

TESS THOMPSON



Mama Moon



CRESCENT MOON RANCH SERIES

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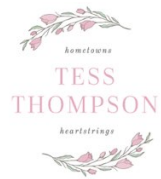
CRESCENT MOON RANCH SERIES

MAMA MOON

CRESCENT MOON RANCH

BOOK ONE

TESS THOMPSON



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*For all the brave, tenacious single mothers out there. I see
you.*

STELLA

No good ever came from loving a rodeo cowboy. At least a half dozen country crooners sing that cautionary tale. My mama was no singer, but she'd told me the same thing.

It was just shy of twilight when I spotted the young man climbing on the back of that bull. A perfect summer night in western Montana, the warm evening soft and silky against my young cheeks. Air perfumed with hay and popcorn. The bleachers packed. Goose bumps from the recently sung national anthem still prickling my arms.

My breath caught as man and bull burst from the holding gate. The power of that bull against the sinewy strength of a rodeo rider. My stomach clenched. Would the mighty beast toss this boy to the ground and deprive the world of his beauty?

I'd heard once that the right lighting could trick a mind into believing just about anything. So if I'm going to hold anyone besides myself responsible for the way that man ruined my life, then I might as well blame the setting sun for casting him in her golden light. He was gorgeous, shimmering, holding on for dear life as the bull bucked and bucked.

I tore my gaze away to glance over at Jennie. My best friend since we were three years old. My perky, cute blonde

friend. All the boys in our high school were obsessed with her. No such luck for them. A year ago, she gave her heart to Mark Armstrong. They were planning on eloping at the end of the summer.

Now, however, she was staring at Rex Sharp with the same hungry expression I felt deep in my own gut.

“Look at him,” Jennie said in more of a sigh than a sentence. “Rex Sharp.”

Rex Sharp. We’d seen his name in the program. “Sumptuous. Resplendent.”

“Can’t you just call him a babe like everyone else would?” Jennie had asked, poking me in the ribs.

Right then, the bull tossed Rex Sharp onto the ground as though he was a rag doll. He popped right back up and ran to safety while the clowns came out to lure the bull back into his pen. Rex yanked his hat from his head and waved it at the cheering crowd. I held my breath, drinking him in. To my surprise, he turned slightly, and somehow, he found me. Singled me out. I couldn’t pull away, simply stared. He stared right back. Just for a second, mind you. But long enough that I knew he wanted to see more. Then he was gone, disappearing into the building behind the arena.

Jennie and I had sneaked out to see the rodeo. My mother would never have allowed us to go alone for fear something would happen to innocent girls out in the big city of Bozeman, Montana. She liked to keep me close. So close that at times I felt as if I might suffocate.

Jennie’s mom had died when we were young, and her father disappeared soon thereafter, leaving Jennie to be brought up by her elderly grandmother.

In just a few months, I was headed to Missoula for college. I'd secured a full ride and planned to study biology and then go to veterinary school. My dad couldn't complain or forbid me to go, because he didn't have to pay for it. This was my chance to get away from him, finally. Freedom so close I could almost taste it that summer.

Jennie managed to get us invited to a gathering at a local bar after the show. The drinking age was twenty-one, but the guy at the door just waved us through. My stomach fluttered, hoping Rex Sharp would be there. He was. Standing in the corner of the room with a beer in his hand and his eyes on me.

The rest of that night blurs at the edges, twelve years later. I remember Jennie managed to inch us closer and closer to the star of the night until finally, we were standing next to him. He was even sexier close up—eyes the color of a wintry blue sky and a mouth that curved into a smirk every time I uttered a word.

Jennie was only a few inches taller than five feet. I was a full five inches taller than her and had earned my ropo muscles and wide shoulders from days of work on my father's ranch. An only child growing up on a ranch, I learned early how to use my body in aid of the family business.

So, as we stood there, taking in the golden boy of the rodeo, I wouldn't have thought I'd have a chance. When we were together, boys only had eyes for Jennie. I was used to it. In fact, I didn't mind at all. I had big dreams. None of which included a man. I was the smart one, and she was the pretty, popular one. I excelled in chemistry class, and she got the entire student body to cheer for our sad little football team, even though we hadn't won a game in ten years, just by bouncing on her toes and waving red and gold pom-poms.

To my surprise, however, Rex Sharp couldn't stop staring at me. I'd never had a man's gaze roam my figure or comment on how pretty my brown eyes were. By the end of the party, I was in the cab of that boy's truck losing what was left of my innocence.

By August, I knew I was pregnant. All dreams evaporated into the clear Montana sky when those two pink lines showed up on a pregnancy test. We'd seen each other a dozen times by then, always ending up in his truck with the same result. When I told him I was pregnant, he said right away that we should get married. My parents agreed.

Only Jennie asked me about my dreams. My plans. "Do you really want to give it all up for a pretend cowboy who probably has eyes on your daddy's ranch?"

"He does?" I'd been eating crackers to help with the nausea, but they weren't doing a thing.

"What if he's a grifter? You don't know that much about him."

I'd sat with that for a minute, her words like a sharp dagger to my heart. Was she right? And if she was, what could I do about it now? There was a baby growing inside me.

On a September day in 1993, I married Rex Sharp. As she'd planned, Jennie married Mark. We gave birth to our babies only four months apart. For me, a fat baby boy with a serious demeanor that I named Atticus after my favorite character. For Jennie, a delicate baby girl with fair skin and bright red hair and an early smile. The panic and despair I'd felt over the unplanned pregnancy was forgotten the moment I held Atticus. He was mine. This helpless little bundle needed me. Just me. The way I was. Unlike everyone else in my life,

Atticus loved me for no reason at all, other than I was his mother.

Did I mourn the idea of my original plan? Sometimes, in the middle of the night, doubt would set in. However, then I'd roll over and see my gorgeous husband and scoot a little closer.

Five precious boys came to me from the union, one after the other.

Now, I yawned and knelt to get one of the mixing bowls from the cupboard. The door hung lopsided because one of the hinges had come loose. I'd asked Rex to fix it for months now. He wasn't exactly what you'd call handy. Most of the time I gave up and just did whatever needed doing myself. I was perfectly capable. Daddy had had no sons, so he treated me like a boy, teaching me everything I needed to know to run this ranch. Regardless, it was the principle of the thing. Rex should have to pull his weight around here.

The scent of coffee filled my small kitchen, as it had every morning since I could remember. I moved around preparing breakfast on autopilot, pulling ingredients out of the pantry and listening to the radio set to 105.3. The local DJ didn't seem to know what era he currently resided in, because most of the country music had been hits in the eighties. I didn't mind. Those songs were like old friends. As comforting as a hug.

I knew every inch of that old farmhouse. After all, I'd lived there all my life. If I went suddenly blind, I'd know how to get around without stubbing my toe or running into a wall.

Rex and I had moved into the big house to help my mother after my dad died. Atticus was only two, and I was about to give birth again.

My mother had lived with us all that time, but Mama died last year. I would have loved to fix up the house. The decor was outdated and frilly. My mother loved her doilies. Truth told, sentiment wasn't the only reason for the lack of change. There wasn't money for a new couch or anything else to spruce the place up and coax it into the modern era. So I left it the same. The boys didn't care. Rex didn't notice anything around him, other than the television and the bottom of an empty beer bottle.

I was measuring the flour for biscuits when I heard Rex's boots clicking across the tiles. Up before the sun? That wasn't like him. Usually he didn't rise until after I'd gotten the older boys off to school. Soren and Thad were still home with me. Next year, when Soren went to kindergarten, it would just be me and my adorable little jester. Thad was a rascal who kept me on my toes, but I loved him with every ounce of my being, just as I did all my boys.

I didn't bother to look at my husband. That's how it was between us now, this simmering anger that neither of us dared let out for fear of what it would do to us.

"Coffee's ready. There's a fresh carton of half-and-half in the fridge." I scooped a tablespoon of sugar into the bowl and reached for the Crisco. The boys loved their biscuits. The smell coaxed them from their beds like nothing else.

"Stella, look at me."

Something in the tone of his voice made me turn around, spoon in hand like a weapon. He was fully dressed in clean jeans and a flannel shirt, a cowboy hat perched on his head even though my mother had had a strict rule about no hats on in the house. His face was clean-shaven, making him look remarkably as he had the first time I laid eyes on him.

He had a suitcase in his hand.

“I’m leaving,” Rex said. “For good this time.”

I simply stared at him. The clock above his head ticked away the seconds.

“Why now?” I asked, finally.

“This isn’t my life, Stella. Never has been. I need to take care of myself for once.”

For once? That was a good one.

“What about the boys?” I asked.

“They only love you anyway,” he said. “And you only love them. You stopped loving me a long time ago.”

“This is it then? You’re just walking out the door without saying goodbye to them?”

“What’s the use in all that talking?”

Talking. When was the last time he really talked to me or the boys? At me, yes. But not a real conversation. Had he ever?

“Will you come see them?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not sure. I’m moving far away from here.”

My fists clenched at my sides, itching to punch his smug face. Anger rushed through me like a sudden storm. Abandoning me was one thing, but the boys? Those sweet, innocent little guys who vied for their father’s attention and approval. Some days I worried his lack of engagement would be the primary wounds of their lives. I should know. My parents’ lack of affection was mine. Heck, I carried it around like a bucket of rocks. “How can you leave them? I understand about me, but they’re your sons. They need you in their lives.”

As much as I hated to admit it, I knew that was true. Boys needed a father. Even this one.

“Listen, Stella, you’re making this harder than it has to be. You always do that.”

“I always do what?”

“Never mind,” Rex said. “We’ve hashed all this out so many times.”

“Where are you going?” My throat was so dry the words came out raspy.

“I’m going to go back to the rodeo.”

My mouth dropped open. “The rodeo? Are you kidding me? You’ll be killed.”

“That’s just it, right there. You’ve never believed in me. You always think the worst. So that’s what I’ve done. But this is a chance for me. A real chance to fulfill my destiny.”

Destiny?

The word sounded weird coming out of his mouth, like me swearing. Which I felt compelled to do at him at the moment.

“Get out,” I whispered. “Don’t come back this time. Just stay out of our lives.”

STELLA

I stood at the window watching the back of Rex's truck as he barreled down our dirt driveway as if the devil chased him. The sun peeked over the hilltop, rising from the eastern sky in glorious orange.

That golden light. It followed him everywhere.

The house was quiet. Only at night and the early morning were the sounds of my rambunctious boys silenced. They all slept like the dead, worn out from roaming the hundreds of acres of ranchland my daddy had left me. "Don't lose the ranch, girl. That's all I ask."

Those were the last words he ever said to me. I was twenty at the time.

Now, as Rex's taillights disappeared from view, I didn't cry. I'd shed so many tears for Rex Sharp by then my eyes were dry, leaving only the dust of this land stuck in my lashes and coating the back of my throat. Clinging to me like failure.

I grabbed my coat and went out to my front porch and sat in one of the rocking chairs my grandfather had carved with his own calloused hands eighty years before. Yellow grasses swayed gently in the cold fall wind. A layer of frost remained sparkling on the dirt. No birdsong this time of year.

Thanksgiving was just around the corner, and the weather had turned cold a week ago.

I breathed in cold air and pulled my jacket tighter. A hint of pine needles, newly turned dirt, and the horses' stalls filled my nose. Randy would be here soon to help me with the horses. After that, he'd ride one of them out to check on our cattle that roamed freely on our property. These days we were the only small ranch left, so it was less likely anything was amiss.

The old chair creaked, perhaps tired like me. I drifted my fingers over the arm of the twin rocking chair next to me. How sad these chairs were. Built for two, yet destined for one. They were meant for a loving couple to sit together and rock in perfect time and harmony, until the years brought white hair and wrinkles, and a deep, loyal friendship replaced the early drug-like attraction. That's what I'd wanted. But the truth? Rex was never the one to give it to me.

I could almost see my mother out here, snapping beans or peeling potatoes and looking out over the fields with that defeated look in her eyes, growing thin and feeble. Then, one day last year, I'd gone to wake her and found her curled into a semicircle, her body already growing cold. I'd fallen to my knees beside the bed and stroked her hair. Something I would never have done if she were alive. My family was not what I'd call affectionate.

I'd already known then that Rex would eventually leave and not return. I was alone. The boys had only me. A single mother with no education and a dying ranch in the middle of nowhere.

We'd done one thing right. Our boys. They were perfect. All different and yet alike at the same time. Fierce and clever,

as physical as the litters of puppies I'd raised over the years. For a decade, they'd come every other year like clockwork. My five little angels disguised as mischievous, rambunctious little boys. They were as much a part of me as my own limbs and organs, the very blood that flowed through my veins.

Now I would have to tell them their father had left without a backward glance.

"He has such potential," my mother had said after the first baby came. "If he steps up and becomes a man, you two might have a chance. But I fear he'll never outgrow that rodeo. Wanderlust, you know. I can see it in his eyes. Mark my words, he'll spend more time at the tavern than with you and the baby. If he sticks around at all."

Her words had wounded me like nothing else she'd ever said to me. Mostly, I suppose, because she was right.

I sat there for some time, watching as the sun rose higher and higher, its orange hue softening into the yellow light of morning. The expansive Montana sky was blue today, not a cloud in sight, leaving me with the sensation that there was no beginning or end, that it went on and on forever. Having never lived or visited anywhere else, I couldn't be certain the sky here was bigger than other places in the world, but I'd always believed it to be true.

Three times Rex had left me. Usually not long after one of the babies had come. He always came back, though. After six months or so on the rodeo circuit, he'd come back with his proverbial tail between his bowed legs, begging forgiveness. "I got it out of my system this time."

Forgiveness came easy to me. Don't ask me why. Perhaps it was my father's fault. The way he'd held back affection and love, making it a game in which I tried with all my heart to get

him to love me by being the very best girl I could be. I excelled at school. Kept slim and took special care with my appearance, just as my mother did, so that he would be proud of me.

I sat there, growing colder by the minute, procrastinating, unsure how I could tell the boys their father had abandoned them. The door opened, and Atticus stuck his head out. “Mama, what’re you doing out here?”

I was a creature of habit. Usually at this time I was pulling a batch of biscuits out of the oven.

He came to stand before me, his light blue eyes scrunched up in worry. This boy. Always trying to take care of me. Compensating for his father. It made my chest ache to know how true it was. He took all of it upon his own young shoulders. *Not his job*. But there was no convincing him. He’d come out of the womb with the natural instincts to look after his mama. It was as though he tried to be an easy baby. He had slept through the night at only two months. He was giant, so that helped. His shock of dark brown hair fell over thick eyebrows. He brushed it back, still studying me.

“I’m fine. Not sick or anything. Just getting a slow start.” I gestured toward the driveway, as if he’d know what that meant.

“You want me to get breakfast started?” Atticus was already dressed for school. He had a math test today, and although he would ace it, he always worried. I’d instilled the idea of breakfast being the most important meal of the day, especially for concentration during school.

I rose from the rocking chair, feeling about a hundred years old instead of twenty-nine, almost thirty. “No, I’ll rustle something up.”

Atticus glanced toward the driveway and slumped over, shoving his hands into his pockets of his jeans. “He left, didn’t he?”

“How did you know?” I asked, surprised, as usual, by his insight.

“I don’t know. Smells different. Like someone took out a bag of stinky trash.”

“Atticus.”

“You can’t ask me to think any other way. I know what’s gone on around here. It was time for him to go. He’s not really here most of the time anyway.” He tapped his forehead. “Not in his mind anyway. What did he tell you? He was going to chase his old dream? The one you supposedly ruined?”

I flinched at that. Unfortunately, when Rex drank too much, which was more and more often these days, his favorite pastime was to rail on and on about how I’d ruined his life. His main theme? He could have been someone if it hadn’t been for me and the kids.

By being someone, he meant succeeding in the rodeo. I wanted to retort back that he was someone—a husband and a father. Weren’t those important enough? Yet I already knew the answer. Nothing was as important as being in the spotlight.

My father had spent the last two years of his life teaching Rex about the ranch. It was only a small operation, but there was a lot to do and learn. One night after a few months, Daddy said to me, “For someone who calls himself a cowboy, he doesn’t have a lick of sense when it comes to being a real one.”

The pain caught up to me then. Those tears I thought were gone made the back of my throat ache with the effort it took to

keep them at bay. *I'm all alone. With these poor boys who need a father. And a future that doesn't involve debt and toil.*

“Mama?”

At the doorway, I turned back toward him. “Yeah?”

I rubbed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Get it together. Be strong. These boys have to understand that I'll do whatever it takes to keep them safe and thriving.* Even if it meant selling this place. My father would turn over in his grave. He'd cared more about this piece of land than he'd ever cared about Mama or me.

Yet even the thought of selling the ranch made me sick. This dirt was in my bones. I belonged to every inch of these acres more than they belonged to me. Where would I go? What would I do?

“I have an idea,” Atticus said. “I've been doing research on how to save cattle ranches and the like. Then I saw this movie—*City Slickers*.”

Our local drive-in had played it a few weekends in a row, even though it was an old movie. Bluefern Drive-in advertised them as vintage cinema, which always made me chuckle. Mark had taken Atticus and Caspian, along with his daughter Annie, to see a week or so ago.

“What about it?” I asked, holding on to the screen door for support.

“The characters are from the city and they want to experience what it's like to be on a dude ranch, so they find this place that used to be a real ranch but now's just a place for tourists to go to pretend to be cowboys.”

“What are you saying?” Did he mean we should turn our place into that? I wouldn't have the faintest idea where to start.

“We can sell most of the cattle. Just keep enough to let the guests pretend to rope them and stuff. The horses will be the main attraction. Lessons and trail rides and stuff like that. City slickers eat that stuff up.”

“A place like that has to have rooms for people to rent,” I said.

Atticus shook his head. “We can build guest cottages. And turn the old bunkhouse into a restaurant.”

It would need a lot of renovation to make that an eating establishment. Even the big house my mother had taken so much pride in was looking rough around the edges. Our furniture and rugs were threadbare and stained. The kitchen needed new appliances. “It would take a lot of money to make this place into a tourist destination. Money we haven’t got.”

“Can you get a loan?” Atticus pushed his glasses farther up his nose in a move I found so endearing it made my heart ache.

A loan? Would any bank give me a loan? Would they think this was a good idea?

“Honey, I need time to think through everything,” I said.

“Totally understand. There’s a lot to consider.”

I pulled him into a hug. Lately, he’d squirmed a little when I embraced him, but not today. He gave me his full weight.

“Is it because of me?” Atticus whispered against my shoulder.

I drew away, placing my hands on his upper arms and looking deep into his eyes. “None of this is about you.”

“Then why doesn’t he want to see us?”

“Why do you think that?” Had he heard our conversation? What had Rex said exactly? Whatever it was, this little boy had interpreted Rex’s leaving as rejection of not only me but of him and his brothers? Anger surged through me. My fingers trembled from rage and frustration.

“I just do.” His gaze dropped to his shoes. “He never liked me much.”

“That’s not true.” I inwardly cringed, hating myself for lying to him. What else could I do? Tell him that his father, whom he loved, was not a good man? That he’d left us for good? “He’s just...very self-absorbed. Which made it hard for him to be present for you boys. But he loves you.”

He pushed his bangs off his forehead and returned his gaze to me. “Mama, you don’t have to lie. I’ve studied the situation carefully. I know the truth. But you love us enough for two people, so it’s going to be okay.”

Tears came then. I tried to stop them, but they overwhelmed me. My little boy wrapped his arms around my waist. “Don’t cry, Mama. He’s not worth it.”

I rested my chin on top of his sweet-smelling head and breathed him in, this boy of mine, and said a prayer to God for help.

Please tell me what to do, for I am lost.

JASPER

The morning had been a busy one at the bank with what felt like half the town coming in to deposit paychecks. My teller, Jennie Armstrong, had a line almost to the door, so I'd jumped in and opened another window. We were a two-person operation, which most days was perfectly adequate for a bank in the small town of Bluefern, Montana.

We always closed for an hour at noon for lunch. By the time it rolled around, I was hungry. "You want to join me for lunch?" I asked Jennie as I locked the front doors. "It's Friday. You know what that means."

"Lasagna special at the diner." Jennie rolled her eyes. "Don't you ever get sick of that food?"

I placed a hand over my heart. "You wound me. A poor bachelor such as myself has to eat somewhere."

"You could pack your lunch," Jennie pointed out, unhelpfully. "As I do."

"I had enough soggy tuna sandwiches as a kid to last a lifetime, thank you very much. Come on, I'll treat."

Jennie knelt to get her purse out of a drawer at her station. "I've got errands to run and a soggy tuna sandwich to eat." An

evasive quality had crept into her tone. What was she really doing?

Don't be ridiculous. Jennie was as reliable as any employee I'd ever had. Still, I peered at her closely for a moment. She wore an attractive wrap dress paired with boots. Blond hair pulled back in a neat bun and impeccably applied makeup hinted at the precision with which she did everything. Short and petite, she had once mentioned that she'd been a tumbler when she was young and head cheerleader. Even though she'd graduated from high school more than a decade before, the cheerleader vibes remained. They were useful at a bank, I had to admit.

Today, though, purple smudges under her eyes hinted at a poor night's sleep.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Sure, yeah. Just busy this time of year. Turkey Day and all. And I haven't even started thinking about Christmas gifts. The holidays stress me out."

"I get it." I knew, as the son of a single mother, how anxiety-inducing the supposed happiest time of the year could be. No matter what she did or how hard she'd worked, my mother had to adhere to a strict budget. It was no wonder I'd become essentially a bean counter for a living. Despite this, somehow, Mom had always given me wonderful Christmas mornings. To this day, I don't know how she'd stretched her meager salary far enough to keep us fed, clothed, and housed, let alone paid for holiday and birthday presents. "My mother struggled this time of year."

"Even with Mark's business, we never seem to have enough," Jennie said. "The cost of groceries seems to go up every month. Fortunately, we only have Annie to feed."

Jennie's husband Mark was a plumber, but with a population just over two thousand, how many broken toilets could there be in any given month?

A few of the women in my bank line had mentioned the cost of groceries and how much they'd gone up over the last few years.

"But at least the world didn't end in 2000 like they predicted," Jennie said, smiling. "Remember all that fuss?"

"Good point." The worry about the computer systems going haywire when the year 2000 rolled around had been over nothing. Instead of the systems of the world going awry, everything had been fine. Until September 11 the following year, when it had felt as if the world were truly ending. Although five years had passed since, that day remained imprinted in my mind. I'm sure I wasn't the only American to feel that way.

Jennie's brow wrinkled. "It's not the money so much as the expectations of perfection."

Her comment surprised me. Jennie had no hint of pretense. She'd grown up in Bluefern and married her high school sweetheart. They had one daughter, age eleven. She arrived promptly at five to nine every morning, came back early from lunch, and showered regularly. Sadly, showering was on my list of good qualities in an employee.

"Let me know if I can help," I said to her.

"Thanks, boss. Now, I'm off to find a turkey."

I donned my winter coat before grabbing the keys and heading for the back door.

Thin, wintry light had me momentarily squinting after the relative dimness of the bank's interior. Pulling my collar up

against the brisk wind, I chose to walk behind the brick buildings to avoid the gusts that traveled down the main street. Regardless, bitter wind whipped through my hair and stung my cheeks. *I should have worn a knit cap.* Having lived in Northern California my whole life, I was more accustomed to autumn fog that dissipated by midmorning than the frigid weather of western Montana. This morning, I'd wakened to a layer of frost on the fallen leaves outside my house. Unlike last winter before I'd gutted and remodeled my old farmhouse, the insulation I'd stuffed in the walls helped with the cold mornings.

I arrived at the back door of the diner. The young man who helped Mandy in the kitchen was taking a cigarette break. He didn't look up at me, hunched over smoking, hoodie covering most of his face. To the right, playground equipment from our public park glistened. A parked car on the street in front of a grassy area idled, exhaust rising into the frigid air.

A second later, I realized it was Jennie's car. She was at the wheel, and a man sat next to her on the passenger side. I'd met her husband a handful of times. Was that Mark? Had to be, although with a cowboy hat pulled low and sunglasses covering his eyes, it was hard to tell for sure. She'd said she had errands to run. Maybe Mark liked to help pick out their family turkey? I stole one more look, noticing this time that they appeared to be in an argument. She waved her hands around. He sat straight-backed, a stubborn set to his lean jaw. Was everything all right?

Move along. It's none of my business. Couples fought. I should know. Janice and I had had several arguments during our lunch hours. No longer, though. Arguments ceased after couples broke up for good, as we had just before I agreed to

open a new branch of Pacific Mutual in Bluefern. The job offer had come at the perfect time.

I bypassed the hooded kid and then went around to the front door. A blast of heat hit me the moment I walked inside. Since I'd been in yesterday for lunch, Christmas had exploded in the diner. Decorations adorned the small space, including a small silver tree and glittery garland strung around the booths. Cartoons of Santa and his reindeer had been drawn and painted on the front windows. It usually smelled of coffee and bacon, but today I caught a hint of cinnamon as well. Most of the booths and tables were taken, so I settled at the counter next to a skinny woman in bright pink exercise attire.

Mandy, who'd worked as a waitress for several decades and finally managed to buy the place, brought an iced tea without me having to ask. I'd been coming here since I arrived last January. She knew what I liked by now.

"You want the special?" Turkey leg earrings hung just below Mandy's brown hair, coiffed and sprayed within an inch of its life with hairspray. Although in her forties, with that hair and her pink waitress uniform, Mandy seemed more like a woman of my grandmother's generation.

"Yes, please." I reached for a sugar packet and dumped it into my tea and then stirred it with one of the long spoons.

Mandy wrote my order on a ticket and placed it in the window to the kitchen. "You want a Caesar salad to go with it?"

"No, thanks." I didn't want to offend her, but the salads were overdressed and made me feel a little sick.

Mandy grabbed the coffee pot from its burner and hustled out from behind the counter to refill cups.

The woman in the pink outfit sipped black coffee and picked at a Cobb salad. Dressing on the side, I noticed. She glanced up at me and smiled. Her teeth were small, like those of a child, and strangely white. “You’re the new guy. The banker?” She reached out a small, manicured hand. “I’m Renee Cox. You may have heard of me.”

“Sure.” Had I? The name didn’t ring a bell. “Are you a customer at the bank?”

“My husband is. I’m the pie maker.”

“Oh?” As far as I knew there was not a bakery in town. Maybe she sold them out of her house?

“The pie lady?” She blinked, clearly baffled by my lack of recognition. “You haven’t heard of me? I win the pie competition every year. No one can touch me.”

“Right. Sure.” I had no idea what she was talking about, but it wasn’t the first time that had happened since I moved here.

My pink-clad companion wrinkled her pert nose. “The Christmas festival? There’s an annual pie contest, and I’ve won for the last five years. My mother’s recipe. It’s all in the crust. I’m kind of famous around here. People keep telling me I should open my own shop, but it would ruin it if I had to charge money for my art. Do you know what I mean?”

Not really. “Sorry, I’m not familiar with the festival. I moved here in January.”

“Oh, poor you. Missing all the fun. What kind of pie do you like?”

“Any kind. I’m a bit of an expert pie maker myself.”

“Really? But you’re a man.” Renee raised one thin eyebrow. “No offense.”

“None taken.” I smiled politely and wished Mandy would return. This woman irritated me. She reminded me vaguely of my ex-girlfriend. Janice wore the same shade of pink on her nails. I’d mess with her a little, I decided. “Maybe I’ll enter this year. I agree that it’s all about the crust. Not to be immodest, but I make the very best one there is.”

All my friends back home asked me to bring one to every dinner party or potluck. My crust was a very precise mixture of butter and Crisco. The room had to be the right temperature. That much was a given. It was also necessary to use exactly four ice cubes in a half cup of water and then carefully drip the frigid water into the dry ingredients one tablespoon at a time. Too much and it made the crust tough. Too little and you had a dough impossible to roll.

