibility like that?”

“Well, sir. I am, but I got at least another ten years until I can have a place to call home.”

Kevin glanced at the kid, wondering if he had ever heard a kid sound so grown up and yet at the same time say things that could tear his heart open. “Geez,” he muttered under his breath.

Angelica laid a hand on Kevin’s thigh, and he glanced at her long enough to see the sorrowful and pleading eyes before turning back to the road.

Kevin cleared his throat. “I think you’re selling yourself short, kid.”

Angelica squeezed his thigh. He hadn’t even had the chance to tell her what had happened in the city, or what his supervisor had said, or even what his plans for the future were. There were moments in life, though, that he had to seize without waiting for a better opportunity.

They were still miles away from Hope City, driving down the mountain between forests and ranch land. It almost seemed destined that they came up to the road to his family’s ranch right then. He turned down it, only glancing when Angelica murmured something in question.

At the edge of the property, right where he had taken Angelica before, he pulled the truck over. He didn't turn toward them at once. Instead, he let his gaze sweep over the land as he drew in a deep breath.

He finally met Angelica's eyes. "I had envisioned this day going a lot differently."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice a small whisper, and she glanced back at the boy, who looked from him to her in rapid succession.

Kevin shook his head. "It's not something to apologize for, nor is it something bad." He turned to Brodie. "Do you know what I do for a living?"

"Angelica says you are like a police officer, but more important."

Kevin's lips quirked. "Well, I'm not sure about more important, but it goes deeper than just being a police officer." He turned back to Angelica. "I, uh, of course, can't share details about what happened, but I don't want you," he glanced briefly at Brodie then back to Angelica, "either of you, to sit here and wonder what I'm about. So...here it is."

After glancing at Brodie, Angelica searched Kevin's eyes and licked her lips. "You mean, they made a decision about... about your career."

"I've made a decision about a lot of things. This last, uh, experience, showed me how quickly life can change, and it

made me realize what I really want out of life. I love law enforcement, you know that.”

“I do, and that is why I..I’ll never ask you to give it up. I love it here, in Hope County. Brodie, does too, but I...we... can’t live in fear anymore. Right, Brodie?”

Brodie gave her a nod, but Kevin could see the panic in his eyes.

Kevin shook his head and took Angelica’s hands. “Let me finish.”

She nodded, though her eyes moistened and she blew out a shaky breath.

“I love Hope County, too. It’s where I want to raise my kids...on the ranch like I grew up.” He glanced surreptitiously at Brodie. “Derrick is giving me a part-time position.”

“Part-time...?” Angelica asked, licking her lips. “What..what does that mean?”

“The FBI—”

“Wait! The FBI? You work for the FBI?” Brodie sat up in the seat, leaning toward them with excitement.

“Yes, well, I did, I mean, I do.” He pushed his hat up and rubbed a hand down his hair. “They took me out of fieldwork but want me to continue to do,” he glanced at Brodie and leaned toward Angelica and lowered his voice, “profiling,” then he sat back, “remotely, as a contractor.”

“So...you...won’t be the one going in and...” She glanced at Brodie.

“Right,” Kevin said.

“But that’s what you love...”

“I thought it was, but I found something that I love even more.” He drew her hands to his lips. “I’ll be happy with this, part-time as a deputy and part-time working on...saving people my way, and safely, from home...with my family.” His voice quivered at the end of the word, and he cleared his throat again.

“Family?” Brodie asked, his eyebrows drawn. “You got a family?”

“Well, not quite yet, champ, but, well, that’s what I’m trying to work on here.”

“How do you work on getting a family? I could use one of those, too,” Brodie said seriously, meeting his eyes.

“Exactly my point, buddy. Now if you will let me finish...” Kevin raised his eyebrows, and the boy sat back in his seat looking as confused as Angelica looked; well, he couldn’t tell if it was terrified or overjoyed, but he hoped for the second one.

“You’re staying?” she asked, squeezing his hands.

“Yes, and what I’m trying to say is,” he let go of her hand and reached into the glove compartment for the little black box.