Renee’s blue eyes glittered as she raised a pointy chin and drew in a deep breath, obviously gearing up for a tongue lashing. However, before she could offer a retort, the bell over the door chimed. Her attention drew away from me to whomever had just entered. The corners of her mouth curled upward like an evil cat. I turned to look, curious. A pretty young woman wearing a thick jacket and knit cap headed our way. She seemed preoccupied, staring mostly at the floor instead of looking around the diner as someone would if they were meeting a friend.

She shrugged out of her coat while simultaneously taking the stool on the other side of me. I caught a whiff of a citrusy perfume. Mandy returned with an empty coffee pot.

“Stella, how are you?” Renee asked the woman, leaning slightly into my space far enough that I smelled her musky

perfume. “I’m so sorry to hear about you and Rex.” She had that fake dripping tone of honey women do when they’re not really sorry for someone else’s trauma. Rivals maybe? They appeared to be around the same age. From my experience in town so far, everyone seemed to have known one another for a long time. Families had lived here for generations, and their offspring seemed more inclined to stick around than where I was from.

Big brown eyes glanced Renee’s direction. “You and the Jazzercise ladies needed something to gossip about, so you’re welcome.”

Renee gave a thin smile and retreated slightly. Blue veins showed under her pale skin as she reached for her cup of coffee. *Twiglike wrists*. Not a bit of meat on those bones. “Stella, you’re so funny. As you know, Jazzercise was something our mothers did. We’re all about strength training these days. You should try it sometime. The classes at the dance studio are wonderful. Mrs. Marple’s really good at giving modifications for newbies. One has to work up, you know, and you shouldn’t get discouraged. That’s what I tell everyone. No reason to be intimidated by those of us obsessed.” She flashed a rictus smile that scared me.

“I get plenty of *real* exercise running my ranch and raising five boys,” Stella said.

Five kids? I felt an immediate pang for her boys. Obviously she and her husband were divorcing. Growing up without a dad was hard. I should know. Well, maybe theirs would stick around. My father hadn’t, but not all men acted that way. I knew plenty who were divorced but still participated in their children’s lives.

My slice of lasagna appeared, set down in front of me with Mandy's practiced hand. "You want more tea?" Mandy asked.

"No, thanks." If the lines continued this afternoon, I wouldn't have much time for bathroom breaks.

Mandy turned to Stella. "Hey there, darlin'. What can I get you?"

"I'd like a stack of buttermilk pancakes, please." Stella darted a glare toward Renee.

"For lunch? Oh my," Renee said. "Aren't you decadent?"

Stella fixed cold eyes upon Renee, staring her down. "I'm celebrating."

"Is it your birthday?" Mandy asked, reaching under the counter for a set of silverware.

"No. Not my birthday." Stella spread her napkin over her lap. "Driving into the feed store just now, I heard that song about the lying, cheating, deadbeat husband on the radio and I thought, why not get some pancakes?"

"What song is that?" I asked Stella.

Stella fixed her gaze upon me for the first time. "The Kathy Mattea one. You know, she rattles off a whole list of adjectives for the bastard who cheated on her. I do enjoy a good cheating song."

"Right. That's a good song. I can never figure out how she can sing that fast," I said.

"Right?" Stella asked. "And with just the right amount of venom. I never really loved it as much as I did today."

I swallowed, a little afraid of this small woman with the shiny brown hair dressed in a pair of faded jeans and boots

covered in mud. Not a stitch of makeup. Not that she needed it. She glowed with health and natural beauty.

“Did Rex cheat on you?” Renee clutched the collar of her sweatshirt. “I’m so sorry.”

Stella shrugged. “I have no evidence. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Then why are you saying anything about it at all?” Renee asked, snappily. “You can’t have it both ways.”

“We covered this,” Stella said slowly, as if talking to a child. “Now you have something to talk about at Jazzercise besides how many calories you ate for breakfast.” She picked up her fork and pressed the tongs into the palm of her hand in a way that reminded me of stories about young women practicing forms of self-harm. My chest ached at the thought. Not just Stella but anyone in that kind of emotional pain.

“It’s not Jazzercise,” Renee mumbled, cheeks red.

“We haven’t met,” Stella said to me. “I’m Stella McKinnon. My family owns Crescent Moon Ranch.”

“I’m Jasper Moon. I bought the house adjacent to your property.”

“I apologize for not coming over to introduce myself earlier,” Stella said. “The ranch and the boys keep me busy.”

“McKinnon?” Renee asked. “Are you taking back your maiden name?”

Stella shrugged as if it meant nothing to her but I suspected that was just a defense mechanism. “I should never have given it away in the first place.”

“That’s what women do,” Mandy said soothingly. “Nothing wrong with it.”

“Well, God giveth and God taketh away or whatever the saying is.” Stella returned her gaze to me. “Jennie says you’re a really good boss.”

“Jennie talks about you all the time.”

“She’s been my best friend since we were three years old. She’s family.” Stella’s face lit up when a steaming plate of pancakes appeared in the window.

“Here you are, honey,” Mandy said, setting the plate down in front of Stella.

“I haven’t had pancakes in eleven years.” Stella smeared the dab of butter over the top before dousing the stack with syrup. She cut half of it into small bites and dug in as if she hadn’t eaten for weeks.

Renee watched the devouring of the pancakes as if she were watching the unfolding of a horror show. She picked up her own fork and speared a piece of lettuce while emitting a pious sigh.

“Could I get a glass of milk, please?” Stella asked Mandy between bites. “Whole, not that nonfat nonsense.”

“You got it,” Mandy said.

Renee pulled some bills from her pink-and-silver-checkered purse. “As fun as this has been, I should run. Must pick up my little guy and get packed. Martin’s whisking me away for a weekend in Bozeman. Tootles.”

The minute Renee was out the door, Mandy cleared up the mostly uneaten salad. “I know she’s a nuisance, but I feel sorry for her. Wouldn’t surprise me if Martin’s running around on her. It’s making her mean.”

“That and the lack of food,” I said, without thinking.

Both women chuckled.

“Sorry. That was unkind,” I said.

“Unkind but funny,” Mandy said in a reproving tone that belied the humorous twitch of her mouth.

“My mother would be ashamed of me,” I said.

“She never met Renee,” Mandy said.

“I hope Martin’s not cheating on her.” Stella swiped the milk mustache above her upper lip with her napkin. “I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. Not even Renee.” She shuddered. “She was one of those mean-girl types in high school and still is. She’s probably delighted by how my life’s turned out.”

“Yet you wish no ill upon her,” Mandy said. “Proving what a good person you are.”

“I don’t know,” Stella said. “Most days I feel like a hard kernel of my former self.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Mandy said. “You’re about to have a fabulous second act.”

“Rex left me with a bunch of debt and five little boys to raise all on my own. I’m almost thirty and uneducated. Nothing but a falling-down ranch to support my family. I’m going to lose the only thing my father ever loved. The biggest mistake of my life was marrying that lying cheat.” She pressed her knuckles against her lips.

“You wouldn’t have your boys if it wasn’t for Rex.” Mandy swiped the counter where Renee had vacated. A whiff of bleach emitted from her towel. “My girls are worth all the years of marriage to my ex-husband. My mama always said my picker was off, and I’m afraid she was right. But it’s not

too late for you, Stella. You're young and pretty. There'll be someone else. When you're ready."

"I won't ever remarry, let alone fall in love." Stella set her fork on the counter, straightening it. "If I can survive this and keep my boys safe and healthy, I'll never ask God for another thing." She gestured toward my lasagna. "You going to eat that before it gets cold?"

"Yes, ma'am. I suppose I should. Unless you'd like to share it?"

A laugh bubbled from her mouth, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the woman she must have been before her heart broke. "I've eaten enough, thank you."

STELLA

Those pancakes sat in my stomach like a lump of rocks all afternoon, mocking me for my rebellion. Rex had never liked me to eat much, always worried I was going to keep the thirty pounds I'd put on when I was pregnant. I never did, mind you. Those hungry babies of mine made sure of that. However, his scrutiny of my weight had made me self-conscious. I'd stayed away from desserts and sugar for the better part of a decade. Until that giant plate of pancakes.

Regardless of my overly full stomach, at half past two, my friend and neighbor Iris and I walked down my driveway to meet the school bus. Iris's yellow Lab, Sophie, along with Soren, and Thad ran ahead, their breath coming out as clouds in the chilly air. Sophie barked happily. Thad yelled nonsense, obviously delighted to run in the cold fall air. Soren, who loved being outside, stopped occasionally to pick up and examine a fallen leaf from the oaks and aspens that lined our driveway.

Although Atticus, Rafferty, and Caspian were old enough to walk the quarter mile down our driveway from the bus stop, I enjoyed meeting them. In addition, it gave Soren and Thad much-needed exercise. Iris had looked after the little boys for me that morning and had stayed to help me do several loads of laundry and make a casserole for dinner.

A heaviness seemed to have made a permanent residence in my body. Fatigue and headaches plagued me during the days. My boys were my only motivation to get out of bed in the morning. They had to be fed and sent off to school. Soren and Thaddeus were still home with me. Their tired mom could barely think of ways to keep their curious, mischievous little souls occupied. The laundry. Oh, the laundry. Those full baskets haunted me. The moment I'd emptied one, another took its place. I'd let two days pass without doing any washing, and the piles had seemed to be magically multiplying. When Iris had offered to come over and help, I'd been incapable of saying no.

“Thanks for rescuing me today,” I said out loud.

“You know it's my pleasure. You're my family.”

“Oh, Iris, you're the best.”

“Seems like yesterday Thad was an infant,” Iris said, a slight tremor in her voice. “And look at him now.”

“Time's a weird thing, isn't it?”

“Sure is. Hard to believe Thanksgiving's two weeks away.” Iris adjusted her knit cap to cover her white curls. Over the years, her sparkling blue eyes hadn't changed, even though the rest of her had wrinkled and grayed.

Iris and her husband, Rocky, were our neighbors to the east. When my mother was alive, she and Iris had been good friends. A real case of opposites attract—my mother skinny and as hard as a calloused thumb and Iris plump and soft as a butterfly kiss. Rocky and Iris had never been blessed with children, despite wanting them desperately. I was an only child. My parents had no desire for offspring, and they'd let it slip more than once that I'd been an accident. Dad mentioned

how expensive I was at least twice a week. One could say I was blessed with four parental figures, but the truth was, my mother and father were too busy being stoic and tough to express much love. Life was a test for them. One in which the only prize was survival. It was as though they were holding in their love as if it was something to be saved for emergencies. Iris and Rocky, on the other hand, were the types to shower love as if they knew it was a renewable resource. The more they gave, the more they received and vice versa.

Our conversation veered toward the plans for the long weekend, which would involve a lot of cooking, puzzles, football, and dishes. Iris and Rocky always joined us for holiday meals, including Thanksgiving and Christmas. Last year had been the first festive season without my mother. She'd died in the spring, and by the time Thanksgiving rolled around, the hollow feeling in my gut had lessened somewhat. Saying goodbye to those we *loved* but didn't *like* might be the hardest grief of all.

We made the same dishes we'd always made, dividing them in half. I did the turkey, potatoes, gravy, and stuffing. She did the other side dishes, including Jell-O mixed with whipped cream. Iris called it a salad. It was the only salad the boys had ever devoured, scooping it into their mouths as if it would magically disappear if they didn't hurry.

"I snagged one of the last giant turkeys they had," I said. "Twenty-two pounds. I could hardly lift it out of the van."

"Excellent. You know I love the leftovers," Iris said.

"We should have enough turkey for soup," I added, especially since Rex wouldn't be there to hoard the legs for himself.

We were one less at table. Should I take out another leaf in the table or just allow for more elbow room?

From the time I was nineteen years old, I'd had a baby every other year. A new chair had been added to the table for each new baby. Currently, I seemed to be going the opposite direction.

I must have sighed, because Iris asked if I was all right.

"Yeah, just thinking about my mom," I said. "And a little about Rex."

"Empty seats. I know."

"Yeah, that." I fought tears by biting the inside of my lip. Too many tears over him. For so many years. All the pain and betrayals stacked up one after the other.

"You're going to get through this," Iris said. "Rocky and I'll be there every step of the way. Whatever you need."

When I was a kid, I'd wished Iris was my real mother. It's a terrible thing to want, I know. But I was a sensitive soul, coveting physical touch and words of praise. No matter how much I craved both, my parents kept them hidden from me. If they ever felt anything for me at all.

Survival, though? That was Mother's expertise. Alice McKinnon worked from sunrise to sunset every day of her life. She kept us fed no matter how lean the year, made our clothes with the aid of her ancient Singer machine, kept the house immaculate and grew a vegetable garden and put away jars and jars of fruits and vegetables after hot afternoons in a steamy kitchen. She may have been emotionally distant, but I never heard a word of complaint about working hard. When she'd married my dad, she'd moved from her parents' home right into his old house, taking on the responsibilities of a

rancher's wife by gritting her teeth and getting on with things. If she ever regretted her choice, she never said it out loud.

Iris, however, had provided the soft landing I often needed. Anything I came up with to do or be, she'd always said, "Well, that sounds like an interesting idea. I bet you'll be real good at it, too."

When I trudged over to her house more than a decade ago to confess to my pregnancy and my intention to marry a rodeo bull rider, she'd not hidden her tears. Iris had known how much I'd wanted to go to college to become a veterinarian. My pregnancy meant all of those dreams went up in smoke. The pregnancy had broken her heart almost as much as it had mine. She'd opened up her arms and held me close, promising that everything would be all right. "You can do this. I'm here to help."

Eight months later, Atticus had healed our broken hearts. I knew it was my destiny to be his mama. A mama, not a mother, as I'd had.

"Every woman in town seemed to be at the grocery store," I said. "It felt like everyone was staring at me, by the way. I guess news has gotten around that he's gone."

"This is a small town," Iris said soothingly. "It's to be expected."

"I wonder what people think? About what happened between us, I mean." I would never admit to anyone but Iris that I cared what people thought about my marriage. Being the one left opened up another level of embarrassment and shame. What was wrong with me that he hadn't wanted to stay? How repulsive must I be if he left his five beautiful boys as well as his wife? Did people speculate? Wonder what I'd done wrong?

“Anyone who knows you knows he had one toe out the door from the moment he arrived,” Iris said, bitterness creeping into her voice.

“Is that true?” Her words hurt, and I stumbled slightly in the loose gravel of my driveway.

She took my arm, steadying me. “Darlin’, you know that it’s true. He wasn’t a good husband. You’ve said so yourself. All the other times he left, it was for a woman.”

We didn’t know for sure, but all evidence pointed to affairs, including unexplained charges on the credit card. I’d taken him back all three times, though. *The boys*, I’d thought with every betrayal. *The boys need their father. I can suck it up and get on with things, as my mother taught me.*

I nodded, holding her arm tight against my side, taking comfort in her soft, warm body. “I just keep wondering if there was something I should have done or not done.”

“Sweetie, there’s someone else. Has to be. Otherwise, his lazy butt wouldn’t have left. He had it too good here. You doing all the work. Him drinking beer with his feet up on your table while you ran yourself ragged with the boys and all the chores. This time, promise me—you won’t take him back.”

“Not this time. I’m done.” This was different. I couldn’t explain why, other than fourth time was the charm?

“You haven’t said how you’re holding up,” Iris said. “Any word from him?”

“Not a one.” He’d been gone three weeks. Every day since, I’d ticked them off in my head. How many more until I woke up feeling like myself instead of a yoked beast?

The yellow school bus reached the end of our driveway about the same time as the rest of us. Thad screamed out to his

brothers while waving his hands to get their attention. Afraid of the bus, Soren moved closer to me. Anything loud or oversize made the muscles in his cheeks twitch. Soren was happier surrounded by cattle and horses than anything man-made, especially if it was loud. His ears seemed more sensitive than others. I wasn't sure what that meant, other than I felt extra protective of him any time we left the ranch.

Rafferty and Caspian tumbled one after the other down the bus steps, followed shortly thereafter by Atticus. Annie pressed her nose against the glass, and as if he felt her gaze, Atticus turned to wave goodbye to her.

I nodded to Sue, the driver, who grunted and touched the tip of her plaid cap before closing the door, the vacuum-packed sound the same as it had been when I was a kid.

Rafferty and Caspian launched themselves at me and then Iris, but Atticus held back. A smudge on Atticus's glasses caught my attention first, before I saw the purple bruise around his right eye.

“What happened to you?” I asked, alarmed.

“He got in a fight,” Rafferty said in his high-pitched little-boy voice.

“You did?” I asked. “With who?”

“Some kid picking on Annie,” Caspian said.

“What was he doing to her?” I made a mental note to mention it to Jennie. She said Annie rarely shared anything that had happened at school.

Atticus hung his head, the tips of his ears red. “I can't say.”

“Spill it,” I said firmly.

Atticus looked up at me, his eyes almost the same color as the faded blue autumn sky. “He wouldn’t stop singing whenever she was around.”

“Singing’s hardly an insult,” I said. “Maybe he was trying to serenade her?”

“*Jolene* isn’t a love song,” Atticus said. “Not according to Annie.”

“Jolene?”

“The Dolly song?” Iris asked.

Atticus nodded, looking miserable. “He did it when we were in the lunch line and made her cry, so I had to hit him.”

Did they even know what that song was about? Why would some kid be singing that to Annie? And why would it make her cry? As far as I knew, no one ever got into a fight over a Dolly song. She made us happy, not upset.

“Which kid was it?” Iris asked as she took Rafferty’s backpack and slung it over her shoulder so he could run ahead with the little ones.

“Johnathan Edwards,” Atticus said. “He takes dance classes with her.”

“He sounded just like Dolly,” Caspian said. “It’s weird.”

“Yeah, which made it worse,” Atticus said. “Everyone started singing along with him.”

The little guys were way ahead of us by then, so I urged everyone forward. As we walked back toward the house, I marveled that an eleven-year-old kid knew a Dolly Parton song. This boy probably had a crush on Annie, as many of the boys did. That alabaster skin and striking red hair made it

impossible not to notice her. “He might like her—you know, trying to get her attention by being obnoxious.”

“Boys can be super dumb,” Iris said.

“Did you get into trouble?” I asked, worry prickling the back of my neck. I probably should have asked him that straightaway instead of trying to understand a boy’s intentions. Atticus would have to be punished, even though it was the last thing I felt inclined to do. After the trauma of the last few weeks, I just wanted to hold him close and comfort him like I had when he was a baby.

Guilt nagged at me too. During the kids’ lunch break, I’d been stuffing my face with pancakes. If school had called, I hadn’t gotten any messages. I had to get myself together or my boys weren’t going to make it through this.

“No one saw us,” Atticus said. “Johnathan was too embarrassed to admit I’d given him a bloody nose, and my eye hadn’t turned black yet, so we just dropped it.”

“A bloody nose? What got into you?” I asked.

“Rage,” Atticus said. “Pure and simple. No one hurts Annie and gets away with it.”

“He pummeled him good,” Caspian said, sounding proud. “That Dolly impersonator won’t be singing again any time soon.”

“I have to punish you,” I said to Atticus.

“I know. But it was worth it.”

STELLA

After I got the boys a snack and settled at the kitchen table to do homework, I pulled Iris aside. “I’m going to pop into town and tell Jennie about what happened at school.”

“No problem. I can stay as long as you need me.”

I told the boys I had errands to run but would be back in an hour or so. Thad was having none of it. “Me go with Mama.”

No one else asked to go, so I scooped my baby up and hauled him out to the minivan. It was a necessary evil, this white whale of a car. As ugly as it was, the functionality won me over in the end. Now I just needed to keep up on the payments.

I got Thad settled into his car seat and then took off for town. He was babbling away in his singsong voice, telling me the story of Pooh and Piglet that Iris had read to him before his nap earlier.

By the time we’d gotten to town he was on to Tigger. “Come on, my chatty one. Let’s go see Aunt Jennie.”

“Me down.”

I let him down but told him to hold on to my hand. The parking lot was mostly empty, but I didn’t want to take the chance of him bolting suddenly and getting hit.

Fortunately, the bank was as quiet as the parking lot. Jennie was behind a teller window counting cash. I spotted Jasper Moon in the glass-walled office behind her. He didn't look up from whatever he was doing on the computer. I'd enjoyed meeting him at the diner. I liked anyone with a good sense of humor and the ability to beat Renee in a pie contest.

Jennie looked up and smiled when she saw it was me. "Hey, what're you doing here?"

"I just wanted to talk to you for a minute about something that happened with the kids."

She looked momentarily wary for a split second. "Great. It's time for my break anyway. You want to get some fresh air out back?"

"Why not?"

"I'll just tell Jasper I'm going to step out," she said. "Be right back."

I remained at the counter, watching as she popped her head into Jasper's office. He lifted his gaze and then turned toward me to wave. I nodded back to him, embarrassed to have interrupted my friend's work. I hadn't thought about it before barreling my way in here. However, he seemed perfectly fine. In fact, he was coming out of his office and headed my way.

"Nice to see you again," Jasper said, smiling in my direction.

"You too." I gave him a stiff smile. Why was my mouth so dry?

"I need to use the ladies' before we go," Jennie said to me. "Won't be a minute."

Was it my imagination, or was she leaving me alone with Jasper on purpose?

Jasper leaned casually against the side of the counter. “Seeing you twice in one day. I’m a lucky man.”

I flushed. Was he flirting with me?

Goodness, he was nice-looking. I’d noticed at lunch but had been distracted with everything else going on to really take in what a fine specimen of a man he was. Broad-shouldered but slim and beautiful eyes the green hue of a mountain stream.

“I hope this doesn’t sound strange or like an overstep.” He lowered his voice. “But is everything all right with Jennie? She’s been acting strange all week. Sort of spacey and jumpy at the same time.”

“I think so. Why do you ask?”

“She’s been acting a little off. Like maybe she had a fight with her husband?”

“I doubt it. They never fight.” Where was he going with this?

“I’m going to sound even more like a nosy neighbor when I say this.” He smiled again, showing off his straight white teeth. “Earlier, when I was walking to lunch, I saw her arguing with a man in her car. I assumed it was Mark.”

“Assumed?”

“He wore a hat low over his forehead and sunglasses, so I wasn’t for sure it was him.”

“They never fight,” I said, matching his quiet volume. Had something happened? *God, please let them be okay.* If those two broke up I’d have to give up all hope there were happy

marriages out there. Not for me, obviously, but for my best friend? Yes. Plus, I loved Mark. He was one of the good ones. Jennie could be a lot. I knew that. High-strung and bossy. But it never seemed to bother him.

“Couples have rough patches,” Jasper said.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” I asked, blurting it out without thinking.

“Not for a few years. Bad breakup before I moved here. So my bad patch was more of a forever patch.”

I studied him for a moment, surprised at this confession. He seemed like the type of man who had everything, including an adoring wife.

“She never got any of my jokes,” he said. “Should have been my first clue we weren’t meant to be.”

Interesting. I couldn’t remember laughing at anything Rex ever said either. Was that what had driven him away? He simply needed me to laugh at his jokes?

Jennie returned from the bathroom. I shared a glance with Jasper before she and I walked out back. The minute we were outside, she started rummaging through her purse. Finally, she pulled out a lone cigarette.

“Jennie, when did you start up again?” I asked, shocked. I’d been preoccupied with my own problems, and here my best friend was obviously going through something.

“Recently. Don’t tell Mark.”

“Is anything wrong?”

A ray of sun appeared from behind a purple cloud, lighting up her blond hair. She wore it pulled into a tight bun for work. Did it hurt? When we were kids, she used to have a pony that

swung back and forth when I walked behind her. She was always in a hurry. Ready for the next chapter without enjoying the one she was in.

“Are you and Mark okay?” I asked.

She lit her cigarette and took in a deep inhale before turning to blow it away from my face. “Why do you ask me that?”

What should I say? Your nosy employer saw you in the car fighting with your husband? “I don’t know. You seem kind of spacey and jumpy at the same time,” I said, finally, borrowing words from Jasper.

“We’re fine.” Her eyeliner was slightly smudged. I don’t know when I’d last seen her with anything but flawless makeup. Maybe when we were in high school? I could remember when she and Mark had gotten into a fight and she’d cried telling me the story. We’d been on the bed, sitting cross-legged as we dissected the disagreement. He’d thought she was flirting with some other guy and had gone completely bananas. What had she said? “Sometimes he holds me a little too tight, and I just want to fly away somewhere.”

Now, as she puffed away on her cigarette, I remembered why I’d come to see her in the first place. “I came by to tell you about something that happened with the kids at school.”

Her eyes glinted with impatience. As much as I loved her, when it came to how she mothered Annie, she reminded me of my mother. Hard and strict. Impossible standards.

“What happened?” Jennie asked.

I told her the story, expecting her to find it slightly humorous as I did. Instead, she paled, and when she lifted her cigarette to her mouth, her hand shook.

“Weird, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, super weird.” She seemed to be avoiding my gaze, looking out to the parking lot to her car. A four-wheel-drive Subaru. I’d been jealous when she told me she was getting a new car. But just because they didn’t have money problems didn’t mean she didn’t have any other worries.

“Well, I should get back to work.” Jennie dropped the cigarette and stomped it out with the bottom of her shoe. “We should go out tomorrow night. Blue Bonnet has live music. My treat. Celebrate...you know.”

“My impending divorce?”

She had one hand on the doorknob but turned back to me. “Did he serve you papers?”

“Not yet. I’ll probably have to do the filing, like everything else in our marriage.”

She let go of the knob and turned all the way around to face me. “Was it really that bad? Being married to him?”

“You remember, don’t you? You were there.”

“No one can really know what it’s like to be in a marriage,” Jennie said. “Except the two in it.”

What was she trying to tell me? Was she unhappy? Jennie and Mark had been high school sweethearts. One of those couples that seemed destined for each other. As far as I knew—and I’d spent a lot of time with them over the years—I’d never heard one cross word between them.

“You lost your spark,” Jennie said. “Do you still love him?”

“He’s the father of my children.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I breathed in the scent of woodsmoke in the air and dug deep for my answer. “I can remember being so in love with him, I’d have walked a thousand miles through the desert to find him. But he kind of ‘boiled the frog’ me. Little by little, he turned up the heat until I was cooked. I could only see all the ways he’d disappointed me. How little he seemed to care for the boys. His way of controlling me, you know, with the food and stuff.”

“How do you mean?”

I played with the zipper of my jacket. Why was she asking me all of this now? Hadn’t she been with me the last ten years? “You know how he was.”

“But do you ever, like, think maybe there was a part you played in it all too?” Jennie asked.

I studied her. She knew me, didn’t she? Couldn’t she see how that question haunted me? “It’s all I think about.”

She seemed taken aback by this. “Well, marriage is hard. For everyone.”

“Whatever’s going on with you and Mark, you can fix it. I know you can. It’s not like Rex and me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Mark.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Rex is a cheater, Jennie. You know that. He’s done this so many times before. Whoever he left me for, I hope she’s prepared to be with a man-child instead of a man. Mark’s a man. He takes care of you and Annie. You’re lucky. You know that, right?”

“Why are you comparing them?” Her voice sharpened.

I stepped back and almost fell from the top step. “You’re acting really weird.”

For a second her eyes glittered, and I thought she was going to launch into me. However, her mask lowered once more, and she gave me a bright smile. “Am I? It’s about time for my period. PMS has been terrible lately. We’ll pick you up tomorrow for dinner. Make a fun night of it.”

“Sure, that’s fine. It’ll be good to get out of the house.”

She turned and this time stepped inside, letting the door slam behind her. I picked up her discarded cigarette butt and put it in the dumpster on my way to my van.