“Is that a real gun?” Brodie sat up again.

“Yes, just...hold on a sec, okay, champ? I’m not so good at this stuff,” Kevin drew a flustered hand down his face.

“At what stuff?” Brodie asked, lowering his voice.

“Shh,” Angelica gently shushed him before looking at Kevin with so much hope that he finally smiled and let out a small chuckle.

“Again, not how I planned it, but we can’t argue with God’s timing, can we?” he said.

“No, sir. God always has the best timing, like when Angelica met me...”

Kevin and Angelica both turned to him with fingers to their lips, and he sat back, watching them with wide eyes.

“You were saying?” Angelica said, her voice so quiet it was like the tips of angels’ wings.

“I had imagined a more romantic moment, some candlelight under the stars, and well, anyway.” He cleared his throat and turned fully to her. “Angelica Payne, you have been a light in my life since the day your aunt introduced us. I know I danced around the bush a lot, but I realized that I don’t want to live this life without you. I want it all: the little house on the ranch, the small town life, the beautiful, sweet wife,” he drew her hands to his lips again, then glanced at Brodie, “the family. Everything.”

“Wait...” Brodie said in a whisper, but Kevin ignored the interruption, knowing he had to do this now before he lost his

nerve.

“So, I’m asking, Angelica. Would you do me the honor of helping me make this dream come true by becoming my wife? What I’m saying is, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Angelica squeaked, pulling him down to her and kissing him full on the lips right in front of Brodie.

“Umm...I’m still here,” he said morosely, with a touch of disgust in his voice.

Angelica pulled away, tears in her eyes. Without losing the embrace of their gaze, Kevin spoke to the kid. “Well, Brodie, if you’re gonna be a part of this family, I suggest you get used to a few kisses.”

“Wait...what?” Brodie asked, looking as if he wanted to crawl out the back truck window.

“What do you say, sweet boy? You said it was time to move past the fear. Do you think you could handle being a part of our family?” Angelica squeezed Kevin’s hand, holding his gaze a moment more before they both looked at Brodie.

His eyes were so wide that Kevin feared they would pop from his head. The little pulse point on his throat raced a mile a minute.

“I know we don’t know each other that well, yet,” Kevin started. “What Angelica has shared about you, though, I’m impressed. She and I have talked about it before, briefly, but enough for me to know that she wanted to adopt you. What do

you say, champ? Want to try the cowboy life on your family's ranch?"

"I..I...you're asking me?"

"Well, yes, sweet boy. It's your choice. You have to want this. We won't force it on you." Angelica kept her voice calm, but Kevin could feel the frantic pulse in her wrist.

Brodie licked his lips. "What if...what if you find out you don't want me? What if you have another kid and decide it's not safe to have me around?"

"Not safe?" Kevin asked, shaking his head. "You know, in a wedding ceremony, there's a line that says, *For better or worse*," he said.

Angelica nodded. "Once everything is finalized, there's no going back. Whatever happens, we handle it together, as a family."

"No matter what?" Brodie asked in a small voice.

"No matter what." Kevin met his eyes.

Brodie nodded and gulped. "Okay...if...if you're sure."

Kevin tousled the kid's hair and pulled Angelica in for a quick kiss. "Well, then, Brodie. Take a gander at our ranch. Remember that house I talked to you about?"

Brodie's eyes opened. "I thought that was a secret..."

"Well, I thought that this moment wouldn't happen so quickly. So, check out that grove of trees out there. How do you feel about that spot?"

“I think it’s just fine, sir. Perfect for a little house on a ranch...for a family.”

“That’s my thought exactly,” Kevin said, wrapping an arm around Angelica. “It will take a while.”

“We have a lifetime,” she said, resting her head against him.

Kevin drew in a satisfied breath, knowing he had been right in hoping on love.

EPILOGUE

SHANE TURNER TUGGED AT his tie, grateful he at least didn't have to stand as a groomsman this time around. He hated being up front where everyone stared.