DRIVING HOME, I turned the radio to one of the only stations we could get out here. They played country from all eras, and if it had come in with a little less static, it would have been perfect.

I thought about Jennie, mulling over our conversation. She had been acting strangely. I felt sure of it. If Jasper was right and she was having marital problems, why wouldn’t she have told me? Maybe she didn’t want to burden me, knowing what I was going through.

Of course that’s what it was. She was always putting me first. All my drama with Rex and she never once expressed impatience with me.

Thank God for Jennie Armstrong. I said a little prayer of thanks, as I did often when I thought about all she’d done for me. We’d been through a lot together. Without her and Iris, I wouldn’t have made it through the last thirty days.

Jennie was a loyal friend—supportive and encouraging—even when I made stupid choices. When I'd told her I was pregnant, she'd looked me straight in the eye and, without an ounce of pity, asked me what exactly I planned to do with the life God had given me. "You got to figure a new path for yourself," she'd said. "One that makes a good life for that little baby."

I'd assumed she felt sorry for me. Maybe even disgusted that I'd lost the scholarship and everything I'd worked so hard for because of a boy who roped cattle. However, she'd not once said anything negative about this curve my life took. My mother didn't speak to me for the better part of a year, even though we lived in the same house. Dad wouldn't look me in the eye. It was only Jennie and Iris who had supported me unconditionally.

Only once, and this was recently, did she admit to being jealous of my good grades and the scholarship I'd gotten. However, she'd never wanted to go to college. At least as far as I knew. She'd always said she just wanted to marry Mark and have a family. The fall after graduation, she and Mark had married and gotten pregnant with Annie right away. We had our babies four months apart. Just like that, we were grown up. And back to living the same life.

Somewhere along the line, the jealousy veered the other direction. I was jealous of the kind of husband Mark was, especially when he opened his plumbing business and made such a success out of it. She remodeled their house and always had a new sweater to wear. I'd scraped along with what the cattle made, a constant, nagging worry about money plaguing me. There's nothing quite like money worries to keep you awake in the middle of the night.

Of course, things hadn't always been easy for Jennie and Mark. I knew that. Just like everyone else, they'd had lean years. A few times they'd worried they'd lose Jennie's family's property. Mark did the jobs, not only working their land but becoming an apprentice to a plumber. Mark's plumbing business thrived before long. Now he made great money. They'd paid off their house and given up farming, keeping only a few chickens and a dog.

There had been more than once over the years I'd been mighty grateful for the free plumbing service. Best I remind myself of that instead of sliding into jealousy.

Jennie loved working at the bank and told me the extra money was going into a college fund for Annie. Yet another thing I felt jealous over. My boys would be lucky to have their books paid for, let alone all of the rest of it at the rate I was going.

It had all worked out for my friends, and I was glad of it. Even if at times it left me feeling a little sorry for myself.

I could hear my mother's voice. Why did you have so many kids, then?

"Because they're going to make the world a better place," I whispered out loud. "Just watch and see."

JASPER

Saturday morning, I sat on my porch sipping a strong cup of coffee, watching the sun rise over the eastern mountains. Covered in freshly fallen snow, the mountains were awash in pink morning light. I'd lived in Bluefern for ten months and even during the days when the temperature dropped below zero, I never grew tired of the landscape.

When my boss had asked me to head up the bank out here in Bluefern, I'd never set foot in western Montana. I'd grown up in a town in California just north of the Bay Area and with money being tight, my mom and I hadn't traveled much. As a kid, my world had been small, yet I never felt deprived. I had books. They were all the traveling I needed. I went through a closet to Narnia, solved international crimes while wondering what a dry martini tasted like, and floated down the Mississippi on a raft with my friends Jim and Huck.

As a boy, I'd never wanted to cause my sweet mother any consternation, especially given our circumstances. I was a good student and earned a scholarship to college. Once there, I chose a nice, safe accounting major and then got a nice, dependable job at a bank. I quickly rose up to management and before I knew it, I'd opened two new branches and was then asked to open a third.

In Bluefern, Montana, population 2,134.

“Does a town that size even need a bank?” I’d asked my boss, Mike Turner.

“They’ve had to do all their banking in Bozeman,” Mike had said, rubbing a hand over his bald pink head. “The townsfolk are excited to have one close by. It’ll be a cake job. If you can stand the winter.”

The first time I drove into Bluefern, I had my doubts, and not just about the weather. Truth told, it wasn’t so much a town as a clump of brick buildings. Besides the grocery store, post office, diner, and Blue Bonnet Tavern, and a sad-sack motel on the edge of town, there wasn’t much to see.

Pacific Mutual had bought one of the original brick buildings right on the main street of town. Although it had been empty for decades, the bones were good. The most challenging aspect had been the hundred-year-old plumbing. Fortunately, I’d already flipped three houses back in California and knew a thing or two about how to wrangle a remodel.

I’d met Jennie’s husband, Mark, when he’d come in to install all new plumbing. He’d mentioned his wife was looking for work. When she came in for an interview, I knew she’d be perfect for the teller position. I’d been right. Of all the employees I’d ever had, she was the most efficient and reliable. Despite her buttoned-up personality, in direct juxtaposition to my jocular style, we got along well. Jennie was not one you’d ever find at the end of a party wearing a lampshade, but her trustworthy personality made up for her lack of fun. I mean, handling people’s money in a small town required discretion and integrity. She had those in spades.

I’d been given a generous moving bonus for agreeing to take the manager position in the middle of nowhere. During

my first couple of weeks as a Montana resident, I set out to find a place to live. I figured I'd just rent, not knowing how long I'd be here. However, that was before I saw the old farmhouse, located just west of the Crescent Moon Ranch property. The local realtor told me the run-down house had originally belonged to the McKinnon family, but five acres had been sold off in the 1940s. The house and barn had been built just after the end of the Second World War. Until their deaths in the late nineties, the house and property had been home to the Browns and their two children. Since they'd passed, the children had decided to keep the house and use it as a rental income. None of the subsequent renters bothered to keep the place up. After the last renters had trashed the place, it stood empty for a decade, making a cozy nest for mice and a few nasty rats. The Brown family was only too happy to get rid of it when I made a lowball offer. It had been unlivable when I'd signed the paperwork, which meant I had to rent a room at the motel in town until I could finish repairs and remodeling.

Growing up, I'd learned how to fix nearly anything that broke—everything from a leaky faucet to putting up new drywall. When I walked into that creaky house, it was readily apparent I'd have my work cut out for me. Regardless, I'd never been afraid of hard work. It might take a while, I'd figured, but I could make the place shine again. For the first six months, I'd spent my days at the bank and my evenings and weekends working on my farmhouse.

About a month after I'd bought the old place, I'd discovered a mama cat and five kittens in the loft in the barn. I'd taken the lot of them to a shelter in Bozeman, hoping they'd be adopted. The kittens had gone quickly but no one wanted the mama. In a moment of impulsivity, I'd brought her

home with me. She took to me right away, following me around in a way I'd have expected from a dog, not a cat. It might have been the wet food I gave her every night or my warm lap that won her over to my side. Whatever it was, we fell madly in love. She chased away all the critters. I made sure my lap was available. A perfect relationship.

Penny was a big help during my house renovation, too. Her contributions weren't completely obvious, but I could see her intentions. She'd nap nearby as I tore down walls and yanked out floorboards but was always keen to accompany me into Bozeman to the home supply store. Those trips were so frequent that the employees knew Penny and me by name.

By early fall, I'd finished up the last of the work just in time for the cold weather and the holidays. Not that I had anyone to share them with. Other than Penny, of course. We liked to watch football together, so that was a comfort, despite my loneliness.

Penny napped near the heating duct by the breakfast nook now. I poured myself another cup of coffee in my charming kitchen. What I was going to do today? It was Saturday, and I had no plans. Back home, I would have hiked in the afternoon with my buddy Carl, then maybe gone to dinner with some other friends. Sunday I always took my mom to church.

I took another sip of my coffee. The familiar homesick feeling washed over me. Moments like this, I had to ask myself—what was I doing out here? I knew no one. Single women were scarce. Most of the men my age were married with families and thus not interested in going for a beer on a Saturday night.

Keeping busy all these months kept a lot of my homesickness at bay. Yet I missed Mom and my friends. Call

me a mama's boy, but I adored my mother. It had always been just the two of us. If she were ever lonely for a husband or a house full of pitter-pattering feet, she never said anything to me. Plus, we had each other. We'd had so many good times. Every Friday night had been movie night. We'd sat on opposite ends of the couch passing Milk Duds and popcorn back and forth. I knew every rom-com as well as any of the girls in my class.

Now here I was in a four-bedroom house with no one but me and Penny. Honestly, the weekends without remodeling tasks had me feeling a little lonesome. But no, I wouldn't let myself get all melancholy. Sitting around feeling sorry for myself served no one.

I'd call my mother. See how she was getting along. She was coming for a visit Thanksgiving weekend, and I couldn't wait. My secret plan was to get her to move out here. When I'd mentioned it before, she'd expressed interest but quickly reminded me that she had a good job as an executive assistant with good benefits. What would she do for work in such a small town? She'd had a good point. As much as I'd have loved to have her move in with me, I knew she wouldn't be happy. She valued her independence. A loyal group of girlfriends kept her busy and social outside of work. Out here, she would have only me.

I dug my phone out of my back pocket and punched in Mom's number. She answered on the second ring.

"Honey, how are you?" She always answered with a slight trepidation in her voice, as if I were going to tell her bad news.

"I'm fine. I am officially done with my renovation and all ready for your visit." I glanced around my kitchen at the gleaming appliances and attractive sage-green backsplash. I'd

had the original floors refinished with a dark stain, and the rich patterns in the wood had come through beautifully.

Penny meowed and jumped up on the counter to rub herself against my forearm. I set aside my coffee to give her a good scratch and a few hard pets the way she liked. No gentle rubs for this one. She liked her massages with a little muscle behind them.

“Have you met anyone?” Mom asked.

By “anyone” she meant a woman.

“No. Everyone’s married here.”

“You should go out tonight. Visit that tavern you told me about. Maybe some other young people will be there, you know, doing whatever one does in a bar.”

“Yeah, okay. Maybe.” I chuckled, picturing her in her little kitchen with the long cord from the landline resting on her slender legs. She refused to get a flip phone, saying she didn’t need any such foolishness since she only talked to me. Which wasn’t true. She had her friends. None of whom had mobile phones either, so I guessed they were all in denial of the modern world together. “What about you, Mom? How are the girls?”

They called each other girls even though they were all in their late forties or early fifties.

“It’s funny you should ask. Martha has a serious boyfriend. They’re getting married. Can you imagine? At our age?”

“Mom, you’re only forty-eight. That’s hardly old.”

“Tell that to my sagging rear end.”

“Mom, please.” I laughed. “Can we not talk about your rear end?”

“It’s a natural part of a person. Anyway, it’s good to hear you don’t think I’m too old to date because I’ve met someone. Nothing serious, as of yet, so don’t get overly worried.”

“Tell me about him,” I said.

“Not yet. We’ll see if it’s anything before I tell you too much.”

A knock on the door drew my attention away from our conversation. “Mom, there’s someone at the door. I have to go.”

“Oh yes, do that. I hope it’s a new little friend for you.”

I stifled another laugh. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll call you later.”



PENNY JUMPED off the counter and ran to the door, obviously as excited as I was for a visitor. I was surprised to see Jennie standing there. Her eleven-year-old daughter stood behind her, copper hair pulled into a braid that hung down her back. She held a plate of what looked like brownies. I really hoped it was. I loved brownies.

“Hello, ladies. What brings you by?”

“We wanted to congratulate you on finishing your remodel,” Jennie said.

“I made brownies.” Annie stepped forward, offering the plate. I immediately caught a whiff of chocolate and butter.

“How did you know I was craving brownies?” I asked.

“I didn’t, Mr. Moon.” Annie peeked up at me from a pair of hazel eyes. Adorable freckles dotted her cheeks and nose. “But I like them anytime, don’t you?”

“For sure.” I backed away from the door. “Come on in.”

I led them out of the foyer and into my bright, modern kitchen. “Would either of you like a brownie? Cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Moon,” Annie said. “I have rehearsal for our recital in a few minutes.”

“Annie’s a dancer,” Jennie said.

“A dancing *student*,” Annie said. “Mrs. Marple says we’re not dancers unless someone pays us for it.”

I assumed she didn’t mean the kind of dancer that specialized in poles or laps.

“Annie takes classes at the little studio in town,” Jennie said. “Mrs. Marple danced in New York City when she was younger and never forgets to work it into a conversation.”

“Mom, be nice.” Annie’s cheeks flushed an even rosier shade of pink. “Mrs. Marple’s lonely. The studio’s all she has.”

Jennie didn’t respond to her daughter, glancing around the kitchen. “This is gorgeous. How did you do this while working full-time?”

“Like Mrs. Marple, I’m lonely,” I said, smiling. “Lots of time on my hands.” I turned toward Annie. “Your father put in all new plumbing for me.”

“Cool.” Annie dropped to the floor to greet Penny. Having no shame whatsoever, Penny climbed into Annie’s lap and started purring. Quite loudly. It was amazing how much sound could come out of such a small creature.

“I met Renee Cox yesterday at the diner,” I said. “She’s... um...interesting.”

Jennie laughed. “That’s one way to put it.”

“She got nervous when I mentioned interest in entering the pie-baking contest.”

Jennie’s eyes twinkled. “I wish I’d seen her face. Renee always wins. She’s absolutely insufferable about it.”

“Mrs. Cox makes a very good pie,” Annie said diplomatically.

“And she’s not afraid to tell everyone either,” Jennie said.

“How many pies can one person enter?” I asked, thinking about my apple and cherry varieties. They were equally good, in my humble opinion. Fresh or frozen cherries were key, not the overly sugary kind from a can.

“How *many* pies?” Jennie tugged on her earring while tilting her head to one side, clearly perplexed by my question. “One, I guess?”

“Are you really going to enter, Mr. Moon?” Annie’s eyes sparkled. “It would be awesome if you won.”

“Maybe I will. My apple pie’s provoked a few marriage proposals.”

“Really?” Annie asked.

“Okay, only one,” I said. “And she was eighty years old, so I’m not certain she was serious.”

Annie laughed. “That must be some good pie, Mr. Moon.”

“Wouldn’t it cause a stir if Renee Cox finally had her title usurped?” Jennie rubbed her hands together as if she were a rebel plotting an overthrow of a kingdom.

“I can try,” I said. “If you think the contest isn’t rigged?”

Jennie stared at me. “Rigged? Never. In fact, there’s a raffle every year to win Mrs. Ford’s quilt. She makes one

especially for the occasion, and one year someone cheated in order to win, but they were caught soon enough, and the rightful owner was given their quilt. Justice is always served in Bluefern.”

How did one cheat in a raffle? Weren't there tickets with numbers?

“The festival's great fun,” Jennie said. “A clean and wholesome family day.”

Annie played with the end of her braid, sweeping it across her fingers like a brush. “Not completely wholesome. Remember the beer garden last year?”

“A few of the dads did act a little silly toward the end of the day,” Jennie said. “But that's nothing to call them out on. Those men work hard every single day of the year. If they want to blow off a little steam, then what's it to you?”

“Atticus's dad didn't work hard every day of the year, and he was the drunkest.” Annie's chin jutted out slightly, and her eyes flashed. “Atticus wanted to die when his dad knocked over Santa's reindeer.”

“Fine, there are exceptions.” Jennie raised one eyebrow and turned back to me. “Regardless of some bad behavior, it's still good times. We have a parade, and the park's transformed into a magical place with lights strewn all about. We roast a whole pig, and the ladies all bring sides to share. I'm famous for my mac and cheese.” Jennie lifted a hand. “Don't ask me what my secret ingredient is, because I can't tell you.”

“I wouldn't think of it,” I said.

“Caspian thinks he knows what it is,” Annie said.

Jenny shook her head. “He should focus more on his studies than messing around in his mother's kitchen.”

“Who’s Caspian?” I asked.

“Stella’s second-oldest son. For nine, he’s strangely handy in the kitchen,” Jennie said.

“He’s totally obsessed with cooking,” Annie said. “His chocolate chunk cookies are to die for.”

“Anyway, you’ll be one of our special guests this year,” Jennie said. “We have a ceremony to welcome our newcomers. You’re our only one this year. Last year we made a big fuss over the new owner of the gas station only to find out later he was a criminal. It was awful. That’s a long story that I’ll have to tell you about when Annie’s not around. It’s kind of salacious.”

“In that case, I’ll be sure to attend the festival and enter a pie into the contest,” I said.

“The other thing—are you free tonight?” Jennie asked. “Mark and I are taking Stella out for dinner and drinks at the Blue Bonnet. You want to join us?”

I studied her for a second before answering. “Is this a setup?”

She widened her eyes and looked slightly offended. “No, nothing like that. She and her husband just broke up.”

“She mentioned something about that. What happened?” I kept my voice casual, even though I was anxious to learn more about why a man would leave a woman who looked like Stella. Brains, too. And funny.

“They were unsuited,” Jennie said noncommittally.

“Atticus says he has a side piece,” Annie said. “He started disappearing for hours at a time and coming home drunk.”

Jennie flinched. “Annie, really?”

“Is Atticus one of Stella’s boys?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s the oldest of the Sharp boys. And he’s my best friend,” Annie said softly.

“A piece of work, that one,” Jennie said, shaking her head.

“She means that he’s like a hundred years old,” Annie said. “And perfect.”

“An old soul?” I asked.

“Exactly.” Annie shot a triumphant glance in her mother’s direction, clearly happy that I seemed to understand.

“He’s intelligent.” Jennie sniffed. “Some might describe him as nerdy.”

“Our science teacher says nerds will have the last laugh,” Annie said.

“Laugh? About what?” Jennie’s brows came together, clearly confused.

“Never mind, Mom.” Annie returned to stroking Penny’s ears.

“Stella was supersmart at school too,” Jennie said. “She was supposed to go to college on a scholarship, but apparently, God had other plans for her when she got pregnant the summer after high school.”

I nodded, thinking of my own mother. “It happens.”

It wasn’t a new tale or a unique one either. Still, it must have been hard to have a baby before you’d even felt grown yourself.

“What about tonight? You up for it?” Jennie asked.

“I’d love to,” I said. “Weekends have seemed long since I finished the house.”

“Great, we’ll meet you there at seven,” Jennie said. “Wear something casual. Not one of your suits.”

“Right. Got it.” Did she really think I would wear a suit to the Blue Bonnet? How uptight did she think I was?

I held the door open for mother and daughter and watched as they walked across my yard to their car. Penny rubbed against my ankle, so I picked her up before shutting the door behind us. “I have a lot to learn, old girl. I hope whatever the initiation is doesn’t hurt.”

Penny yawned, completely uninterested in my plight. Typical cat.

STELLA

I sat on the edge of the bed in my room and fought the urge to shred my fingernails with my teeth. A bad habit that had wanted to come back since Rex left. Jennie smoking and me with my fingernail biting—we'd gone back to high school.

I'd agreed to go out. Which meant I must get ready. Put on something presentable. Fix my hair and my makeup.

Dinner out at Blue Bonnet was more than I'd done in a long time. Why did it sound hard? It was just Jennie and Mark. Some steaks and a few beers. Nothing frightening. I knew them as well as I did my own family. It's not as if there would be any pressure.

Then it hit me what was wrong. The last time I'd gone out it had been the four of us. We'd had a good night, too. Or, at least I thought it was good. Rex had been sweet that night. Playing the role of the perfect husband for my friends.

All right, fine. This would be different. The first time out on my own since I was eighteen. There had been many nights alone, of course, just not out. Rex had spent plenty of nights at the Blue Bonnet without me. Playing pool with the guys and drinking. He'd come home smelling like cigarette smoke and booze.

My hands shook thinking about facing anyone else out tonight. There would be all the questioning looks and pretend sympathy. Everyone wanted to know what the heck had happened, and I couldn't blame them. I'd want to know, too, if it were one of them who had been left high and dry by their spouse.

Rex, where did you go?

I pressed my cold hands between my knees. Maybe I should say I was sick? I could just stay home, comfy in my flannel pants and thick Irish sweater. Snuggle with the boys. We could watch a cartoon, or I could read them a story.

I hadn't been doing a good job with them. Since Rex left, I'd struggled to get through the days, counting minutes until I could put the boys to bed and then crawl into my own, shivering until the sheets warmed. Rex had been good for something. His body had made the bed a lot warmer. A bad taste came to my mouth just thinking about him.

I crossed the room to stand at the window and peered out into the dark evening. Lacking serious commitment, snowflakes drifted lazily from the dark sky. The weather forecast predicted several feet of snow during the week of Thanksgiving, but at the moment the ground was clear.

I needed to thaw the turkey.

The first Thanksgiving without Rex.

I thumped my forehead against the cold window. "You are pathetic," I whispered to myself. "Why are you mourning a man like Rex?" Wasn't that what had gotten me into this mess? Falling in love with the wrong man? Believing we could make a loving family together?

Holidays without him would be easier, I told myself. No one lying on the couch, nearly drunk by noon, asking for another beer and did I have any chips? As if Iris and I weren't in the kitchen making enough food to feed an army?

Frost decorated the inside corners of the window. The old glass couldn't keep out the cold as it should. Windows were ridiculously expensive. I could send a boy to college for what it would cost to replace even half of them. I etched a heart with the pad of my finger in each corner. "Please God, help me to get through this," I whispered.

Shivering, I wrapped my arms around myself. I swear, lately, it was as if my body had a constant fever. Aches and chills constant, unwanted companions. I'd even gone to the doctor in town to see if I had some kind of fatal disease. I worried about dying and leaving my kids orphans more than was mentally healthy, but even before Rex left, I knew I was the only parent they had that would come through for them. The doctor declared me in perfect physical condition and asked if I'd ever thought about seeing a therapist.

I wanted to ask—with what money? But I didn't want to appear rude. Also, my father had always told me never to talk about money with anyone in town or it would be everyone's topic at dinner. Anyway, the doctor was new to town and we were all glad for such convenient medical care. For years, we'd had to traipse all the way to Bozeman when we were sick, which took an hour to get to and an hour to get back. If you weren't ill when you left, you might be when you returned at the end of the day, exhausted and weary.

I pulled my curling iron from the back of the drawer. I don't know the last time I'd used it. Maybe last Christmas festival? It smelled slightly of burned hair spray when it

heated, but I used it anyway, making a few waves in my medium-length brown hair. At least I'd kept my figure. I could console myself somewhat with that thought. Having kids young meant your body returned fairly quickly to its normal ways without too much effort. Albeit with a few stretch marks to remind me I'd carried a fat baby boy around for nine months.

Pulling open the closet, I scanned the hangers for something to wear, averting my eyes from Rex's empty side. What he hadn't taken, I'd gotten rid of myself by taking them to the Goodwill in Bozeman. I'd dumped those black plastic bags of clothes as though they were possessed by the devil, then screeched out of the parking lot like a teenager. Burning his things would have been preferable, but I couldn't in good conscience waste perfectly good clothes when there were so many folks who needed them.

Standing in the doorway now, though, the absence of his clothes was a stark reminder that a closet meant for two now held clothes only for one. What of the years we'd spent together? Was I to look back at any of them fondly, or were the last eleven years a waste of my time and love? Had they meant nothing to him? Was our marriage simply a mockery of what God intended for us? I leaned the side of my head against the doorframe and let out a long, shaky sigh. My father would have had a fit to know his daughter was getting divorced. He always bragged about how there had never been one couple in his family tree ever to divorce. They might have been miserable and the husband a no-good cheater, but by God, they stayed together.

The weather had dropped into the teens earlier in the afternoon. I'd need to dress warmly. Practicality trumped fashion here in Bluefern, but I should at least try to look

decent tonight. Who knew how many people I'd meet at Blue Bonnet just dying to see my broken heart on display. Best to hide these things if possible. My mother had her faults, but she knew how to keep up appearances and keep on keeping on even when life imploded.

In the back of the closet, a few lonely dresses clung to their hangers as if for dear life. I chose a sage-green sweaterdress, which Iris had mentioned flattered my olive complexion and brown eyes the last time I'd worn it.

I found a pair of wool stockings at the back of my drawer still in their package, so I pulled those on for a little extra warmth. Jennie had given me a thick black leather belt last Christmas, and I fastened it around my waist to give the dress a little shape. I shoved my feet into my best riding boots, the pair I didn't actually use for working outside or riding. I saved these for when I went into town for church or grocery shopping. When had I last worn them?

Standing in front of the full-length oak-framed mirror that had been in this house as long as the floorboards, I did a quick assessment. Worn out. Washed out. At only twenty-nine, I felt like a used-up dishrag, limp and gray. That's what a broken heart did to a person.

I needed a little blush. Maybe some mascara? Something to make me look less washed out.

The phrase "rode hard and put up wet" came to mind as I rubbed pink rouge into my cheeks. I even patted some eyeshadow on my lids and finished with mascara and lipstick. I looked better. Good as it was going to get, I thought, as I tugged the belt tighter. I hadn't been eating enough since Rex left. When I sat down to a meal, my stomach knotted with

worry and grief, and I ended up putting it all back into the fridge.

This was what my life had become. A washed-out woman with five little boys and no skills to support us with.

Enjoy yourself tonight. Have a few beers. Whenever I'd gone out with Rex, he'd played pool and drunk whiskey all night, basically ignoring me until it was time to drive his drunk butt home.

How different tonight would be? I'd still be alone. Bonus? I wouldn't have to worry about him waking the kids when he stumbled into the house.

After a final look in the mirror, I went out to the kitchen. The boys were there with Annie and Iris making homemade pizzas. Each of them had a small piece of dough and were doing their best to flatten it. Only Caspian's looked round. The others were in shapes not usually seen in nature or otherwise.

"Thanks for having me, Aunt Stella," Annie said.

"You're welcome here any time, you know that." I smiled at her, always glad to have my best friend's girl at my home. She and Atticus shared one end of the table, making one large pizza instead of a solo like the rest of the kids.

Thad, perched at the edge of his booster seat, tried with all his might to make his piece of dough flatten. Caspian and Soren would have gotten frustrated at that age and tossed it all onto the floor. Not my Thad. He had the patience of a saint. If something didn't work, he just kept at it.

He looked up and grinned when he saw me standing there in the doorway. "Mama, we making pizza."

"I can see that." My heels clicked on the floor as I crossed over to my shabby kitchen table covered with flour and dough.

Normally, I scrubbed the surface clean as soon as a meal was over. My mother might be dead, but her voice still echoed through my mind.

Thad held his dough up in the air and started spinning it around until one part broke off. He giggled and picked it up again. At this rate he'd never have any dinner.

I turned my attention to Soren, who was in the process of punching his dough into submission. Like Atticus, Soren was stoic and serious in nature. However, unlike his oldest brother, who had started to talk at nine months, he rarely spoke. Just today, I'd noticed him listening and watching everything that went on around him, soaking it all in without totally participating. During the long winter months when it was too cold and snowy to play outside, he'd sit for hours on the window seat and just stare out at the landscape. Even if all the others left Montana and their old mom, Soren would stay. This land was as much a part of him as it was me. God help him.

I kissed the top of Soren's fair head. He and Caspian had light hair, whereas the rest of them were dark like me. Soren looked up at me with his big green eyes and his old soul. "Mama, you're fancy."

"I'm going out with Aunt Jennie and Uncle Mark. Remember?"

"I know," Soren said, returning to his dough. "That's why Iris is here."

"Me love Iris," Thad said, thumping his dough.

"I love you too, baby," Iris said, blowing him a kiss.

Thad pretended to catch her kiss in his chubby hand. My sweet boy.

Rafferty, my middle child, used a rolling pin on his dough and had his tongue between his teeth, concentrating on getting the shape exactly right. Clearly dissatisfied, he picked up a butter knife and cut his thin dough into a nearly perfect oval. *Like a surgeon.* At seven years old. He was a bit of a mystery to me, yet reminded me of myself in a lot of ways. Ambitious. I used to be anyway, before the kids.

I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Well done, sweetie.”

He glanced up at me, beaming. “Do you really think so? Is mine the best?”

Caspian, who had also managed to create the perfect shape and thickness of his dough without the use of a knife, smiled to himself, but didn’t comment. His was the best, and he knew it. I kept it to myself, never wanting to pit the boys against one another. My deepest wish was for them to grow up to be best friends.

“They all look good.” I kissed the top of Caspian’s head, taking in the scent of his freshly washed hair. They were all dressed in flannel pajamas, including Annie, who would sleep over tonight so her parents didn’t have to wake her. This house might be falling apart, but it was big enough for a few guests.

“We get to watch Nemo.” Thad squealed with delight. He’d seen that move a dozen times already but never got sick of it. Last Christmas I’d splurged and bought a DVD player. I never grew tired of the novelty of putting a small disc into a machine and getting a full movie. Although I still missed going to the drive-in. Jennie and I had a lot of good times there.

“What will you put on your pizza?” I asked Caspian, curious. He always had the most interesting ideas when it came to food.

“I wanted to put pickled onions with the pork sausage, but we don’t have any of those,” Caspian said. “Did you know you can make pickled onions? We don’t have to buy them with your plastic card.”

I looked over at Iris, who was cutting up lettuce for a salad. “We had a lengthy discussion about the process of pickling earlier.”

We exchanged a knowing smile. Caspian was different from his rough-and-tumble brothers. He loved to cook and bake. Last summer he’d become interested in growing herbs, and the two of us had planted several boxes on the back patio. All through the warm months, he’d dutifully watered them. Watching my little guy bent over herbs with his watering can made my eyes sting.

Rex and I had fought more about Caspian than any of the others. He’d ridiculed Caspian for his interests and called him names that had made me feel murderous. Even now, just thinking about his mockery of my special boy made me hot.

We were better off without him. Another reason I couldn’t argue with.

If I could just keep us together financially, we could live in peace going forward. Atticus’s idea had been playing around in my mind for weeks now. I planned to speak to Jennie and Mark about it tonight. If they thought it was a terrible idea, I would let it go. If not, maybe I would consider it. Maybe Jennie had an in at the bank and could get that nice boss of hers to consider giving me a loan. He’d want a business plan, though. I didn’t know if I was even capable of such a thing.

“Mama, our fresh herbs are in the sauce,” Caspian said in his sweet little boy voice. “Can you smell them?”

I sniffed the air, taking in the glorious scents of onions, tomatoes, olive oil, and oregano, thyme, and garlic. “I can. I could eat here with all of you.”

“No, Mama needs a night out,” Rafferty said. “Miss Iris said you work yourself to the bone.”

I chuckled and glanced back at Iris. “Direct quote?”

She tilted her head, smiling. “It’s true, you know. You need help around here.”

“I wish I could afford it, trust me.”

Iris tutted and held up her hands. I knew exactly what that meant without her saying the words. *Worthless, worthless Rex.*

At the end of the table, Atticus and Annie whispered to each other as they spread sauce over their dough. Those two practically had a secret language. What could we have expected? They’d grown up side by side, only four months apart in age.

“Annie and Atticus, help Miss Iris with the little ones,” I said.

They looked up in tandem as though one brain controlled them both and said at the same time, “Yes, ma’am.”

JASPER

A few minutes before seven, I walked into Blue Bonnet. The air smelled of beer and kitchen grease. I'd eaten here at least a half dozen times in the last six months. Their burgers and fries were surprisingly good. My mother would be appalled at how often I ate out. However, making a dinner for one always seemed like such a waste of time. Instead, I stacked the freezer with boxes of frozen meals. Not great tasting, but they did the trick.

Tonight, being Saturday, the joint was hopping. As much as anything in Bluefern could hop, that is.

I scanned the room, looking for Jennie and Mark, but didn't see them. Patsy, the owner, greeted me with a friendly smile. She was no taller than five feet, with a pudgy middle and warm eyes the color of woodsmoke. Smudges of barbecue sauce smeared the front of her green apron. She brought a handkerchief to her forehead and patted away the shine. "Goodness me, we're busy tonight. Jeff's having trouble keeping up with the orders, even though we hired Mercy's son to wash dishes."

I didn't know who Mercy was but nodded as if I did. "Busy is good, right?"

“You bet your sweet bottom it is.” She scanned the length of me. “Mr. Moon, you’re not wearing a suit.” She grinned. Infectious, that smile, with the gap between her two front teeth, and bright red lipstick.

“Is there something wrong with what I’m wearing?” I’d dressed in a button-down shirt and a pair of black jeans. They were comfortable but looked decent too. Or I’d thought so anyway.

“No, you look fine. I’ve just never seen you without your school clothes on.”

School clothes? I laughed. Normally I stopped in for a bite after work. “Jennie instructed me to go casual tonight. On the weekends, she’s the boss of me, apparently.”

“Is she fixing you up with Stella?” Patsy asked. At the back of the room, a group of men broke into laughter and then clinked their beer mugs. Another table with several couples got up to play a game of darts.

“This is not a setup. Jennie was very specific about that.”

“Such a pity. She could do worse. Than you, I mean.”

Was Jennie fixing us up, even though she’d denied it? An image of Stella at the diner tackling those pancakes floated across my mind. No, she wasn’t even divorced yet. Which meant she was off-limits. Plus, she had five kids and a ranch. Something casual would not be good for her, and I was pretty sure that’s all I was capable of at the moment. For one thing, the bank could ask me to open another branch at any time, and I would have to go.

Why did that thought leave me with a pang in my gut?

Patsy scowled. “You need to get yourself a pair of boots. What are those things on your feet?”

I looked down at my loafers, slightly hurt. “They’re Italian leather.”

She nodded and patted my arm. “They’re real nice.”

Patsy grabbed four of the plastic menus stacked neatly on the hostess lectern. “Follow me.”

Peanut shells crackled under my feet as we passed through the maze of red-and-white-checked plastic tablecloths.

I sat at the four-top and, without thinking it through, asked Patsy about Stella’s husband. “What’s he like?”

She pursed her lips and gave a rueful shake of her head. “A bad seed if there ever was one. Ruined Stella’s life, if you ask me. She was going to be a veterinarian. Broke her father’s heart too. I think that’s why he died so suddenly.”

“When was that?”

“When her first little boy was just a few years old. They had to move into the big house and the burden of that ranch fell on her.” She lowered her voice and leaned closer. “That SOB she brought here never lifted a hand to do much other than toss back a beer. She’s better off without him. Although, from what I hear, that ranch hasn’t made a profit in ten years. She may lose the whole thing, and then I don’t know what she’d do. Three generations of McKinnons have raised cattle on Crescent Moon Ranch.”

Lose the whole thing? I tried to imagine this woman living anywhere but here. Stuffed in some apartment in the city with five boys and a minimum wage job? My accounting background could barely stand the thought.

“You want a pitcher of beer?” Patsy asked.

“I’m not sure what they’ll want, so I’ll wait for them.”

“Real thoughtful of you,” Patsy said, approval creeping into her voice. “A lot of men just do whatever they wish without thinking of others. Not Mr. Anderson, mind you. He’s always treated me like a queen.”

“Good for you,” I said. “It’s nice to hear about a good marriage occasionally.”

“God’s blessed us, that’s all there is to it. Tell you what—I’ll order you a bucket of wings so they’re here when they arrive.”

Before I could stop her, she was off to greet another customer.

I looked through the menu, even though I knew it well already. Typical bar food: burgers, nachos, fries, and chicken wings. What could be better?

The television over the bar played a show about fly-fishing. It was on my list to do more of next spring. I had yet to try cross-country skiing or fly-fishing. A part of me wondered if I’d be around this time next year. Should I bother learning the ways of this wild country only to be yanked away? Mike had mentioned on the phone the other day that I was genius at starting new branches and if I wanted, he could send me to another one if an opportunity arose.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jennie, Mark, and Stella walk in and turned to wave them over to the table. Jennie lifted her hand in greeting. Behind her, Mark and Stella followed her. I stood to greet them, shaking Mark’s hand. Tall and muscular, Mark Armstrong was the type to look a person straight in the eyes. He did so now, peering at me with a kind, open expression that reminded me of his daughter. As did his copper-hued hair.

“You remember Stella,” Jennie said, shrugging out of her heavy winter jacket.

“Nice to see you again.” I held out my hand and for a mortifying second I thought she might ignore me. She stood as still as a statue and stared down at my hand. Finally, she blinked and raised her gaze to mine.

“Same.” Brown eyes stared up at me, warm but wary in her heart-shaped face. Her full mouth curved into a tentative smile, as though her lips were out of practice. Nice, full lips and straight teeth. A small, elegant nose. Okay, she was pretty. Very pretty. Not that I was looking at her that way.

We all settled at the table. Stella took the seat next to me. When she picked up her napkin to set in her lap, I noticed her hands were shaking. My chest ached in sympathy. Jennie had mentioned this was her first night out since her husband left. Having gone through a few breakups myself, I knew how hard it could be to go out instead of huddling under a blanket on the couch watching sad movies.

While racking my brain for ways to make her feel more comfortable, Jennie suggested we order a pitcher of beer and some hot wings.

“The wings are already ordered,” I said. “Patsy insisted.”

“That’s just like her,” Mark said, grinning, as he waved Patsy over. “God bless her.”

“Good evening.” Patsy placed a dry, reddened hand briefly on Stella’s shoulder. “Nice to see you. You’re looking lovely, as always.”

“Thanks,” Stella mumbled.

Soon, we had a pitcher of beer and a tub of hot wings in the middle of the table. Mark and I ordered burgers, and the

ladies asked for French onion soup and side salads. After Patsy left, Mark poured us all a beer. Jennie slid a few small plates across the table.

“Ladies first,” Mark said.

Jennie nodded and scooped a few onto her plate. Stella, however, simply stared at the bucket.

“Would you like some wings?” I asked Stella.

She met my eyes for a brief moment. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Too hot for you?” I asked. “My mom hates anything spicy.”

“No, it’s not that.” Stella looked down at her lap. “I just don’t like them much.”

“Stella, he’s not here any longer,” Mark said. “You can eat whatever you want.”

What did that mean? Was he talking about her husband? Had he controlled her eating? Why? She’d blow over in a good wind.

To my dismay, Stella started to sob. I froze. What should I do? I glanced over at Mark, who looked as surprised and unsure of what to do as I.

Jennie jumped up from her chair and pulled Stella up and toward the bathroom. “We’ll be right back,” she called over her shoulder.

I looked back at Mark. “Is she all right?”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, kind of. Whenever we were out, Rex never let her have wings because he said they were too messy and therefore unladylike.”

“*Let her?*” I asked.

“Yeah, I know. He was...awful. No one liked him much around here. And everyone loves Stella.”

“Why did she marry the guy?”

Mark’s gaze shifted around the room. He lowered his voice and leaned across the table. “She was crazy in love with him. No one could understand why. Lately, though, I could see she was over it. He’d managed to make her miserable enough that she stopped loving him. One time he had the nerve to complain to me that she cared about her boys more than she did him. Idiot man-child, if you ask me. Anyway, what could he expect? He had multiple affairs. Left her three times. I mean, who does that and expects to be adored? He should have been thankful she took such good care of his sons.”

“But he always came back? That’s weird.”

“Yeah, and she took him back. Also weird.” Mark put his hands up in the air. “Frankly, I don’t get it, but the guy has a mesmerizing effect on women. Even Jennie acted all flushed around him. We used to fight about it sometimes.”

I thought about that for a moment. Janice had been flirty with one of my friends like that. It had irritated me, just as I’m sure it had Mark.

“I’ve thought about it a lot over the years,” Mark said. “About Stella and Rex, and all I can say is that she didn’t exactly grow up in a loving household. I don’t know if she’s ever understood how she should be treated.”

“Sounds like my mom,” I said.

“Stella’s parents were rough on her—didn’t make it easy for her and Rex to make a go of things. Her dad died when she was pregnant with her second son and her mom had them move into the big house on the ranch. Since then, Stella’s been

running that place alone. They average about a hundred cows at a time, with only a few ranch hands to help. Rex didn't do much as far as I could tell. Stella's mom died last year, but when she was alive she wasn't what you'd call an emotional support. Super critical of Stella and the boys, even though they're good kids. But it's been a rough go of it the last eleven years. I feel for her. Stella's like family to me. I'd love to see her happy."

"The poor woman." The more I learned about Stella the more I came to admire her. She'd done a lot all on her own.

The ladies returned right around the same time the rest of our food arrived. As we ate, we chatted about this and that. The weather and some local gossip being the main topics of conversations. They all knew one another so well, yet they didn't make me feel like an outsider. If anything, peppered with questions, I felt like the center of attention. Had I found Bluefern to my liking? Did I miss California? How did I like my work at the bank? I answered as best I could, even sharing with them how lonely it had been since moving here. "I had a lot of friends back in California, and I miss my mom."

"What about your dad?" Jennie asked.

"He left my mother when she was pregnant with me. Mom raised me by herself from the very beginning. I never felt like anything was missing. She's the best. In fact, I'm trying to convince her to move here, but she's rejected the idea. So far. I'm not giving up."

"Maybe she doesn't want to cook and clean for a grown man." Stella's hand wrapped around her beer.

My stomach clenched. This was a bitter woman. Not that I could blame her. She hadn't had anyone to count on or come through for her. I'd be bitter too.

“I love to cook,” I said. “So she wouldn’t have to worry about that. In fact, it would be nice to have someone to cook for. It gets lonely at a table for one. My hesitation is about my work. The bank could send me to open a new branch at any point.”

“Really?” Jennie asked. “You never said that before.”

“I’d be sure to recommend you take the manager role,” I said. “Should it come to that.”

“I’m flattered,” Jennie said, beaming. “That means so much. You have no idea.”

“What about cleaning?” Stella asked, lifting her gaze to look me directly in the eye before taking a swig of beer. “Do you like to clean? Laundry? Yard work?”

Her accusatory look directed my way was enough to freeze a man from the inside out. “I’m lucky enough to be able to afford a cleaning lady every few weeks, so there’s not much of that to do.” I returned to dipping my fries into ketchup but slid a sideways glance her way.

Stella grimaced before stabbing a piece of cucumber from her salad with a fork. “That *is* lucky.”

We ate in awkward silence for a moment. The food suddenly tasted like sand. Maybe a night out with Stella present wasn’t the best idea Jennie had ever had?

“What about the weather? Would she be able to deal with the cold in the winter?” Stella asked me in a more polite tone than before. Maybe she felt bad about her rude questions. Whatever it was, I’d take it, just to get past the cringeworthy silence.

“That keeps a lot of people from moving here,” Stella added.

“I’m not sure how she’d do,” I said, truthfully. “The Bay Area can be cloudy, but it’s temperate. I put extra insulation in my walls, though. As a selling point.”

“You should see what he did to that old place,” Jennie said, reaching for one of her husband’s fries. “The kitchen’s out of this world.”

“I thought that house was haunted,” Stella said.

“Stella, that’s not true,” Jennie said before looking at me. “It was just a rumor when we were kids. No one ever saw anything weird.”

“There *was* a murder there. Everyone knows that.” Stella stabbed another cucumber.

All right. Stella did not like me. I don’t know what I’d done to offend her but whatever it was, I was sorry.

“Must be why I got such a deal on it,” I said lightly. I’d already learned about the murder from the real estate agent. They were legally bound to tell potential buyers if anything illegal had taken place.

“Did you get a good deal?” Stella asked me.

“You can look it up,” I said, offended. “Public information.”

Stella waved a fork at me. “What kind of money do bank managers make anyway?”

Taken aback, I glanced over at Jennie. She tucked one side of her hair behind her ears and sent me an apologetic smile.

“Truthfully, not a ton,” I said. “I’ve made it up by buying and renovating houses. Back in the Bay Area, that is. I haven’t done that since I got here. Too busy with my own house.”

“Why do you work at a bank?” Stella asked. “I mean, it’s not like you’re making the world a better place. Wouldn’t construction pay more and give you more satisfaction?”

I ground my teeth together before answering. It took everything I had to speak calmly. “Listen, I don’t know what I did to make you mad, but I mean no harm.” I picked up my beer. “I was looking forward to meeting some new people but maybe my instincts were right. I should have stayed home with my cat.”

Before anyone could say anything further, the band, who had been setting up in a corner of the tavern, started to play a cover of an Alan Jackson tune. Couples immediately flooded the small dance floor.

“Let’s dance,” Jennie said to her husband. As they rose from the table, she leaned over to whisper something in Stella’s ear.

“Apparently, I’ve been rude, and I’m sorry.” Stella scooted closer to me. I caught the scent of her citrusy perfume and a hint of strawberry that might have been coming from her hair. “I’m acting awful. It’s just that—crying in front of people makes me mad. Mostly at myself, but I take it out on those around me.”

“Don’t give it another thought.” I couldn’t wait to get out of here and go home to Penny.

“No, really, I’m sorry. It’s no excuse, but my life’s in shambles. I’m a mess.”

“Maybe you should cry more often,” I suggested. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’ve been through a lot.”

“How do you know what I’ve been through?” she snapped, before placing both hands on the table. “Never mind. I know

the answer to that question. This here is a small town. And my friends have big mouths.”

“They care about you, that’s all.”

She pushed her plate away. Her soup had gone mostly untouched. “I know they do.”

“Did you not like your food? I could order you something else. Or do you want some of my fries?”

“This isn’t a date,” she said softly.

“Does that mean you can’t eat my fries?”

She lifted her gaze, her eyes so sad it was enough to wipe away her lack of social skills from my memory. “I think so.”

“I didn’t know that rule. I’ll have to write it down so I don’t forget.” I sipped my beer. “I haven’t had a date in a long time.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, moving here for one. There’s not a lot of unmarried women to choose from. But before that, when I was still back in the Bay Area, I had a girlfriend. Long-term girlfriend. She dumped me for a friend of mine.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, it hurt. A lot. I decided to take some time off from relationships after that.” Ironically, it had not been the friend she always flirted with that she’d left me for.

“Are you over her?” Stella asked.

“It’s been two years. So yeah.”

“Is that one of the reasons you moved here?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” I said.

“Sorry.” She returned to nursing her beer.

“It’s not as simple as all that, but let’s just say when my boss offered me the position here, I didn’t hesitate. Fresh start. No chance I’d run into my ex or my former friend.” I took another drink of my beer. “This is embarrassing, but I changed my mobile number when I came here. As if she were going to call me.”

“She might have. Rex used to leave and come back months later, all ‘sorry and could we try again?’”

“No, she married Drew.” I was surprised to find I could say his name without the stabbing pain it used to evoke. “Janice. That was her name. Janice married Drew.” *Good*, I thought. I’d said both of their names together, and I didn’t die. At one time, it had felt as if I might. “It’s good to have finality, you know? So in that way, I’m glad they married. No chance for reconciliation if they’re married.”

“You wouldn’t really go back to someone who chose your friend over you, would you?” Stella asked.

“I can say categorically that I would not. But when it first happened, I’m not sure I could have resisted. Had she come back to me, begging for another chance, I would probably have given in, even though it would not have been in my best interest.”

“That’s what I did. Three times in total. Not as many times as we have number of kids.” Her mouth twitched as if she might smile, but in the end, she didn’t.

“How do you know he won’t come back this time?”

“Because Monday morning I’m filing for divorce. This time I’m done.” She blinked. “You know, I hadn’t decided that until just the moment I said it.”

I lifted my glass. “To closure then.”

She clinked my glass. “To closure.”

This time she did smile. *Absolutely gorgeous*. What a pity life had made her as bitter as the IPA I was drinking. There might be a chance for her, though. She just needed some time. Someday, she’d be ready to open herself up to love.

The band started another song. An Emmylou Harris cover. “My mother loves this song.”

“Do you want to dance?” Stella asked.

I looked up from studying my beer. “Um, sure. I’m not the greatest dancer that ever lived.”

“It’s all right. I haven’t danced much in the last eleven years.”

I stood and offered her a hand, helping her to her feet. We walked together to the closest corner of the dance floor, and I placed one arm loosely around her waist and took her hand with the other. She was stiff in my arms, posture ramrod straight and staying at least a foot away from me. Not that I minded. A man should always respect a woman’s boundaries, plus she was hurting.

When the song was over, she grabbed my hand and started walking toward the front door. “I need some fresh air.”

“It’s kind of cold out there.”

“I don’t care. Buy me a beer. We’ll sit in your truck.”

“Is that allowed?”

She took a good, hard look at me. “You’re a rule follower?”

“For the most part, yeah. I mean, I’m a banker. Compliance is sort of our thing.”

She nodded, laughing softly. “I’m asking you to buy me a beer and go sit in your truck. Can you do that?”

“I guess I can.” This was turning into a very strange evening. But who was I to disappoint a beautiful woman? Even if she did scare me.

STELLA

The lone beer must have gone to my head, or I never would have invited Jasper Moon to come outside. To sit in his truck. What had gotten into me tonight?

I had to admit, it was a nice truck. Smelled of leather and his cologne, which was not hard on the nose. He wasn't hard on the eyes, either.

Which is why I disliked him immensely.

Which is why I *tried* to dislike him immensely. Total, epic fail. He was ridiculously likable.

Which would explain why I was now in his truck with a bottle of beer in my hand, the stars above us twinkling through the front window. But I never promised anyone, including myself, that I would always be perfectly logical.

Fine, there was the other thing. Being in his arms had thrown me into a near, dizzying, mistake-making attack of desire. Every inch of me had come alive. I'd imagined leaning closer, placing my mouth against his and kissing him until he hauled me to his house and had his way with me.

I wouldn't have done it. I couldn't. Not with the boys to think of. I didn't have the luxury to fall apart and sleep with a bunch of inappropriate men.

I'd thought it would be strange to dance with a man who wasn't my husband; however, it had felt just fine. Better than fine. For all intents and purposes, I'd still been a kid when I fell for Rex. Now I was an adult. Letting Mr. Sweetheart Handsome into my bed could be catastrophic.

But his arms? They'd felt so strong and sure. Like nothing could happen to me if I was within his embrace. With Rex, it had always felt dangerous. Even at the end when we hardly touched, there had been a hint of something forbidden. Was that what I wanted? To rebel against expectations and my parents? God, if that was true, I really needed to get to therapy.

"You okay?" Jasper asked, turning slightly to get a better look at me.

He'd been surprisingly strong, given his job. However, after learning about the renovation of his house, it made more sense as to why those shoulders were as wide as one of our hundred-year-old trees. That and flipping houses, which must be why he could afford this brand-new truck.

"What year is your truck?" I tapped the dashboard, hoping to distract myself.

"A year old, give or take. I bought it before I came out here."

I turned all the way on the seat to face him. Even in the scant light cast by the neon glow of the tavern, I could make out his fine features. Strong jaw and sleepy bedroom eyes. Cheekbones to die for. All well and good except it made him extremely attractive. I'd fallen for a man with good looks and no substance before, and it had ruined my life.

But that wasn't the deal with this guy. I knew it deep in my bones. This was an "I love my mama and promote my

employees and remodel houses and bake pies” kind of man.

Not that it mattered. Who would want a woman with five kids and a ranch that barely broke even? Not this good-looking, all put together, grown-up person.

“What did you drive back in the city?” I asked.

“I drove a truck there too. Because of the construction I did on the side.”

“Why didn’t it come to Montana?” Why I was asking about trucks, I couldn’t say.

“She broke down on me just before I moved. I’d had her ten years, and she’d served me well. I’m the type who’ll hang on to something even when it doesn’t work as well as it should.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You talking about your ex?” Jasper asked before taking a pull from his beer, watching me with eyes that glittered in the light. For heaven’s sake, he was sexy.

“I guess so.”

“How come you don’t like me?”

“I like you fine.” I shrugged one shoulder.

“Doesn’t seem like it. Most people do, though. It’s kind of my thing.”

I fiddled with the zipper on my boot, avoiding his gaze. “You seem pretty great. It’s more...your face.”

“My face?”

“Yeah, it’s too nice. Too good-looking. And you’re charming and polite. I bet you can talk a woman out of her jeans like nobody’s business.”

“Good thing you’re wearing a dress then.” He chuckled and swiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Funny.”

“I wish what you said was true. However, that’s not really my speed. I’m more of a slow and steady kind of guy.”

“Why aren’t you married then?”

“Like I said, I had a long-term girlfriend. I thought we’d get married. In fact, I was ready to ask her when I let myself into her apartment and found her naked on the couch with my buddy.”

The idea of it made my stomach queasy. “I’m sorry. That must have hurt.”

“Gut-wrenching.”

“I’m sure Rex has someone this time. Someone serious.”

“Why do you think so?” Jasper asked softly.

“I don’t know. Just a feeling I have. When you’ve lived with someone as long as I lived with Rex, you start to pick up on things, you know? He’d slimmed down, for one. No one does that unless they’ve got a piece on the side. I mean, no one like Rex does that. He loved his beer and his chips. Suddenly, he was asking me if we had any broccoli. That should have been my first sign.” I giggled. Halfway through this second beer and suddenly I was feeling wild and free. “Sorry. I’m a little drunk.”

“You barely ate any dinner. Never a good idea when drinking. Or anytime, really.”

I took another swig of my beer and watched him for a moment. Jasper Moon was comfortable in his own skin. Didn’t

have pretenses or guile. Not like Rex. Rex was all about the show. Until you got him home and the real man came out.

“I bet you wonder why I have so many kids,” I said.

“Not really.”

“Why not? Five is a tremendous number. All boys too.”

“I don’t suppose you can just order what you want, right? I don’t know much about kids, but I seem to recall that from health class.”

I laughed. “No, you have to take what you can get. My boys are the best thing in my life. All five of them are sweet, even though they’re so different from one another.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

I gaped at him and then surprised myself by flicking his hard shoulder. “Of course not. Why would you even ask such a thing?”

“My best friend growing up was from a big family, and he said his mother had favorites. He was not one of them.”

“Well, I love them all the same. Some of them are easier to raise than the others, but that doesn’t change how I feel about them.”

“They’re lucky to have you. I had a great mom, too, and it means the world. Whether you turn out good or bad—so much of it’s about how your mama raised you.”

“I guess.”

“What do you say that?” Jasper asked.

“My mama was not like me. Never showed me any affection or warmth. When I had Atticus, I swore to myself I’d make sure he knew I loved him every second of his life.”

“He’ll do just fine then,” Jasper said. “They all will.”

“Thanks.” Embarrassed, I took another slug of beer.

“Okay, I am a little curious, since you asked, why *do* you have so many kids?” Jasper asked.

“You mean because I was married to a man who had one foot out the door?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “And from everything I can gather, you were way, way too good for him.”

I glanced out the front window. A half-moon hung low tonight. “I’ve thought about that a lot actually. The answer is I don’t know. I just kept getting pregnant, and I kept not minding. I guess I was made for one thing and that was to be those boys’ mother. It’s the only thing I’m good at.”

“I doubt that,” he said.

“I used to be good at things. I used to be full of life and so smart. I thought I’d be a vet by now, making my dad proud.”

“He’d be proud of you whether you’re a vet or not.”

“I thought I’d have a life somewhere else. Somewhere with more than one tavern. Anyway, I’m all dried up and old. So it’s too late for me.”

“You’re not old. Or dried up.”

I pointed my beer bottle at him. “Don’t you lie to me. I know you see nothing but a tumbleweed when you look at me. All prickles and thorns.”

“I’ll have to respectfully disagree.” He set his beer bottle between his legs and placed both hands on his steering wheel, looking up at the stars. “It won’t matter what I say, though. Whatever you feel like inside is all that matters. I could tell

you how pretty you are until I'm blue in the face. It's you who has to believe it."