He admired Kevin and Angelica for having a smaller, more informal wedding. They looked good together, standing under the driftwood altar on the beach in front of Megan and Tyler's beach house.

Only Derrick and Chasity stood up with them, well, them and little Brodie. Shane's heart steeled against the emotion that filled him every time he thought that he might have had a part in that boy finding a home. He knew it wasn't his doing, but maybe he started the process that night when he felt led to tell Angelica about the volunteer position.

If only he had always followed those moments of guidance. If he had...his gaze traveled past the wedding party toward the sunset painting the sky in brilliance. Golds and crimsons cast a magical glow on the lake.

His gaze followed the shoreline as the preacher spoke of faithfulness and compromise. Had he compromised? No. He hadn't. He had laid down the details, expecting her to give in to them, to follow him.

He drew in a deep breath, focusing his eyes once again and realizing that the dark blob he had been absently staring at was a person. A woman. A woman with a baseball hat on and curvy hips. His woman.

His body tensed, and he dug his heels into the sand to keep himself from running after her. She had been clear when he ran into her last time: he was to keep his distance.

His fists balled tightly, and he didn't take his gaze off her until the wedding ended with an abrupt uprising of applause. He pulled his eyes back to the bride and groom, clapping his hands and whistling.

Another one of his friends, albeit newer friends, was hitched and settling down. Brodie's adoption would be finalized in the next month, and they'd probably start on more like Derrick and Chasity, and Tyler and Megan. Now that Jordan and Caitlin were back together, they were talking adoption, too.

He thought about all the kids he saw at Camp Hope, all hoping for forever homes. Then his mind went to one kid in particular. The cutest little girl he'd ever seen, all curls and freckles, just like Addie.

It wouldn't be proper for him to adopt a little girl on his own; otherwise, he would have already. Watching his friends all settle down and have their families, kids that looked up to

them and filled their houses with joy, only strengthened his yearning.

He sighed, even as he plastered a smile to his face and congratulated the newlyweds. No one could ever replace Addie in his heart. He couldn't see himself with anyone else, not since Junior High...it wouldn't change now.

He didn't care that she had gone off to the city. It didn't even matter to him that she married that suit. If she returned because that was over, he'd take her back into his arms in a heartbeat. Hoping to catch another sight of her, he returned his glance out to the deserted beach. Only her footprints were left on the sand...just like on his heart.

He glanced up at the night sky where the stars appeared one by one and searched the heavens for the answers...for guidance. *Tell me how to get her back.*

The answer came into his mind: *Never give up hope.*

He held the words to him, narrowing his eyes at the beach where she had disappeared. Knowing that she ran from something or someone only intensified his ardent plan.

Tomorrow, he would start hoping on tomorrow.



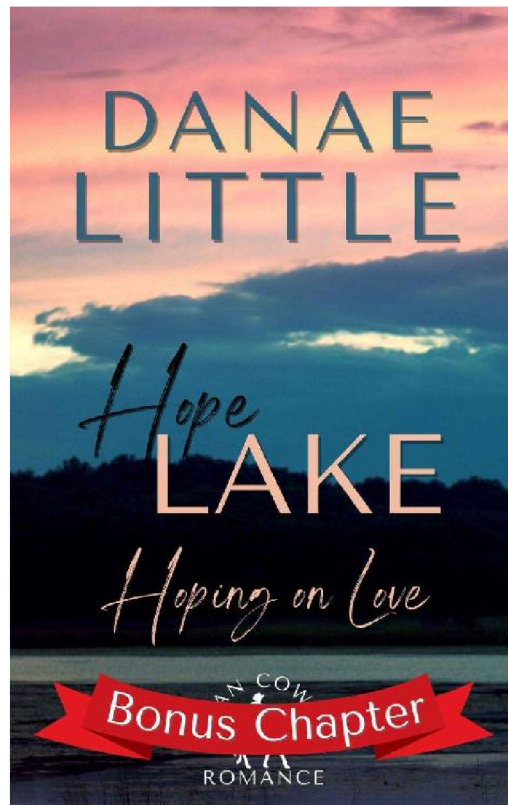
Thank you for reading Hoping on Love. I hope you enjoy Kevin and Angelica's story. Reviews mean the world to me, so if you feel led to, please leave me a review.