"What does that mean?" I asked, suddenly hot.

He spoke slowly, as if he didn't want to further anger me. "It means you're gorgeous. Drop-dead. Obviously smart and tough and a great mother. But my opinion doesn't matter. You're the one who has to look in the mirror and see your own worth."

I sighed, letting go of my irritation. Anyway, he was right. "I'm a few years from wearing nasty old sweatpants around town and forgetting to brush my hair."

"That would be a real pity. You have a lot more to offer the world. Your next chapter's going to be epic."

For a second, I let myself believe him. An epic next chapter? Yes, please.

"When I was a girl, I was sure I was going to have this big life. I wanted to be a veterinarian and come back a hero ready to save horses and cattle with my magic touch. Instead of leaving and returning on my own terms, I never left. I'll tell you one thing, though. This land of my father's is more important to me than I ever thought it would be. I hope I can hang on to it. I want the boys to have a choice. Stay or go or come back. It'll always be here, waiting for them."

"I've never felt like that before, but I hope to someday have a place to call home," Jasper said. "A house and piece of land that feels just right. Something and someone worth fighting for."

We were quiet for a moment, sipping our beers.

"You know," he said, breaking the easy silence between us. "Being a good mother is more important than anything you'll

ever do. Take it from me. My mother's the best, and look how great I turned out."

"Still to be determined," I said, smiling.

"I'm sure you're fun in addition to being quick-witted. You know, way down deep."

"I'm totally fun," I said flatly, then laughed

"I'll take your word for it."

I tipped back my bottle, emptying the last of the beer into my mouth, before answering. "I used to be sweet. Compliant. People-pleasing. You should have seen me back in the day. Not a sharp edge anywhere."

"Sorry I missed those days."

I laughed. "I guess I am too."

"You want me to take you home?" Jasper asked.

I glanced at my watch. It wasn't even eight o'clock. My little boys would just be getting ready for bed. If I went home now, I'd break up the routine. Plus, I wasn't ready to go home. At the same time, I had no interest in going back into the bar.

"I'm not ready to go home."

"What would you like to do?" Jasper asked. "I'll take you wherever you want to go. Or we can stay here, just like this."

"You have beer at home?"

"My house? Sure." He ran a hand through his hair. "You want to come to my house?"

"Just to see this remodel Jennie won't shut up about. Then you can take me home."

"Your wish is my command."

For the third time in less than a half hour, I laughed. When had that last happened?

STELLA

“You’re doing what?” Jennie asked from the bathroom stall next to me.

“I want to see what he did to the house.”

“Okay,” Jennie said, elongating the vowels.

“Don’t okay me. It’s not what you think. I’m not even divorced yet.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

I stood and pulled my wool stockings back up and smoothed the front of my dress. “You’re pretty sure he’s not a serial killer, right?”

“Can one ever be entirely sure?” Jennie asked, before her toilet flushed.

I stepped out of the stall to wash my hands. Jennie had beaten me there and was scrubbing her hands like a doctor before a surgery. She’d always been worried about germs. When we were kids, her hands used to get red and chapped.

“I’m not weird about germs,” Jennie said, reading my mind.

“I didn’t say a word,” I said, echoing her previous statement.

Jennie dried her hands with a paper towel, then grabbed another. “Give him a chance. He’s a really nice guy. Although you know what they say about rebound guys.”

“I don’t know.”

“Everyone knows a rebound guy will never be the one.”

“I’m not looking for a guy. Anyway, who is going to want a woman with five unruly boys?”

“They’re not unruly. Colorful maybe, but not naughty.”

“You haven’t seen them at bedtime,” I said.

She placed her hands on my wrists and looked me in the eye. “You deserve the best there is in this life, Stella McKinnon. It’s time you start taking what’s yours.”

I had no idea what that meant, but I nodded and smiled to appease her. “Sure. No problem.”

“Don’t forget how much I love you,” Jennie said. “Whatever happens.”

Why did it feel as though she was saying much more than the words suggested? She turned to leave, but I grabbed her hand and pulled her around to face me. “Hey, are we all right? It felt weird between us yesterday.”

“Of course we’re fine.” She wasn’t meeting my gaze though. Something was off.

We walked out of the bathroom together but parted ways so she could rejoin Mark at the table as I headed out the front door. Jasper, as promised, was waiting with the truck running. I hoisted myself up and into the passenger seat, enjoying the leather smell once again. “Oh, that heat feels good.” I placed my hands over the heating vents for a moment.

“This weather’s no joke.” Jasper backed up his truck and then pulled out to the main drag of town, mostly dark this time of night. The grocery store stayed open until nine. When we drove by, I saw a lone checker flipping through a magazine, probably counting the minutes until she could go home.

A layer of frost sparkled in the headlights as we headed down the highway in the direction of my ranch. About a mile before we would have reached my place, Jasper took a left into his dirt driveway. A light over his front door beckoned to us. A shape of a cat in the window drew my attention. “You have a cat?”

“Yeah, that’s Penny. The love of my life.” Jasper parked in his garage, ten or so feet from his house. I couldn’t be certain, given the darkness, but it seemed that he’d made a lot of improvements to the house’s exterior as well as the yard. The last time I’d seen the old place it had been abandoned and home for rats and mice.

“Did you know my family used to own these acres?” I asked as I followed him into his kitchen. A light flickered on, revealing a large kitchen with a massive wood-block island. A farmhouse sink, deep and wide, was positioned near a window. I couldn’t see this time of night, but my house was just over the hill.

“Yeah, the agent told me the history of it. Including the death you so politely pointed out to me earlier.”

I flushed, embarrassed. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m only teasing you.”

“You can almost see my house from here.” I gestured toward the kitchen window.

He unzipped his jacket and hung it on a peg in his mudroom. He wandered over to stand beside me, while rolling up his shirtsleeves. I stepped a few inches to my right, so we could both stand at the sink.

“Do you see anything out there?” Jasper asked. “Or just darkness?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You have to promise not to tease me if I tell you.”

I mimed a zipping motion across my mouth.

“Sometimes I get a little creeped out living by myself. I check the locks like three times before I go to bed.”

“But you’ve got Penny here to protect you,” I said. “She won’t let a bad guy get you.”

He placed both hands on the rim of the sink and nudged my shoulder with his. “I hope you’re right. And thanks for not making fun of me.”

Darned if he didn’t smell delicious—a mixture of shaving cream and spice. I was too aware of him. Almost delirious. Good Lord, his hands were gorgeous. Those long, sensitive fingers. The palms and pads of his hand were probably calloused from all his hard work. They would feel good on my skin. I just knew they would.

I blinked and took in a steadying breath.

This was not good. Not good at all.

I hadn’t thought it possible to ever find another man besides my husband attractive. Even when I suspected Rex of cheating, I never felt the need to look outside of my marriage. If only he had felt the same way.

For the thousandth time, I wondered where he was and what he was doing. *Who* he was doing, for that matter. Was he in love?

Never mind that. Do not let him ruin yet another one of your evenings, I told myself. Here I was with a nice man and instead of enjoying his company, I was thinking about the one who hurt me. The mind can be so fickle and untamed. Especially mine.

“You all right?” Jasper asked, turning his head to look at me. “Is it weird to be here?”

“No, not at all.” *Yes, totally and completely.* “Your kitchen’s beautiful.” Spotless too. Maybe we had tidiness in common?

Who cares if you do? He’s a friend. That’s all.

“You want a beer? Or, I could open wine?” Jasper asked.

“A beer’s good.”

He reached into the refrigerator and pulled two longnecks from the door. After popping their tops on an opener hung on the side of the cabinet, he handed one to me.

A loud meow and a thump came from the other room, followed by the pitter-patter of paws across the floor. An orange tabby cat appeared, lunging for Jasper’s foot as if it were a piece of halibut. She battled the tassels on his loafers before plopping onto her back to show us her white tummy.

Jasper knelt to pet her. “This is my very spoiled cat, Penny. She doesn’t like it when I’m away and usually punishes me for a good ten minutes. However, she’s showing off for you. She’s really proud of that tummy of hers.”

As if she understood, Penny stretched her paws over her head while staring at me with suspicious green eyes.

“Can I pet her too, or will she scratch my eyes out?” I asked.

“Let her get used to you first. She can be a real jerk.”

“She’s a cat.”

“Do you want me to hang up your jacket?” Jasper asked. “I kept the heat on while I was out. Otherwise, my California blood can’t take it.”

“Yes, please.” I slipped it off my shoulders, and Jasper took it from me and hung it next to his. Why did it look so good? His jacket was dark blue and mine red. A perfect match.

What in the world was wrong with me? Was I really this starved for physical contact?

Without my outer layer, the cold crept up my skirt. I hugged myself for warmth as Jasper turned on a few more lights. He’d really transformed an old farmhouse into a modern, sophisticated version. Everything felt open and airy, with sage and beige colors on the walls and furniture.

“It’s incredible what you’ve done here,” I said. “You really know your stuff.”

“I enjoy the process. It’s kind of a creative outlet for me. I don’t love living in the mess, but it’s worth it to transform something with my hands. When I was a kid, I wanted to be an artist.” He stopped, peering at me. “You’re cold.”

“A little.”

He adjusted the thermostat on the wall near the door. “I’ll put on the fire in the living room too. Let’s go hang out in there.”

“Should I take my boots off?” I asked.

“Sure. Why not?” He kicked off his loafers while I unzipped my riding boots. “I’m going to use the restroom. Make yourself comfortable in the other room. I’ll be right there.”

I did as he asked, wandering into the living room, perusing the rows of books in the built-in shelves, as well as several decorative vases and bowls. I chose to sit in a soft, oversize chair next to the fireplace. He had kindling and a newspaper set to light. For some reason, it touched me to think of him coming home to this house alone and sitting by the fire with Penny on his lap.

An artist? That tidbit of information had surprised me. What kind of man loves art, works in a bank, and remodels houses? A unique one, I guessed.

Seconds later, Jasper appeared and knelt to light the fire. “Should be going in a second.” He straightened and reached for a red-and-black-plaid throw blanket. “Here, drape this over your legs.”

“Thanks.” I curled my legs under me and spread the blanket across my lower half.

Jasper sank onto the couch, gazing at the fire. Penny jumped up and plopped into his lap.

What was I doing here? Sitting with a man I barely knew. Wrapped up in his blanket that I was dying to sniff to see if I could inhale his scent. I’d gotten in his truck and come to his home. Divorces must make a person unbalanced.

“You were lying earlier, weren’t you? It *is* weird to be here.” Jasper set his bottle of beer on the coffee table between us.

I nodded. “Yeah, how could you tell?”

“You got quiet.”

“I’m not very experienced in this,” I said.

“Hey now, there’s no pressure. I get that you’re not ready for anything, and although I’ve enjoyed your company, I have zero expectations.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I’d love if you’d consider me a friend. Someone you can call if something needs fixing, for example. Like I said earlier, I’m hoping to find some new friends. This past year’s been lonely.”

“That’s really nice of you to offer.” Tears prickled the backs of my eyes, but I pushed them aside. I’d had enough crying for one night. This was a nice man, though. How often in my life had I met someone who seemed so selfless and kind? If I was reading him right, his mother had done a good job raising him.

“What happened to your dad?” I asked. “As in, do you know where he is?”

He turned his head slowly to gaze at me. “No, I never knew him. I’ve never even seen a photo of him. My mom doesn’t talk about him much, other than to say he split when he heard I was coming.”

“Do you ever feel like you missed out on something—not having a father?”

“Are you thinking about your boys? Is that why you want to know?” Jasper continued to look at me.

“Boys need their dads, don’t they?”

“That’s what they say, but in my experience, it matters more if a kid has a mother or at least a mother figure. Your boys are going to be fine. You take care of yourself. Show them what a fulfilled mama looks like. That’ll give them permission to live their lives without worrying about you.”

I stared at him for a moment. “That’s really good advice.”

“Not that I know anything about raising kids,” he said. “But just from the perspective of the son of a single mother, you’re going to get through this, and so will your boys. If you ask me, it’s better they see you caring and working for their well-being rather than a man who wishes he were somewhere else.”

“Would you like to come over for Sunday dinner?” Who knew where that question come from? My mouth seemed to have a mind of its own this evening.

“Sure. I can bring a pie. You make a list if there’s anything you need done around the house too.”

“Apple?” I asked.

“You got it. I need practice anyway if I’m going to enter the contest.”

“Your pie’s going to have to be really good if you’re going to beat Renee. No offense, but she’s an expert.”

“So I hear.” He tipped back his beer, eyes twinkling at me.

“Cocky will get you nowhere.”

“You can let me know on Sunday if you think I have a chance.”

“I’d be happy to be a taste tester and offer my opinion,” I said, grinning.

For the next hour, we chatted about his work, the history of my family's ranch, the boys. Before I knew it, the hour was way past my bedtime. "This was nice," I said. "Thank you but I should get home."

"I enjoyed it a lot. I hope we can do it again." The vulnerability in his eyes touched a part of me I'd thought was long since dead. My heart.

As he drove me home, the stars and moon bright in the sky, I thought about what I'd learned about him.

He'd been raised by a single mom on a limited income and earned a scholarship to college where he chose to study accounting because it was safe and reliable. "Kind of like me," he'd added, with a chuckle.

He was prepared to support his mom, should the time come. His passion was remodeling homes, gardening, and making pies. He wanted to learn how to can vegetables and make jam but was afraid of a pressure cooker. He loved old movies and that snobby cat of his. His mother was one of his best friends, as well as his buddy named Joe, whom he'd grown up with. Joe was a lawyer tied to his desk, according to Jasper, but made a lot of money. Jasper's favorite color was green, which explained the decor in his house. He tried to eat healthy, but his weaknesses were French fries and after tonight, chicken wings.

We arrived at my place a little before ten. I stifled a yawn, unaccustomed to staying up much past the kids. Mornings came early on the ranch. The little boys were up at five-thirty, which meant so was I. By six I was out feeding the horses and talking with our ranch hand, Randy, about the plan for the day.

"May I escort you to the door?" Jasper said.

I didn't argue, even though it was perfectly safe for me to walk across my own driveway. However, I was glad for the company when my porch light flickered and then turned off completely. "That darn thing. It just does that willy-nilly."

"I'll take a look for you tomorrow," he said. "I could put some sensor lights around the yard, too. That way they'll automatically come on when it's dark."

"Thanks. I mean, if you want to help, who am I to say no?"

"Good, then we understand each other perfectly." Although he was mostly hidden in the dark, I could sense his smile. "What time tomorrow?"

"Five?"

"Great. I'll be there," he said.

I opened the door and let myself in, waving before closing the door. The house was quiet, but a dim light from the living room told me Iris was still awake, probably reading. I caught a scent of popped corn from earlier. I'm sure I'd find a few kernels between my couch cushions.

Annie would be asleep on the foldout couch in the den. She slept over so often I kept it made up. Jennie or Mark would pick her up in the morning, probably after breakfast. Maybe a slow morning would be good for them. They obviously needed to talk, given how strange Jennie had acted earlier. It was probably just the normal strains of marriage. Relationships were hard, no matter who you were.

The living room was spotless. No toys or clothes strewn about, the rug void of popcorn. As expected, Iris was tucked away in one of the chairs reading. She looked up at me, then set aside her book and rubbed her eyes. "Did you have a good time?"

“It was weird. But yes, I did. A really good time. How were the boys?”

“They were good,” Iris said. “As they always are. We played a highly competitive game of Pictionary before the movie. Annie and Atticus were partners, and of course they won. Those two can read each other’s minds. Rafferty hates losing, as you know, but he hid it well tonight.”

“That’s progress.” I perched on the edge of the couch. “If he’s like this at seven, think what he will be like when he’s grown.”

“I just hope he doesn’t become one of those sleazy attorneys,” Iris said.

“They’re not all sleazy.”

“Who dropped you off?” Iris asked. “Because that was not Mark’s SUV.”

“Jennie invited the new bank manager to dinner with us.”

“Oh, she did? Interesting.”

“It was not a setup. She told me he was lonely and needed some friends. You know Jennie—she can’t stand the thought of anyone eating alone on a weekend night. We ended up talking in his truck for a while and then going to his house for another beer and more talking. He’s a nice guy. Good conversationalist. And knows I’m only looking for friendship, not romance.”

“If you say so.” Iris innocently picked a piece of lint off her jeans. “Do you have plans to see him again?”

“I invited him over for Sunday dinner tomorrow. He’s bringing pie.”

“Pie? Well, that’s unusual. Homemade?”

“Apparently.”

Iris didn't comment further, only gathered up her purse and jacket. “I'll see you at church in the morning, sweetheart.”

At the door, I gave her a quick hug and thanked her. “I'm grateful for your help. Always.”

“You're my family,” she said. “You know that.”

I watched from the window as she drove down my driveway toward the road, her taillights eventually disappearing into the darkness.

What an unexpected night it had been. Despite my earlier horrendous behavior, I might have made a new friend. What could be wrong with that?

If only he didn't smell so good.

JASPER

Sunday flew by. I have to admit, I thought about my new friend Stella more than a few times. I'd enjoyed my evening with her. She was great company and a spitfire, which I was naturally drawn to. However, there was more to it than that.

She seemed familiar to me in a way I'd not experienced before, as if we'd known each other longer than the few hours we'd spent together.

Thus, I was excited to join her for dinner. I'd spent a portion of my afternoon making an apple pie and then had the idea that homemade ice cream could be fun for the boys, so headed into town to the hardware store. Luckily, they had one ice cream maker in stock, and I snatched it up. At the grocery store, I picked up some salt, ice, vanilla, and cream.

By the time I loaded everything into my truck, I'd started to worry that it would be unwelcome. Stella might be the type of woman who didn't allow her kids to have ice cream. Back home in California, my friends with children had a lot of rules around food.

Soon I turned into the driveway of Crescent Moon Ranch. A sign hung between two posts with the name carved into a crude wooden board. Cottonwoods with golden leaves lined

either side. Yellow grasses swayed gently in the chill breeze. When I pulled up to the ranch house, thin autumn light had nearly faded. The house itself was a gem, although it looked as though it needed a new paint job, and the front porch bordered on dangerous.

The minute I stepped out of my truck, two boys rounded the corner of the house. I glanced at them quickly. Which were they? I'd called Jennie earlier to get all their names straight and had them memorized, as well as birth order and ages. Atticus was eleven, Caspian nine, Rafferty seven, Soren five, and Thad three.

None of it did me any good. I had no idea what age they were.

They stopped about six feet away and stared at me. I called out hello as I reached into the back of the truck to get my ice cream supplies.

"Are you Mr. Moon?" The younger of the two had brown hair and dark blue eyes. Thick lashes blinked up at me.

"I am. And you are?"

"Rafferty." He stuck out his small hand. Stifling a smile at the sight of this serious seven-year-old, I shook with him.

"I'm Caspian." Taller than his brother by a few inches, his eyes were a lighter shade of blue. Hair the color of harvested wheat curled at the base of his neck. "Do you really make pies?"

"Sure."

"We never heard of a boy making pies before," Rafferty said.

“Our dad says cooking’s for sissies.” Caspian looked up at me with a mournful, shamed look in his eyes.

I silently cursed this poor excuse for a man.

“Did you know that most chefs in fancy restaurants are men?” I asked.

“Really?” Caspian asked.

“Sure. It’s hard for a woman to make it as a head chef,” I said. “Which is wrong, but the truth. There are all kinds of cooks, both in their own kitchens and at restaurants. Anyone who loves to cook should do it. Like me, for example.”

“I love to cook,” Caspian said. “My dad doesn’t like me to, though.”

“He left us,” Rafferty said in his serious tone. “Mama says he won’t be back for a long time.”

“If he ever comes home at all,” Caspian said. “She didn’t tell us that, but we heard her say it to Iris.”

“Then I guess we don’t have to worry about what he thinks.” I had no idea if this was appropriate to say, but it had all just slipped from my mouth. To change the subject, I brought up ice cream. “I brought an ice cream maker. We can make some vanilla ice cream to go with our apple pie.”

“An ice cream maker?” Caspian grinned and tugged on his brother’s arm, almost toppling them both over onto the gravel driveway. “We’ve wanted one of those forever.”

“Do you know how to use it?” Rafferty asked, stuffing his hands into his jacket.

“It has instructions,” I said. “I stopped in at the store and got all the ingredients.”

“Can I help?” Caspian asked.

“I’ll be the taster, if you need one,” Rafferty said.

“Anyone who wants to help is welcome.” I pulled the bag of groceries from the back of my truck and was about to ask if one of them wanted to carry the salt when Stella appeared on the porch, dressed in loose jeans and a black sweater.

She called out hello and headed in our direction.

“He brought an ice cream maker,” Caspian said, high-pitched.

“Is that all right?” I asked, inwardly cringing. I’d hate to start out on the wrong side of her today. Last night had taken some work and patience to win her over even slightly. However, it had been worth it to see the real woman emerge from under her sadness and disappointment.

A shy smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “I’d have to be a fool to say no. There’s nothing better than apple pie with ice cream. Thanks for...going to the trouble.” She wrapped her arms around her waist, clearly cold.

“Come on, boys,” I said. “Let’s get your mother inside. It’s freezing out here.”

I grabbed my bags of supplies, including the rock salt, while Stella took hold of the box with the ice cream maker. Rafferty insisted on lugging the bag of ice into the house, informing me in no uncertain terms that he was very strong.

Crossing the driveway, I took a better look at the house. Painted white, with a wraparound porch and dormer windows, it seemed lonesome on the flat piece of land with mountains rising up in the distance. The vastness of the Montana sky made everything seem small. Several rocking chairs and a porch swing had been rubbed of paint in some areas, hinting at

many hours of enjoyment by the inhabitants. A fall-themed wreath hung on the black front door. On either side of the door, several pots hosted orange mums.

To the right of the house, surrounded by a pasture, stood a red barn. A half dozen horses grazed on the natural grasses. Off in the distance, a herd of cattle dotted the landscape.

The exterior of the house needed a fresh coat of paint, as it was faded in spots and flaky in others. When I ventured up the porch steps behind Stella, the floorboards creaked. I looked down to see that several of the boards were rotting. Soon, they wouldn't be safe. I'd hate for one of the boys to fall through and hurt themselves. I'd put that as a priority on my list of repairs.

Inside, the scent of onions and rosemary made my stomach growl and my mouth water. "That smells delicious."

"Nothing special, but it'll fill you up," Stella said.

The house seemed to be stuck in time, circa the 1950s. Photos of the boys hung on the walls, along with some that had to be Stella when she was a girl. She'd been adorable, with her big brown eyes and toothless grins.

We arrived in a dark-paneled kitchen. Atticus, I presumed, sat at the rectangular rustic farmhouse table with two little boys. He had a textbook open and was bent over it, pencil between his teeth, clearly studying. Soren and Thad colored black-and-white drawings of trucks with thick crayons. The familiar waxy aroma reminded me of my own happy afternoons coloring. They'd been a staple in my own childhood as well.

Atticus looked up from his work and blinked, as if to remind himself where he was. He stood to greet me, waiting as

I set the bags on the counter.

“I’m Jasper Moon,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Moon.” Atticus shook with surprising firmness. His gaze didn’t falter as he sized me up, a wary expression on his young face. He resembled his mother, with her same complexion and full mouth. However, his eyes were a striking light blue instead of brown—in fact, such a light hue that I found them slightly unnerving.

The little guys had stopped coloring and now stared at me, Soren’s face scrunched up in obvious distrust.

“Who is that?” Soren pointed at me. He held the crayon so tightly between his fingers that it broke in half.

“This is Mr. Moon, and he’s brought a pie, and we’re going to make homemade ice cream,” Stella said.

“I like ice cream.” Soren continued to gaze at me, his brow furrowed.

“Me like ice cream too.” The smallest of Stella’s boys jumped from his chair and came running over. He looked up at me with big brown eyes. His mother’s eyes. “Me Thad.” He tugged on my jeans. “Mister, bring me up.”

I knelt slightly to haul him into my arms, resting him against my hip. He placed his small, warm hands on either side of my face and stared into my eyes. “You like horses?”

“Sure I do.” I might not have been from Montana, but I knew there was a wrong answer, and I wasn’t about to give it to him.

“Do you eat steak?” Soren asked from the table.

“It’s none of your business what he likes to eat,” Caspian said. “Not everyone has to like steak.”

“I do like steak,” I said. “There’s not much I don’t like. A bachelor like me can’t be picky.”

“What’s a bachelor?” Rafferty climbed up to sit on one of the kitchen stools.

“An unmarried man,” Atticus said. “Usually one without a moral compass.”

“Atticus, whatever gave you that idea?” Stella asked, flushing.

“I’ve deduced it from my reading.” Atticus placed his pencil next to his book.

“What kind of reading is that?” I asked, curious.

“Spy novels mostly,” Atticus said. “Some science fiction.”

“Ah, yes, well, bachelors are often depicted that way,” I said. “But my moral compass happens to be very acute.”

“How do you know?” Atticus asked.

How did I know? Excellent question. “I have a mother who taught me what was right and wrong. Just like you have.”

Atticus sighed, looking slightly relieved. “Okay, yeah.”

“Why are you worried about your moral compass?” Stella asked, shutting the freezer door and turning to look at her oldest son.

“I’m half of him.” Atticus picked up his pencil and made a mark in his book.

Half of his father? Yes, obviously. His father’s departure must weigh heavily upon him. How could it not? It had me. I’d wondered often why my father didn’t stay around, even if just to see me every once in a while. Was the idea of a child so abhorrent to him that he had to run away? If so, I’d wondered

back then, what about me? Would I grow up to be the leaving kind too? My mother's radio had played enough country songs with that theme over the years. Somehow, though, I'd grown out of that worry. I was a good man. A loyal one too. Whatever gene my father carried had not been passed on to me.

"I'm half of my father too," I said out loud. "And from what I know of him, his moral compass was not pointing in the right direction. Yet I turned out to be a man of integrity. My conclusion? It's your mother that matters."

Atticus returned his gaze to me. "Nature versus nurture? It's a real question."

"How old are you?" I asked, laughing.

"Eleven going on forty," Stella said. "Atticus, why don't you go down to the cellar and bring up one of my canned jars of caramel. We can pour it over the ice cream."

"I'll go with you," Caspian said to his brother. "There's something I need to check down there anyway."

I glanced at Stella, who was watching her boys head down the stairs, a worried expression on her face.

"What can I do to help with dinner?" I asked.

"Nothing, really," Stella said. "But the chickens need to be fed. Soren, it's your turn. And can you bring in the eggs, please? Also, ask Randy to bring the horses in from the pasture. It's going to snow."

"Sure, Mama." Soren slid from his chair and headed toward the mudroom and grabbed his jacket. I spotted all kinds of hats, scarves, and boots stowed neatly in cubbies. *She runs this place like a military school.* One would have to with this crew.

“You train them young,” I said.

“What? Soren? He’s five. He knows how to toss some chicken feed down for our girls.”

“I’m impressed.”

“We grow them tough in these parts.” She pinched the bridge of her nose before turning toward me. “I’m going to throw a salad together so we have one healthy thing on the menu.”

I realized I hadn’t brought the pie in from the truck. I’d placed it in a box and left it on the floor of the passenger seat so it didn’t get damaged on the ride here.

“Who wants to go with me to get the pie?” I asked.

Rafferty raised his hand. “Me!”

“Me too. Me too,” Thad shouted. “Don’t go without me.”

“Come along. We can all go,” I said, exchanging an amused glance with Stella.

All three of us tromped out to my truck. Temperatures seemed to be dropping drastically by the minute. As I reached in to get the pie, a snowflake landed on the windshield.

The boys had run over to the fence, each with an apple in their hand.

“Do you want to see our horses?” Rafferty asked.

I agreed but said I’d deliver the pie to his mom first. When I arrived back in the kitchen, Stella had opened the ice cream maker box and was bent over reading the instructions.

I put the pie on the counter. “The boys want to show me the horses.”

She looked up and smiled. “Put your jacket on or you’ll catch your death. Will you take the boys’ jackets out to them?”

I obediently followed her into the mudroom and donned my jacket and took two small ones from her outstretched hands. “Were we ever this tiny?”

“I was, but I don’t know about you.” Her eyes sparkled up at me. “Given your massive size now.”

There she is. The woman she used to be, standing right in front of me. “I’ve always had an overly large head.”

“You do not.” She laughed and playfully smacked my chest. “Don’t stay out too long. Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I went back outside to the meadow. The boys called out to the horses, beckoning them over with a bucket of apples. Soon, four horses stood at the fence, chewing noisily on their treats. After a proper introduction that involved a pat on each of their noses and learning their names— Starbright, Susan, Molly, and Sugar—little Thad tugged on my arm. “We go to barn now.”

“If Mr. Moon wants to,” Rafferty said.

“Lead the way,” I said. “I love barns.”

As we made our way toward the barn, Thad wrapped his little hand around my index finger. No big deal. Just my heart doubling in size.

One of the ranch hands was cleaning a stall when we arrived.

“That’s Randy,” Rafferty said. “He helps us.”

Randy straightened and lifted the brim of his cowboy hat. “Howdy. You the banker?”

“That’s me,” I said. We shook hands. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Randy scratched under the collar of his flannel shirt. White bristles sprouted from his face. Deep lines traveled from his eyes to his cheeks. “My wife was in the bank the other day. She said you were real friendly and helpful. Sally White’s her name.”

“Your wife’s Sally,” I said, recalling a plump middle-aged woman who had come in to deposit checks a week or so ago. “I remember her.”

“We’ve been banking at the branch in Bozeman our whole married life. Was real happy to have one open out here.”

“Me too. Since my job brought me to this beautiful part of the country.”

We chatted for a few more minutes while the boys chased each other around the barn. Randy told me he’d been with Miss Stella since she was a teenager. “Back then, her father ran the ranch, but she always did whatever needed doing. That’s the kind of girl she is. Her mother was the same, but she didn’t have Stella’s big heart. I don’t know where it came from. Her folks were no-nonsense types. Nothing soft about either one of them.”

I couldn’t tell if he admired that quality or not, so I simply nodded.

“She’s had a hard time.” Randy lowered his voice. “That idiot put her through the wringer. Rumors of other women. Left a couple of times before this but always came back. None of us could understand why she took him back.”

I gestured toward the boys, who were now headed out to the chicken coop to help Soren gather eggs for their mother. “She took him back for them.”

“Right you are,” Randy said.

The boys returned with the eggs. “Six in all,” Rafferty said. “We got seven this morning. Mama will be happy.”

We said good night to Randy and all headed back to the house. The light had faded to near dark by the time we arrived in the warm, fragrant kitchen.

A great amount of activity happened in the small mudroom over the next few minutes. Jackets hung, boots stored in cubbies, all three boys reminding me of uncoordinated puppies. Stella was just taking the roast out of the oven by the time all that was sorted.

A sheet of raw biscuits was set on the counter waiting for its turn in the oven. Stella twisted the dial up a few notches while instructing Atticus and Caspian, who had returned from the basement by this time, to set the dining room table. “Since we have a guest, we’ll eat in there tonight.”

“Wahoo,” Caspian said.

Stella shooed the rest of the boys off to wash up. “Comb your hair,” she called after them. “And make sure your fingernails are clean.”

“Do I need to comb my hair too?” I asked.

She tilted her head to one side and peered at me. “Nope. Looks good. But you should wash your hands.”

I chuckled and went to the sink to do as she asked. “I’ll hit the hardware store this week and pick up a few of those light sensors. You can let me know what evening works for me to

come by and install them. It'll have to be after work, unfortunately. Until then, I can change the light bulb over the back door."

"Sure. If it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. It must get dark out here at night."

She put her hands on her hips. "Mr. Moon, are you afraid of the dark?"

"I'm afraid for you." I grinned back at her. "But only if you want me to be."

"The light bulbs are in the hall closet," she said. "Hang on, I'll get one."

While she was gone, I took a deep sniff of the pot roast from which scents of garlic, potatoes, and various herbs wafted up through the steam. The kitchen, although outdated with its dark paneling and orange Formica counters, was homey and pleasant nonetheless. How many dinners had been cooked and served here over the years? Three generations of McKinnon women had fed their families in this very kitchen.

From the dining room came the muffled voices of the boys as they set the table. For a moment, I took it all in at once. The sweet chatter of little boys setting a table. Thumping sounds as a few more ran up the stairs. The radio playing softly in the background. Aromas of a delectable dinner. Family life.

A beautiful, strong woman at the helm.

How could that man have walked away from all this?

And what can I do to take his place?

That thought came out of nowhere.

I'll win her over by being handy and dependable. Prove to her that I'm worthy of trust. Little by little maybe I could wear her down.

"Here you go," Stella said, returning with a bulb in hand. "Also, I'm wondering if we should get started on the ice cream? It's a process. Has to freeze and all."

I agreed, picking up the instruction guide.

"I want to help." Caspian rushed in from the other room and clambered onto a stool.

"We're supposed to make a custard on the stove," Stella said. "Caspian, you can measure everything out for me."

I left them to it while I went out to change the light bulb out back. I'd kept my jacket on and was glad of it. Snow had begun to fall in earnest, fat flakes that appeared to be sticking to the ground. I had four-wheel drive on the truck. I should be fine to get home. There was no way I was leaving before dinner.

It took only a few minutes to switch out the bulb. When I returned to the kitchen, the children and their mother were all gathered around the ice cream maker.

"Mr. Moon, we cooked it into custard." Caspian beamed at me. "Now we're going to put it in there, and it's going to freeze while we eat dinner."

"I can't wait," I said, tossing the used light bulb into the trash under the sink. Before I shut the cupboard, I noticed a leak, slowly dripping from the area where the two pipes came together. If I didn't tighten it, the wood could be ruined by morning.

I straightened to see Stella adding the rock salt to the outer layer of the new appliance, then poured in the vanilla custard.

“Do you have a wrench, by any chance?” I asked. “Your pipes are leaking under the sink.”

She let out a sigh. “Yeah, they’re in the shop.”

“I’ll take you out there,” Atticus said.

A few minutes later, the two of us walked out to the shed, a flashlight illuminating the path. When we reached our destination, Atticus pulled a string much like the one over the back door. My eyes adjusted quickly to see a workshop filled with gardening and mechanical tools. Nothing seemed to have a place of its own, everything scattered here and there. Atticus found a wrench, however, without much trouble.

“My dad was in here a lot,” Atticus said. “Even though it’s a mess. My mom likes things neat, but it was impossible for her to do everything.”

“Makes sense.” I trod carefully, not wanting to say anything bad about his father. He might be able to say it himself, but I suspected he’d take offense if he heard it from anyone else.

“Is it true you never knew your dad?” Atticus asked, remaining near the spot from which he’d dug out the tool I needed.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Do you hate him?”

“I used to. I mean, as much as you can hate someone who was never around and I never knew. But after I grew up all the way, I started not thinking about him at all. He has no relevance to my life.”

“What if he came back and begged to see you?” Atticus’s voice sounded terribly small and sad in the cold shed.

“I would be curious, I guess, but there’s not any part of me that hopes for that kind of thing.” I perched on the edge of a tall bench. “When I was a kid, though, sometimes I’d think of these outlandish stories about why he’d disappeared. None of it his fault, you know, and then he’d come back and tell us all about it and my mom would be happy and we’d be a family. That kind of thing.”

Atticus stared at me for a moment, his eyes glittering. “That’s sad.”

I smiled and shrugged. “I know. But it won’t hurt this bad forever. Pretty soon you’ll wake up and not think of him at all.”

“I hate him.”

“I understand,” I said.

“My mom cries a lot. At night when she thinks we’re all asleep.”

A pain nudged my chest. My empty fists balled. I thought of Stella’s puffy red eyes looking at me from the other side of my truck after she’d broken down at the bar. “She deserves better.”

“We’re going to lose the ranch.”

“What?” I leaned forward, stomach clenched. “How do you know?”

“I saw the papers from some bank in Bozeman. We owe a lot of money after they took a loan out against the house.”

This wasn’t good. Not good at all.

“Have you talked to your mom about this?”

“I didn’t say anything about the letters from the bank, but I did tell her I had an idea of what we could do to save this place.”

“What’s that?” I studied this serious, smart little man, prepared to listen with an open mind. Although, what could an eleven-year-old have come up with that would save his family’s land?

From his young mouth came an idea so good I was surprised it hadn’t occurred to anyone prior to this. Especially if his mother’s financial situation was as bad as Atticus believed it to be.

A dude ranch for tourists.

Brilliant.

Atticus continued. “We could sell off most of the cattle. Just keep enough to entertain the tourists. I read this article in a travel magazine at the library, and they featured this place in Colorado that has all these little cabins and people rent them out. At night they have bonfires and people roast marshmallows. During the day, there are games and horse rides. You know, all that kind of thing city people love.”

“And you told your mom this idea?”

He nodded. “She doesn’t think we could do it because we don’t have any money to invest. Plus, all the money we already owe.”

“Right. That makes sense.” I looked up at the ceiling. There were several spiderwebs in the far corner. I shivered. I hated spiders.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “Let me talk to her about a loan—maybe we can figure something out at my bank. A way to finance her. No promises, but I’ll see what I can do.”

I thought about the nest egg I had in savings. Part of it I invested in the stock market, but I was conservative with money and had the rest of it in a very safe savings account. I'd told myself that if anything arose that seemed of interest or a good idea, I might invest. Was this it?

"Come on," I said, gesturing toward the house. "Your mom will get worried if we don't run along now."

"Yeah, okay."

The two of us walked back to the house in silence. The snow fell heavily now, like a gauzy curtain.

I was a man who believed in fate and signs and that the good Lord looked over those who did their best to serve Him. Was He telling me this family was my responsibility to help? I was free and single, by many standards wealthy. Was I supposed to do something here? I'd promised myself to find a community where I belonged. Be part of something larger than myself.

Is this it?

I put it aside for now. There was a leaking faucet to fix first.

STELLA

Gathered around the dining room table, the boys and Jasper dug into the pot roast, creamy carrots, and flavorful potatoes. I'd invited Jasper to sit in what had not so long ago been Rex's seat. It was strange to see another man where my husband had spent so many evenings devouring my cooking without a word of thanks.

"This is delicious," Jasper said. "Are the herbs fresh?"

"Yes, they're from Caspian's herb garden," I said. "We're pleased with how well they're doing."

"Nothing can beat fresh, can it?" Jasper asked before swallowing another bite of the roast.

Caspian grinned. He'd lost both front teeth of late, and his adult replacements had not yet arrived. "Mama and me planted them ourselves."

"The fresh thyme and rosemary really make the dish," Jasper said.

"I'm surprised you can tell they were fresh," I said.

"I have a very discerning tongue." Jasper smiled and picked up his glass of red wine I'd poured for us from the box I kept under the sink.

Discerning tongue.

Why had those words just sent a shiver down my spine?

To distract myself, I glanced out the window. Snow fell as thick as feathers released from a burst pillow. If it continued like this, Jasper would be stuck here. In the morning, the plows would come through and clean the main road. However, tonight, in the dark, the visibility would be almost nil.

“You’ll have to stay over if it keeps up,” I said, as if we’d been talking about the weather.

Jasper’s brow furrowed for a moment. “I remember a storm like this last January. It was a chore to clear my driveway.”

“We have a tractor,” Atticus said. “With a scooper.”

“None of us ever get to skip school,” Caspian said mournfully.

“You’d miss a lot of school if you stayed home every time it snowed,” I said.

“Wouldn’t that be awesome?” Caspian asked. “We could make cookies all day.”

The boys launched into more questions for Jasper. He was a good sport, answering anything they wanted to know.

“Do you have brothers?” Rafferty asked.

“No. I’m an only child. Not like you guys. You’re lucky,” Jasper said.

“What’s your favorite part about Thanksgiving dinner?” Caspian asked.

“Stuffing,” Jasper said. “Preferably made from corn bread. And gravy. I love gravy.”

“Gravy’s good,” Caspian said. “Especially Mama’s.”

“Where’s your wife?” Rafferty asked.

“I don’t have one.”

“How come?” Atticus asked.

“I never met the right woman. Not yet anyway.” Jasper glanced down the table at me, a sheepish smile on his face.

My stomach plummeted. Was he insinuating interest in me?

Why else would he be over here fixing leaks and putting in light bulbs?

Could I let myself trust again? Fall in love?

The conversation veered to Jasper’s remodeling stories. “One time, I fell through the second-story floor right into the living room below. Got my leg trapped under some wood and had to wait for my buddy to come rescue me. He’d gone out to get us some tacos for lunch.”

“What kind of tacos?” Caspian asked.

“Pork,” Jasper said. “From this dive around the corner. Really tasty.”

“Was anything broken?” I asked, cringing. The idea of being trapped made my skin crawl.

“Nah, my head’s too thick for that.” Jasper thumped the side of his head with a clenched fist.

The boys giggled.

“Then there was another time I tore down a wall, and you won’t believe what I found in there.” Jasper looked around the table, clearly inviting guesses.

“Treasure?” Rafferty asked.

“A dead body?” Atticus suggested.

“A smelly dead rat?” Soren asked. “We had one of those.”

We had indeed. What a smell too. For weeks we had to wait it out until the animal fully decayed. Rex had wanted to tear open the wall, but I knew if he did that, we’d never get it repaired again. Until I did it myself, of course. Thad had still been in diapers and crawling everywhere. I could barely keep up with that kid. Of all the boys, he’d been the most physically active. If I weren’t careful, he’d climb up a kitchen cabinet and start opening drawers with dangerous appliances.

“Any other guesses?” Jasper asked. “Should I give you a hint?”

Choruses of yeses rose from around the table.

“The inhabitants of said wall were furry. And cute.” Jasper raised one eyebrow. “What could that be?”

“Puppies?” Caspian asked.

“Close. A mama and her five kittens,” Jasper said. “Kind of like you guys.”

“These boys are more like puppies,” I said, chuckling.

“I was thinking the same thing earlier.” Jasper and I locked eyes for a brief moment. Another plunge of the stomach, followed this time by butterflies.

“What did you do with them?” Atticus asked, as if I were being interrogated for a crime.

“The mama cat didn’t have any tags or anything to identify her, so I took them to a shelter. Once they were old enough, they were given away to families who could provide them a good home.”

“What about the mama kitty?” Soren asked. “Did they kill her?”

Jasper blanched, looking slightly shocked. “No, no. A shelter wouldn’t kill her. They do whatever they can to find cats a good home. In this case, Penny came home with me. Eventually. At first, she and the babies were very sick. They had to feed them all with one of those eyedropper things.” He tapped his thumb and index together to mime using a tube.

“Did they all live?” Caspian asked, tears springing to his eyes.

“Yes, they did,” Jasper said. “In fact, I’m in touch with all of the families, and the kittens are living very spoiled lives. Two families took pairs—they like to be with their brother or sister.”

“What about the other one?” Atticus asked. “The one who was adopted without his brothers?”

“He’s doing well,” Jasper said. “An older grandmother type took him. He’s the most pampered of all.”

Atticus sighed, clearly relieved. “That’s good.”



AFTER DINNER, I stood at the kitchen window. Jasper would have to stay until morning. It would be impossible to see two feet in front of the truck in this weather.

I placed Jasper’s pie in the oven to warm while I filled the sink with soapy water. The boys and Jasper cleared the table. Even Thad helped by bringing in the used napkins.

“The ice cream’s perfect,” Jasper said, pulling the blade from the container. Thad clambered up the step stool to get a

better look, eyes wide.

“Atticus, get Soren and Thad ready for bed,” I said. “They’ve already had their baths. The rest of you, get showered. Anyone who has their jammies on gets pie and ice cream.”

The boys filed out, Thad hanging on to Atticus’s hand.

Jasper folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the cabinet. “You’re an amazing mother.”

“Thanks. They’re good boys.”

“They’re obedient and so curious. You’ve done well.”

“They have their moments,” I said, pleased he’d noticed how well-behaved they were. I’d done a lot of things wrong, but at least I had my boys to prove I wasn’t a complete failure.

Jasper nudged me aside. “Let me in there. The cook shouldn’t have to wash the dishes too.”

“Fine, if you insist.” I couldn’t help but be charmed by Jasper Moon. How was this man single? What would my life have been like had I married a man like this one instead of a man like Rex?

Why did he have to be so good-looking? And handy? He’d fixed two things for me already, and he’d only been here a few hours. The boys were clearly crazy about him. But with all these kids in tow, would he even look my way?

“You went dark,” Jasper said. “What’s up?”

I turned to look at him. “I was thinking about my divorce. Wondering what Rex has up his sleeve. He’ll want this place to sell if he can get his hands on it.”

“I know an attorney,” Jasper said. “My best friend back in California. He can help.”

“I don’t have money to pay.”

“He’s a softy. Once he hears your story, he’ll want to help.”

“That would be nice. Thank you.” My gaze traveled the length of his tall, muscular physique. He had his sweater sleeves rolled up, showing off his rosy forearms. Suds from the dishwater had caught in the hairs near his wrist. “You’re going to have to stay the night.”

Jasper reached into the sink to pull up the stopper. The water made a whistling noise as it started to drain. He then knelt to open the cupboard under the sink and poked his head in, presumably to see if he’d fixed the leak.

He pulled his head back out from under the sink, reminding me a little of a tortoise. “You think?”

I gestured lamely toward the window. “I can’t have you driving home in this.”

“And me without my toothbrush,” he said, smiling.

“I’ve got an extra one around somewhere.”

“Great. Should we have pie now?”

“Will it be weird for you?” I asked.

“I’d have thought yes, but after being here tonight, I’d have to say an emphatic no.” He drew closer.



AFTER THE BOYS went to bed, the two of us settled in the living room. Thad, Soren, and Rafferty had all asked if Jasper

could tuck them in. Frankly, that flabbergasted me. Their dad had never tucked them in. Where did they even get the idea?

A movie had arrived in the mail that day from Netflix. I offered to put it on but expected him to balk when he saw it was a rom-com starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant.

“I’ve been wanting to see this one,” he said.

“For real?”

“My mom and I have watched every romantic movie ever made,” he said. “I am the result of growing up as an only child of a single mom.”

I made us each a cup of herbal tea and settled on the couch to watch. He put several more logs on the fire and then sat in one of the easy chairs. My living room was nothing special, but it was cozy, especially on a snowy night like this one.

We watched, laughing at parts and crying at the end when she makes her grand gesture. By the time it was over, the hour was after ten. We agreed to get to bed.

“I’ll show you up to the guest room,” I said.

“I wanted to ask you something first. It’s about your place here. Atticus told me his idea about how to keep the ranch.” He launched into Atticus’s plan.

“Yes, he told me that idea as well,” I said.

“But you have a loan that hasn’t been paid.”

“My father would turn over in his grave. Except he was cremated.”

“Is it something you’d consider?” He leaned back in his chair, crossing a leg over one knee.

“I might. I mean, if I could even get a loan. And then there’s all this unresolved stuff with Rex. Who knows what he’s going to do. I’m afraid he’s going to ask for half of this ranch, which means I’d have to sell.”

“We’ll get my buddy on this,” Jasper said. “Try not to worry. Also, my bank might be able to help with financing. I can get creative—maybe wrap the mortgage into a new loan. There are a lot of options. I’d have to look at the numbers, obviously.”

“You really think your bank would approve a loan? For me and the crazy idea of an eleven-year-old?”

“A forty-year-old trapped in an eleven-year-old body,” Jasper said. “Anyway, I happen to think it’s a stupendous idea, and I happen to know the bank manager here in town. In fact, he may have a crush on one Stella McKinnon.”

I went hot. Burning hot. *Crush*. He had a crush on me? I chose to ignore that comment. For now. “Don’t you have superiors who would have to approve?”

“I do, yes. However, I’ve built trust over the years. If I recommended something, they’d agree to it. Mostly likely anyway.” He scratched under his chin. “You could offer an old-fashioned Christmas experience around this time of year. Get a sled to take people out for excursions. Do you have a sledding hill for kids?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “But I don’t want people in my house. This is my home, not a hotel.”

“Completely valid. However, little cabins could be a great option. We could build them for pretty cheap.”

“We?” I asked.

“I mean you. Although I could help, if you wanted. At least find you a decent contractor and keep on them to make sure they delivered what they said they would.”

“I’ll sleep on it,” I said. “I’m not sure I’m capable of making any decisions right now.” What was I saying? I had no time to waste or I’d lose my family home. “I take that back. I have to get my act together.”

“I could help you write up a business plan. Also, I have some cash. I’ve been looking for a good investment. This might be it.”

I was speechless. Was this man for real? “Um, okay.”

Jasper stood, yawning. “Now, show me that guest room. I’m beat. Your boys have a lot of energy.”

“Is that why I’m so old and tired?”

“You’re not old,” he said. “But you’ve earned the right to be tired.”

Before we headed up the stairs, I reached out to touch his wrist briefly. “Thanks for everything tonight. It was nice to have company, and thank you for fixing my leaky pipe and replacing the bulb.”

“Anytime.” He smiled at me in the dim light. It was everything I could do to keep from throwing myself into his arms. Thankfully, I restrained myself.



A BANGING STARTLED ME AWAKE. Foggy and disoriented, I looked over at the clock. Three a.m.

Had I really heard it or had I been dreaming? My heart thudded as I waited in the dark. Then it came again. A definite pounding on my front door.

I reached for my bathrobe and stumbled over to the door. When I reached the hallway, Jasper was already standing there. I flipped the hallway light on.

“Who could be here at this hour?” I whispered, not wanting to wake the boys.

“Someone stuck in the snow?”

“Right. Could be.” Still, I didn’t want to go to the door for fear it was someone trying to get in and hurt us.

“I’ll go first. Stay behind me.” Jasper patted my shoulder. “It’ll be all right.”

We hustled down the stairs. Another knock startled me. “I’m getting the poker.” I ran into the living room and grabbed the fire poker and rejoined him in the foyer.

I snapped on the porch light and peeked out through the small window on the side of the door. It was Rex. Lying in a pool of blood.

“Oh God,” I gasped, then screamed, then yanked open the door.

He wore no jacket, only a thin sweatshirt.

I dropped to my knees. It was a gunshot wound to his chest. I’d seen enough growing up on a ranch to recognize a gunshot injury. Instinctively, I pressed into the wound, hoping to curb the bleeding. Rex stirred and moaned. “Call 911,” I screamed to Jasper.

“Rex, look at me. Wake up.”

Rex's eyes opened slowly. "Stella," he said, barely audible. "The porch light was on. I could see it, and I made my way here. It took so long."

"Hang in there," I whispered. "You're going to be fine."

"I did so much to hurt you. None of it deserved." He spoke as if it were hard to breathe, gasping for air. I strained to hear him, willing him to keep talking. "I'm so cold."

His pants were covered in snow. He'd trekked through all this with no jacket? Where had he come from? Why had he been out in this storm? "What happened to you?"

Rex opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Blood appeared at the corners of his mouth. *Oh my God. Please, God. Help him.*

From behind me, Jasper talked to dispatch. "I'm at the house of a friend, and her estranged husband just showed up at the doorway. He's been shot in the chest. It looks bad."

"Jennie," Rex managed to say.

"What about her?" I asked.

"She hated you, and you could never see it."

"What are you talking about? She's my best friend."

"I picked wrong." His words came slow and labored. Blood covered his mouth. "And now I have to pay the piper." His eyes dulled, and little by little, he slipped away from me until he was no more. Gone from this world.

I continued to press into his wound, unable to let go of hope. But he was so still. Nothing but an empty vessel now. The boy who had captured my heart all those years ago had been gone long before now, replaced by a man who hurt me over and over. Still, this was different. All parts of him, good

and bad and in between, were no longer. His body was already starting to grow cold.

His last act had been to bang on my front door, collapsing soon thereafter. Why? What did he mean about Jennie hating me?

“He’s gone,” I whispered. “Dead.”

Jasper fell to his knees beside me but remained on the phone. “He’s passed away,” Jasper said into the phone. “Yes, right. Okay. I’ll wait to hear.”

Jasper set aside the phone and gently removed my hands from Rex’s chest. “They’re sending an ambulance, but the roads aren’t cleared yet. We have to wait.”

“The police. We need the police.” I started shaking. My skin felt clammy and sticky. I looked down at my lap, realizing they were covered in blood. Rex’s blood. “Someone shot him.”

“She understood and is sending the police too,” Jasper said. “As soon as they can.”

“But they have to hurry. Will they hurry?” I knew I was speaking nonsense, but I couldn’t find the right words.

“Yes, they’re hurrying. They’ll be here soon. Will you come inside with me to wait?” Jasper asked. “It’s too cold for you to be out here.”

“What time is it?”

“Just after three,” Jasper said.

The snow had ceased falling, but probably two feet covered the ground. Usually the snowplow wouldn’t start up until dawn. An ambulance or the police would not get here before the boys woke. We had to hide the body from the kids.

“They can’t see him like this.” Still on my knees, I swayed slightly, light-headed.

“We’ll keep them away from the porch. I’ll make breakfast and keep them distracted.”

“They’re going to see. Atticus is so smart,” I said, starting to cry. Rex’s last words played in my mind.

She hated you.

Pay the piper.

Picked wrong.

“He said Jennie hates me.” I looked up at Jasper, locking eyes. He was my only anchor to earth. To sanity. “Why did he say that? What was he trying to tell me?”

“Think back,” Jasper said softly. “Put the pieces together.”

The truth came as if it were a tornado bearing down on me. I could see it coming. Knowing it would swallow me whole even while thinking: *move the other direction, pass me by, I’m too weak to bear it.* Regardless of my wish, I was powerless to stop it, watching as it overtook me, lifting my body like a rag doll and shaking me with the intent to destroy me with the cold, hard knowing. The truth. My husband and my best friend had been having an affair. He left me for her. How had I not seen it? Every piece of evidence had been presented. An idiot. I was a trusting idiot. “He and Jennie. It was her.” For how long? Was it always her? Or had there been others? Which was worse? “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I can’t,” Jasper said gently. “What he said—there’s no other way to interpret it.”

“Do you think she did this?” I gestured toward Rex. “Did she shoot him?”

“I don’t know.” The simplicity of his answer unhinged me completely.

“Oh my God, what if it was Mark? What if he found them?”

Bile rose to the back of my throat. I was going to be sick. I jerked to my feet and stumbled to the end of the porch and leaned over the railing to throw up. The accumulated snow mixed with the blood from my hands. My stomach convulsed. When I was done, I turned back toward the light. Jasper stood near and reached to pull me into an embrace. I sobbed, gasping for air, until my thoughts veered another direction. My kids. “What am I going to tell the boys?”

He drew back to look into my eyes. “You’re shivering. Let’s get you into different clothes. I’ll make a fire and some coffee.”

“Do we just leave him out there?” I asked. “In the cold?”

“The dispatcher said to leave him as we found him. They’ll treat this as a crime scene.”

“Oh God.”

“I know.” He held me tight against his chest. “Let’s go inside. Please. We’ll make a plan.”

I nodded consent. He put his arm around my shoulders and guided me into the warm house. Jasper locked the door behind us.

Why had he done that?

Because a killer could be loose. Maybe a random stranger had shot Rex.

Don’t be an idiot, my mother’s voice in my head chided me. You know what’s really happened.

Except I didn't. Not all of it.

Jasper guided me into the kitchen. "Sit. I'm going make you something warm to drink."