There's so much more to tell about little Brodie that I wrote a bonus chapter from his point of view. It's set after the wedding during his adoption. Want to read that bonus chapter for free? You can download it here: **<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/wihs2uts2w>**

Stay tuned for the next Hope Lake cowboy, Shane. He stars in his own book, *Hoping on Tomorrow*, another second chance clean cowboy romance where you will revisit your favorite characters from Hope Lake, glimpsing into how their happily ever afters are playing out. Plus, you'll root for Shane as he does whatever it takes to get the love of his life back from the path of fear and pain she lost herself in.

Read more about *Hoping on Tomorrow* on the next pages! Or go here: **<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/wihs2uts2w>** to make it yours now!

Bonus Chapter!



Want more happily-ever-after for Angelica and Kevin? Read this bonus chapter from *Hoping on Love* where you learn more about Brodie from his perspective.

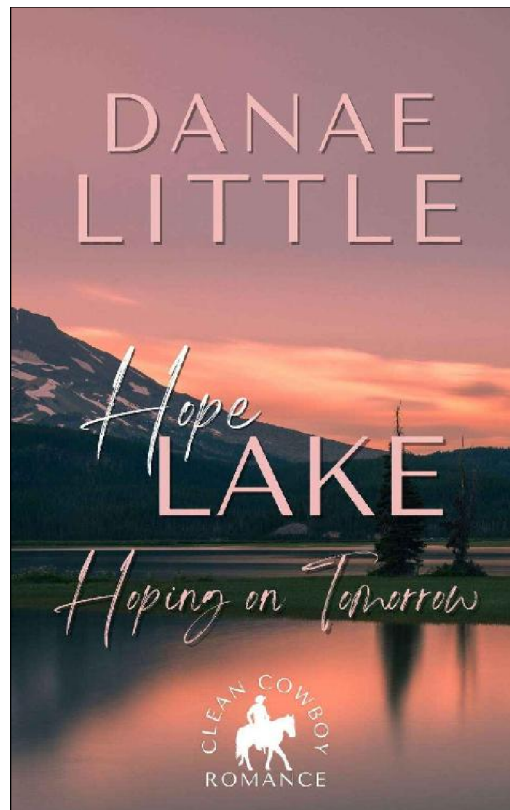
By downloading this Bonus Chapter, you will be added to Danae Little's newsletter list where you will receive weekly emails with behind-the-scene looks at her current and past projects, a sneak peek into Danae's life, and be notified of monthly sales as well as new releases.

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Read this exciting Bonus Chapter now!

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Next in Hope Lake



A WOMAN ON THE run, the cowboy she left behind years ago, and the small mountain town that brings them back together

Addie Brown returns to Hope Lake to hide from her ex. She has lived her life in fear for so long, she has forgotten what it feels like to be safe, much less to trust.

Knowing her heart can't handle being hurt again, she struggles to keep her high school sweetheart at a distance.

Hope Lake works its magic, slowly seeping into her until she starts to lose her battle with love.

There is no other woman in the world for Shane Turner besides Addie, and now that she is back in town, he is determined to win her back. Between working on his ranch and volunteering at Camp Hope, he weaves his way back into Addie's life.

Addie's ex shows up in town with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. Shane quickly realizes it was a mistake to convince Addie to let her guard down when her ex's relentless hunt spells trouble for Addie and the entire town of Hope Lake.

Once again the town pulls together to save one of their own, but will it be soon enough to save the long held love between Shane and Addie?

Hoping on Tomorrow is Book Four in Hope Lake, a clean cowboy romance series with a touch of suspense to keep you up reading past your bedtime. You can read each book as a standalone, though for maximum enjoyment the author suggests you start at the beginning. Hope Lake also features favorite characters from Danae Little's Faithful Cowboy series.