"We should call Jennie's house." I rested my face in my hands, remembering too late they were still covered with blood, despite my stint in the snow.

Jasper handed me a paper towel. "Are you sure?"

"I have to."

Jasper brought the phone to me, and I punched in the number I'd called a thousand times before. Mark answered after the first ring.

"Hello," Mark said, his voice raspy and shaky, as if he'd been crying.

"Mark, something's happened."

"I know. I'm so sorry I haven't called yet. I just couldn't get up the courage. I thought maybe she'd come back, but she's not going to. Is she?"

"Are you talking about Jennie?" My heart pounded against my ribs.

"Yes. She told me tonight before she left. She and Rex... they've been together for a year. Or, not together but running around behind our backs. She left here to go meet him. They're leaving. She left Annie. Her own daughter. I just don't understand."

I drew in a deep breath. "Mark, please listen carefully. Rex showed up here not long ago, bleeding from a gunshot wound to the chest. He's dead."

"What? No, no, no. This can't be happening."

“Something went on between them from the time she left you until Rex showed up on my porch.”

“Do you think she shot him?” Mark asked. “Or were they abducted or something?”

I thought back to something I’d read recently. Most violent crimes were committed by someone the victim knew. “Maybe they argued. Maybe he said he was having second thoughts. And she shot him. Don’t ask me why I think it was her because I don’t know, other than it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“She carries around that pistol. In her purse. But why would she shoot him?” Mark sounded frantic now. I could picture him slumped over his kitchen table, scraping his hands through his hair. “Oh, God, I’m going to be sick.”

“Take deep breaths. You’re okay.”

“What are we going to tell the kids?” Mark asked. “What if...?”

The end of his sentence was too complicated to even say out loud. What if Jennie was a murderer? What if she’d run off? What if she was dead too? “I don’t know, Mark. I just don’t know. Did she give any hint about where she was meeting him?”

“He’s been staying at the motel in town. Can you believe that? Right under our noses?”

Not the rodeo after all. Sleeping with my best friend. Leaving her daughter and her faithful husband for that useless excuse of a man. Later, I would get good and mad. Later, I might grieve. Right now, Mark’s devastation had flipped me into a calm and strangely rational state. “Okay, listen, I’m going to hang up now and call the police to let them know

where he'd been staying. Maybe she's there. Or maybe she's run away. But we'll figure out what happened, eventually. Right now, you have to pull yourself together. Annie will be awake for school soon, and you need to tell her that her mother's left, and you're not sure what's happened to her. Tell her the truth. They were going to leave together. Rex is dead. We can't lie to Annie and Atticus about this, or we're going to break them. Do you understand?" Saying the words gave me even more confidence I was absolutely right. We couldn't sugarcoat this and leave things out. Not for Atticus and Annie anyway. The others? My sweet little boys? God only knew.

Again, later, I would fall apart. Right now Mark and all our kids needed me to stay calm. *I am at the helm. I am the one who can keep us together.*

I hung up and called the police. A few minutes later, they'd promised to head to the motel the moment they could. "We've got the plows out now, Mrs. Sharp. It won't be long."

Jasper had made coffee by then, and I drank a cup fast, sitting at the table. It was almost four. The kids would be up in a few hours. Would they wake to a driveway full of police cars?

"I need a plan about the kids," I said to Jasper. "Help me."

He joined me at the table. All color had long ago drained from his face. Blood stained his shirt and jeans. I'm sure I looked worse.

"Let them sleep for now," Jasper said. "After we know more from the police, we'll have a full story to tell Atticus and Caspian. He's old enough, and like you said about Atticus, if you gloss over the truth, it'll be worse for him later on. As for the small guys, you'll have to tell them their father's died. Let's hope to God the cops get here soon."

“I need to get this blood off of me,” I said. “And put on clothes, but I don’t know if I can make it up the stairs.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” Jasper gathered me into his arms and strode up the stairs to the second floor. By the time we reached my room, I was shivering so violently my teeth clattered.

“I’m going to run you a bath,” Jasper said. “Just give me a minute, and then you can undress in there, all right?”

Numbly, I nodded. “Thanks.” I wanted Rex’s blood off my skin. “Wait, I’ll take a shower instead.” I didn’t want to bathe in a tub of bloody water.

“Sure. I’ll get it started.” He loped into the bathroom, leaving the door open as he turned on the shower. Soon, steam rose around him.

He stepped out, moving toward me slowly, as if worried he’d scare me with any sudden movement. “Close the door. I’m going to stay right here the whole time.”

I nodded, the unspoken fear clear. A killer could be outside the house. What if Jennie had followed him? How had I not thought of that? “Yes, okay.”

In the bathroom, I stripped off my pajamas, then walked blindly into the hot shower. The water was almost painful against my cold skin.

A sob rose from deep inside me, born from Rex’s history of betrayal as much as from the here and now. This was the ultimate betrayal. It was bad when he left, but this was so much worse. This was Jennie too. I crumbled to the floor of the shower and wrapped my arms around my bent legs and let the water pound down upon me and cried until there were no

more tears. Then, I rose out of the shower and got dressed. My boys needed me.

JASPER

Then the truth came out.

The call came shortly after we'd come down from cleaning up. I could tell from the way Stella's face crumpled that it was not good news.

She hung up the phone and stood for a moment breathing in and out like a yoga master. *Trying not to cry.*

Finally, she looked up, her strength returned. "They found Jennie at the motel. She was dead. Is dead. Gunshot wound to her head. Suicide. They're on their way to pick up Rex's body."

I glanced at the clock above the stove. Not yet five a.m.

"The roads have been plowed," she added, as if that weren't obvious. "That was the sheriff on the phone, who I've known for decades. He knew Jennie and Mark too. I'm not sure what he sounds like normally while investigating a murder-suicide, but he sounded shook up. This kind of thing doesn't really happen here."

"Can they piece together what happened?"

"The sheriff said they found Jennie's car on the side of the road not far from here. There was blood all over the driver's seat. They figure they argued at the motel, she shot him and

then herself, but he wasn't dead. Somehow, Rex managed to drive away in her car. Sheriff says it all must have happened fast or Jennie would've realized he was still alive. He must have been driving here and gotten stuck in the storm, then walked the rest of the way."

"He was coming here. For a reason."

"Yes, he was. I think Rex told me what he wanted to tell me—that he was sorry. In a small way, it's a comfort to know he hadn't forgotten us completely."

"I'm sorry," I said. "About everything."

"None of this is your fault. In fact, if you weren't here, I don't know what I would have done."

I'd be there for however long she needed. "I'm not going anywhere."

As calm as I may have appeared on the outside, I was reeling. Jennie Armstrong was not who I thought she was. It seemed impossible that this efficient, charming woman who worked for me could have done this. I'd trusted her. I'd thought she was one of those perfect people who had everything together. I'd thought she loved her best friend and her husband.

"The sheriff wants to ask us questions," Stella said. "Which I guess is to be expected."

While I scrambled some eggs and cut up apples for the boys' breakfast, Stella called Randy, her ranch hand. In a flat, wooden voice, she told him what had happened. "Don't come out today. I don't want you to see all of this." She paused, nodding her head. "Yes, thank you. That's very kind. I'll let you know."

After she hung up, she looked over at me, a blank expression on her face. “Now what?”

“One minute at a time.”

At five-thirty, we heard the sound of footsteps above us. Stella leaped to her feet. “Will you look after the three little ones? Keep them in their room until after they take Rex away? There’s an old sweatshirt of mine hanging in hall closet you could put on so they won’t see all the blood.”

I hadn’t thought about my bloody clothes. They would scare the boys. Even during one of the worst moments of her life, Stella was thinking of them. “Whatever you need, I’m here.”

“You can read to them,” she said. “While I tell Atticus and Caspian.”

It was still dark when the sheriff and an ambulance arrived to take away the body. I’d managed to keep the little guys away from the front windows by entertaining them with books in the bedroom Soren, Thad, and Rafferty shared. I’ve no idea why, but the sight of their three small beds lined up in a row nearly brought me to tears.



THE REST of the day was kind of a blur. I’d offered to come back to check on Stella after I went into work. To my surprise she took me up on it.

“You’ve been such a help with the boys,” she said. “I would have been lost without you.”

“I’ll be back after work.”

She surprised me further by throwing her arms around me. “You are a good man, Jasper Moon.”

I squeezed Stella back before slipping out the door. On my way to work, I stopped at home to shower and feed Penny. She was not too pleased to see me after her night of neglect. A can of wet food later and she was back to rubbing against my legs.

I picked her up and looked into her green eyes. “Penny, you won’t believe what happened.”

As if she understood, she snuggled against my chest, purring as I stroked her head.

“I’m not sure what to do here. How do I help?”

Sadly, Penny had no answers either.



AFTER WORK, I stopped by to see Mark. I’d called first to ask him if he needed anything, and he’d asked if I’d pick him up a six-pack of beer. I suspected he wouldn’t be in good shape.

I was right.

He was dressed in a ratty pair of flannel pajama pants and a sweatshirt.

We sat in his kitchen for a few minutes, drinking a beer and not saying much. This was how men held conversations for the most part. After the first beer, he started to open up, sharing with me his shock and disbelief.

“Had to identify the body, Jasper,” he said. “Like everyone in town didn’t know who she was.”

“I’m sorry, man,” I said. “Is there anything I can do?”

“It was nice, you stopping by like this. How’s Stella?”

“Bad. But so strong too. That woman’s remarkable.”

“Yeah, this one’s going to hurt for a long time.” He gestured upstairs. “Annie hasn’t come out of her room since I told her.”

“People process things differently,” I said. “I hope this is okay to say, but there’s no shame in therapy.”

“I guess she’ll need it.”

“You two are experiencing something truly awful. Might do you good too.”

Mark was quiet for a moment, raking his hand through his hair. “I don’t know if I can live here any longer. This house. It’s all Jennie. I thought we’d grow old together. She’s the only girl I ever loved. I’m such an idiot—I trusted her implicitly. Not for one second would I ever think she was cheating on me. She was squirreling money away. I learned that today too. Her paychecks were a lot heftier than she let on. Which means all of this was planned. Not the murder-suicide part, but the running away together. It was like I was married to a woman I’d never met before.”

“Rex said something weird to Stella before he died. Something I’d like to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“He said Jennie had always hated her. Is that true?”

“Hate’s a strong word. I’d not thought her capable of hatred but now, who knows?” Mark rubbed his thumb along the corner of the table. “My wife was competitive. About everything and everyone. Whatever Stella had, she wanted. Stella never seemed to notice. She’s always been so independent and without a need for outside approval. Whereas Jennie cared a lot about what people thought of her. My wife

always wanted everyone to look at her and admire her. Back in high school, she could have had any guy she wanted.” He lifted his gaze and scratched the back of his neck. “Except maybe for Rex.”

“What do you mean?”

“That weekend they went to the rodeo, Jennie managed to get them invited to the party afterward. When they got there, Jennie went on and on about how Stella had ditched her just because some sexy rodeo guy was into her. There was an edge to her tone, now that I think about it. Like she was put out that Rex only had eyes for Stella. Jennie was not accustomed to that. Stealing Rex might have been a compulsion that went back years and years. I simply don’t know. I may never know. But I wish to God my little girl didn’t have to learn the truth about what her mother did—the choice she made. How can I possibly get Annie through this? That’s the part that makes me the most angry.” His eyes filled, and he brushed the tears aside with his sleeve. “What she did to our sweet, precious daughter—that I can’t forgive.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. What else could I say? “Do you know what you’re going to do next?”

“My parents want us to move to Texas and live with them for a while, and I think it would be good for Annie. She’s going to need a woman close by, especially with puberty around the corner. I don’t think I can stand to live here. Not now. This tragedy is all anyone will think of when they see us. From now on, we’re a sad story. I don’t want that for Annie.”

“I’d say go with your gut. If you think that’s best for Annie, then you have to do it. And your mother will be a comfort to you both.”

“Tell Stella I’ll be over to see her before long.”

“She’s probably the only person on earth who understands exactly what you’re going through,” I said.

Mark cocked his head to the side, studying me. “You like her?”

“How could I not?”

“She deserves a man like you, Jasper. Be patient with her. This is going to take some time to recover from. If you can wait, she’ll come around.”

“That’s good advice,” I said. “Thank you. Also, don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything. Anything at all.”

We shook hands at his front door and then, on a whim, I pulled him into a hug. “You’re going to get through this.”

“It doesn’t seem possible right now, but I have to—I have Annie to think of.”

I drove to my house in the already dark evening, thinking about legacy. What do we leave behind when we leave this world? How did we treat others? Were we selfish or giving, kind or unkind?

Two selfish souls had left behind six innocent children who would be haunted by their actions for the rest of their lives. Not so much a legacy as a curse.

STELLA

Somehow, we made it to Thanksgiving. Atticus and Caspian had taken the news with their typical stoicism. Which left me nervous and worried about what they were feeling and thinking. Whatever it was, neither was ready to share it with me.

Every night after work, since Rex and Jennie died, Jasper had come by to check on us, bringing groceries or cookies. Sometimes he'd stay for a beer, and we'd talk about our plans for the ranch. He had already started working on a loan structure and felt confident we would be able to secure the funds to build our cabins. I was grateful for his easy friendship and for his business advice. He'd seen me at my very worst, which should have left me feeling vulnerable and exposed. Instead, his company was nothing but a comfort to me.

I invited him for Thanksgiving dinner, but he declined, saying his mother was in town. "You just need your close family together this year," he'd said. "Not a stranger."

"You're not a stranger," I said. "And I'd love to meet your mother."

"Maybe coffee on Friday?" Jasper said. "But you let me know what you need. I'm around and only a phone call away."

Jasper Moon. What a thoughtful man. So considerate and gentle with me. I could grow accustomed to being treated this way. No one ever had. Not my parents. Certainly not Rex. I'd thought I could trust Jennie, but that turned out to be false. She was as bad as the others. Maybe worse.

The tight feeling came to my stomach, and a wave of pain coursed through me. Would this ever go away? Rex was one thing. My best friend's betrayal was almost worse. She'd pretended to love me. Rex had at least been honest. He felt nothing but contempt for me. Why wouldn't he? I'd proven over and over that he could walk all over me, and I'd still take him back.

God, I was such an idiot. I should have never let him come back the very first time he left. But I'd had the boys to think of. My dream of a happy family had outweighed a logical conclusion. Rex had been a cheating snake without a fatherly bone in his body. He was everything I despised. How could I have wasted so many years with him? Hoping things would get better?

I wouldn't have the boys, though. Which made all the heartache worth it. Nothing else mattered at this point. Not a betrayal of a friend or a husband. I had my sweet sons. Five blessings from God.

Mark had accepted an invitation to dine with us, as had Iris and Rocky. Cooking all morning with Iris had felt like a relief. The busier I was, the better.

All day, I kept an eye on Annie. Like my kids, she seemed unable to express her feelings, other than to pretend like nothing had happened. She and Atticus talked and giggled as they always did. It was only once, during dinner, that I caught Annie staring at the section of the table where her mother had

sat so many times. The look of desolation and devastation in her eyes broke my heart anew. Would she be all right? How would this affect her life? If only there were something I could do. But I didn't know what to do about my own children, let alone Jennie's.

Would the anger ever subside? Right now, I doubted it. Yet, a part of me knew, too, that the only way to find joy and peace was to forgive. I didn't have to forget what they did to me, but I did have to find grace in my heart. Without it, I would never move forward. Never love again.

And there was a kind, smart, funny man in loafers who had appeared in my life. To let Jasper in, I had to let Rex and Jennie go.

In the kitchen after the meal, Mark and I spoke quietly while Iris started a game of Pictionary with the boys and Annie.

I'd opened a beer for him and we sat at my kitchen table, the scents of turkey and gravy lingering from dinner.

"I'm going to put the house on the market," Mark said. "I want to be at my parents' by Christmas. I've got to get my daughter out of here before then. Otherwise, it will be unbearable."

My eyes filled, thinking about Atticus. He would miss his best friend. After what Jennie had done, would they ever be able to be the kind of friends they were before?

"I'm sorry to see you go," I said. "But I think you're doing the right thing. There are too many memories here. And stigma. You know how small this town is."

"That's right. I just want Annie to have a chance to be happy again. I don't know how."

“You’ll be there for her,” I said. “You’ll be enough.”

“God, I hope so.” He sipped from his beer. “How are you? For real.”

“One day at a time. You?”

“Same. We just need to get through the holidays. Next Thanksgiving, it will have been a year. I hear that’s a magic number.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Later, leaving the older boys to watch football with Iris and Rocky, I tucked the little boys into bed. I’d been observing them closely since Rex’s death. The two smallest seemed unfazed by the loss of a parent. Rex hadn’t participated much in the day-to-day. Life went on for them almost as usual. They might grow up to have no memories of him. Was that a good or bad thing? Only time would tell.

Rafferty, however, was as much of a concern as my older two were. At seven, he understood the concept of death and had started asking me a lot of questions about heaven and God. I answered the best I could, while grappling with the same question. Why had God allowed this to happen?

Sitting next to him on the couch, I’d taken his hand in mine and told him the truth as I knew it. “People are imperfect, and they make mistakes. God tries to help us, but a lot of times we’ve strayed too far from him. We can’t hear his guidance any longer.”

“Is that what happened to Dad? He strayed?”

You could say that again. “Yes, he took a path that led to bad things for him and for us.”

“For Annie too. And Uncle Mark.”

“That’s right,” I said, my heart heavy.

He’d crawled into my lap after that. I’d stroked his hair and told him his favorite story of Peter Rabbit and his sisters and scary Mr. McGregor.

When his eyes had drooped, I’d tucked Rafferty into his narrow bed, careful not wake his two little brothers. As I smoothed his quilt over his legs, he wrapped his fingers around my wrist. “You won’t leave me, will you?”

“I’ll do whatever I can to make sure I’m here to watch you grow up.”

“What about after that?”

The question took me aback. What about after that? What would my life be without wrangling and loving these sweet souls?

“I guess I’ll figure that out when it’s time.” I kissed him on the forehead and said good night and that I loved him.

“Love you too, Mama.”

When I slipped out to the hall, I caught a glimpse of Annie and Atticus sitting together on his bedroom floor. He had his arm around her. She was bent over, resting her face on her knees. Was she crying? I sneaked across the hall to hear better.

“It’s not fair,” Annie said. “Why did she have to wreck everything?”

“We’ll always be best friends,” Atticus said. “We can write letters.”

“Every week?”

“I’ll do my best. I have a lot of studying to do in the next few years if I’m going to get a scholarship to college.”

“And then you’ll build your empire,” Annie said. “Just like you’ve always planned.”

“Maybe by the time I have my empire built, we’ll be back together.”

“And maybe I’ll be a famous actress.”

“I’ll watch for you in every movie and show,” Atticus said. “I know one day I’ll see you right there on the screen. That’s going to be a good day.”

“You won’t forget me?”

“Impossible,” Atticus said.

“We won’t be able to get married now.”

Married? When had they planned that?

“Why not?” Atticus asked, sounding bereft.

“Because of what they did.”

“Rex Sharp’s not my father. He’s nothing to me except for a man I used to know. Kind of.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. I silently cursed Jennie and Rex. *Do you see what you did?* My fingers tingled with the rage that coursed through my body. I turned to go. The floorboard squeaked, giving me away.

“Mom, is that you?” Atticus asked from inside the room.

I backed up a few steps and then acted as if I’d just arrived. “Hey guys. Just tucking in the little boys. You two okay? There’s some pumpkin pie left.”

“We’re good, Mama,” Atticus said.

I moved into the doorway. Atticus had removed his arm from around Annie. They looked so small and sad sitting there

I had to fight tears. “Annie, I was thinking. Maybe you could come visit us during your school breaks?”

“I’d like to.” Tears rolled down Annie’s cheeks. I knelt on the floor next to her and took her into my arms, letting her weep into my sweater. I whispered platitudes I could not guarantee, wishing that I could. When she’d gathered herself some, Annie lifted her face to look up at me. “You still love me even after what she did?”

“You are your own person. Both of you are. What your parents did has no reflection on either of you. Someday, when you’re all grown up, you’ll see clearly how good you are—how impossible it would be for either of you to do such a thing.” I paused, choking up. “You must not let this selfish act ruin your lives. That would be a true tragedy. You know how I know? Because I’ve watched you two grow up. I know your hearts. You’re both special and have a lot to offer the world. You must remember that. Always. Can you say you’ll try?”

“I’ll try,” Annie whispered.

“Me too.” My oldest son glanced up at me for a brief moment, and the strength and anger I saw there both buoyed me and scared me.

God, please look after these two.

“You sure you don’t want more pie?” I asked.

“I like Mr. Moon’s pie better,” Atticus said. “Maybe he can come to Christmas dinner?”

Maybe so.

JASPER

The week with my mother flew by, and soon it was time to say goodbye. In only three weeks, she'd be back for Christmas. Still, the house felt empty when I returned from taking her to the airport. I found myself thinking longingly about the lovely chaos of Stella's house. Was it possible she would ever consider me more than a friend? If I had a chance, I had to keep myself in check. She needed a friend right now, not pressure.

I contemplated all of this driving home from work and almost jumped out of my skin when my mobile phone rang.

"Hey, it's Stella. You want to come to dinner? The boys and I could use a distraction."

"Sure." I sounded way too eager. "How are they?"

"Rafferty and Caspian are shaky. The others seem oblivious. Annie and Mark left today. Atticus is a wreck."

"I'm sorry. How about you?"

"I'm a little shaky too. I could use your...comforting way, I guess. You make me feel calmer. And the boys too, I think."

I had the urge to fist-pump the air but held myself back. This was a woman grieving. Her whole world had collapsed.

That she needed me was not a good thing. “I need to check on Penny first and change clothes, and then I’ll be over.”

“Great. See you soon.”

A few minutes later, Penny met me at the door, looking even more put out than usual. “What’s wrong with you?”

She meowed loudly.

“I’m sorry, but I have to work. How else am I going to keep you in wet food?” I picked her up and gave her some love before heading upstairs to change my clothes. Five or so minutes later, I grabbed a bottle of wine on the way out the door.

Another loud meow and a scathing look from Penny.

“Fine. You can come.” I tucked Penny under my arm before getting back into my truck. Hopefully she would like the boys. I knew they’d like her.

When I got to Stella’s, I went around to the back door. The front porch held too many bad images for me. I was going to have to tear it down this summer and build a new one.

Atticus answered the door. Penny, the rascal, jumped from my arms and ran into the kitchen. “Hey, Mr. Moon. You here for dinner?”

“Is that okay?”

“My mom wants you here, which means I do too.” He hesitated, looking at his shoes. “Mr. Moon, can we talk?”

I swallowed. Here it comes. This kid was about to tell me to get lost.

“Sure. Come on out here where it’s private,” I said.

He did so, closing the door behind him. “Mama’s acting tough but she’s...you know.”

“I do know. I’ll help her however I can.”

“Are you the type of man who sticks around?”

“Some might say it’s hard to get rid of me,” I said.

He nodded, still staring at me as if he were trying to crack a code. “She laughs when she’s with you. I want her to laugh. All the time. You think you can do that?”

“I’ll do my best. If she wants that, of course. I don’t know if she likes me. But I’m going to try to win her over.”

“Even with all of us?” Atticus said.

“You remember how I told you it was just my mom and me when I was a kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there was this family across the street from us. They had eight kids, and sometimes I’d get invited over for dinner, or they’d look after me if my mom had to work. God, I loved it there. Everyone talking at once or arguing about sports or whatever, and I’d think, someday I’m going to have this. But so far, I’ve not been able to find anyone who wants me around long enough to make a family.”

“Well, we’re already made,” Atticus said.

I smiled. “Maybe that’s the best part. I’ll know just what I’m getting myself into.”

Stella poked her head out of the door. “Are you two knuckleheads going to talk out here all night or come inside where it’s warm?”

I placed a hand on Atticus's shoulder and said softly in his ear. "You ever want to talk about anything at all, you know you can come to me."

I followed him inside, noticing that he swiped at his eyes with the sleeve of his sweater. *God, give me the wisdom I need to help this family heal*, I prayed silently.

"What have you done?" I asked Stella, pointing at a very happy Penny slurping up what was left of a can of tuna.

"I couldn't resist. She looked hungry." Stella entranced me for a moment with her sheepish grin. *If I could see that every day of my life, I'd be a happy man*.

"Plus, I want her to like me," Stella said.

"That'll do it."

She'd already started making chicken soup, and I pitched in by peeling carrots, wishing to ask her about how it had gone with Atticus and Caspian, but I decided I should let her tell me when she was ready. She'd already had to live through it once.

Caspian appeared in the doorway, asking if he could help.

"Do you want to make the biscuits?" Stella asked.

"Yes, yes, yes," he shouted.

I never thought I'd see a nine-year-old excited to make biscuits, but the members of this family never ceased to amaze me.



THE CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL fell on the first Saturday of December. The night before, Stella and all the boys came to my house to cheer me on while I made a pie for the contest.

After much debate with Stella about the best strategy with which to beat Renee, I'd decided to go head-to-head with her. Apple pie to apple pie.

I'd managed to find four different kinds of apples, knowing a variety gave the right texture and mix of tart and sweet. For my dough, I used half butter and half Crisco to get the exact right flakiness. In my opinion, together they created the perfect crust—one that could be rolled out easily but still had a buttery flavor. My spices included cinnamon, nutmeg, and a smidge of allspice.

Other than Caspian, the other boys quickly grew bored when they realized there were no treats involved during the baking process and wandered into my living room to play Old Maid and Go Fish. Caspian, on the other hand, remained behind to watch every step of my pie-making process. Even Stella drifted away to sit at the table and thumb through a copy of my latest *Cook's* magazine.

Caspian had a dozen questions along the way. What thickness should we roll the dough? How come I'd put ice in the water before adding it tablespoon by tablespoon to moisten the dry ingredients? Why did the dough have to go in the freezer for so long? And so forth.

I loved every second of it. This kid. Such a sweet, generous, curious boy. All Stella's sons had found their own unique place in my heart. Each possessed an aspect in their soul and personality I understood as well I did my own. The feelings were not simple, could not be described even in words, yet they overwhelmed me with a sense of purpose. Although I would never be their biological father, I felt God had brought me into their lives for a purpose. I could not confess to understanding my mission completely, only that I

would remain fully present when and if they needed me, for however long I was blessed to be asked to dinner.

Someday, maybe, God willing, I could be the father they needed, regardless of blood. If Stella was ever ready, I planned on making my feelings known. For now, I would bide my time. Be the man they all needed, meeting them where they were instead of where I wanted them to be. A man must be patient. Our desires are not achieved simply by wishing it so. I had to do the work, possibly the most important of my life.

By the time the pie was in the oven, dinner was ready. Stella had brought over a casserole, and Caspian and I made a salad to go with it, shredding the lettuce leaves instead of chopping. “It keeps them fresher for longer,” I said to Caspian.

“It’s prettier, too,” he said.

“You’re right. I never thought of it before.”

We ate at my kitchen table instead of the dining room, so we could keep an eye on the pie. It had to be just right if I were going to beat Renee. I’d set the kitchen timer for five minutes before it should have been done. When it went off, I decided the crust needed at least five, maybe ten more minutes to get the perfect golden shade.

Caspian brought his chair over to sit in front of the oven, peering in through the glass.

Stella and the others cleared the table, but Caspian and I remained watching.

“You know a watched pot never boils, right?” Stella asked, laughing.

“Mama, we have to be extra careful,” Caspian said. “This is the most important pie of Mr. Moon’s life.”

I caught Stella's eye over Caspian's head. She mouthed the words *thank you*.

That was enough for me. Even if Renee beat me, I'd already won.



I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE my eyes. The park had been transformed into a holiday movie set. I almost expected one of those Hallmark actresses to walk out from behind the lit-up Christmas tree. The gazebo in the middle of the park had been strung with twinkling fairy lights.

Thad tugged on my sleeve. "Me want to see."

He squealed as I lifted him up and slung him over my shoulders. "Hold on tight, okay?"

"I will." The next second he screamed, "Santa! I see Santa!"

"We'll go in a minute." Stella took Soren's hand. "Atticus, lead the way."

The pathway was lined with a variety of booths, each adorned with sparkling lights and fresh sprigs of holly. Looking around, I spotted a hot cocoa stand, and another with mulled wine and cider. Kids sat around a table in a heated tent decorating gingerbread houses. From a cart wafted the scent of grilled sausages in the crisp December air.

"We need a sausage before this night is over," I said.

"For sure," Caspian said. "I hope they have Dijon mustard."

The largest fir in the park had been adorned with lights and decorations. We stopped to admire the way the lights shimmered and danced. “The tree’s decorated with homemade ornaments.” Stella pointed at a red plaid quilted star. “That’s one of Iris’s. After Christmas is over people buy them, and the proceeds go to the food bank.”

We came upon a hot cocoa stand, the air around it misty from the warmth of the brew. Nearby, a group of adults huddled, sipping from mugs, presumably filled with spiced cider or wine.

Craft booths dotted the scene, including jewelry, knitted hats and gloves, and pottery. Hand-blown glass ornaments glistened under soft lights. A woman who looked like Mrs. Claus worked diligently at a neighboring stall, embroidering names onto velvety red stockings. Another displayed handmade quilts, beautiful designs my mother would have loved. I made a mental note to check them out before the night ended.

From a crude wooden stage that somehow seemed just right, our high school choir sang *The First Noel*. Their voices harmonizing and rising into the night gave me goose bumps. “They sound so good,” I said.

Stella leaned close, touching my gloved hand with hers. “You’re a sentimental one, aren’t you?”

“I love Christmas. What can I say?”

She held my gaze for a moment. “I think it’s wonderful.”

On the far side of the park, a temporary ice rink hosted rosy-cheeked skaters.

“May we go?” Atticus asked. He, Caspian, and Rafferty had all brought their skates from home.

“Not until you tell Santa what you want for Christmas.” Stella pointed at Santa, where fidgety children and their parents waited to see the big guy in a red suit.

“Come on, boys, let’s do this,” Stella said. “Santa needs to know your wish.”

“I’m not doing it,” Atticus said.

“Yes you are,” Stella said. “I want a photo.”

“How about I get us all something hot to drink while we wait in line,” I suggested.

“Make mine a hard cider please.” Stella pointed at the mulled wine and cider booth. “Double.”

“You got it.” I lifted Thad over my head and set him on his feet. “Wait with your Mama. Come on with me,” I said to Atticus. “You can help me carry them all back.”

“I want to come too,” Caspian said.

“Yeah, okay.” I took another look at the line. We should have plenty of time to get back before our turn.

The three of us took off for the hot cocoa booth. I slipped a five-dollar bill into Atticus’s hand. “Use that to pay. I’m going to grab your mama a cider, and I’ll meet you back here.”

It only took a few minutes for us to get something for everyone. By then, Stella was almost to the front of the line. She took what appeared to be a grateful slug from her cider.

Atticus went first. He didn’t exactly sit on Santa’s lap, more perched like someone using a portable potty. I would have loved to know what he asked for. He’d told his mother not to get him anything this year because of finances. *Fat chance of that*, I’d thought when she told me. I already had some money set aside for gifts.

Caspian asked for a commercial mixer in red. Rafferty wanted a Lego set he'd seen on television. Soren asked for a tractor. Little Thad asked for a baseball bat.

"That's new," Stella said. "I've never heard him say a word about a bat."

"Don't worry," I said. "Santa knows just where to find one."

Later, as we walked toward the tent where the winner of the pie contest would soon be announced, I stepped in line with Atticus, letting Stella and the others go ahead. "What'd you ask Santa for?"

He looked up at me, his eyes sad but sincere. "I asked that Mama have a reason to stop crying herself to sleep every night."

I felt a pang as though someone had stabbed me with a dull knife. "I want that too. That's one for Jesus, though, not Santa."

"You pray for my mom?"

"Every night," I said. "Every single night."

"Then I will too." Atticus shifted so that our arms touched as we walked into the tent. I took it the way I would have intended, had I been eleven. A hug.



WE STOOD near the front of the tent, near the table with my half-eaten pie. Besides mine, there were three others. The judges, all of whom I recognized from the bank, sat behind the table looking very serious. There was hardly room to move, as it appeared the entire town had come out for this event.

“Pie’s serious business around here,” I whispered to Stella.

“You fit right in,” she said.

Daniel Stewart, who owned the grocery store, took hold of the microphone. His handlebar mustache seemed to quiver in excitement. “Thanks everyone, for attending tonight’s activities. This year we had an outstanding group of pies. I daresay, the best we’ve ever had.”

I looked over at my competition. Iris stood with her husband, smiling serenely. Mrs. Van Nuys, wrapped in a plaid shawl and wearing a Santa’s hat over her white hair, stood next to her. When I’d delivered my pie to the judges that morning, she’d been dropping hers as well. I’d taken a quick peek and almost gasped. It was the ugliest crust I’d ever seen—like a patchwork quilt the way she’d pieced the bits of crust together. Or maybe one of those creepy dolls from a horror movie that had its face sewn back together. Didn’t she know how to use a rolling pin? She must have read my mind because she said, “I know it’s ugly, but it’s what inside that counts.”

“Do you enter every year?” I’d asked, politely.

She’d lifted her chin and sniffed. “As a matter of fact I do. I never win, which just goes to show people are too concerned with appearance. It’s substance that matters.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I’d said.

Next to her, Renee shifted from one foot to the other, bringing me back to the present. Funnily enough, I didn’t really care if I won. Entering had made me feel like part of the community. Standing with Stella and her boys made me feel as though I was home.

Renee caught my eye. I gave her a nod and mouthed, “Good luck.”

She did not return the sentiment.

“Coming in third place is Iris’s delicious berry pie,” Daniel said. “Well done this year.”

Which meant it was between Renee and me. There was no way that ugly pie was going to win.

Caspian slipped his hand into mine. “Pick us, pick us,” I heard him whisper.

We were an us? My chest expanded. Again, I’d already won.

“In second place, in an upset this year, Renee,” Daniel. “Congratulations.”

Me and the ugly pie? Was I being too cocky? Maybe they’d pick hers after all, and then I’d really feel like an idiot.

“The winner of this year’s pie contest is newcomer Jasper Moon.”

The crowd exploded with cheers and applause. I don’t know if it was for me or in celebration of perfect Renee’s demise.

“We did it,” I said to Caspian.

“I knew it,” he said.

Stella beamed at me. Other than Caspian, the boys were jumping around like happy puppies. I looked down again at my little helper and my heart stopped. His eyes were streaming with tears.

I dropped to my knees. “Buddy, what’s wrong?”

“I’m so happy and sad at the same time,” Caspian said. “It’s so confusing. Making that pie was the best day of my life.”

I pulled him to my chest and held him tight. “It was a really good day, and we’ll have a whole bunch more of them, okay?”

“Don’t leave us, Mr. Moon.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I glanced up at his mother, who was also crying. She placed a hand on my shoulder, smiling through her tears. “Don’t leave us, Mr. Moon.”

I kept an arm around Caspian as I straightened and leaned close to Stella. “Wherever you are, I’ll be. As long as you let me.”

STELLA

By the time Christmas Eve rolled around, Jasper and I had completed our business plan and secured a loan, along with a new mortgage with a lower interest rate. I'd sold most of the cattle and used that to pay off some debt. As soon as the snow thawed, Jasper said we'd start building the cabins. To keep costs low, he and Randy had agreed to do as much of the work as they could. There was the problem of what to serve our guests for meals yet to be figured out. Building a commercial kitchen that would pass code was another whole challenge to tackle. Jasper kept assuring me all along the way that it would all come together.

“It better,” I said, thinking of the large sum of money he'd put into the investment.

Jasper had spent so many evenings and meals with us by then the boys treated him as family. He was great with them too. There were piggyback rides and sledding adventures and baking during those cold days of December.

My infatuation with Jasper had not lessened. As the days wore on, I wanted him more and more. But he had yet to kiss me or even act as if he wanted to. Every night when we said goodbye, we gave each other a quick hug, but that was it.

Did he like me? I had no idea.

When I ran it by Iris, she only rolled her eyes and said, “You can’t really be that dumb, can you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The man spends every evening over here. Plus, I see the way he looks at you. He’s waiting until he thinks you’re ready.”

Would he ever think so? Would I be?

The kind of pain Rex caused the boys and me had repercussions that would taint the rest of our lives. Would Jasper Moon lessen our pain? He certainly had so far.

Christmas Eve we had lasagna for dinner, which Jasper had said was a tradition at his house growing up. It was a big hit, as was the pecan pie and ice cream for dessert. Caspian was by his side the whole day, chattering away about this and that. I’d never heard him talk that much. It made my mama heart really happy.

Jasper’s mother, Elaine, had arrived a few days before Christmas. I’d expected her to be older or at least look her age. Instead, this glamorous, slender blonde walked into my kitchen. When I commented upon her youthful appearance, she patted my hand. “I had Jasper when I was only eighteen.”

“Like me,” I said.

“That’s right. The good news is, at some point these rascals will leave you be, and you can get a little rest.”

I poured us both glasses of wine, and we toasted in the warmth of my kitchen, the noise of the boys and Jasper in an epic snowball fight a background.

“How come you never remarried?” I asked.

“You mean married. You have to be married once to add the ‘re-’ on there.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“I never met the right man, to be honest. He had to be near perfect if he were to be around my son. And, spoiler alert, there are no perfect men. So here I am at forty-eight still single.” She smiled mischievously. “That said, I have been seeing someone.”

“Is it serious?” I asked.

“I think so. He’s divorced with grown daughters, so the timing’s good.”

“How did you meet?”

“We both arrived at a party on the same night—standing outside our friends’ apartment, ringing the doorbell like a couple of dummies. Our friend wasn’t home, prompting our conclusion that we had come on the wrong night. Instead, he took me out to dinner and we’ve been dating ever since. But I don’t know...he’s a wealthy businessman, and I’m just plain old me. All my career, I’ve worked for men like him. As an assistant, mind you. I watched them all leave every night to head home to their families, and I would think, why couldn’t that have happened to me?”

“Firstly, you’re not plain,” I said. “You’re absolutely gorgeous. Your son told me once that it didn’t matter what compliments someone else gave you, only that we believe in our own beauty. Our own worth, for that matter.”

“He’s wise, my son.”

“I spent more than a decade with someone who never said anything remotely kind to me. Jasper, on the other hand, seems to have an endless supply.”

She peered over at me, a question in her eyes. She wanted to ask me something else. Something personal. Most likely about the nature of my relationship with her son. However, she must have decided against it, because she returned to chopping carrots for the salad.

If she'd have asked me if I liked her son, I would have replied yes.



WE ATTENDED the Christmas Eve services at church, singing carols with the rest of the congregation and hearing the story so familiar to all of us of Jesus's birth. Elaine had decided to stay in and get a good night's rest, so it was just my brood and Jasper. By the time we got home, the boys were exhausted and fell into their beds.

When I came downstairs, Jasper had his coat on. This was ridiculous. I was going to have to be blunt.

"I want you to stay," I said. "And I want you to kiss me."

His mouth dropped open, and then he grinned. "I would like to kiss you as well. And I would like to stay. Possibly forever."

He pulled me to him without bothering to take off his coat and kissed me hard, like a man who had been starved for exactly what I could give him.

By the time we pulled away, we were both breathless.

"I better stop now, or we could get into big trouble," he said.

"Maybe I like trouble."

He drew back to look into my eyes. “I don’t know if you’re ready, and I respect your decision either way. However, I need you to know something. When you’re ready, I’m going to put everything I have into winning your heart. I’m in love with you, Stella. I’m in love with your boys too. I could be a partner. A good one. And a good dad.”

“Are you sure?” My heart was pounding twice as hard as it usually did. “I have all these kids, and I’m probably going to lose this ranch, and I have no job skills and nowhere to go.”

“I’m a lonely bank manager who likes to bake and spend time with his cat. I don’t own the right kind of boots. I know nothing about raising children. Or horses. Or chickens. And you have someplace to go. Me. You could come to me. And I could learn about how to be a Montana man.”

A lump in my throat prevented me from speaking for a moment. “What if I were to say I like you just the way you are, boots or not?”

“Then I would say I’m one lucky man.” He pulled something from his pocket. A second later, I realized it was mistletoe. “I brought this just in case I got up my nerve.”

He lifted it over my head.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to shun tradition.”

We kissed under that mistletoe, and for the first time in a long time, I felt as though I was home.

JASPER

In the spring, we finished building six cabins, all with bathrooms and fireplaces. We wanted to have a dwelling for every type of guest, thus we constructed them with a specific type of person in mind. For example, a honeymoon couple would more likely book a suite with all the comforts of a fine hotel. A family would need bunk beds and a slightly bigger bathroom. Stella had insisted on that, already anticipating the tired mothers who would come to have a break and a rest from real life. All of which meant that the family cabins had a full tub decked out with bubble bath and body lotion.

Our honeymoon cabin included two rocking chairs set before the fire and a queen bed with layers of cozy blankets and feather-filled pillows. The tub was meant for two—also equipped with the necessary oils and soaps. For a family of four, we had bunk beds and pullout couches, depending on the size of the family. Sometimes we had groups of women for a girls' weekend, and they required bunk beds and sometimes the entire fleet of our cabins. By June, we were fully booked until the new year.

Stella had wanted a casual, cozy look for the interiors. We'd bought the quilt makers' entire inventory last year, knowing that we'd need them for our cabins. As the quilts for

our anchor points, Stella chose paint colors and accessories for each cabin.

We'd also built a small restaurant on the property. Although the decor wasn't fancy, we'd found an excellent young chef who surprised us with his talent. We served a fixed menu, other than adjustments for allergies, which kept planning and execution simple. Stella did most of the serving, with the boys and me as busboys. Soon, if we kept turning a profit, I was going to propose hiring a waitress. I wanted Stella to myself at night. Life was short. We wouldn't have many years before the boys were all grown and leaving us for lives of their own.

Randy had embraced a new role at the ranch. We'd asked him to be our official cowboy, taking the guests on horse rides and hikes. He taught kids and adults how to use a lasso. Sometimes the guests actually succeeded in roping our fake bull. In the evenings, we built a bonfire and invited everyone for s'mores and hot chocolate.

By the time Christmas rolled around, we had good systems and routines.

I didn't enter the pie contest the next year, after learning of Renee's near breakdown. Not wanting to be the cause of further consternation for the poor woman, especially after she discovered her husband in the arms of another. I figured the pie contest meant more to her than it did to me.

For weeks now, I'd had the ring in my pocket. Stella and I had already agreed that I would propose at some point in the near future and that she would say yes. We'd wanted to work out a few details before talking to the boys about this giant change to their lives. Including what kind of family would we be exactly. Would I be a stepdad or a dad? Would they all take

my name? I knew what I wanted but wasn't sure how Stella would feel.

When I'd asked Stella if I could adopt the boys, her response had been to cry and then shower me with kisses. I took that as a yes.

After the Christmas festival, we all gathered at home to decorate a tree the boys and I had found on their property and dragged a quarter of a mile home. I hadn't dared suggest a fake tree with this crowd. During said tree hunting trip, I'm happy to report that I wore an appropriate pair of boots for such an activity.

The rest of the house and our guest cabins were already decorated. Stella and Iris had spent all week putting up lights, wreaths, and garlands, transforming it into a winter wonderland. Even the weather cooperated by dumping several feet of snow.

But we'd saved decorating our family tree for just us. I'd put Christmas music on and built a roaring fire.

Now, however, as I stood next to our decorated tree, my stomach fluttered with nerves. What if I was wrong and the boys didn't love me as I did them? The little ones already acted as though I were their father, but I'd felt Atticus and Caspian holding back. Once in a while I caught them staring at me with eyes that held both hope and worry at the same time. They were waiting to see if I left them. That would never happen. My greatest wish and ambition was to erase any doubt from their minds that not only was I here for good, but they could trust that other people would stay too. Projecting into the future, I could see how hard it would be for them to trust the woman they loved. Would they give their heart only to have it

broken? It was my purpose on this earth to make sure they could. When the time came, of course.

For weeks I'd debated the best way to propose the idea of adoption. I wanted it to be the boys' decision, but I also wanted them to say yes. Therefore, I had to ask the question just right.

I'd ended up writing up a contract, which was now in my pocket next to their mother's ring. I would read it to them. Hopefully without breaking down, but it was likely the tears would start rolling the minute I opened my mouth.

Now, the box of decorations were all hanging on the tree. It was time.

"Boys, will you sit on the couch, please?" I asked. "I have something I need to ask you and your mom."

None of them said a word, not even rambunctious, talkative Thad. He'd finally stopped referring to himself as "me" in every sentence. Stella was relieved, but I missed his funny way of talking.

I had them all sit together on the new couch I'd purchased after the old one collapsed one night during a heated game of Scrabble.

Stella had taken the chair closest to the fire. A log shifted and sparks flew against the grate, as if it knew what I was about to do. I dropped to one knee and pulled the ring box from my pocket.

"Stella, you have changed my life and opened my heart. I'm amazed by your strength and intelligence. Working together to build this business has been the happiest time of my life. I never believed in soulmates until I met you, and I believe God put us together just at the right time. You're

everything I could ever want in a partner and best friend. I hope you'll agree to make me the happiest man alive and agree to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

She nodded, tears in her eyes. "Yes, I'll make you the happiest man alive."

I slipped the solitaire diamond I'd picked especially for her onto her pretty hand and then leaned in for a chaste kiss. No need to gross the boys out.

Rafferty, Soren, and Thad piled on top of me, shouting hooray and hugging me around the neck. After I untangled from them, I glanced over at the two older ones. They hadn't said anything, but smiles played at the corners of their mouths.

After the little guys returned to their places on the sofa, I sat on the coffee table and took a good look at our motley crew. They were sitting in order of their age, little stairsteps if there ever were some. Since we'd come from the festival, their hair was tousled from tearing off knit hats, and they wore flannel shirts and jeans. *I need to keep this image in my mind for the rest of my life. Take it out to look at when they're all grown.* "I'd like to ask you gentlemen something as well. I made up a little contract, so I wouldn't forget what I wanted to ask you." I tugged it out of my pocket and unfolded the contract I'd carefully typed up before I came.

"In a nutshell," I said, voice quivering, "I would like to adopt you and become your father." I glanced down at the paper. "I've come up with a promise. One that I will keep. I'm calling it SLURFPIG. Which I propose be our family motto from here on out."

Soren and Thad giggled.

Nonetheless, I continued my speech.

“S is for support. I promise to always be there for you. I’ll be here today and all the rest of the days of my life. Think of me like a tree with deep, strong roots. I’m here whenever you need me. To listen, to give advice or just take you fishing so we can be quiet together.

“L is for love. I promised to love your mother, and I promise to love you boys. If you’ll have me, I’ll be your papa and love you as if we’d always been together. I’d like you to take my last name, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to. However, it seems like fate, given the name of your ranch, that we all be Moons, so I do hope you’ll consider it.”

I started to choke up at this point but continued on, even though my words were strained. “U is for understanding. There will be moments of adjustment as we grow into a new kind of family. That’s to be expected. But I’ll do my best to be patient and understanding, and I hope you’ll do the same, even when and if I do something dumb.”

“You’re not dumb,” Soren said solemnly. “Not one bit.”

“Thank you, Soren. I appreciate your kind words.” I continued, even though I felt precariously close to tears.

“I don’t think you’re dumb either,” Rafferty said, raising his hand.

“Thank you.” I smiled back at him, hoping to reassure him fighting for my attention or love was unnecessary. This was not a contest or game he had to win. “There’s enough love in my heart for all of you. Actually, you’ve made my heart bigger.”

“Like the Grinch,” Caspian said.

“Because you love us,” Rafferty said.

“I love you, Mr. Moon,” Thad yelled out.

“That’s right.” I wiped tears out of the corners of my eyes. “*R* is for respect. I promise to honor and respect your feelings, opinions, and individuality. I’m not here to change you. In fact, I think you’re all just right the way you are. Instead, I want to help you grow into the best men you can be. We might not always agree, but I promise I’ll always listen and value your opinions.

“*F* is for family. We must put it above all else, always. Together we’re strong.” I drew in a deep breath. “*P* is for protection. I’ll protect you with my life. If anyone tries to hurt you, they’ll have me to answer to. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you’re safe and healthy. And I will never leave you.

“*I* is for inclusion. Our family came together late and in an untraditional manner, but my hope is that we’ll make new traditions and memories together. We’re a team now, and a team works together but also plays together.”

Soren and Thad were starting to wriggle, so I sped up my delivery.

“*G* is for growth. I commit to supporting your dreams, aspirations, and ambitions. I’ll always be on your side, no matter what you decide to do or be. I don’t expect perfection, only that you be true to yourselves and give whatever you do your all.

“In conclusion, I propose SLURFPIG start this very night. As a matter of fact, I’ve prepared something that will remind us of the promises I’ve made to each of you and to your mother.” I grabbed a present from under the tree and handed it to a red-eyed Stella.

She tore open the paper and then held up the painting I’d had made. I’d commissioned a local artist and he’d done a fine

job. “SLURFPIG” was written in beautiful cursive and placed inside of a heart.

“It’s...lovely,” Stella said, getting up to wrap her arms around my neck and kiss me on the cheek. “We’ll hang it in the kitchen.”

I took Stella’s hand and turned back to the boys. “What do you say? Should we make this thing official?”

Atticus’s head was bent, making his expression unreadable.

“Atticus?” Stella asked. “Are you okay?”

He slowly lifted his face. Tears dampened his cheeks. “Long live SLURFPIG. And the Moon family.”

The rest of them all cheered. Then, as they were wont to do, Soren, Thad, and Rafferty jumped up and started chasing one another around the house shouting “SLURFPIG” at the top of their lungs.

“How about you?” I asked Caspian. “You on board?”

He nodded, his eyebrows coming together as if he were perplexed by all the fuss. “You’ve been my dad since we made our pie.”

“But this is official,” Atticus said. “Legally, he’ll be our dad.”

Caspian shrugged. “I don’t need anyone to tell me what I already know.”

There were more hugs then, and we opened cider and champagne and made a toast to “Long live SLURFPIG” and then all collapsed together on the couch to watch Christmas movies.

For as long as I lived, I'd never ever forget this night.

Later, after the boys had finally settled down for the night, Stella and I snuggled up together on the couch, watching the logs turn to embers in the fireplace. We talked about the future and the wedding and how to proceed legally with the adoption and everything in between.

"We have the rest of our lives to do this," Stella said. "Talk until the fire burns out."

"Do you think I can stay over tonight?" I asked. "Now that you have that ring on your finger?"

"And after the speech of the century," she said. "You deserve it. But we agreed not to let the boys see us waking up together unless we're married."

"Then let's do it tomorrow. We'll drive to Bozeman and get married at city hall. I don't want to wait another minute."

Her expression softened, and she looked at me with such love in her eyes that my knees felt weak, and I wasn't even standing. "Jasper Moon, I would follow you anywhere, including city hall tomorrow."

I kissed her, hoping to convey the depth of my love. The world fell away as it always did when I captured her mouth with mine. Finally, though, I pulled away, knowing that tomorrow I could follow her up to her room and start the rest of our lives. "In that case, we better put another log on the fire, because I'm sleeping on the couch. We want to get an early start in the morning so we're married by noon."

She laughed. "What about Penny? She's all alone."

"She should enjoy it while she can. Her life's about to get a lot noisier."

“And hectic,” Stella said. “The life of a family is not for those who crave quiet.”

Family. The very best word in all of the English language.

My family. At long last, I was home.



THANK you so much for reading Mama Moon. Sign up for Tess’s newsletter for a [BONUS SCENE of MAMA MOON HERE!](#)

To continue the saga, you can pre-order Swoony Moon, releasing on Christmas Day, 2023 [HERE!](#) Atticus and Annie meet up twenty years after they were forced to say goodbye. I can’t wait for you to read it!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Isla Drake and Fran for coming up with the names for my hero and heroine. Fran suggested Jasper and I immediately fell in love with the name. Isla came up with Stella and it's one of my favorite names and I had not used it for a heroine yet! Thanks to all the readers who participated in the name contest! There will be more of those. It was way too much fun

ALSO BY TESS THOMPSON



EMERSON PASS HISTORICALS

The School Mistress

The Spinster

The Scholar

The Problem Child

The Seven Days of Christmas

The Musician

The Wordsmith

The Rebel

EMERSON PASS CONTEMPORARIES

The Sugar Queen

The Patron

The Pet Doctor

The Correspondent

The Innkeeper

CLIFFSIDE BAY

Traded: Brody and Kara

Deleted: Jackson and Maggie

Jaded: Zane and Honor

Marred: Kyle and Violet

Tainted: Lance and Mary
The Season of Cats and Babies
Missed: Rafael and Lisa
Healed: Stone and Pepper
Christmas Wedding
Scarred: Trey and Autumn
Chateau Wedding
Jilted: Nico and Sophie
Kissed
Departed: David and Sara

BLUE MOUNTAIN

Blue Midnight
Blue Moon
Blue Ink
Blue String
Blue Twilight

RIVER VALLEY

Riversong
Riverbend
Riverstar
Riversnow
Riverstorm
Tommy's Wish

LEGLEY BAY

Caramel and Magnolias
Tea and Primroses

CASTAWAY CHRISTMAS

Come Tomorrow
Promise of Tomorrow

SOUL SISTERS

Christmas Rings
Christmas Star

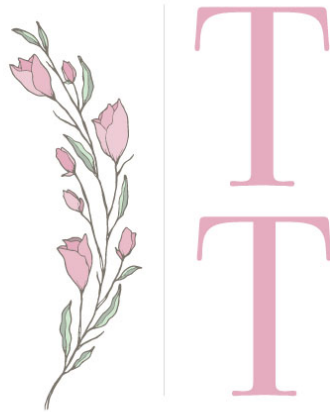
STANDALONES

Duet For Three Hands

Miller's Secret

The Santa Trial

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tess Thompson is the USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author of clean and wholesome Contemporary and Historical Romantic Women's Fiction with nearly 50 published titles. Her stories feature family sagas, romance, a little mystery, and a lot of heart.

She's married to her prince, Best Husband Ever, Cliff, and is the mother of their blended family of two boys and two girls. Cliff is seventeen months younger, which qualifies Tess as a Cougar, a title she wears proudly. Her bonus sons are young adults working toward making all their dreams come true out in the world. Oldest daughter is at college studying Chemistry. (Her mother has no idea where she got her math and science talent!) The baby of the family is a junior in high school and a member of a state champion cheer team as well as an academic all-star, including achieving a 5 on the AP World History exam during her sophomore year.

Tess is proud to have grown up in a small town like the ones in her novels. After graduating from the University of Southern California Drama School, she had hopes of becoming an actress but was called instead to writing fiction.

Tess loves lazy afternoons watching football, hanging out on the back patio with Best Husband Ever, reading in bed, binge-watching television series, red wine, strong coffee, Zumba, and walks on crisp autumn days. She never knows what to make for dinner and is often awake in the middle of night thinking about her characters and their stories.

She's grateful to spend most days in her office matchmaking her characters while her favorite cat Mittens (shhh...don't tell Midnight) sleeps on the desk.

She adores hearing from readers, so don't hesitate to say hello or sign up for her newsletter: www.tesswrites.com. You'll receive a free ebook just for signing up!