This is a clean series, meaning it is free from swearing and intimate scenes. Read this edge-of-your-seat, clean cowboy romance now.

<https://books2read.com/hopingontomorrow>

Waiting for the Next Hope Lake?



Start the Unforgettable Cowboys series!

S HE OWNS A RANCH and needs a pair of strong hands. He stumbles onto her porch broken, bleeding, and with no memory. What will she do with Her Unexpected Cowboy?

Sydney leads a fulfilling life of hard ranch work. She has her animals, and she thought that was enough for her. Until she makes a crazy birthday wish which is answered with an unexpected cowboy.

Jameson wakes up on the side of the road, battered and bruised, with no idea how he landed there. In fact, he can't remember anything...not even his name. When he shows up at Sydney's house and asks to stay the night in her barn, he has no idea of the trouble he brought with him.

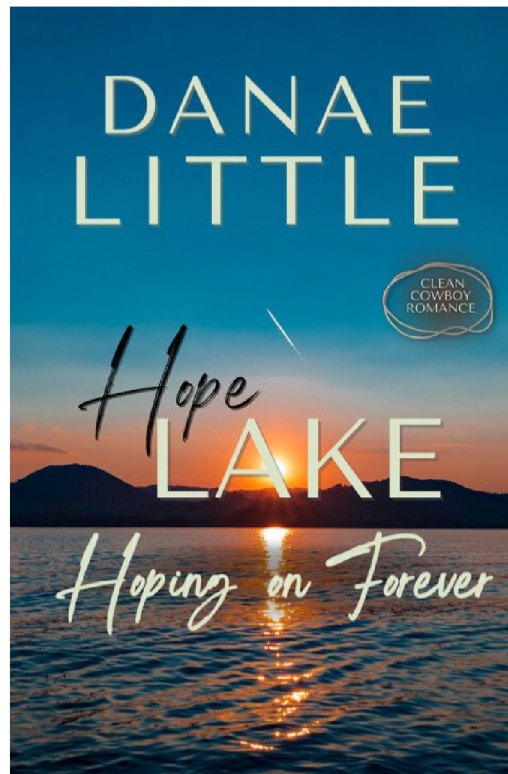
To survive the mess he brought down upon them, they will have to learn to trust each other.

Start with Book One of the Unforgettable Cowboys, a clean and wholesome romance series with a touch of suspense.

Start Reading Now:

<https://books2read.com/HerUnexpectedCowboy>

Free Book: Hope Lake Prequel



SHE'S HIDING FROM A stalker no one else sees. He's the sheriff sworn to protect her.

Chasity Chambers barely survives the attempt on her life. When she keeps seeing her incarcerated attacker following her, she flees to the safety of her childhood refuge.

Derrick Davis is Hope Lake's youngest sheriff, but his love life is less than successful. After breaking off his engagement, he can't get his teenage crush out of his mind.

When Derrick and Chasity run into each other, the sparks fly just as they had ten years before, but they each hold their own secret. Derrick is the only one that sees her stalker, and Chasity doesn't know whether to be relieved she isn't crazy or terrified for her life.

They will have to learn to trust again or lose each other to this threat.

Read this prequel to Hope Lake, a clean cowboy romance series with a touch of suspense.

Join my newsletter to read Hoping on Forever for Free!

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/vq7zfkfyys>

Acknowledgments

There are so many people to show appreciation to who have helped me along the way.

I want to thank everyone who has been a part of my writing journey, from my editors, beta readers, ARC readers, and family to the people who I meet who might unknowingly spark a new story in my mind.

ALSO BY DANAELITTLE

See all of Danae Little's books on StoryOrigin:

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About the Author

Danae Little writes sweet, clean romance. Each book that she writes holds an element of hope that leaves her readers saying, “Aww!” at the end of the story. Danae Little lives in a small town at the base of the Sierras with the adventurous love of her life and their miraculous son. She spends her days feeling blessed to be chasing imaginary dragons in their magical forest and finding any quiet moment possible to put pen to paper.

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